The Fragments of 'impegno':
Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-1995

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Michaelmas Term 1998

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Abstract (i)

This thesis explores the representation of political and social issues in the work of a selection of contemporary Italian authors, aiming to assess what has become of the notion of political commitment ('impegno'), as debated by intellectuals in the sharply-defined political climate following World War II, and whether the institutional seizure then crisis of the 1980s and 1990s has encouraged a comparable literary response. In part one, I examine the critical works of Vittorini and Calvino, two authors central to the early discussion about the social role of literature, revealing the tensions between their conceptions of the relationship between writers and society, which, despite their close collaboration, are identifiable in their writings of the 1950s and 1960s. I then trace these different veins of thinking - which I have termed 'fault lines' in the solid mass of 'impegno' - into the works of Celati and Palandri, who express the socio-political consciousness of youth in the 1960s and 1970s. In the six chapters of the main body of my thesis, I consider the further breakdown, in the recent climate of political diffidence, of the traditional sense of commitment to a specific cause, into a fragmentary exposure of a variety of 'minority' issues in the work of individual authors or groups of the 1980s and early 1990s, broadly classifiable under the 'giovani narratori' label. This allows me to consider well-known contemporary authors, such as Tabucchi, De Carlo and Tondelli, from a specific perspective, alongside Ballestra, a young and little studied writer. My last two chapters discuss a selection of established women writers and barely-known African immigrant writers, assessing the impact of specific interest-groups on the 'impegno' question. I conclude by considering the specificity of these 'fragments' to Italian culture, within the general context of the postmodern lapse of faith in ideologies.

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Abstract (ii)

This thesis explores the representation of political and social issues in the work of a selection of contemporary Italian authors, aiming to assess what has become of the notion of political commitment ('impegno'), as debated by intellectuals in the sharply-defined political climate following World War II, and whether the institutional crisis of the 1980s and 1990s has encouraged a comparable literary response. The standard view of Italian fiction in these past two decades is that it reflects the 'riflusso' of the contemporary socio-political climate. My aim is to demonstrate that the doctrine of political commitment in literature which held authority in the early post-war period has been re-interpreted as a piecemeal engagement with social issues in the prose narrative of the 1980-1995 period. As my title suggests, I describe the relation between the original and the contemporary versions using the metaphor of fragmentation: the monolithic notion of commitment to a usually communist agenda in writing began in the late 1950s to reveal cracks of dissension, and the long-term effect of this is a break-up of the commitment to a single, overarching social agenda into a fragmentary attention to specific issues.

In the introduction to this thesis, I sketch the political and social condition of Italy in the 1980s and 1990s, comparing the so-called beginning of the 'Second Republic' after 'Tangentopoli' with the true beginning of the First in the late 1940s. I set out the issues which writers might be expected to address, and discuss the potential significances of the word 'impegno', outside its literary-historical context. The theoretical referents for my research, and the criteria by which I selected the authors studied in the main body of the thesis, are also established.

The background to the recent manifestations of 'impegno' is explored in part I of this thesis. In chapters one and two, I demonstrate the first cracks in the 'impegno' project, and then trace these forward to expose some of the main 'fault lines' which produce the fragmented commitment of 1980-1995. In chapter one, I concentrate on the critical writings of Vittorini and Calvino during the period from the mid-1940s to the 1960s (extended, in Calvino's case, to 1980). I compare their comments on the relationship between the writer and society, and on the problem of creating a literature genuinely of 'the people', and question their use of such terminology. I discuss the revealing differences between their personal approaches to the subject, and end by examining the self-editing process by which both writers adjusted the impact of their 'committed' writing under the tutelage of hindsight. Calvino's changing views of the

social function of literature as the 1960s turned into the 1970s are then examined in conjunction with the critical projects of Gianni Celati in chapter two. The tension between the thinking of these two authors replicates the Vittorini-Calvino divisions in form, but leads in acutely different theoretical directions, opening up further possibilities for the writers of the past two decades. This chapter closes with a brief analysis of Enrico Palandri's novel, *Boccalone* (1979), and more particularly, of the author's subsequent critical 'editions' of it. I thus bring one of the central re-interpretative strands up to the beginning of the period of my research, introducing the general theme of youth, which is taken to define the work of the writers of this period, commonly known as the 'giovani narratori'.

The main body of the thesis is divided into three parts of two chapters each, which chart a movement from the centre of the literature industry to the margins, considering first well-known 'bestsellers' and then shifting towards authors who are less popular, largely due to less aggressive marketing and less critical attention. In the first part, I consider the narrative works of Antonio Tabucchi and Andrea De Carlo, who demonstrate two contrasting approaches to 'mainstream' political issues. Tabucchi's work is well-known for its intertextuality and literary craft, but I argue that this self-referential gloss covers narrative which is also deeply embedded in a web of intersecting political themes, which connect the violence and cruelty of twentieth-century European history with the world of today. I discuss a selection of his novels and short stories, showing that the dual vision described above is always implicit in his writing, but that it becomes more acute and angered in his most recent works. By persistently re-working the theme of looking back at the past with sadness, regret, remorse, then pain, Tabucchi forces the reader to take account of history. His nuanced and often fantastical stories make the reader work to interpret them, and in this way, the author inculcates a responsiveness, or indeed, responsibility, on the reader's part, which enables him to raise questions about political behaviour, on both personal and public levels. This produces an original and subtle interpretation of commitment, which is rooted in the concern for humanity propagated by Vittorini and Calvino.

De Carlo, on the other hand, openly writes about current political issues, such as the 'Tangentopoli' crisis, in his novels, and in so doing, vividly depicts a generational experience, the roots of which he traces back to 1968 in his ambitious 'Bildungsroman', *Due di due* (1989). In this sense, the 'giovane narratore' label fits him well, and his early writing displays an ostentatious and carefully-contrived superficiality which is also deemed to be characteristic of the writers of the 1980s. Rejection of tradition accentuates his newness, and this is partly expressed in his predilection for America (North and Central/South) as settings for his novels. In chapter four, I concentrate, however, on his novels set in Italy, with the exception of his first, *Treno di panna* (1981), which I include because of its stylistic skill in cultivating a disaffection of character towards society, and of narrator towards reader. In the 'Italian' novels, De Carlo addresses issues concerning the contemporary socio-political climate which clearly anger him personally, and this results in novels which are not necessarily well-written, but which demonstrate features crucial to any understanding of the current meaning of 'impegno'. Whereas the careful cultivation of distance in his first novel enables the author to convey certain messages about the disaffection of contemporary youth, the heavy-handed way in which political events

and social problems are grafted onto the text in later novels has the effect of disrupting the relationship between author/narrator and reader. When this unsophisticated sense of 'impegno' is viewed in comparison with Tabucchi's work, it becomes clear that the commitment of the writer to the relationship with his/her reader is one of the vital components of narrative which has a social impact.

Youth is the focus of part III, in which I study the works of Pier Vittorio Tondelli and Silvia Ballestra. Both these writers genuinely get under the skin of contemporary Italian youth culture, and thus lend some meaning to the otherwise rather vacant label of 'giovane narratore'. Gender and sexual relations are a central concern for youth culture, and one tackled by both these authors: Tondelli foregrounds homosexuality, as a mode of living and of writing, whilst Ballestra explores sexual relations in general, using irony to allow her an almost ungendered perspective (I return to this feature in chapter seven, on women's writing). In chapter five, I consider the huge range of Tondelli's literary/journalistic output, discussing the crossing of generic borders in his work, and examining how such infraction of conventional codes can be related to his writing 'as' a homosexual, both thematically, in that he exposes the way in which social norms inhibit the lifestyle and behaviour of the gay community, and formally, in that there are subtle ways in his novels in which he disrupts the reading process. By contrast, I also consider the surprisingly traditional commitment - redolent of Vittorini - which Tondelli shows to the effort to make literature widely-relevant and 'popular', in the strongest sense of the term, in the form of his various projects encouraging 'ordinary' young people to read and write.

Ballestra is one of the young writers 'discovered' in this way by Tondelli, and I mention in chapter six her continuation of this initiative after Tondelli's death. The more substantial ways in which she picks up where he left off concern the subject matter of her narrative (provincial youth), her language (sensitive to sub-cultural abuses) and her dedication to make literature an integral part of the expression of youth culture, alongside pop music, cartoons, cinema, etc.. In all these ways she tests conventions even more rigorously than her predecessor: for example, bringing the narrative techniques and language of television broadcasts into her texts. She also differentiates herself from him in her fantastical but fundamentally serious representation of current socio-political issues. Anthropology is an epistemology referred to frequently in her writing, and this defines her particular and original commitment to explore and understand the mechanisms of human behaviour, of community, and of cultural expression. Her approach is knowledgeable, intelligent, but far from academic: irony conditions her view of the world, creating a narrative style which is superficially bright and fundamentally dark, and which links her to a 'fault line' deriving from Celati.

From this very contemporary view of the society to which literature should address itself, the final part of this thesis looks at two groups of writers who potentially represent pressure-groups: 'minorities' who have a history of marginalization and who might therefore offer a re-interpretation of protest literature. In chapter seven, I consider three established women writers - Francesca Sanvitale, Fabrizia Ramondino and Francesca Duranti - assessing the relevance of the political and theoretical arguments of feminism on their writing. In a sense, this reveals a

parallel history of fragmentation, in that the earliest text (Sanvitale's *Madre e figlia*) is the one most clearly 'feminist' in themes and approach, after which the foregrounding of women's issues becomes more nuanced and fragmentary, culminating in Duranti's multi-faceted pseudo-novel, *Ultima stesura* (1991). I identify a movement from feminism towards what might be termed 'post-feminism' - the dissolution of gender to only a faint suggestion - which is identifiable in the writing of Ballestra and others of her age-group. The writers in chapter seven are all part of the 'mainstream' - they are not confined by gender or gender issues - and the interweaving of general and gender-specific themes in their works provides a valuable insight into the process of the fragmentation of commitment.

Nuance and fantasy veil a much more urgent sense of injustice in the small corpus of literature by African immigrant writers which I consider in my final chapter. I begin the analysis by investigating the various symptoms of the social and cultural displacement experienced by these writers, and the implications of this for their writing, which apparently needs to be 'adopted' by indigenous Italian writers, journalists, etc., who introduce or co-produce their works. This bears some influence on the generic range covered by this limited collection of texts, from sociological enquiry to the multi-layered novel. The focus of the chapter is the more clearly narrative texts, and particularly one novel by Salah Methnani and two by Mohsen Melliti. I discuss these in detail, exploring the political issue of immigration, and the social issue of the integration of different cultures, and, perhaps most interestingly, the literary issue of the innovative (at least, for European readers) narrative techniques which they employ. The implications for Italian literature of this proposal of a discourse with a different culture, and the particular status of these texts as 'political' writing, are discussed in the conclusion to this chapter. Both here and in greater detail in my general conclusion, I also demonstrate how the particular and urgent type of commitment in the writing by immigrants can be used as a counterpoint to the other 'fragments' I discuss, illuminating the relationship between genuine experience and the narrative representation of it.

The conclusion to the thesis examines the writing I have discussed in the context of postmodernism, assessing to what extent the fragmentation of commitment to a cause, the testing of generic and disciplinary boundaries, the collapse of the high/low culture hierarchy, are all symptoms of the postmodern loss of faith, and to what extent the strong vein of responsibility to society running through my selected authors is a manifestation of a traditional Italian, broadly humanistic, belief in the integrity of literature. I summarize the fragments of commitment encountered in my research, and identify their relationship with social and political questions of the period. The writer-society relationship in the 1980-1995 period is compared with that in the immediate post-war period, leading me to comment on the absorption of writers-intellectuals and working class into a homogenous, 'middle-class' community, which hobbles the writer's attempt to take a stance. The concept of mediocrity, the criticism levelled at most Italian writing of recent years, is questioned in this light, and this reaction correlated with the absence of a vibrant critical community in which young writers might work. I close with an overview of other authors of the 1980-1995 period, and suggestions of how this period might be viewed in the history of late

twentieth-century Italian culture, concluding that 'impegno' has been rehabilitated, piecemeal.

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INTRODUCTION

The standard view of Italian fiction in the period 1980-1995 is that it reflects the 'riflusso' or 'vuoto' of the contemporary socio-political climate.[1] The conviction in the two decades following World War II that literature should engage with political and social issues was eroded by the literary experimentalism of the late 1960s and 1970s, which in turn revealed its limits, leaving a vacuum for writers of the 1980s to attempt to fill. My aim in this thesis is to demonstrate that the doctrine of political commitment in literature which held authority in the early post-war period in Italy manifests itself as a piecemeal engagement with social issues in the prose narrative of the 1980-1995 period. The contemporary instances of 'impegno' are not replicas of the original model but souvenirs of it: metonymic representations of a total experience. As my title suggests, I describe the relation between the original and the contemporary versions using the metaphor of fragmentation: the monolithic notion of commitment to a usually communist agenda in writing began in the late 1950s to reveal cracks of dissension, and the long-term effect of this is a break-up of the commitment to a single, overarching social agenda into a fragmentary attention to specific issues.

This history of literary-political commitment reflects the evolution of political commitment *per se*: the dedication to communism which the Resistance movement in Italy contributed to inspiring began to be questioned in the late 1950s, and adherence

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[1] See Lino Pertile, 'The Italian Novel Today: Politics, Language, Literature', in *The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barañski & Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 1-19 (pp. 16-17).

to the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was partial and argumentative over the next thirty years.[2] This reflects a global, or at least, 'western', withdrawal of commitment to macro-political, left/right-wing ideologies, in favour of micro-political, community-based initiatives. The end of the Cold War, the convergence of the policies of parties of the 'left' and 'right', and the rise of regional and issue-based political parties all illustrate this diffusion (rather than diminution) of political energy.

One of my reasons for selecting the narrative of the period 1980-1995 as my sample for analysis is that this period is taken to include the nadir and zenith of recent political commitment in Italy. In the 1980s, the hegemony of the Christian Democrat (DC) and Italian Socialist Party (PSI) coalition was such that political change seemed to be out of the question. The 'riflusso' - the waning of political enthusiasm - which followed the perceived failure of the second student and workers' uprising in the late 1970s, was chilled into stasis by the terrorism and the extremist political manoeuvrings behind it, making a stagnant status quo in the 1980s ruefully acceptable.[3] With the collapse of communism symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 came the opportunity, or necessity, to break up the existing hegemony, an initiative taken up by the PCI, which signalled its intention to respond to the global re-alignment almost immediately by re-naming itself the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), fully launched in 1991.[4] This voluntary admission of inadequacy on the part of one of the key parties in Italy in the post-war period

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[2] A recent, well-documented history of the PCI is Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy* (London: Penguin, 1990).
[3] See Ginsborg, chapter ten, on the 'riflusso' and terrorism.
[4] See Martin J. Bull, 'The great failure? The Democratic Party of the Left in Italy's transition', in Stephen Gundle & Simon Parker (eds), *The New Italian Republic* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 159-72.

represented an invitation for marginal elements who had long been calling for change to make their voices heard,[5] and the resulting electoral reforms, facilitating the expression of a general sense that at last change was feasible, brought about the so-called 'crisis of the First Republic' in the form of the 'Tangentopoli' investigations into political corruption.[6] This process began in February 1992 and continues to this day, but the height of its activity was the period between mid-1993 and mid-1994, when the investigations focussed on the most famous names in post-war politics and industry, such as ex-prime ministers Craxi (PSI) and Andreotti (DC). The decimation of the political class which had governed seamlessly since World War II left a vacuum to be filled by new parties and politicians, most famously Berlusconi.[7] The purpose of this brief and necessarily simplified summary is to establish that the early 1990s was a period when politics was engaging once more, after a decade of public disaffection with the processes and the people of government. To what extent this engagement was superficial *Schadenfreude* or a genuine impetus for political reform is a question I shall address over the course of my analysis of contemporary writing.[8]

This is why the 'impegno' question is pertinent in the period I have selected. Italy is again purported to be going through a period of political change comparable to the period following World War II when the fascist regime and the monarchy were dissolved and new parties were established. Although the current 'crisis' does not

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[5] For example, Mario Segni pushed for a referendum in June 1991 which ended multi-preference voting, and so the era of coalition government. See Simon Parker, 'Electoral reform and political change in Italy, 1991-1994', in Gundle & Parker, pp. 40-56.

[6] On 'Tangentopoli', see Gundle & Parker, and also Donald Sassoon, *Contemporary Italy*, 2nd edn (London & New York: Longman, 1997).

[7] See Patrick McCarthy, 'Forza Italia: the new politics and old values of a changing Italy', in Gundle & Parker, pp. 130-46.

[8] For a thoughtful assessment of the authenticity of the 'silent revolution' in Italy, see David Hine, 'Italian Political reform in comparative perspective', in Gundle & Parker, pp. 311-25.

involve the drafting of a new constitution, the reforms to the electoral system, the formation of new parties, the adjustments in the rulings over party funding and politicians' business interests, and the questions raised regarding the operations of the judiciary, together indicate that this latest crisis is a systemic one, more profound than the frequent 'crises' in the form of collapse of the ruling coalition which have characterized (and become the caricature of) post-war Italian public life.[9] The unofficial label of the 'crisis of the First Republic' points out the comparable magnitude of the situations in the late 1940s and the early 1990s. The former is the situation which gave birth to the idea of 'impegno' in literature, so it seems incumbent on anyone interested in the way literature operates with or within a social context to ask how writers are responding to the equivalent moment of acute constitutional crisis in the 1990s.

As in the late 1940s, the specific political emergency in Italy is the cypher of a situation of significant social change. In the 1940s, this concerned the economic and industrial renewal required to repair the damage inflicted by fascist rule and by the conflict within the peninsula between Allied and German powers.[10] The wider context was the recovery of the continental body of Europe from the seizure of the war. In the 1990s, the social pressures on Italy are partly attributable again to its geographical and political location: immigration, from North Africa and from Eastern Europe, is a huge social challenge which appeared in the 1980s and has accelerated in the 1990s.[11] The

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[9] On the chaotic appearance of Italian public life, see Joseph La Palombara, *Democracy Italian Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[10] See Ginsborg, chapter three.

[11] My chapter on immigrant writing deals with this issue in detail. On the sociological phenomenon, see Vanessa Maher, 'Immigration and Social Identities', in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. by David Forgacs & Robert Lumley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 160-77.

most unstable regions of Europe - Albania and the former Yugoslavia - are Italy's closest neighbours to the east, and Albanian refugees in particular have been a source of friction for the Italian government. During the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and in the Gulf at the beginning of this decade, Italy served as a launch-pad towards the war-zones for American and British forces. Regional differences, always acutely felt in Italy, have been accentuated by the general rise in nationalism and regionalism in Europe, in response to the break-up of umbrella states such as Yugoslavia and the USSR. The north-south opposition in particular has been boosted in one sense by the apparent justification provided for the northern separatist parties (subsumed into the Lega Nord) by Tangentopoli's exposure of the corruption in central government which they had always claimed wasted the fruits of northern labour. That the investigations centred on Milan, 'Kickback City' itself, was seemingly a technicality. In a second sense, the Lega benefited from the opportunity to gain power at the national level offered by the changes in electoral law and the demolition of the DCI-PSI hegemony, and from the general receptiveness to alternatives on the part of a disillusioned electorate.[12] Italy in the early 1990s is therefore a country whose national identity is under threat perhaps more acutely than at any time since the Risorgimento.

The more positive influence on social change is the move towards closer European integration, which Italy has always keenly supported. Despite the long-term soundness of this process, the pressures on Italy during the transitional period have

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[12] See Ilvo Diamanti, 'The Northern League: from regional party to party of government', in Gundle & Parker, pp. 113-29.

been harsh: the demands to curb public sector debt and stabilize the lira in order to join the ERM and later EMU;[13] the reaction to the failure of Italian immigration laws and their enforcers to control entry to the country, and to provide decent conditions for those who gain it, legally or otherwise; the disapproval, communicated by the European media and through diplomatic channels, of certain aspects of Italy's political reconstruction, particularly the success of the neo-fascist party (MSI) and the opacity of Berlusconi's financial arrangements. This is not to suggest that Italy has been victimized unduly by other members of the European Union or by the institution itself:[14] what I wish to illustrate is that, despite the appearance of economic affluence and impressive standards of living which most of Italy generates, it is a country which, in the 1980s and 1990s as much as in any of the previous decades in which its suffering was worn more obviously on its sleeve, is troubled by questions regarding its own identity and stability. Add to the above the social issues facing all 'developed' societies in the last twenty years, such as drug abuse and the challenges posed by changing gender and sexual relations, and it becomes clear that Italy in the 1980s and 1990s is a society ripe for the sort of self-scrutiny to which literature can make a fundamental contribution.

The obvious question to pose in the light of the above assertion is: how exactly can an individual writer address the neuroses of the society to which she belongs? Already in phrasing the question like this, I have pre-empted the response, implying

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[13] Such economic pressures influenced the process of political reformation in the form of the 'technocrat' prime ministers from the Banca d'Italia (Ciampi, 1993-4; Dini, 1995-6) charged with safeguarding the economy while the political drama continued. On the economy in the 1990s, see Sassoon, chapter five.

[14] On European influence, see David Hine, *Governing Italy: The Politics of Bargained Pluralism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), chapter ten.

that the writer is an analyst of the national psyche. This is precisely what I want to avoid doing, and why I shall not attempt to assess the potential definitions of 'impegno' in this introduction. My thesis is that the 'fragments' of 'impegno' in the narrative of the 1980-1995 period are all suggestions of how to define the term, or rather, of how to refine our understanding of what the term might potentially mean. It is therefore preferable that the writers or their works speak for themselves in the course of my research, re-enacting the process of refinement, rather than that I prescribe the parameters of their discussion from the outset. Part one will examine the original definitions of 'impegno' in the work of writers of the immediate post-war period, and then trace its derivations into the 1970s; the main body of the thesis (parts II to IV) will pursue certain interpretations of commitment in the works of writers of my focus period.

This said, I wish to take here a preliminary step in the direction of defining 'impegno', in order to prise it away from its instinctive association with a rather oppressive type of political literature of the 1940s and 1950s, and to open the reader's mind to the potential of the term before proceeding to examples of its application. This first step is to look at the definitions of the word in abstract. 'Commitment' and 'engagement' are the principle equivalents in English - words familiar in literary discussion. Other suggestions include 'undertaking', 'obligation', 'liability' and 'responsibility' - words which increase the gravity of the transaction and put the accent on the punitive implications of falling short in one's 'impegno'.[15] What is clear

[15] These definitions are from the Cambridge-Signorelli Italian-English, English-Italian Dictionary (1985 edition). The *Nuovo Zingarelli* Italian dictionary (Eleventh Edition) suggests in addition the sense of a burden ('briga, incombenza'): I shall highlight instances in the course of my research where I believe the political content does burden the narrative. The *Zingarelli* also describes the literary

is that the word 'impegno' presupposes a relationship; and a relationship charged with a moral significance. In the context of literature, this relationship has two representations, which are not necessarily distinct from one another: indeed, one is perhaps a metaphor of the other. The two relationships are between the writer and the reader and between the writer and the society in which he writes. The notion of 'impegno' dictates that the writer has some responsibility for the response she produces in the reader/ship, and that this respondent treats responsibly the commitment thus made by the writer. Here, a splinter of the definition of 'impegno' is pertinent: 'pegno', from which the term derives, is the word for pawn. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (Seventh edition) defines pawn as 'thing left in another's keeping as security', a description which covers the elements of both trust and risk in the bond between writer and reader. In short, the wider implications of my research concern the ethics of writing.

This prescription makes some theoretical assumptions which should also be explained at this point. The most obvious is my assumption that the author is not dead.[16] Although it would be an oversimplification comparable to that of killing off the author to claim that the notion of 'impegno' demands that there be the presence of an individual, opinionated consciousness to make a commitment in her writing, I think it is clear from my description of a relationship in the previous paragraph that I believe that individual will exists and manifests its intentions in writing, and

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version of 'impegno': 'attivo interessamento ai problemi sociali e politici da parte dell'uomo di cultura'. I have not taken this to preclude my discussing women writers in this thesis.

[16] I refer to Barthes' famous elimination of the author in his essay 'The death of the author' (1968), included in Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-8.

'committed' literature in particular demonstrates that the message has some independence from the medium.[17] However, that a constant and identifiable personality uses writing as a means of creating a prescribable response is an inadequate description of the creative process. A writer offers up a certain part of his consciousness in adopting a position from which to write, and the interpretation of what is written depends on this author-function, but also on the position of the text (its language, form, the way it is published and marketed), and on the position (or disposition) of the reader, who, like the writer, can function in a variety of ways in this textual performance, reading 'as' a man, woman, intellectual, political activist, teenager, etc..[18] The reader, like the writer, is still a human, social being, and brings to the text the traces of a set of factors and experiences, biological and cultural, which make him an individual subject. The text equally has a degree of autonomy as a particular set of words, outside of its immediate context. It is the conjunction of the three sets of factors, representing the writer, reader and, to a lesser extent, the text, which determines which positions are taken up in the negotiation which is the experience of literature, or 'reading'.

In placing such emphasis on the relationship implied in committed literature - that is, that the writer does not commit (a part of) himself in a void but commits himself to paper, which will be passed on to another - I am clearly drawing on the

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[17] A thorough discussion of the significance of authorial intention is provided by W.K. Wimsatt, 'The intentional fallacy' in *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), in conjunction with E.D. Hirsch, 'In defense of the author', in *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

[18] The notion of the 'author-function' is proposed by Michel Foucault in the essay 'What is an author?' (1969), included in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory* (London & New York: Longman, 1988), pp. 197-210. A convincing discussion of the possibility of reading 'as' is the first chapter of Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).

various theories of reader response.[19] In considering the reader-function in terms of readership - the society which responds to the text - reception theory also provides a basis.[20] The assessment of a work according to its reception by a succession of societies over time is clearly not relevant in a discussion of such contemporary writing as I have selected, but the recognition of the associations a text acquires in a certain historical context is indispensable to my analysis. Fish's theory of 'interpretive communities', though reductive, has also been influential in my assessment of how the reception of novels is influenced (determined, according to Fish) by the social conditions of its readers.[21]

To adopt any one theory or school as a methodological model, in a thesis which approaches a wide variety of texts and authors, would be myopic, running counter to my aim of expanding the referential panorama of the 'impegno' question. Like 'impegno' itself, 'theory' is a grand concept which has been questioned and broken down in recent literary practice, and its appearance in contemporary Italian writing is fragmentary. I shall therefore use theory as the *apparatus criticus* to facilitate my analysis. Feminist theory and philosophy, for example, have an impact on the chapter on women writers, and the Derridean investigation of *différance* informs the discussion of sexual difference in the chapter on Tondelli.[22] The theories potentially relevant in discussing politics and literature are many, from Marxist theory and its

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[19] The phenomenology of reading is examined in detail by, most notably, Barthes (1969; trans. 1975), Iser (1976; trans. 1978), Fish (1980), and Eco, in *Lector in fabula* (Milan: Bompiani, 1979). A valuable survey of the subject is Elizabeth Freund, *The Return Of The Reader* (London: Methuen, 1987).
[20] Hans Robert Jauss proposed his *Rezeptions-ästhetik* in the late 1960s. A clear account is Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory* (London: Methuen, 1984).
[21] Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text In This Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
[22] See the 1968 lecture, 'Différance', in Jacques Derrida, *Margins Of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 1-27.

adaptations to New Historicism and Neopragmatist philosophy. The concern of such theories with how ideologies express themselves in literature and even dictate it is a valuable caveat in my research but not a core concern. More interesting is the exploration of how literature can challenge ideologies and in what ways it performs a social role.[23] As indicated above, I shall proceed with a general critical sensitivity, and call upon such theories as they become relevant to my discussion, but the focus of my attention will be the practice, rather than the theory, of the interaction between literature and society. Postmodernism is one theory or concept which must be addressed in any discussion of the form and function of contemporary art, and which some of my selected authors foreground. My conclusion will assess the significance of postmodernism in the field of my research.

Criticism of the novels I discuss in the main body of this thesis mainly takes the form of broad surveys. *Fiori di carta* by Cesare De Michelis provides the model for the sort of reference manual to contemporary narrative of which others have produced versions: brief records of the works of individual writers, indicating comparisons but not attempting to identify trends or to map features of recent narrative onto the cultural background.[24] La Porta's *La nuova narrativa italiana* groups writers in a more informative manner, and is critically bolder both in assessing individual writers and in suggesting the context which influenced their writing.[25] *Altre storie*, a

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[23] An intelligent synthesis of theories of literature's capacity for questioning ideologies is Jonathan Culler, 'Political Criticism', in David Wood (ed.), *Writing The Future* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 192-204. He ultimately calls for a 'varied and opportunistic' (p. 203) political criticism, which describes the type of resistance manifested in some of the recent writing I discuss.
[24] Cesare De Michelis, *Fiori di carta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990).
[25] Filippo La Porta, *La nuova narrativa italiana* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995). This is clearly more up-to-date than De Michelis' work.

collaborative project, analyses new writing from both commercial and literary points of view, and provides a useful index of authors and critical material.[26] Tani's *Il romanzo di ritorno* is perhaps the most thought-provoking of these surveys in Italian, situating narrative of the 1980s in relation to the recent history of the novel in Italian, and posing the question of mediocrity.[27] He posits that contemporary Italian narrative has run into a bottleneck around the 'romanzo medio': the middle-brow bestseller which in its form and content represents no serious challenge to the reader's perception of herself and the society she lives in. This concept of mediocrity is valuable as a device by which to measure recent Italian fiction in ways beyond those on which Tani concentrates, raising questions regarding, for example, whether mediocrity is a manifestation of indifference - sticking to the middle of the road politically, rather than committing oneself to a cause - or an ironic statement whereby one occupies the middle ground as a political statement, in order to criticize it from within. In short, Tani judges mediocrity to be a negative attribute, whereas I think it is worth considering its relevance beyond the value-scale of high, middle and low culture. This is a consideration I shall raise in reference to individual authors, and to which I shall return in my conclusion.

English-language commentaries on contemporary Italian narrative are scarce. *The New Italian Novel* is a collection of essays more rigorous than the Italian equivalents on writers of the 1980s, some of whom I have included in my thesis.[28] I am indebted to this collection for the sound presentation it gives of individual writers,

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[26] *Altre storie: Inventario della nuova narrativa italiana fra anni '80 e '90*, ed. by Raffaele Cardone and others (Milan: Assessorato alla cultura, Provincia di Milano & Marcos y Marcos: 1996).
[27] Stefano Tani, *Il romanzo di ritorno* (Milan: Mursia, 1990).
[28] See note 1.

and for the informed account of the broader context provided by Pertile's introduction. However, my objective in this thesis is to advance research in this area in three ways. The first is in bringing the analysis up to date, because new factors have come into play in the fiction of the 1990s, including the socio-political developments detailed above. This leads to the second, which is the inclusion of authors who have so far received little or no critical attention, especially in English-language studies: for example, Silvia Ballestra and immigrant writers. The final, most important progression is my aim not to skim the surface of the literary scene, as do the surveys I have discussed above, but to cut a cross-section through it on a specific angle.[29] To look specifically at the demonstrations of commitment to political and social issues in contemporary writing is, I believe, to make a qualitative advancement in the knowledge of the literature of the period. To contextualize this within the history of post-war Italian literature, as I attempt to do in part one, is to open a new outlet on the existing scholarship. In investigating the political and social issues raised by writers in contemporary Italy, I also aim to shift the analysis of contemporary narrative away from a strictly literary epistemology towards a broader cultural inquiry. My chapter on immigrant writers provides the most traction in this direction.

Regarding my own selection of writers for analysis, the first comment I would make regards the date margins, 1980 to 1995. 1980 marks a turning point in Italian fiction, in that critical opinion has labelled the 1970s as the decade of the decline of

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[29] The precedent for this perspective is provided by Michael Caesar and Peter Hainsworth (eds), *Writers And Society In Contemporary Italy* (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1984). As the date of publication indicates, the writers selected represent a generation preceding the writers I discuss, but the introduction and general approach provide an indispensable reference for my research. See also John Gatt-Rutter, *Writers And Politics In Modern Italy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978).

the novel, the only viable option being to write literature referring only to itself.[30] The marker of this turn inwards is identified as Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979), a 'novel' about the process of creating novels. This work was significant also in its success in translation, which seemed to auspicate a re-birth of Italian narrative. Its birth partner was Eco's *Il nome della rosa* (1980), an even greater international success endowing Italian writing with new glamour.[31] Again, this is a novel whose subject-matter is pointedly removed from contemporary social issues (at least in the most immediate sense). The decade thus seems to open with two ambitions: one, the expansion of Italian narrative, in terms of its production and distribution; and the second, the contraction or condensation of its frame of reference. I intend to trace the extent to which these ambitions were adjusted in the face of the political and social evolution of the decade, producing different ambitions for the 1990s.

The progeny of the inaugural novels by Eco and Calvino are the works by the so-called 'giovani narratori' which the 1980s nurtured.[32] This label is one which most of its carriers reject, and which appears to be a marketing contrivance devised by the publishing industry rather than a genuine statement of community. There is indeed a plethora of 'young' writers publishing in the 1980s, no doubt encouraged by the

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[30] This judgment lacks subtlety, failing to take into account successful novels such as Elsa Morante's *La storia* (1974). La Porta's introduction argues that narrative was still alive in the 1970s: however, in comparison to the preceding and following decades, the status of the novel was weak.

[31] See Carla Benedetti, *Pasolini contro Calvino: Per una letteratura impura* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), p. 45. Benedetti contends that Pasolini's *Petrolio*, had he lived to complete it, would also have been published in 1979, challenging the inaugural authority of Calvino and Eco's novels and perhaps influencing literary development in the 1980s.

[32] See the introduction to Barañski & Pertile on the 'giovani narratori' phenomenon. As Pertile points out, the deaths in the 1980s of most of the 'old masters' of Italian narrative - Morante, Calvino, Parise, Levi, Sciascia, Moravia - facilitated the marketing of a new, young generation.

industry's receptivity to their work.[33] However, I shall use the term 'giovani narratori' only as the expedient it is for describing the group at its widest, and as a reminder of the commercial interest it indicates. The looseness of the term is in fact a signal that there is an absence of 'schools' in contemporary writing, and little communication of critical opinion or sense of a mutual creative project amongst writers. The implications of this diaspora, an aspect of the 'fragmentation' idea, will be discussed in my conclusion.

1995 was selected as the close of my analysis, partly to accommodate the literary response to the social and political developments I have already explained, and partly in order to see how the 'giovani narratori' age. A new label, 'pulp' or 'cannibale' has ousted 'giovani narratori' in the mid-1990s, and though it again arouses the suspicion of artifice attached to any media-friendly initiative, in this case there is clearly a stylistic concord to justify the grouping. I shall discuss this in my chapter on Silvia Ballestra.

In covering fifteen years of prolific publication of narrative fiction in Italian I am casting my net very wide; but it is a net with holes of a specific shape. My selection of authors for the body of the thesis is limited first by the fact that I am fishing only in the waters of 'impegno': seeking authors whose work has a political or social dimension, even if not in an obvious sense. The second selection is of authors of a particular shape: the 'big fish' in the mainstream of the publishing industry, who

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[33] La Porta includes approximately seventy authors in his survey (though this also covers the early 1990s); De Michelis covers fifty-four.

address contemporary politics (part II: Tabucchi and De Carlo); the medium-sized ones held in the powerful cross-current of 'youth' writing, who comment with acuity on multiple aspects of contemporary society (part III: Tondelli and Ballestra); and the minnows grouped near the banks, who raise specific, 'minority' issues (part IV: women and immigrant writers).[34] I shall explain in detail in chapter seven my reasons for grouping women writers. This risks being a ghettoizing move, suggesting that they are a minority struggling for recognition, and have relevance only as such. This is clearly not valid: in general, women in Italy have a degree of power and opportunity comparable to that of women in any other 'western' society; there are women writers in Italy as successful as their male counterparts (though fewer of them); and their writing is not delimited by their gender. This position of relative privilege does not, however, annul their right to foreground issues pertaining to their gender: in fact, it proffers the possibility of questioning the very concept of 'gender issues', 'women's rights', etc.. I have therefore addressed women writers in conjunction with immigrant writers, as another example of potentially 'single-issue' writing; and in a group, in order to maximize the range of commentary both on the issue itself, and on the process of committing the issue to paper.

To summarize, part one will assess the origins of the 'impegno' concept, and then trace some of the 'fault lines' by which the concept is undermined. Chapters three to eight will then consider the 'fragments': writers of the 1980-1995 period who demonstrate different interpretations of commitment, firstly to politics in its public,

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[34] Individual chapters and my conclusion will address specifically the authors excluded from my selection.

ideological guise, then to politics as the performance in the social arena of personal or group needs and interests. My conclusion will attempt to decide whether these expressions of 'impegno' are attached to a specific set of social and political circumstances, and to assess where they stand in the history of Italian literature in the Twentieth Century, with a glance towards the Twenty-First. In order to reach such a level of critical disengagement, however, it is first necessary to engage with the various 'scrittori impegnati'.

PART I: CHAPTER ONE

VITTORINI AND CALVINO:

THE 'IMPEGNO' DEBATE OF THE EARLY POST-WAR PERIOD

In order to assess the extent to which writers of the 1980s and 1990s are politically 'committed', and indeed to assess what the term itself might mean, it is necessary to return to the origins of the literary use of the term 'impegno' in the debate of the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. During this period, much was written about the place of the intellectual in the modern, industrialized society which Italy was rapidly becoming. The challenge was not only to express but to address the problems faced by a growing and struggling working class. The writers and intellectuals who contributed to this debate are many: Vittorini, Calvino, Pasolini, Gadda, Moravia, Pavese, Arbasino, Eco, Fortini, Ferretti, Asor Rosa.[1]

In terms of the subject of this thesis - how literature can express a commitment to socio-political issues - I think it is most useful to concentrate on Vittorini and Calvino. These two discussed the issue in the greatest detail in literary journals, culminating in their joint editorship of *Il menabò*,[2] and the striking differences (though slow to manifest themselves) in their visions of the relationship between the writer and society create a tension which stretches the specifically literary question to its limits. This tension might be interpreted as fundamentally, if elliptically, influential

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[1] Journals and newspapers, such as *Rinascita* and *l'Unità*, and others which I refer to below, provided a major forum for debate.

[2] Published by Einaudi, in ten issues, from 1959-67. Vittorini also edited *Il politecnico* for Einaudi, from 1945-7.

on some of the writing of the 1980s and 1990s, to be discussed in parts II to IV of this thesis.

Pasolini is the 'intellettuale impegnato' of the post-war period whose total absence from this study would be remarkable, especially in the light of the recent debate detonated by Carla Benedetti.[3] The failure of contemporary writers to refer to Pasolini is in itself insufficient reason for his exclusion, since they rarely acknowledge explicitly any influence of their Italian literary forebears, yet, like Calvino and Vittorini, Pasolini is a part of the culture from which they have developed. As Benedetti has amply demonstrated, there are powerful reasons why Pasolini's contribution to the development of Italian literature in the middle part of the century should be considered: his very public involvement in debate on political and cultural topics, his relentless experimentation with artistic forms, and perhaps most strikingly, his resistance to self-perpetuating systems, such as the Italian cultural establishment.

It is perhaps during the period of the journal *Officina* (1955-9) that Pasolini offers the most scope for influence. The name - 'workshop' - suggests a concordance with Vittorini's attitude towards his critical work: it is indeed work - practical, demanding - and it has more affinity with the manual labour of the working classes than with the cerebral activity of intellectuals. The flaw in this project is encapsulated in Pasolini's interpretation of the term 'officina'. Robert Gordon describes 'Pasolini's own nostalgic, anti-modernist penchant for metaphors of artisanal work to describe his

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[3] Carla Benedetti, *Pasolini contro Calvino* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998). The debate mooted in the title was launched in newspapers and literary journals in anticipation of the publication of the work itself, and continued for months afterwards. For analysis of this debate, see Robert S.C. Gordon, '*Pasolini contro Calvino*: culture, the canon and the millennium', in *Modern Italy*, 3 (1998), 87-99.

intellectual and aesthetic activities'.[4] Pasolini's contributions to the debate on the future of literature have less to do with the practical problem of creating a 'popular' literature than with an almost utopian quest for poetic self-realization (although Vittorini and Calvino are by no means immune to romanticization of their own work, as I shall demonstrate).

Pasolini personally sets himself apart from Calvino, in a review of Calvino's *Le città invisibili*.[5] Having described their 'closeness' of age, beliefs, and intellectual endeavour, he identifies a separation: 'All'inizio degli anni Sessanta, qualcosa si spaccava, e io e lui eravamo sulle parti opposte della spaccatura' (pp. 58-9). Though Pasolini does not discuss here the nature of the divide, it can be summarized in Calvino's sympathy and Pasolini's antipathy towards the 'avanguardie', a theoretical divergence which continues into the 1970s, with Calvino becoming increasingly ludic and ironic, and Pasolini proportionally explicit and direct. Interpreted according to Benedetti's suspiciously neat schematization, this 'spaccatura' would mark the inauguration of Calvino's subtly self-promotional project to make of his own notion of literary perfection the hegemonic concept of literature in contemporary Italy. Apparently, the progress of this project works to exclude Pasolini in the sub-culture of 'letteratura impura'. Purity is associated with irony, abstraction, clarity, completeness; impurity with passion, involvement, confusion, fragmentation.

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[4] Robert S.C. Gordon, *Pasolini: Forms of Subjectivity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 3.
[5] This review was written for the journal, *Tempo illustrato*, in January 1973. See Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Descrizioni di descrizioni*, ed. by Graziella Chiarcossi (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), pp. 58-64.

Benedetti may well be right with regard to the 1970s onwards, but until the 1960s, I think the interesting part of the debate, and the part which includes the 'impure' features of fragmentation, contradiction, and perplexity, lies with Calvino and Vittorini. As I hope to demonstrate, their discussions of 'impegno' are troublesome, and it is for this reason that I think they illustrate best the difficulty of the whole concept - a difficulty which persists to this day. Pasolini's more striking qualities as an intellectual maverick, passionately 'committed' to issues such as the use of dialect, make his work seem the more compelling object of study, but these are part of a performance of the artist. He does not address the practicalities of the relationship between literature and society, which genuinely trouble Vittorini and Calvino (though in different ways). Pasolini's varied and problematic exploration of writing connotes a range of possibilities for development by younger writers, but these possibilities have simply not been grasped in the period of my study.[6]

Terminology

There are two entities with whom the writer is potentially establishing a relationship, or to whom she is potentially 'committed': society and the reader. An estimation of the extent to which the two groups remain distinct, overlap, or subsume one another in the activity of an individual writer is one measure of the meaning of 'impegno', and its modernization. When Vittorini talks of the 'popolo', he has in mind society, in a sense almost as broad as that of 'population'. He comments that writers of his age were born with a 'concetto di popolo', rather than specifically a

[6] There is some suggestion in reviews of the 'pulp' writers of the late 1990s that Pasolini's influence is manifest in their thematic of violence: e.g. Bruno Ventavoli, 'Pulp Romanzo. Figli di Pasolini, fratelli di Tarantino', *Tuttolibri*, 999 (23.3.96), 1.

'conoscenza di classe'.[7] For those brought up under fascism, as he was, 'esistevano [...] dei rapporti di azione in senso popolare. Un senso di disagio generale. Anche di ostilità generale, se si vuole. Ma esso non si manifestava come azione classista. Portava, come ho detto, o riportava, a un concetto di popolo' (p. 44). This 'popolo' may or may not contain readers, but it is implicitly seen as a society of potential readers, in the sense that reading has the potential to be a key contributor to their collective fulfilment. Vittorini barely ever, I hazard, expresses the relationship between himself and society as a relationship between a writer-individual and a reader-individual; rather, he considers himself as one of a group of intellectuals (political theorists, economists, anthropologists, artists, writers) who have to create or develop a relationship with a group of 'people' (industrial, domestic, agricultural workers, non-workers, and, amongst them, readers). The author-reader relationship is, in other words, a subset of a much greater, even universal, set of relationships.

In the debate of the period, Calvino explores this concept of his role as writer, 'politically correct' in its historical context, but it is never a system with which he seems comfortable. As his later works declare, but earlier works also suggest, he is more interested in the relationship between individuals - specifically the two individuals brought together by the literary text - than in interaction between ill-defined collectives in which literature has an important but not primary significance. He himself seems to have difficulty with the concept of 'popolo', whereas the reader is someone he can readily envisage, and even mould. The risk in identifying the above

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[7]These comments appear in the posthumous edition of *Il menabò* dedicated to Vittorini: *Il menabò di letteratura*, 10, ed. by Italo Calvino (Einaudi, 1967); referred to hereafter as *m*10. Calvino entitled the first section, containing writings by Vittorini, 'Diario in pubblico: La ragione conoscitiva' (pp. 7-63).

difference is that of proscribing Vittorini as man of his time, crucial in literary historical terms but with limited present-day relevance, and Calvino as a premature postmodernist, in dialogue with critical theory of the late 1960s and the 1970s. This characterization has some validity, but I aim to show that the response of each to post-war cultural development is more complex than a simple pre- and post-theory opposition can measure.

The trickery of the term 'popolo' is famously exposed in Asor Rosa's critique of 'populism' in Italian literature, *Scrittori e popolo*.[8] He calls the bluff of literature of the immediate post-war period, arguing that writers' attempts to engage with the 'people' in fact represent an idealization - a barely-urbanized perpetuation of the romantic myth of the noble peasant: 'l'intellettuale va verso il popolo, ma *il più delle volte, prima ancora di raggiungerlo concretamente e seriamente lo trasforma in mito, in immagine rovesciata di sé*' (p. 161; italics in text). As a Marxist, he interprets from a rigorously socio-political perspective the laxity of the term 'popolo' which I described above, blaming the lack of specific analysis of the working class for the mystification of the term: '*Popolo e classe operaia sono nell'uso comune sinonimi;* il discorso scivola dall'uno all'altro termine, dall'uno all'altro concetto senza che il critico si renda quasi conto che fra di essi passa un abisso' (p. 249; italics in text). Vittorini's comment, quoted above, demonstrates Asor Rosa's contention: his generation entertained an abstract 'concept' of the people, as opposed to a genuine familiarity with a specific socio-economic grouping. Umberto Eco, in *Apocalittici e*

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[8] Alberto Asor Rosa , *Scrittori e popolo* (Rome: Samonà e Savelli, 1965). I refer to the 1975 edition.

integrati,[9] identifies the same problem from a semiotician's perspective, pointing out that the terms 'massa' and 'cultura' are both used as if their signified were defined, when in fact their meaning remains largely uninvestigated.[10]

Asor Rosa's exposure of the short-sightedness of critics, and particularly, of writers of the period inevitably illuminates my analysis, and I shall refer to his work specifically at certain points. My aim, however, is to engage with the debate by minimizing my critical distance from Vittorini and Calvino, although to do so partially involves adopting the distance they themselves set. In the context of the 1940s to the 1960s, the journals, *Il politecnico* and, later, *Il menabò*, provided the forum for exchange and development of ideas, but the authors' collection of articles into consolidated literary works at a later date is telling. Hindsight permits highlights: the author, or his editors, faced with a set of spontaneous contributions to a debate, can pick out some and leave others in the shade. This is not to suggest that the author produces a 'false' version of his previous thinking, because there is no such thing: the later presentation is 'genuinely' representative, but representative of a different interpretive step - a metacritical moment, that reveals how time and experience have acted upon the theories and the theorist. By concentrating on the collections of critical work by Vittorini and Calvino, I hope to maximize the insight afforded by their inherent dual perspective.

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[9] Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati* (Milan: Bompiani, 1964).

[10] See Zygmunt G. Barañski & Robert Lumley, 'Turbulent Transitions: An Introduction', in *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy*, ed .by Barañski & Lumley (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 1-19 (p. 10). They comment that 'massa' is used in the American sense of mass-produced goods, whereas 'popolo' has a folkloric sense, embracing 'the rich variety of cultural life enjoyed by the majority of the inhabitants of the peninsula'.

Vittorini

Vittorini's own collection of his critical writings was published in 1957, and contains pieces from the period 1929-1956, taken from journals (pre-dating *Il menabò*), newspapers, conference papers, letters.[11] A dialogue is produced between the original articles and the footnotes added by the author for publication, giving Vittorini the opportunity to be the critic of his own ideas, but the retrospective comments are rarely the 'last word'. Instead, the footnotes often take the form of questions, indicating the author's keenness to probe the argument further in the light of what has elapsed, critically or politically, since the original comment. A second 'public diary', circa 1957, is superimposed on the original chronicle of three decades, and the reader is offered a dual image of the writer of the past and of the present.

Critics have responded to the dialogue of synchronic and diachronic perspectives in this work in various ways. Rodondi analyses in detail Vittorini's omissions from this collection,[12] and concludes that the work represents a punctilious sculpturing of the author's self-image. The prevalence of ellipses in my quotations from *Diario in pubblico* is a measure of the author's truth-economies, but I think self-representation is only a part of the author's objective here. Asor Rosa, in an explicitly retrospective assessment of Vittorini's work,[13] claims that the process of self-fashioning accommodates the cultural chronicle of a generation: 'la bipolarità speculare della struttura recupera il *vero dell'esperienza*, ma solo per sistemarlo

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[11] Elio Vittorini, *Diario in pubblico* (Milan: Bompiani, 1957); referred to hereafter as *Dip*. I have used the 'Gli struzzi' edition (Turin: Einaudi, 1980).
[12] Raffaella Rodondi, *Il presente vince sempre: Tre studi su Vittorini* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1985).
[13] Alberto Asor Rosa, 'Lo sperimentalismo utopico di Elio Vittorini', in Paolo Mario Sipala & Elena Salibra (eds), *Vittorini vent'anni dopo: Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi* (Siracusa - 3/5 aprile 1986) (Siracusa: Ediprint, 1988), pp. 9-20.

dentro *l'immagine nuova*, che lo scrittore fornisce di sé mediante il lavoro di scomposizione e ricomposizione del suo lavoro passato' (p. 17). He identifies in *Diario in pubblico* a new form of literary text, which creates of documentary and critical writings a work having the descriptive coherence of a novel. From the perspective of the 1980s, he sees it as an almost postmodern 'bricolage': 'Quello che in altre opere di Vittorini è puramente e semplicemente il "non finito", in *Diario in pubblico* è l'originale scoperta della totale manipolabilità della scrittura a fini altri da quelli originari' (p. 17). Referring to Vittorini's pursuit of 'verità', which I shall shortly discuss, he sees this collection as the closest the author comes to the sought-after 'macrotext' which might express the complexity of human existence.

The writings in this work are collected under four clear headings, 'La ragione letteraria / antifascista / culturale / civile', all covering specific periods. Why is it entitled *Diario in pubblico*? The title suggests that the individual consciousness is being exposed in the public arena, but these are writings which originally appeared in very public places (newspapers and journals), and were written for, and largely about, the public. The work is a diary rather in the sense of a chronicle, that is, a presentation of the progression of an individual's thinking in the terms of a specific historical period. Its potent civic sense is the motor of the work, driving two main courses of thinking: one regarding culture in general, and the other, specifically literature. To draw such distinctions is to simplify violently, but provides useful parameters for discussing Vittorini's writings. I shall therefore consider the two aspects separately.

Culture

Culture seems to be a concept with which Vittorini feels more comfortable than with literature *tout court*. Culture, by his definition, is something active and organic, in whose production the 'popolo' might actively participate. In a sense, he sees it as society's expression of itself, in a much more immediate and genuine way than literature alone can facilitate. Although culture seems to signify for Vittorini the all-embracing sum of human interest and co-operation - a humanistic concept of culture as the vehicle for self-fulfilment - difficulty and ambiguity persist in his perception of popular culture. He clearly believes and states that culture should be accessible to all, but the mechanics of translating this high-cultural ideal of individual advancement into a language which corresponds with the consciousness of factory-workers are never investigated. For example, in an article of 1945, addressing the re-building of the Italian education system after the caesura of the War, Vittorini calls for equal access to education. He declares, 'È nell'interesse della civiltà che anche il più umile lavoratore manuale si trovi, di fronte ai libri, di fronte alle opere d'arte, di fronte al pensiero scientifico e filosofico, di fronte alle ideologie politiche, ecc., nelle stesse condizioni (...) in cui, funzionalmente, si trova l'ingegnere, il medico o il professore' (*Dip*, p. 181). But how does this come about? Vittorini expresses a messianic ambition to change culture from an exclusive to an inclusive concept, but between ambition and realization is a reality gap - Asor Rosa's 'abisso', as quoted above.[14]

[14] See Gian Carlo Ferretti, *L'editore Vittorini* (Turin: Einaudi, 1992). Ferretti comments on Vittorini's lack of consciousness of new production and marketing methods which were changing the nature of culture. Despite his discourse of modernity, 'manca in particolare a Vittorini la consapevolezza dei crescenti dislivelli socioculturali' (p. 302).

The workings of culture itself are similarly ineffable. Vittorini refers frequently to a central concept: 'lo spirito di ricerca'. This 'spirit' is the essence and energy-source of culture, and the reason why it is so important to human development. The very phrase encapsulates two directions which persist in Vittorini's critical thinking: the 'spirito' expresses a metaphysical quality, whilst the 'ricerca' indicates a more practical and earthly activity. These two directions broadly correspond with those the author identifies as 'tensione affettiva' and 'tensione razionale', in notes collected posthumously under the title, *Le due tensioni*.[15] The combination of emotion and reason, vision and hard work, is central to Vittorini's attitude to culture, and provides, I think, the beginnings of a counter-argument to *Scrittori e popolo*.

To concur with Asor Rosa, there is undeniably an aestheticizing propulsion behind Vittorini's thinking about culture. The following definition of culture envisages it as a protective cordon safeguarding traditionally high-cultural values from inimical political influence:

> Aspira, volendolo, ad ordinare il mondo in un modo per cui il mondo 'non ricada più' sotto il dominio di un interesse economico, o comunque di una necessità, di un automatismo, e possa, al contrario, identificare il proprio movimento con quello della ricerca della verità, della filosofia, dell'arte, insomma della cultura stessa. (*Dip*, p. 249)

This socially-unaccountable tendency goes hand-in-hand, however, with a practical tenacity, which, if it fails to realize any practicable methodology for universalizing culture, at least manifests a commitment to that objective, in the form of the contributions collected in *Diario in pubblico*. It seems that Vittorini and Asor Rosa

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[15] Elio Vittorini, *Le due tensioni: Appunti per una ideologia della letteratura*, ed. by Dante Isella (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1967); referred to hereafter as *dt*. The notes date from the period 1961-1965.

seek the same destination but are travelling there along parallel lines. Asor Rosa follows a Marxist line, whilst Vittorini follows an eclectic theoretical course, but there is no substantial divergence. The contiguity of their aims, but also the essentializing tendency of Vittorini, are illustrated in his claim in his letter to Togliatti of January 1947, that culture essentially tends towards revolution:

> Per il fatto stesso di essere ricerca della verità (...) la cultura inserisce una nostra scelta nell'automatismo del mondo. Cultura è verità che si sviluppa e muta; e si sviluppa, muta non solo grazie ai mutamenti concreti del mondo [...], ma grazie anche al suo proprio impulso per cui essa 'è' nella misura in cui è un tale impulso. (*Dip*, p. 249)

Vittorini's capacity for calling into crisis his own high-humanist pretensions is illustrated in his exploration of the question, '*Quali i compiti e i fini della cultura?*' (1952). He posits:

> Direi simbolicamente: gli stessi ch'ebbe Adamo nell'addentare la mela dell'albero proibito. Dunque 'fini' e 'compiti' che sono nell'interesse maggiore dell'uomo: per un suo più alto 'valore', per una sua più elevata 'condizione'; ma che possono anche essere in contrasto con la sua felicità contingente (a causa di tutte le lacerazioni che producono nella sua 'condizione attuale'). (*Dip*, pp. 339-40)

The 'ma' announces a discrepancy between ideal and reality, and introduces a more nuanced conception of culture, recognizing its potentially antagonistic function. Bound up in this, as the Eden references suggest, is the idea of liberty. Genuine liberty necessarily incorporates the freedom to make mistakes and to cause damage, perhaps to oneself. Through this freedom, and the mistakes it allows, humankind can approach truth, theoretically. Vittorini points out, however, that in reality, contingent happiness is prioritized at the expense of a 'greater', possibly more painful, good, and society prohibits humankind from finding out more (and risking more in the process): 'La

società ha "paura" dei problemi che ogni nuovo morso nella mela potrebbe far nascere' (p. 340).

This pseudo-theological reasoning may seem somewhat remote, but Vittorini makes clear that the freedom he is talking about is less a grand metaphysical concept than an object of political bargaining. In the contemporary context, freedom is what culture is fighting for against political or economic powers which aim to prescribe 'freedom' in their own terms. The concept is further complicated by the writer's assertion that culture has certain self-destructive, or at least self-limiting, impulses:

> Il guaio più grave è che la cultura stessa ha in sé la propria contraddizione. Ad ogni nuovo 'morso' che dà nella mela l'uomo crede di averla mangiata tutta. Allora lo spirito di ricerca si annulla nella pretesa di 'possedere' la verità (tutta la verità), e si ha una 'cultura depositata' che è la nemica più temibile della libertà della cultura. (p. 341)

Vittorini notes that this was written with reference to restrictive Soviet cultural organization, but it is clear that he is also questioning the complacency of conventional culture and trying to re-define it as something complex and dynamic which resists schematization. He describes other threats, both internal to its own functioning, as described above, and created by external forces which seek to appropriate its energy to their own ends. He persists in defending the 'sovereignty' of culture in relation to politics, but acknowledges that culture has limits and can fall prey to a sort of hubris, if it attempts to take on roles beyond its natural functioning: 'Appena si ponga sul piano del "dirigere", dell'agire, la cultura si trasforma in politica. Dire cultura che dirige è dire politica' ('Lettera a Togliatti', *Dip*, p. 248). This is a denatured and therefore devalued culture.

Culture is an entity which represents for Vittorini a sort of buffer zone - like a specially developed biological 'culture' - between the writer and society, or between the aesthetic and the material. I shall now turn to Vittorini's comments on his own craft.

Literature

It is important to recognize Vittorini's fundamental vision of literature not as an artefact or illustration, but as an integral and active component in the complex mechanism of industrialized society. In this way, it cannot help but express the movement of the whole machine: 'Mentre una storia politica non sempre ha in sé la storia della letteratura, una storia della letteratura non può non avere in sé la storia politica; [...] una storia letteraria che fosse completa non potrebbe non essere implicitamente storia anche degli eventi' (*Dip*, p. 193; May 1946). In a passage composed in 1948, however, Vittorini states that philosophical, artistic, political knowledge are all separate, non-interchangeable epistemologies, which complement, but cannot replace, each other. He criticizes the 'insensatezza cui l'estetica crociana ha portato' (*Dip*, p. 290), but affirms that rejecting the value of art as its own judge and moderator is a step backwards. To value art according to its political or philosophical impact is to demand that it merely tell us what we already know in a different way, making of it a mere 'ancella' to logic and to political consciousness.

The 'sovereignty' of art or literature is thus defended, but is the writer sovereign? Vittorini addresses the question of a writer's identity, as an artist and as a politically-aware member of society, and in discussing commitment, he uses the

French term, 'engagement', acknowledging the origins of the debate in Sartre's writing.[16] Vittorini tries to provide his own definition of commitment by differentiating between explicit intention and implicit effect:

> Io nego che uno scrittore (o un pittore, un musicista) possa impegnarsi a lavorare in un senso piuttosto che in un altro, e poi averne qualche risultato valido. Uno sforzo velleitario, da parte sua, non coinvolge, al più, che il suo intelletto e non fa che accentuare il lato 'intellettualistico' della sua arte (...). Ma c'è un engagement 'naturale' che agisce in lui al di fuori della sua volontà. Gli viene dall'esperienza collettiva di cui egli è spontaneo portatore, e costituisce, segreta in lui stesso, l'elemento principale della sua attività. (*Dip*, pp. 293-4)

In a sense, Vittorini thus annuls the notion of 'impegno' because of the conscious choice the term implies. The political element in literature is rather, according to the above reasoning, something pre- or un-conscious, of which the writer is a carrier.

In an interview from 1965 - the year of publication of *Scrittori e popolo* - Vittorini appears to have re-considered (though not rebutted) the mystical and mystified '"engagement" naturale'. His re-assessment does not bring him into line with Asor Rosa's Marxist demands, but rather leads him to an interesting critical perception of the contest between internal and external pressures on the literary work:

> Oggi tutti rifiutiamo il concetto velleitario di *impegno* quale è stato divulgato da Jean-Paul Sartre. Però resta il fatto che un'opera è sempre *oggettivamente* impegnata, cioè ha un significato politico e una funzione *ch'essa prende di per se stessa*, indipendentemente dalla volontà dello scrittore. E allora resta augurabile che lo scrittore cerchi di controllare le forze *che condizionano il senso del suo lavoro*, e magari di contenerle, di correggerle, oppure, *ma a ragion veduta*, di esasperarle. Questo è *a mio giudizio* il solo impegno soggettivo possibile: *paradossalmente una specie di contro-impegno*. (*m*10, p. 60; italics in text)

In this conception of 'impegno', the element of will or intention on the writer's part has returned, manifesting itself not, however, as the decision to make a certain

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[16] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, Situations II* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1948).

political reference, but as the determination to maintain a certain position and to safeguard a specific identity in a struggle for influence. Empirical politics are thus translated into textual politics: the struggle of subjective and objective powers within the text (also conceivable as a struggle between writer and readership/society) reflects the wider political issue of the individual asserting his/her rights against greater social or economic forces. Vittorini's call for a 'contro-impegno' has resonances of Asor Rosa's support, in the face of ill-judged progressive populism, for 'un'arte seriamente e consapevolmente disimpegnata' (*Scrittori e popolo*, p. 280). Vittorini is still defending a fundamentally humanistic conception of literary integrity, whilst Asor Rosa is defending the interests of a politically and economically defined class, but it is striking that by 1965, they have both reached a point where the 'lotta' frequently referred to in earlier debate, as a real or mystified condition of the life of the 'popolo', has become a struggle within the field of literature.

It should be noted that, until this last, the majority of the observations I have discussed are taken from *Diario in pubblico*, that is, from writings of a period ending in the mid-1950s. This is significant in that this was a period in which the enthusiasm which fired both political and cultural movements in the aftermath of the Liberation was waning in the face of various interrelated factors including the inability of the Italian Communist party (PCI) to exert effective political influence (especially after the electoral defeat of 1948), the increasing disillusionment with the Soviet model of Communism, the social difficulties engendered by industrialization and consequent population migration, and the failure of the neorealist project in literature. It was a period of uncertainty and frustration for those attempting to create a future for both

society in general, and culture. *Diario in pubblico* is the testament of this situation: full of ideas, of good faith, in short, of commitment to the future, but shot through with doubt and provisionality. It is the dialogue of original text and footnote which gives the accent to this complexity.

This is not to judge the work or the period negatively, because Vittorini in fact thrives on the lack of clarity and presents a vibrant and rigorous critical discussion. What I want to point out is, firstly, that the absence of a distinct 'ideology' in the work, or rather, its accommodation of a selection of unaccredited 'ideologies', makes of it an authentic chronicle of the times. The second observation deriving from the above is that the posthumous collection of later writings, *Le due tensioni*, and the later pieces included in *Il menabò*, n.10, reflect the increasing certainty and optimism of the late 1950s and early 1960s (the so-called 'Economic Miracle', the literary innovation fuelled by developments in linguistic and stylistic theory). They reflect this both in the freedom to question received wisdom, and by representing a stronger 'message': a sense of a genuine blueprint for the social and literary future being within the writer's grasp.

Literary renewal is a central concern of the pieces collected in *Il menabò*, n.10, which were mostly written in response to the discussion inaugurated by Vittorini in *Il menabò*, n.4 (1961), on 'Industria e letteratura'. Commenting on post-neorealist attempts to represent the reality of life as a factory worker,[17] Vittorini complains that

[17] Examples of authors pursuing this agenda are Ottiero Ottieri, Vincenzo Guerrazzi, and, the most successful, Nanni Balestrini.

literature has tended to respond to industrialization by attempting to get inside the system and present a 'fetta di vita' (*m*10, p. 12), instead of imaginatively representing the effect of this new system on the contemporary human condition. He proceeds to reiterate in various ways that writers and literary theorists have continued blindly to try to adapt an established approach to new subject matter, rather than recognizing that the approach itself needs to be re-thought. It is an example of the practicality of his commitment to writing that he calls for this search for new forms to be sanctioned and supported by the literary establishment. In a letter to the jury of the 'Prix International de Littérature' (1962), he criticizes the preference for accomplished copies of traditional literary models over attempts, albeit flawed, at representing new cultural movements. He avers that literature should move away from a consolatory, moral-didactic function towards 'quello [piano] opposto delle verifiche, delle approssimazioni determinanti, delle contestazioni feconde, delle illuminazioni operative, e insomma della scienza' (*m*10, p. 20). Both broadly cultural and specifically literary conventions are to be questioned.

Continuing his attack on the nineteenth-century notion of the novel as repository of some sort of moral authority, he reflects the theoretical trends of the 1960s (in an interview from 1964) by envisaging the text as the locus of doubt and possibility, rather than certainty, and, unusually, addressing the author-reader relationship. I quote his argument in detail in order to illustrate how his language has changed:

> La letteratura deve tendere, a mio parere, a rompere la sua struttura autoritaria che, specie nel secolo scorso, era diventata soffocante. Allora, gli scrittori naturalisti raccontavano la realtà come se ciascuno di loro fosse Dio, e il lettore era costretto a immedesimarsi in questa realtà senza poterla discutere o negare: il piacere estetico tendeva così a diventare piacere mistico. Il romanzo moderno, invece, deve svegliare il senso critico del lettore, dargli la sensazione che ciò

> ch'egli legge non è più la Bibbia, lasciargli una possibilità di scelta tra varie congetture sulla realtà, che egli può completare a suo giudizio. (*m*10, p. 22)

With reference to the developments in linguistics of the late 1950s and 1960s (he discusses Saussurean theories in detail elsewhere), he gives full weight to a declaration in support of the attention to form over content:

> La narrativa che concentra sul piano del linguaggio tutt'intero il peso delle proprie responsabilità verso le cose risulta a sua volta, oggi, più vicina ad assumere un significato storicamente attivo di ogni narrativa che abbordi le cose nella genericità d'un loro presunto contenuto prelinguistico trattandone sotto specie di temi, di questioni, ecc. ecc. (*m*10, p. 26)

This shift from convention to innovation, from content to form, is also conceived of as a scientificization of literature. Vittorini discusses at length the sciences vs. humanities debate, but it is clear that the root of the discussion is his own frustration, as released above, with the established model of humanistic culture. Humanism needs not to be rejected but to be rejuvenated:

> La cultura scientifica non potrà sostituire l'umanistica tradizionale se non a patto di rinnovare l'umanesimo, cioè di diventare essa un umanesimo, *di assumersi una responsabilità umanistica*. Ma il punto di partenza è una demistificazione dei valori tradizionali, col sottoporli ad una radicale verifica (linguistica, psicologica, scientifica) per conquistare una rivoluzionaria unità culturale, pur tenendo presente che unificare non significa dimenticare la necessità delle specializzazioni. (*m*10, p. 54; italics in text)

He stresses the point that cultural operators must clear away the dead wood of received wisdom to create space for a scientific culture which also has a humanistic role. Vittorini's criticism of humanism thus enables him to sanction and re-affirm a variety of it which he himself has defined and updated. *Diario in pubblico* and the later collections are testimony to a long process of self-review, concentrating on the writer's critical work. I shall now turn to more personal instances of self-assessment.

Vittorini rarely talks subjectively of his role as a creative writer, but from the point of view both of what he says in these instances, and of how he says it (under what compulsion, given his resistance elsewhere to subjectivity), they merit close analysis.

There is a glimpse within the 'public diary' of a more intimate type of diary. In the second part of the collection is a piece published in the first edition of *Uomini e no* (1945), but later removed. These two details are revealing in themselves: first, that it was included in a creative work, implying that such could be a fitting place for a more personal type of writing; and second, that the writer later ceased to want it made 'public', implying a sense of embarrassment. The writer states, 'io penso che sia molta umiltà essere scrittore' (p.162), and explains that writing involves always allowing others to be right, to have opposing views, and it involves taking criticism. This has a confessional air, as if Vittorini is divulging a secret about the awkwardness he feels about writing (an awkwardness perhaps expressed in the withdrawal of the piece from *Uomini e no*).

A possible explanation for this sense of the writer's vulnerability is expressed in *Le due tensioni*. Picking up the theme of challenging authorial omniscience which is broached in *Il menabò*, 10 (see above), Vittorini describes the crisis of doubt of the modern writer, who feels uncomfortable expressing the reality with which 'he' is faced:

> Egli *ha certo perduto l'antica sicurezza e presunzione* dei realisti borghesi (fino a Zola compreso) di poterla [la realtà] raffigurare obbiettivamente, *da un punto di vista di Dio*, egli dubita di fronte ad essa di avere un giudizio obbiettivo, che vi possa essere un giudizio obbiettivo univoco [...], si rende conto che il '*discorso*' tenuto finora dalla letteratura sulla realtà è un discorso 'autoritario', presuntuoso, dispotico[...], e si rende conto della necessità di sostituirlo con un

> altro discorso, '*democratico*', dialettico, congetturale (dove si possa lasciare al lettore di orientarsi e decidere da sé tra elementi di realtà non di per sé giudicati e valutati). (p. 28; italics in text)

Vittorini is clearly responding here to the rise of the reader in literary theory of the 1960s, but he is hinting at the difficulty of being the destroyer of certainty and of authority, even whilst declaring it necessary. Although the author-god role must be undermined in order for there to be any development of literature in the modern age, he is conscious of the vacuum this leaves behind. To remove fixed reference points is to pull the rug out from beneath both reader and author, and it is the author who has the most difficulty in reconciling himself to this displacement because he is the perpetrator of the act, inflicting harsh treatment on the reader in the belief (not unshakeable, in the absence of reference points or precedents) that it is 'for her own good'. The author's position is one of shaky and wounded 'authority': having denounced and debunked his own omniscience, he must now reclaim some of it in order to sustain the conviction that the vacuum will be filled, and with something more valuable than before. The author is the emperor who has voluntarily given up his clothes, but is unsure whether he or his subjects can genuinely bear his nudity.

The preface to *Il garofano rosso*[18] is the place where Vittorini describes at length his feelings about the process of writing. He informs the reader of his resistance to this task in the first lines of the preface:

> Io non ho mai creduto alle prefazioni, mai, nel tempo delle mie letture, ne ho lette, ma per una volta, per questa, ecco che mi trovo costretto a credervi.
>
> Costretto a credervi? Mi trovo costretto a scriverne una. (p. 201)

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[18] Elio Vittorini, *Il garofano rosso* (Milan: Mondadori, 1948). This novel first appeared serialized in the journal *Solaria* in 1933-4, but permission to publish it whole was denied by the Fascist censors. The preface was written for the 1948 edition.

The business of explaining his creative writing is presented as a whole new ideology to which he must address himself - a religion which he has 'never believed in'. He goes on to explore the significance of prefaces, and the distinction between work and preface. The substance of what he says is less interesting, however, than the tone in which it is said. What he does in this 'preface to the preface' is to distance himself tacitly but emphatically from the critical task he is undertaking. In this paratextual interlude which would normally allow for the author-reader relationship to be deepened, the reader being invited to participate in the reconstruction of the creative act, Vittorini is in fact imposing an ironic barrier, establishing that he can replicate this confessional process but that he is not genuinely participating in it.

Why write this preface then? The issue of retrospect again comes into play: the preface was written fourteen years after the novel was first written, and Vittorini explains that 'non oserei pubblicare, oggi, questo mio "romanzo" di tredici anni fa senza premettervi almeno la spiegazione del motivo per cui lo pubblico' (p. 202). He would not 'dare' publish it without justification: the preface is a way of expiating the shame of having written. And, returning to the opening lines, he is 'forced' ('costretto') to do this: it is an act of contrition.

What is so shameful about the original text of *Il garofano rosso*? On one hand, Vittorini presents publication as the writer's come-uppance in response to his hubris: 'Certo è anche umiltà pubblicare dopo che si è avuto l'orgoglio di scrivere' (p. 203). At the root of the shame, however, is the author's 'impegno'. Vittorini is accounting for - or, more precisely, being called to account for - his fascist political convictions

of an earlier period. Further experience and a critical hindsight have caused him to reject the ideas expressed in the novel, ideas which reflected their times. The risks of commitment are being exposed: to commit oneself is potentially to commit an error (or even a crime), and to commit it to paper, where it becomes public. The author acknowledges his accountability for the act of writing:

> Preferirei, tuttavia, aver già pubblicato il libro a suo tempo, quando in esso credevo; e aver scontato allora, al coperto della fede che avevo in esso, ognuno dei debiti di responsabilità per i quali un libro, nei rapporti col pubblico, è un'azione. (p. 203)

This comment makes two things clear: one, which is perhaps the strongest definition of 'impegno' so far, that a book, a collection of published words, is equal to an action; two, that the act of writing endangers the writer, linking his name in indelible print with a belief he may have to justify in adverse circumstances.

Developing this, Vittorini states that, whatever the writer might 'prefer' to do, and whatever the risks, he has an obligation to write: 'Ma non possiamo mai scegliere tra scrivere e non scrivere. C'è su di noi un impegno che non ce lo consente. Ci viene da tutti gli uomini, impegno che rende terribile la nostra vocazione' (p. 207). This suggests that, in addition to the general risks of writing described earlier, there is a sado-masochism involved in politically-committed writing. A part of this is that one is laying oneself bare to a risk of political, and perhaps violent, backlash, and a part is the martyrdom suggested in the quotation: the writer has the cross of an incalculable civic responsibility to bear.

That the action of writing can indeed bring about change is confirmed in the following:

> È in ogni uomo di attendersi che forse la parola, una parola, possa trasformare la sostanza di una cosa. Ed è nello scrittore di crederlo con assiduità e fermezza. È ormai nel nostro mestiere, nel nostro compito. È fede in una magia: che un aggettivo possa giungere dove non giunse, cercando la verità, la ragione; o che un avverbio possa recuperare il segreto che si è sottratto a ogni indagine. (p. 202)

Here, the mystical description of literature's special, super-conscious cognitive capacity to which I drew attention earlier is expressed in a perhaps more modern idiom, whereby language itself is credited with the capability of containing and conducting higher knowledge. Notable also is the manifestation of the 'two tensions' I identified: the practical business of writing ('mestiere', 'compito') versus the aesthetic spirit ('magia', 'segreto'). The writer's essential characteristics, which differentiate him from 'ogni uomo', are the faith in this cult of language and the professional dedication to transform that faith into action. This sounds a priestly role: despite his rejection elsewhere of the author-God concatenation, Vittorini is describing himself and fellow writers as ministers of a linguistic faith.

This pseudo-religious notion of writing is apparently sanctified by the following evocation of 'the Word': 'Io non ho mai aspirato "ai" libri; aspiro "al" libro; scrivo perché credo in "una" verità da dire' (p. 206). The practical tension, however, draws him to a more workmanlike clarification of his position: 'se torno a scrivere non è perché mi accorga di "altre" verità che si possono aggiungere, e dire "in più", dire "inoltre", ma perché qualcosa che continua a mutare nella verità mi sembra esigere che non si smetta mai di ricominciare a dirla' (pp. 206-7). The second quotation sticks

a pin in the hubris of the first and introduces the provisionality and doubt which the author will come to see as necessary for any renewal of literature in the modern world (in *Il menabò*, 10). The 'spirito di ricerca' powers this perpetual and literally vital re-assessment of the 'truth'.[19]

The most interesting section, which provides a good starting-point for comparing Calvino's attitude to writing, is towards the end of the preface, where Vittorini returns to worry at the question of why he is writing it. Discussing what the work means to him, and how far, in relation to his other works, it represents him, leads Vittorini to try to identify where the text is situated between author and readership. He initially states that a book is a product of a society more than of an individual:

> Ma un libro non è soltanto 'mio' o 'tuo', né rappresenta solo il 'mio' contributo alla verità, il 'mio' sforzo di ricerca della verità, e la 'mia' capacità di realizzazione letteraria. Un libro è un riflesso più o meno diretto, e più o meno contorto, più o meno alterato, della verità obbiettiva, e molto in un libro, anche all'insaputa dello scrittore, specie in un libro mancato, può essere verità rimasta grezza. (p. 223)

The possessive pronouns are persistently placed in quotation marks to accentuate them in a negative way, suggesting that they are words to be handled with care, representing concepts not to be trusted. Most significantly, it marks a distance between the author and the words he uses, stressing that he indeed uses these words, in quotation of someone else. The status of the concept of individual authorship of a

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[19] See the introduction to Elio Vittorini, *Le opere narrative*, ed. by Maria Corti, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), I, XI-LX. Corti observes that 'Vittorini non travasa mai un'opera intatta da una rivista a un volume, raramente da una stampa in volume a una ristampa' (p. XLIX). She interprets this stringent corrective process as a pursuit of formal perfection, but I think it is also a re-phrasing of 'la verità'.

text is thus weakened in relation to 'la verità', the objective truth, which stands unmarked.

To the question of to whom this 'verità' belongs, in the state in which it has been revealed in the work in question, *Il garofano rosso*, Vittorini responds, 'Alla società alla quale io appartengo; alla generazione alla quale io appartengo' (p. 223). He thus refers to a pyramid of relations, at the pinnacle of which is the work, which belongs, at a wider point, to the author (amongst his other works), who belongs in turn, to a wider generation, and ultimately, at the full extent of the base, to society. Still shackling the possessive pronouns with speech marks, he claims that even when a work is considered 'his', it belongs to him only in his capacity as a member of a specific society. It is interesting that 'society' and 'generation' are concepts which, vague though they seem, he feels no need to cordon off with quotation marks: the signifiers of objective categories are solid, whilst subjective terms are slippery.

This distinction is complicated, however, by Vittorini's comments about the status of the unpublished text. Until a work has been presented to the public with the writer's name - the sign of a relationship of possession which in the above he rejected - it is less than a work, he claims:

> Ma dove non sono 'mio', e il mio libro non è diventato realtà letteraria (e la mia ricerca di verità non è diventata verità letteraria), un libro è come se fosse stato scritto impersonalmente, da tutti coloro che hanno avuto o conosciuto o comunque sfiorato la mia stessa esperienza, vale a dire è un documento, e io farei maggior violenza a non lasciarlo pubblicare di quanto Mondadori non sembri ne faccia a me col suo diritto contrattuale di pubblicarlo. (p. 223)

The quotation marks slip off the possessive adjectives here. The reason seems to be that, once possession is established by and for society, by objective standards, then it is legitimate. Furthermore, the subjectivity of the work is validated here - it should not be impersonal - but again, within the parameters of a subjectivity defined and sanctioned by society. Vittorini is fundamentally saying that to write in a vacuum is an act of moral violence: a work only acquires sense and literary status (becoming a 'libro' rather than a 'documento') when it enters the public domain. Returning to the pyramid analogy, the upper levels (of the individual writer and text) cannot exist without the wide base (of society) on which they stand, and by which their shape is defined. Vittorini's perception of the individual writer's relationship with society is the point from which differences between Calvino and him derive.

Calvino

In exploring Calvino's interpretations of the term 'impegno', I shall follow much the same course as I did with Vittorini, looking at critical writings, then at the 'metacriticism' provided by the prefaces to the criticism, and finally at the retrospective preface to his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*.[20] This sort of movement allows again for an exposure of the critical dialogue created by the author between his writings in their context and his re-visiting of them under the tutelage of hindsight. I shall focus on critical work dating from the mid-1950s until the mid-1970s, because such date-margins afford a clear insight into Calvino's thinking as it progresses dialectically from Vittorini's, and because, in selecting these parameters

[20] *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1947). The preface was added in 1964; I quote the Einaudi edition of 1977 (in the series, 'I Coralli').

himself when producing the collection, *Una pietra sopra*, the author makes an implicit comment on his *Discorsi di letteratura e società* (the subtitle of the collection) which I think it is useful to address.[21] It is worth noting that Calvino writes essays exploring in detail a specific topic, whilst Vittorini's critical writings are mainly brief, intense responses to an external stimulus. This difference illustrates (crudely) the contemplative/active tendencies of the two, and explains the essay-by-essay sectionalization of this part of my analysis.

Further to the remarks I made at the beginning of this chapter comparing Calvino with Vittorini, there is another point useful to bear in mind when discussing the two. This is that there is a distinct sense of mentorship in the relationship between the two men in the 1950s and 1960s, fostered by their editorial activity at Einaudi and their critical collaboration on *Il menabò*. Vittorini's death in 1966 seems to remove a restriction, and a sense of self-possession develops in Calvino's critical writings, which also owes some debt to broader theoretical movements (structuralism and after) with which Calvino seems to work more 'naturally'. I shall draw attention to the manifestations of this independence as they are encountered in the course of my analysis.

'Il midollo del leone' (1955)

This was chosen to be the first essay in *Una pietra sopra*, as the manifesto of the young 'intellettuale impegnato', and in it Calvino foregrounds the positioning of

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[21] Italo Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980; Milan: Palomar Srl & Mondadori, 1995). I quote from the later edition. For earlier essays discussing the relationship between writing and society, see 'Altri discorsi di letteratura e società: Per una letteratura dell'impegno', in Italo Calvino, *Saggi, 1945-1985*, ed. by Mario Barenghi, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), I, 1469-1504.

the individual in society. He states that literature's greatest opportunity to influence history is via the fictional 'personaggio': less a representation of an empirically recognizable human type than the postulation of a moral or psychological premiss. He recognizes a problem with the protagonists of contemporary fiction (by Pavese, Moravia and Vittorini), whereby the intelligent, socially-aware individual is demonstrated to be unable to communicate successfully with the society in which he finds himself: 'La narrativa italiana contemporanea è nata dunque sotto il segno d'una integrazione mancata: da una parte il protagonista lirico-intellettuale-autobiografico; dall'altra, la realtà sociale popolare o borghese, metropolitana o agricolo-ancestrale' (p. 8). The intellectual is embarrassed by his understanding and experiences it as a barrier to social integration. This posing of the question of how the intellectual operates within society as a question of literary technique is an expression of the problem of Calvino-as-intellectual interacting (through writing) with the society around him. Whereas Vittorini addresses the question of the writer (intellectual) in his relationship with society, Calvino is already concerned with the writer-intellectual as a textual entity.

One option for renewal which Calvino considers is the response of Vittorini and others, who concentrate on the raw vitality of life as it is lived, validating experience over thought. The language he uses to describe this expresses his overwhelmingly negative attitude towards it: 'Ma questa resa alla vitalità e all'incultura non è solo un postulato critico di Vittorini: è qualcosa che è nell'aria, un attuale male del secolo che dilaga nelle carte dei giovani, edite e inedite' (p. 12). Any recourse to a brutal, expressionistic 'realism' is rejected as an immature backlash, and the sense of a mass

degradation evoked by the language used illustrates a resistance to populism which will become much more obvious in the later essay 'Il mare dell'oggettività' (the use of the verb 'dilagare' above fixes the metaphorical association).

Having dismissed the type of 'impegno' which defines itself as the expression of society at its most base, Calvino sets out his literary-political manifesto, with a declaration which rings rather hollow - an impression reinforced by the use of the royal critical 'we':[22]

> Noi crediamo che l'impegno politico, il parteggiare, il compromettersi sia, ancor più che dovere, necessità naturale dello scrittore d'oggi, e prima ancora che dello scrittore, dell'uomo moderno. Non è la nostra un'epoca che si possa comprendere stando *au dessus de la mêlée*, ma al contrario la si comprende quanto più la si vive, quanto più avanti ci si situa sulla linea del fuoco. (pp. 15-16; italics in text)

The shakiness of this declaration is demonstrated by the fact that only two years later, Calvino published *Il barone rampante*, a novel in which the protagonist understands and acts upon the society around him precisely by situating himself '*au dessus de la mêlée*', living in the trees.[23] It is important to recognize that these two years witnessed the author's increasing disaffection for the PCI, culminating in withdrawal from the party in 1957 (following the Soviet intervention in Hungary of 1956). Though this explains somewhat the exploration of isolation in the novel, it nevertheless remains clear that the integration of intellectual and society is a challenge which Calvino cannot meet by means of an apparently unproblematic mission statement such as that above.

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[22] In essays written after the mid-1960s, Calvino generally abandons this 'noi' in favour of the more unassuming impersonal 'si'. See my discussion of later essays.
[23] Italo Calvino, *Il barone rampante* (Turin: Einaudi, 1957).

The essence of the novel, for Calvino, is exposed in adventure classics: a morally strong but as yet undefined person is placed in a situation (fantastical) which demands that s/he develop latent moral strength in order to prosper, remaining morally unscathed. He acknowledges the nexus of individualism involved, the concept centred as it is on ideas of will, intelligence, moral strength, etc.. This, it seems to me, is the essence of Calvino's 'problem' regarding 'impegno': his imagination only fires on all cylinders when fuelled by an image of an individual, albeit an individual within a given society - an exception which proves the human 'rule', but nevertheless remains an exception.[24] Social beings functioning within society leave him cold.

I refer to this as a problem above, but the inverted commas signal that it is such only in the mathematical sense of a proposition on which to base an inquiry. The 'problem' is that Calvino is suggesting a type of 'impegno' which simply does not fit the discussion as it stands in the mid-1950s. In envisaging a commitment which draws society into literature rather than vice versa,[25] he is trying to contribute to the discussion in a different language from the other participants. When he adopts their language, as I have pointed out above, his voice seems inauthentic. The end of the essay provides a further example of this, where the language of Vittorini describes rather discordantly an image of reading typical of Calvino, producing a romanticizing effect (compare my quotation of Vittorini on p. 26): 'È sempre con curiosità e speranza e meraviglia che il giovane, l'operaio, il contadino che ha preso gusto a

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[24] Again, Cosimo, protagonist of *Il barone rampante*, is a good example of this type of character.
[25] Quotations from Vittorini's writings used at the beginning of my analysis exemplify the perception of commitment as a subsumption of literature into social history.

leggere, aprono un libro nuovo. Sempre così vorremmo che venissero aperti anche i nostri' (p. 22). Calvino and Vittorini are both under the yoke of the ill-conceived populism which Asor Rosa takes issue with, and this serves as a reminder that the differences I have exposed above are signposts to a divergence which manifests itself fully in later writing. At this stage, the two writers are using different expressive means to approach what is still a common end: the integration of writers and 'the people'.

'Il mare dell'oggettività'[26]

This essay concentrates on the theme of the individual in relation to the mass, and here Calvino's discomfort with the concept of what Vittorini would term the 'popolo', is strikingly expressed. The metaphors with which he describes society - 'mare' (title), 'flusso' (p. 47), 'magma' (p. 49) - convey a palpable sense of distress. He feels that the intellectual 'high ground' has been flooded, annulling the authority of the individual creator in favour of the 'mainstream' which now directs the course of culture: 'il vulcano da cui dilaga la colata di lava non è più l'animo del poeta, è il ribollente cratere dell'alterità nel quale il poeta si getta' (p. 49). Calvino attempts to justify his almost neurotic reaction by claiming that the mass-cultural 'deluge' represents the crisis of the revolutionary spirit, in that the revolutionary by definition goes against the flow, challenging as an individual the course followed by society. Choosing literary examples, he concedes that Gadda and Pasolini have adopted the consciousness and the language of the mass in order to challenge it from within, proving that the revolutionary spirit can persist, but the previous essay and the tenor

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[26] This essay was written in 1959 and published first in 1960, in *Il menabò* 2.

of the current one lead the reader to conclude that this is not a reaction Calvino endorses wholeheartedly, nor one he feels he himself could produce. The message this essay implicitly sends is that the individual is the most potent locus of political, and, more importantly, of literary, potential.

It is difficult to avoid interpreting Calvino's apocalyptic tone in this essay as that of an intellectual terrified by popular culture - an 'apocalittico', to use Eco's distinction. The language and attitude he adopts strike a chord with John Carey's eye-opening analysis of the reaction of intellectuals of the early twentieth century to the development of mass culture.[27] The points of concurrence are the following:

1. the diluvial metaphors: Carey opens his study by referring to Ortega y Gasset's description of 'a gigantic mass of humanity which, launched like a torrent over the historic area, has inundated it'.[28] Such metaphors express specifically the loss of individuality.

2. the distrust of journalism (this emerges particularly in later essays): Carey comments that, 'the popular newspaper presented a threat, because it created an alternative culture which bypassed the intellectual and made him redundant. [...] In an important sense, too, it took over the function of providing the public with fiction, thus dispensing with the need for novelists' (pp. 6-7). He adds that

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[27] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and The Masses* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992).
[28] José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of The Masses* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932). The original version in Spanish was published in 1930.

novelists' contributions to newspapers did not necessarily represent an immunity to this fear: Waugh (as, perhaps, Calvino) was happy to feed the mouth that bit him.

3. the propensity to obscurity: as literacy increased, giving the masses access to culture, intellectuals reacted by making their work increasingly abstract and inaccessible (modernism, in England). 'Realism of the sort that it was assumed the masses appreciated was abandoned. So was logical coherence. Irrationality and obscurity were cultivated' (p. 17). Is this the direction Calvino is taking in his works of the 1970s? It is interesting that one of the continuities Carey identifies (in his postscript) between pre- and post-war high culture is this cultivation of incomprehensibility, and he claims that 'theory' picked up the baton in the 1960s.

The ways in which Carey's analysis does not fit Calvino are also the reason why I have referred to it here. Carey is, of course, analysing in the main a generation which precedes Calvino, in a different country - the English literary intellectuals of the period 1880-1939. Although the points of continuity he describes in his postscript (point 3 above) are, I think, valid, it is clear that the objects of Carey's analysis are reacting to a different set of circumstances, and react in a much more extreme manner (such reactions are at the roots of fascism, for example, to which any affiliation on Calvino's part is unthinkable). Calvino displays in his novels no particular fetishization of mass culture - a common intellectual reaction identified by both Eco and Carey.[29] He simply avoids writing about it, and I think some of the reasons for

[29] Calvino and Vittorini generally use the terms 'popolo' and 'società', which recognize individual human beings, albeit gathered in a fairly indistinct group, rather than 'mass', which denotes an undifferentiated and sub-human agglomeration.

this avoidance are latent in this essay, especially viewed from Carey's perspective. Of course, Calvino has 'intellectually correct' grounds for rejecting a literature which deals with the people, the exhaustion of neorealism chief amongst them, but the intensity of his defence of the individual in this essay betrays a more personal inability to confront popular culture. It is an intellectual, rather than a moral, revulsion that he expresses: the cerebral tendency I described earlier shrinks in the face of the cognitive challenge posed by the chaos of popular life.[30] This problem is something he literally comes to terms with - tackling it by means of writing.

'La sfida al labirinto' (1962)

Three years later, in response to the special issue of *Il menabò* on 'Industria e letteratura', Calvino produces his argument from the same individual-mass dialectic. As the title of his essay announces, the metaphor has changed and mass culture is represented by the cognitively approachable labyrinth. Calvino starts by positing that there have been two industrial revolutions, the first in the nineteenth century and the second in the post-war period. Reactions to this second revolution are, he claims, characterized by an attention to the individual self, because the external world is perceived to be automated and autonomous - beyond the capacity of the individual to modify: 'L'uomo della seconda rivoluzione industriale si rivolge all'unica parte non cromata, non programmata dell'universo: cioè l'interiorità, il *self*, il rapporto non mediato totalità-io' (p. 111; italics in text). Far from consolidating and empowering the individual's conception of himself, Calvino asserts that this withdrawal from society represents a surrender or dissolution of the individual, and in describing this,

[30] Adopting Benedetti's dialectic, Calvino craves a purity which an impure society seems to preclude.

the familiar marine metaphor resurfaces: 'Il nuovo individualismo approda a una perdita completa dell'individuo nel mare delle cose' (p. 111).

The conclusion is that there are two possible approaches to the 'labyrinth' of the modern industrial world: scrutiny or surrender. Literature can provide no key to escaping the labyrinth, rather: 'Quel che la letteratura può fare è definire l'atteggiamento migliore per trovare la via d'uscita, anche se questa via d'uscita non sarà altro che il passaggio da un labirinto all'altro. È la *sfida al labirinto* che vogliamo salvare, è una letteratura della *sfida al labirinto* che vogliamo enucleare e distinguere dalla letteratura della *resa al labirinto'* (p. 116; italics in text). Bearing in mind the precise context of this essay, that is, a discussion about possible relationships between literature and industry, it is striking that Calvino is steering well clear of the sort of commitment to social issues which demands a direct engagement with the quotidian reality of industrial life (e.g. the factory-floor novels of Ottieri and others).[31] He is following an increasingly direct course towards the sort of commitment exhibited in later works, such as *Palomar*,[32] where literature's specific and invaluable social role is that of nurturing in the reader the interpretive skills which will enable her better to relate to the world around her. Again, the means are different (based on cognition rather than participation) but the end is still the broadly humanist one to which Vittorini aspires: individual self-fulfilment under the tutelage of literature.

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[31] Calvino himself states that his one essay which sounds like a contribution to this more narrowly industrial debate, 'L'antitesi operaia' (1964), was received badly. His own attempts at writing 'industrial' fiction are problematic works: *I giovani del Po* (written in 1951 but appearing in *Officina* in 1957-8), and the unfinished *La collana della regina*, in Italo Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. by Claudio Milanini, 3 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1991, 1992), III, 1343-4.

[32] Italo Calvino, *Palomar* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983).

'Per chi si scrive? (Lo scaffale ipotetico)' (1967)

It is in this essay that Calvino seems genuinely to speak for himself. The very title is an indication of this: the question, the parenthesis, and the foregrounding of a hypothesis, are all 'typical' of Calvino the novelist, who, as early as *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, favours the potentiality of fable, rather than the factual reliability of the conventional novel.[33] This essay is thoroughly analytical and reads more harmoniously than the earlier essays. The explanation of this is, I think, that the writer is now, in the latter part of the 1960s, in a theoretical environment which accords much better with his own conception of literature than that of the 1950s, which suggested that literature take on society's issues in a way which he perceived as onerous. Calvino writes this essay in the year following the death of Vittorini: he perhaps feels better able to express himself having shed the shadow of his mentor's influence, and to distance himself from the latter's theoretical preferences.[34] The very language he uses echoes the structuralist initiative to identify and question signifying systems. Literature can indeed, he proposes, perpetuate itself by re-producing and shoring up established values: 'A noi però interessa un'altra possibilità della letteratura: quella di mettere in discussione la scala dei valori e il codice dei significati stabiliti' (p. 193).

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[33] It should be noted that the question is a reference to the title of a piece written by Gian Carlo Ferretti *et al* for *Rinascita* 39 (6.10.67), 'Per chi si scrive un romanzo? Per chi si scrive una poesia?'. The present essay was a response to this, published in *Rinascita* 46 (24.11.67). However, the reformulation of the question by Calvino, making it still more open, supports my point that he is turning towards generating questions rather than supplying answers.

[34] In the same year, Calvino himself articulates the divergence between him and Vittorini: 'è sempre il rapporto uomo-mondo quello che gli interessa, è sempre un umanesimo il suo, centrato nella storia degli uomini e negli uomini come storia' (*m*10, p. 76).

It is a measure of Calvino's sense of being at a juncture between old practices and new possibilities for literature that he defines in this essay the 'state of the art', giving a critical summary of literary theory and practice in the post-war period in Italy. Drawing on the metaphor of the 'scaffale ipotetico', he maintains that the 1945-50 period was spent trying to insert novels into the 'shelf' for political theory, which did not work, because the space for political culture was yet to be created. In the 1950s, writers tried to explore the moral values of Italian historicism, but failed again, because this discussion was inadequate to account for what was happening on the larger scale of global politics. The situation then exploded in the 1960s, with writers trying to account for literature in the much wider context of other disciplines (linguistics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, sociology). This, Calvino acknowledges, has led to questioning whether literature has a place at all, and to seeing literature as living through its own negation: 'Ecco che allora alla domanda posta in principio la risposta diventa: si scriveranno romanzi per un lettore che avrà finalmente capito che non deve più leggere romanzi' (p. 195). This last phrase presages the later Calvino's taste for paradox.

A further measure of the sense of individual authority which Calvino imparts in this essay is his attention to the reader. In focussing on the reader, he is not only accommodating the increasing significance of this factor in literary theory, but also integrating the socio-political and the literary aspects of the writer-reader relationship. He defines the main problem facing society as that of the inequality of cultural levels, and the divisions between them, all deriving from class difference. Literature can act on this only indirectly, by not adopting a patronizing, paternalistic stance: 'se si

presuppone un lettore meno colto dello scrittore e si assume verso di lui un'attitudine pedagogica, divulgativa, rassicuratrice, non si fa che confermare il dislivello; ogni tentativo d'edulcorare la situazione con palliativi (una letteratura "popolare") è un passo indietro, non un passo avanti' (p. 196). In thus dismissing popular literature, he is nailing his colours firmly to the mast of high culture, but in a more reasoned manner than previously, whereby 'high' culture is only so in quality, not in accessibility.[35]

Regarding the specifically political function of literature, Calvino states his position here with clarity:

> Per prima cosa occorre che la letteratura riconosca quanto il suo peso politico è modesto: la lotta si decide in base a linee strategiche e tattiche generali e a rapporti di forza; in questo quadro un libro è un granello di sabbia, specie un libro letterario. L'effetto che un'opera importante (scientifica o letteraria) può avere sulla lotta generale in corso è di portarla su un livello di consapevolezza più alto. (p. 197)

He is similarly bold when he addresses the question of influence, stressing that authorial intention is all but irrelevant, whilst reception is the determining factor in the effect a work of literature has: 'Politicamente rivoluzionaria non è tanto l'opera, quanto l'uso che se ne può fare; anche l'opera che si vuol far nascere politicamente rivoluzionaria non diventa tale che nel corso del suo impiego, nei suoi effetti spesso ritardati e indiretti' (p. 198). The work is situated in a wide social context, and

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[35] Calvino's own edition of *Fiabe italiane* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), and his frequent references to Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* tales and Stevenson's *Treasure Island* seem to prove that he does not spurn popular literature. However, there are clearly two separate notions of popular literature in operation: the first, the romantic one of stories which are 'popular' in the sense of folkloric; the second, the modern notion of writing which responds to the desires and worries of the urban 'masses'. It is the second which troubles Calvino.

political divisions pass through it: 'Territori al sicuro non ne esistono; l'opera stessa è e dev'essere terreno di lotta' (p. 198).

It is interesting that by the mid-1960s, Calvino and Vittorini, and indeed Asor Rosa, are responding to the crisis in conventional hermeneutics in highly individual ways. Calvino sees the rise of the reader as empowering and invigorating for the text: picking apart his language in the quotations above (note the recurrency of the word, 'opera'), it becomes clear that he is defending the text from any utilitarian notion of intention and reception, dissociating it from any defined social reference, and preserving its cognitive specificity ('un livello di consapevolezza più alto'). In Vittorini's comments on the rights of the reader (see earlier comments from *Le due tensioni*), language of loss and disorientation prevails: the reader's gain is morally and intellectually unimpeachable, but is still the author's loss. Asor Rosa, in his preface to the second edition of *Scrittori e popolo* (1966), interprets the deconstruction of literary-critical models as a revolutionary move the effects of which have extra-literary impact, in exposing the class structure between intellectuals and 'readers'.[36] He and Calvino interpret the mechanics of the crisis in a very similar way, but for Asor Rosa, its significance is political, whilst for Calvino, it is literary. As a 'manifesto' for Calvino's literary-political practice, then, this essay is more thoroughly and individually reasoned, more 'authoritative', than the essays of the 1950s. There are an assuredness of tone and a guarded optimism which hint at a way forward from the theoretical *impasse* of 'impegno'.

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[36] 'La trattazione dei materiali letterari non comporta per noi di conseguenza che letterario debba essere l'ambito entro il quale la trattazione si muove; anzi: nel fare un certo tipo di lavoro sarà compito del ricercatore marxista di associare ad un analogo processo di disgregazione sia l'oggetto che studia sia lo strumento specifico, disciplinare, con cui lo studia' (p. X).

'Usi politici giusti e sbagliati della letteratura' (1976)

Almost ten years elapsed between the previous essay and this, and these ten years saw the waning both of political commitment throughout Italian society, in response to the relative failure of the workers' and students' movements of 1968-9, and of the creative impetus promised by critical innovations of the 1960s, witnessed in the comments above. The result is an essay which is sombre and thoughtful in tone, lacking the optimism of the earlier analysis. I think it is mistaken, however, to read it as Calvino's speech of valediction to the concept of 'impegno'. On the simplest level, he does in fact suggest two (with a notional third) 'usi politici giusti della letteratura', and in general, the essay is the expression of a crisis, with the implicit invitation of proposals for a way beyond it, rather than the definitive closure of a debate.

In a sense, this essay is hindsight's response to the essay, 'Per chi si scrive?', as Calvino takes stock of the returns on the initiatives in which he had invested his optimism. The early part of this piece reverberates with a sense of shock and emptiness following the death of long-held certainties, and it is the effects of structuralism and post-structuralism which Calvino singles out:

> Tutti i parametri, le categorie, le antitesi che usavamo per definire, classificare, progettare il mondo sono messi in questione. Non solo quelli più legati a valori storici, ma anche quelli che sembravano essere categorie antropologiche stabili: ragione e mito, lavoro ed esistenza, maschio e femmina, e perfino la polarità delle topologie più elementari: affermazione e negazione, sopra e sotto, soggetto e oggetto. (p. 346)

Calvino laments that neither literature nor politics appeared adequate to the task of grasping the opportunities such a crisis offered. He blames the student movement of

the late 1960s for the fact that the two 'avanguardie' - political and literary - never realized their potential synergy, because, in justly rejecting the literature of convention and mediocrity, it crudely swept aside all literature as ineffectual bourgeois entertainment. He remarks with acerbity: 'Che il culto dell'azione fosse innanzi tutto un vecchio mito letterario fu compreso - o sta per essere compreso - molto lentamente' (p. 348).

The aftermath of this negation is a recuperation in the 1970s of literature as one amongst a glut of media.[37] Calvino here introduces the theme of the endangered specificity of the literary word that will feature in his critical writing until his death in the 1980s. He comments that only in societies where literature is repressed can it achieve its full potential, and its full political import, giving a voice to those that do not ordinarily possess one. One of the suggested 'usi politici giusti della letteratura' is, therefore, that of giving voice to the dispossessed. The other is a non-didactic, but broadly educative, function, whereby literature can propose models of language, perception, thought, creativity. The third 'use' posited is rather vague and mystical (similar to Vittorini's 'verità' but expressed in language updated for the 1970s): 'in ogni libro c'è una parte che è dell'autore e una parte che è opera anonima e collettiva' (p. 354). This latter can help politics to understand and 'know itself' better. Straying into psychoanalysis, Calvino also suggests that literature can lead us to confront the sublimated guilt we experience for the selfish motivations behind our actions.

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[37] 'Nell'oceano delle parole, stampate o trasmesse, le parole del poeta o dello scrittore si perdono' (p. 351). The diluvial metaphor recurs in the context of journalism and the media, endorsing one of Carey's points.

These conjectures provide a suitably weak anti-conclusion to an essay which enacts a state of critical and moral disorientation. The writer comments at the beginning that recently, when thinking of politics and literature, 'provo due sensazioni separate, e sono entrambe sensazioni di vuoto: il vuoto d'un progetto politico in cui io possa credere, e il vuoto d'un progetto letterario in cui io possa credere' (p. 346). That at the time of writing, he had not published a novel for three years (*Il castello dei destini incrociati*, 1973) and would not publish one for a further three (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979), demonstrates the magnitude of this 'vuoto'. That he takes the trouble (and it does seem deeply troublesome for him) to think about both issues and to write about them, indicates that he believes that something must come of the crisis, even if it leads in divergent directions.

'I livelli della realtà in letteratura' (1978)

The distance from Vittorini is almost palpable in the final essay I shall consider, the discussion of the levels of fiction involved in the process of writing. Twelve years and a great deal of theory have elapsed since Vittorini's death, but this essay represents the culmination or realization of a concern always central in Calvino for the relationship between writer-text-reader - as individuals, or as individual functions. The essay also pre-dates *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* by one year, and predicts it by presenting the writing subject as a hypothesis or a persona, whose relationship with the 'world' (a knowingly de-politicized term replacing 'popolo'?) is no longer 'natural' but selective:

> Che una persona metta tutto se stesso nell'opera che scrive è una frase che si dice spesso ma che non corrisponde mai a verità. È sempre solo una proiezione di se stesso che l'autore mette in gioco nella scrittura, e può essere la proiezione d'una vera parte di se stesso come la proiezione d'un io fittizio, d'una maschera. Scrivere presuppone ogni volta la scelta d'un atteggiamento psicologico, d'un rapporto col mondo. (p. 382)

Using the Song of the Sirens as an example, Calvino goes on to 'prove' that 'poetry' pursues, through multiple layers (veils) of reality, a truth which is ultimately nothing - an absence, or inexpressibility. He points out that he has discussed 'livelli di realtà' instead of 'della', meaning that literature knows levels of reality, rather than a single, unitary reality, of which he doubts the existence.[38] Assertions of this type are familiar in the general theoretical context of the 1970s and 1980s, and in the context of the author's later fiction. They problematize the 'impegno' issue by disrupting the notion of a definable social reality to which the writer might refer. This problematic serves as an informative key by which to interpret the writers I shall discuss in detail in the main body of this thesis. The reason for drawing attention to it now is to demonstrate how far Calvino has diverged from Vittorini in his exploration of the relationship between politics and literature, his 'commitment' having weathered the theoretical storm which Vittorini largely avoided, and thus how he brings the debate up to date and defines the discursive parameters in which his successors will operate.

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[38] See Ulla Musarra-Schroeder, *Il labirinto e la rete* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1996), pp. 37-44. She identifies this essay as the marker of a turn in Calvino's thinking from exclusion of the chaotic plurality of reality ('il mare dell'oggettività') to acceptance of it as an object for analysis and a source for writing. The result is its re-definition in the 1980s as 'il mondo non scritto'. See 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto', in *Saggi*, II, 1865-75.

The 'presentazioni'

i. *Una pietra sopra* (a)

As indicated in my introductory comments, the relationship between the writer and his theoretical writings is experienced very differently by Calvino and Vittorini. Vittorini conducts an ongoing dialogue, printed *ad hoc* in the text of the *Diario in pubblico*, whilst Calvino has the essays published in their original form, with a broad, generalizing comment as an introduction. The matter is complicated by the existence of two 'presentazioni': one of barely two pages which was published in the Einaudi edition of the collection, and a second, three times as long, which he published in the newspaper, *la Repubblica*, in the same month as the book appeared (15th April 1980). The striking difference between the two is that the latter, as its length suggests, is more analytical, complex and intimate than the first, which seems perfunctory in comparison. It is perhaps odd that the piece destined for longevity (the book introduction) is more superficial than the piece whose shelf-life was intended to be one day,[39] but Calvino's reluctance to bare his theoretical soul is the crux of the difference between himself and Vittorini in the present context. Illustrating comments I made in the opening of this piece, he cites Pasolini's magniloquence as a counterpoint to his own reticence: 'uno scetticismo di fondo m'ha impedito d'investire tutto me stesso in una battaglia ben definibile, così come Pasolini...' (p. VI).

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[39] Despite its original publication in a newspaper, the piece has not proved ephemeral, having been included in the Palomar and Mondadori edition of *Una pietra sopra* to which I refer, and in the collected *Saggi* (I, 399-405).

In the *Repubblica* article, Calvino describes narrative as reaching its own perfection and being released from him as a separate entity, but his critical writings remain the objects of discussion, so are never released from him, nor he from them. He admits that he can only publish these essays as a collection now, because he is far enough from them to be detached:

> Il volume esce ora che mi sono tanto allontanato dal punto di partenza da non saper più cosa potrei correggere o aggiungere; ora che il tempo ha esteso su queste carte una patina uniforme trasformando l'occasionalità in documento d'epoca; ora che posso riconoscere nel libro un disegno, quale esso è venuto assumendo indipendentemente dalla mia volontà, un tema che si precisa via via, un itinerario e una vicenda cui si può attribuire un senso compiuto, anche se non un punto d'arrivo. (p. VII)

I quote the passage at length in order to draw attention to the language Calvino uses to express his relationship to his work. Note the passive role assigned to himself as subject, conveyed by the shift from the reflexive to impersonal 'si', and the attribution of action to vague actants such as 'time'. He is stating that he is publishing these pieces now that he can 'present' them (literally) as neutral, outdated curiosities for which he can no longer be expected to offer any explanation or defence.

The article is entitled 'Sotto quella pietra', conveying the sense that the writer is excavating material he presumed to have left entombed.[40] The psychoanalytical implications of the modified title are manifest: the stone represses the resurgent guilt related to his critical writings of the past (whereas Vittorini's guilty conscience is pricked by his narrative works). Discussing the title, Calvino presents it as another opportunity to impose conclusion and separation. He concedes that this log-book of

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[40] For a thorough discussion of the significances of the 'pietra', see Angela M. Jeannet, 'A Writer's Project: Cornerstones, Milestones, and Headstones', in Franco Ricci (ed.), *Calvino Revisited* (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1989), pp. 207-25.

past thinking might have its uses, but describes these in terms sufficiently ambiguous to dissolve them: 'Ma *Una pietra sopra* ha anche il senso della necessità di fissare la propria esperienza così come è stata, perché possa servirci a qualcosa' (p. VIII). The image of the title - a stone, and a stone placed on top of something to hold it down or suppress it - is in any case an uncharacteristic one for Calvino. He enjoys mineral imagery, but generally exploits the almost super- or hyper-natural simplicity and purity of earthly matter, rather than its weighty materiality: 'pulviscolo' rather than 'pietra'. A comparison between the title of this collection and that of the later one, *Collezione di sabbia*, sums up the difference.[41] To pin down with a paperweight the sought-after 'leggerezza' of the written word is not something one would expect Calvino to attempt.[42] It seems he experiences his early criticism as a millstone around his neck.

Calvino uses the supplementary tactic of turning the collection into a narrative, in order to escape accountability.[43] He presents it as a novel about himself, using non-committal terms (the use of the conditional gives accent to the sense of hypothesis): 'In poche parole, il tema del libro sarebbe questo: per un certo numero di anni c'è uno che crede di lavorare alla costruzione d'una società attraverso il lavoro di costruzione d'una letteratura' (p. VII). The 'story' is of an individual trying to regenerate society

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[41] Italo Calvino, *Collezione di sabbia* (Milan: Garzanti, 1984). Barenghi also makes this comparison in his introduction to the collected *Saggi*, pp. IX-LXXIII (p. XXXII).

[42] 'Leggerezza' is the title of the first in a series of six lectures by Calvino, prepared for the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures at Harvard University in 1985-6, describing the qualities for which the best literature should strive. The lectures are published as *Lezioni americane: Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milan: Palomar S.r.l. & Mondadori, 1993).

[43] Jeannet observes that the framing of the collection lends it the tone of narrative: 'By bringing out two faces of experience, that of youth and that of maturity, *Una pietra sopra* also reaffirms the dialogic structure which was imbedded in several of Calvino's most significant fictions, such as the trilogy *Our Ancestors*' (Jeannet, 1989, p. 208).

through literature, but becoming aware that society is increasingly complex and incalculable. He endeavours to make his schemes more subtle and complex but ultimately comes to believe that society cannot be changed in such a way: rather, it changes itself in the course of microscopic and millennial processes. This description is the author's 'confession', the genuine statement of the task he set himself as a writer, albeit couched in the more comfortable terms of fiction. However, having shared this confidence, and suggested the 'truth', Calvino ends by disrupting the bond between authorial intention and written product, throwing responsibility for interpretation back at the reader. He eventually uses the first person here, but, within the 'make of it what you will' tone of this section, it serves only to accentuate the division between writing and reading subjects: 'Gli scritti che ho scelto per "montare" il libro potrebbero servire a tracciare una storia come quella che ho raccontato. Ma certo non voglio imporre una direzione di lettura univoca: se ci sarà chi ricaverà dal libro un'altra vicenda, non ha che da proporre la sua tesi e dimostrarla' (p. VII).

Calvino hints at a reason for his alienation from these essays in the suggestion that he was writing under the intoxicating influence of Vittorini. He identifies 1959 and 'Il mare dell'oggettività' as the start of a new era, and acknowledges Vittorini as his inspiration and animator in this sense. The 1960s is the period when most of the essays in the collection were written and is the period of *Il menabò*: 'Sollecitato dallo slancio di Vittorini che ha ritrovato in quegli anni la sua carica più comunicativa, combattiva e ottimista, ho scritto due saggi in cui cerco di dare una sistemazione complessiva delle esperienze letterarie più diverse' (p. IX).[44] It is interesting that he

[44] The essays are 'Il mare dell'oggettività' and 'La sfida al labirinto'.

presents Vittorini as the proactive factor in the partnership and himself as conductor of the other's energy. There is even a hint of diffidence: Vittorini was being carried by a current which momentarily (and against his better judgement?) swept Calvino along too.[45]

This tone of uncertainty persists in the last paragraph, but here the author ascribes his discomfort not to literary influences but to the moral emptiness of society and of literature themselves. Calvino seems to speak honestly here, using ambiguity in a confessional rather than a distancing way, and bearing witness to a symbiosis between author and text: 'Non so se questo libro indichi chiaramente il punto in cui mi trovo ora, nell'itinerario che ho cercato di ricostruire. Certo gli ultimi testi del volume non posso storicizzarli perché corrispondono a [*sic*] miei pensieri di adesso. Vuol dire che da un certo punto in poi la pietra che poso sulle pagine scritte va intesa solo come un fermacarte' (p. XI). This last line suggests, without ebullient optimism, that there might be the potential for further debate on the relationship between literature and society. The image of the intellectual with which Calvino imprints this collection is of an individual once 'impegnato' but now perplexed by the fragmentary nature of the 'mondo non scritto'. Published in 1980, this is his legacy to the 'giovani narratori'.

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[45] On the influence of Vittorini on both Calvino and Moravia, see David Robey, 'Moravia, Vittorini, Pavese, Calvino: Fascism, Allegory, Humanism', in *Reconstructing The Past*, ed. by Graham Bartram and others (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), pp. 151-174 (p. 166).

ii. *Una pietra sopra* (b)

By contrast with this rather tenebrous and soul-searching comment on the essay collection, the 'official' introduction is brief, efficient and almost brusque: four points are made in four paragraphs. His fictionalization of himself (and, by extension, the whole work) seems mocking: 'Il personaggio che prende la parola in questo libro (e che in parte s'identifica, in parte si distacca dal me stesso rappresentato in altre serie di scritti e di atti) entra in scena negli anni Cinquanta cercando d'investirsi d'una personale caratterizzazione nel ruolo che allora teneva la ribalta: "l'intellettuale impegnato"' (p. 4). Calvino seems to trivialize 'impegno' here, fictionalizing it in order to bracket out any need to supply a moral or historical explanation of the position, as if it were a role adopted by necessity of circumstance, or of fashion, rather than by considered choice. He concludes by placing the writings of the collection in an emphatically passive role: they are dead matter, museum pieces, with nothing to tell. All that can be done with these (direct) objects is to 'rileggerli e farli rileggere', 'fermarli al loro posto', 'allontanarli', 'osservarli'. There is no dissection or questioning of the title in this instance. The last sentence is simply, 'Per metterci una pietra sopra' (p. 4), which performs the closure of the entire intellectual experience chronicled by the collection.

iii. *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*

As with Vittorini's preface to *Il garofano rosso* (though on a later time-scale all together),[46] the issue of hindsight is crucial to interpretation: the introduction enacts a

[46] Vittorini's novel was published in serial form in 1933-4, and the preface added fourteen years later, in 1948, a year after Calvino's novel was first published, after which seventeen years elapsed before the preface was added, in 1964.

revisiting of the text, and of its social and literary context, after a period of detachment and change. In Calvino's case, this period has produced the essays 'Il mare dell'oggettività' and 'La sfida al labirinto', which chart his withdrawal from identification with society on a direct and broad scale in favour of individual observation of society from an acutely literary perspective. The long (eighteen pages) preface is less the gloss to this particular novel than the explanation of a whole historical and literary period. It is an attempt to put 'una pietra sopra' the writer's first work and, more generally, on top of neorealism.

What is striking about the preface is its rhetoric: it has an oral rather than inscriptive quality. In a sense, it is one long *captatio benevolentiae*, using a direct and conversational tone which incorporates questions and fakes digressions in order to solicit the reader's sympathy. A salient rhetorical device is the statement and question posed in the first two sentences and repeated, in modified forms, three times. The first version is, 'Questo romanzo è il primo che ho scritto; quasi posso dire la prima cosa che ho scritto, se si eccettuano pochi racconti. Che impressione mi fa, a riprenderlo in mano adesso?' (p. 7). Five pages later, the reader is drawn back to the beginning: 'Questo romanzo è il primo che ho scritto. Che effetto mi fa, a rileggerlo adesso?' (p. 12). There has been a progression from picking up the book to reading it, and on the next page, we proceed to critical judgment of it: 'Questo romanzo è il primo che ho scritto. Come posso definirlo, ora, a riesaminarlo tanti anni dopo?' (p. 13). The novel resists definition over a further nine pages, so the final 'da capo' aims rather wearily at deriving from it any general comment: 'Cosa ne posso dire, oggi?' (p. 22). These repetitions are interspersed with conversational hooks cast out in order to draw the

reader's thought-process into step with that of the author, for example: 'Devo ancora ricominciare da capo la prefazione' (p. 15); 'Interrompo' (p. 17); 'Ecco: ho trovato come devo impostare la prefazione' (p. 19).[47] This very self-conscious rhetorical artistry installs a sort of meta-commentary into the preface. Whilst on one, straightforward level, Calvino is genuinely, I think, trying to establish a rapport with his reader which will allow him to explain his own critical development, on another, he seems to be commenting on the very act of commenting, drawing attention to the artifice implied in the act of inserting a structure of interpretation somewhere in the margins between narrative and critical discourses.

Connected with this rhetorical manoeuvring is the interplay between two registers in this preface. Commentary demands statements of facts and opinions, but this is held in tension by a largely irresistible impulse towards narrative, the former introduced and re-introduced by the rhetorical devices described above, and the latter constituting the large passages of 'digression'. Calvino plays on the narrative element at the beginning of the preface, in order to demonstrate that this novel is the product of a specific social context, rather than of an individual subject.[48] He not only creates a narrative of the period, but stresses that life in the Resistance and its immediate aftermath was a narrative experience: 'si era faccia a faccia, alla pari, carichi di storie da raccontare, ognuno aveva avuto la sua' (p. 7). An impression is created of a rich, interwoven 'text-ure' of experience in which reality and the story of it are

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[47] Barenghi discusses this tactic in his introduction to the *Saggi* (p. XXIX).

[48] See Martin McLaughlin's note in Italo Calvino, *The Path To The Spiders' Nests*, trans. by Archibald Colquhoun, rev. by Martin McLaughlin (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), pp. 1-5 (p. 4). McLaughlin points out that the preface has twelve sections, as does the novel, illustrating the correspondence between narrative and commentary.

indistinguishable. The message thus articulated is that the question of the relationship between writers and society was annulled during the period he recalls: the 'popolo' was comprised of 'scrittori', or at least, 'narratori'.

The section of the preface where the wrestling between the impulse to narrative and the obligation to comment is most intense is the one which produces some statements regarding 'impegno'. On pages 12 and 13 the author insists twice, as detailed above, on starting from scratch, and this effort produces first a comment on the obligation to record experiences of wide social importance: 'credo che ogni volta che si è stati testimoni o attori d'un'epoca storica ci si sente presi da una responsabilità speciale...' (p. 12). There follows a definition, if not of what 'impegno' means, at least of what it does not mean:

> Oggi, in genere, quando si parla di 'letteratura impegnata' ci se ne fa un'idea sbagliata, come d'una letteratura che serve da illustrazione a una tesi già definita a priori, indipendentemente dall'espressione poetica. Invece, quello che si chiamava l''engagement', l'impegno, può saltar fuori a tutti i livelli; qui vuole innanzitutto essere immagini e parola, scatto, piglio, stile, sprezzatura, sfida. (p. 13)

The issue of narrative is still paramount here, but its accent has changed. Whereas early in the preface, describing the Resistance and immediate post-war period, narrative is seen as significant for the people, as a mode of experience deeply connected to the folkloric tradition, it is now, in the context of the 1960s, written texts which are significant for the writer-intellectual, as a mode of interpretation. Calvino situates *Il sentiero* intertextually, describing the novels which made him write.[49] There follows a declaration which attempts to balance the literary and social worlds:

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[49] The novels cited are those of the 'canon' selected by writers of the period, Vittorini included, such as Hemingway's *For Whom The Bell Tolls* and Stevenson's *Treasure Island.* Calvino also singles out

> Le letture e l'esperienza di vita non sono due universi ma uno. Ogni esperienza di vita per essere interpretata chiama certe letture e si fonde con esse. Che i libri nascano sempre da altri libri è una verità solo apparentemente in contraddizione con l'altra: che i libri nascano dalla vita pratica e dai rapporti tra gli uomini. (pp. 15-16)

The statement above fuses the various registers of this commentary, and maximizes the potential of hindsight, drawing out from past experience the essence which has both interpretive and creative significance in the present. After this, Calvino discusses in detail the political hinterland of the novel, and starts to impose a distance from it, placing the 'pietra sopra'. He describes the transience of the success of the objective mode of writing he used in this first novel: 'Il dono di scrivere "oggettivo" mi pareva allora la cosa più naturale del mondo; non avrei mai immaginato che così presto l'avrei perduto' (p. 19). The whole preface is laced with references to the remorse linked to the responsibility of writing about a period of acute historical significance - Pavese's anguish about whether writing was enough - and the culmination of this is the confession, echoing Vittorini, that, 'il primo libro sarebbe meglio non averlo mai scritto' (p. 22). In Calvino's case, this is partly due to the feeling that the written account renders a false or limited account of the original experience. It is not however, merely a disparity between experience and narrative that he regrets (after all, he claims that experience and narrative interpenetrate one another), but the more specific problem that narrative fixes experience - it produces a definition in a limited number of words of the unfettered original story, and of the writer: 'e questa definizione poi dovrai portartela dietro per la vita, cercando di darne

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Russian writers Fadeev and Babel, and a home-grown example: Ippolito Nievo's *Confessioni d'un Italiano*.

conferma o approfondimento o correzione o smentita, ma mai più riuscendo a prescinderne' (p. 23).

Calvino's exploration of his own remorse makes it clear that what he feels has been lost or wasted is access to a certain type of writing. This marks a clear contrast with Vittorini, whose shame was linked to the political beliefs expressed in his first novel. Calvino re-visits his first work in an attempt to explore and mourn the literary potential it offered, whereas Vittorini re-visits his in order to confront the shame of what he wrote and to explain that it was a necessary stage in a process of working towards a 'truth' accessible by means of literature but not literary in itself. There is no question for Vittorini of placing a stone on top of his work: the burden of what he wrote must be carried by him as a reminder of what he still must try to write. Calvino concludes: 'Un libro scritto non mi consolerà mai di ciò che ho distrutto scrivendolo: quell'esperienza che custodita per gli anni della vita mi sarebbe forse servita a scrivere l'ultimo libro, e non mi è bastata che a scrivere il primo' (p. 24). The preface comes to be a memorial to this first novel - a headstone inscribed with words which can only attempt to recall the creative 'life' which the novel embodied.

Summary

To attempt to draw conclusions from this analysis of Vittorini and Calvino's critical writings would be to confound the purpose of the analysis, in the sense that my aim is to demonstrate that the two writers, in very different ways, generated the pluralistic and deliberately non-prescriptive debate on 'impegno' that leaves the issue still open to interpretation by writers of the 1980s and 1990s. I think it is reasonable to

claim that they, Calvino continuing where Vittorini left off, inaugurated the fragmentation of the idea of 'impegno' which I shall document in the course of my thesis. As I have already illustrated, they both worked to define political commitment in literature negatively: that is, they are clear that it must not involve literature becoming an alternative mouthpiece for expressing political theory or policy, nor can it successfully present (rather than represent) the reality of the life of the working classes, as neorealism intended. The implication is that it is possible and desirable only to make statements about what 'impegno' in literature is not, and to make suggestions as to what it might potentially be.

Most of the differences between the two writers have, I think, been suggested in the course of my analysis. To summarize, I would reiterate two points:

1. Calvino feels at home talking about his narrative work, and capitalizes on the ease with which he does this by implicitly enforcing a recognition of the fact that criticism and self-criticism are narratives themselves, which interpenetrate the fictional narrative. Writing about his writing becomes one of Calvino's games, taken very seriously. Vittorini, on the other hand, prefers a dialogue with other critics and intellectuals to a dialogue with his own work.

2. Calvino addresses his reader when he writes, and constructs his discussion in the terms of the narrative which has introduced one to the other. Vittorini addresses the public when he writes. If in practice, this is a limited public of writers and intellectuals, in theory, it is the public in its most popular sense.

> The object of his discussion is the society which he and his addressees constitute, and the opportunities for improving it.

The reason I focus on the above points is that they seem to epitomize a clear divergence in the thinking and the writing of the two men, broadly reducible to the difference between modern commitment to social advancement (Vittorini) and postmodern ironic awareness that correlations of such a direct nature are untenable (Calvino). This supposition holds some validity, and certainly any young writer of the last two decades would be much too knowing to claim for literature any direct influence over the general course of social development. However, what both the above points accentuate is that Calvino is talking amongst 'himselves' and Vittorini is projecting his voice outwards. Faced with the disillusionment with the status of literature in contemporary culture which Calvino amply documents in his essays, most writers have followed his example and chosen to write about what they know best: writing. Yet there are stronger traces of Vittorini's influence than are generally acknowledged amongst writers of the 1980s and 1990s, from the modified 'astratti furori' which trouble Tabucchi's character, Pereira, to the energy channelled by Tondelli into encouraging 'ordinary' young people to read and write literature. What we read in the most meaningful and innovative of recent Italian narrative is describable as a combination of Vittorini's vision, receptiveness and sheer hard work with Calvino's caution, self-awareness and exquisitely literary consciousness. Unexpectedly, the word 'impegno' sums up this combination rather well, rendering the sense of a task at hand which demands of the individual a serious moral/ intellectual/ imaginative investment. The definition of 'impegno' which Vittorini and

Calvino gradually made space for, and which carries forward in the writers of the 1980s and 1990s, is perhaps 'taking seriously the task of expression'.

PART I: CHAPTER TWO

CELATI AND PALANDRI: FAULT LINES IN 'IMPEGNO'

In the previous chapter, I traced the development of Calvino's thoughts on the relationship between writing and society into the 1970s and 1980s, although the focus of my analysis was the 1950-1970 period. In this chapter, I shall look initially at Calvino's collaboration with Celati as the 1960s turned into the 1970s, in order to describe a further intellectual 'spaccatura' and to expose one of the lines traceable from Calvino to the writers of the 1980s and 1990s.[1] I shall then consider its offshoots in two novels by Celati and Palandri, though maintaining the focus in this part of my thesis on the critical commentary embedded in the narrative.[2] I have termed these lines of connection fault lines: the solid assumption that literature must be committed had been shaken, but not broken, by Vittorini and Calvino's questioning of how it could enact such a commitment, and in the late 1960s the cracks begin to appear, as writers question why literature need be committed at all. These cracks or fault lines ultimately produce the fragments I shall discuss in the main body of this thesis.

Although certain names from the group of 'giovani narratori', particularly Andrea De Carlo and Daniele Del Giudice, are often cited as Calvino's literary sons, Gianni Celati, the writer who was close to Calvino during the turn from the 1960s to 1970s, has much stronger credentials to claim some sort of literary paternity from Calvino, especially in the context of the 'impegno' question. Celati cannot be

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[1] I refer to Pasolini's description of a 'spaccatura' between himself and Calvino, discussed in my previous chapter.

[2] The novels are Gianni Celati, *Lunario del paradiso* (1978), and Enrico Palandri, *Boccalone* (1979). These dates refer to first editions: full details of all editions will be provided when I discuss the texts.

classified as a 'giovane narratore', serviceable though that term is. Born in 1937, he is no longer suitably 'giovane' in the 1980s, and his heterogeneous intellectual output defies the label of 'narratore'. Calvino is only fourteen years his senior, and their relationship is based on an exchange of ideas derived from a range of disciplines but directed towards the development of literature. De Carlo (born 1952) is almost thirty years younger than Calvino, and Calvino's correspondence with him consists solely in revising his first novel.[3] The Calvino-Celati relationship has elements of brotherhood, in comparison with the more clearly paternal and unilateral influence supposedly exercized over the 'giovani narratori'. This complex dynamic between Calvino and Celati is an intrinsic element of the intellectual discourse which they develop, and of its wider effects.

The focus of the relationship between Calvino and Celati is a project for a journal which might have had the name 'Alì Babà'.[4] That the project never reached fruition is perhaps indicative of the fact that the putative journal served as an umbrella under which to shelter an intense discussion amidst a diverse group of intellectuals (participants included Guido Neri, Carlo Ginzburg and Enzo Melandri). This discussion concerned, fundamentally, the possibility of sustaining literary activity in the ambiguous social and intellectual environment of the late 1960s. Perhaps the dates of the project would provide the most accurate label for it, because it is a product of a specific intellectual moment. Celati's first encounter with Calvino, in summer 1968, was defined by the latter's description of the events of May that year in Paris. Celati

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[3] See the two letters to De Carlo, in Italo Calvino, *I libri degli altri: Lettere 1947-1981*, ed. by Giovanni Tesio (Turin: Einaudi, 1991), pp. 627-30.

[4] The project is thoroughly documented in the journal *Riga*, 14 (1998), entitled '"Alì Babà": Progetto di una rivista, 1968-1972', ed. by Mario Barenghi & Marco Belpoliti.

records that, 'mi spiegava la sua sensazione di essersi levato dei pesi di dosso, e che adesso si sentiva di "voltare pagina"'.[5] Politically and socially, there is a sense that the establishment has been challenged and that new patterns of behaviour are to be tested. In intellectual and literary terms, this was also the moment when structuralism collected its 'post':[6] the re-assessment of social systems was proceeding hand-in-hand with that of accepted systems of thought and expression. It is clear that, for Calvino, this represented an opportunity genuinely to turn over a new leaf and close the discussion on the social responsibilities of literature, with whose terms and tones he felt uncomfortable. The collaboration with Celati and others represented the chance of a new type of intellectual partnership: a looser alternative to the rigid collaboration with Vittorini.

I concentrate on the relationship specifically between Calvino and Celati, because these two seem to mark out the axis about which the project turns. The letters and minutes regarding the project, collected in *Riga*, 14, demonstrate the centrality of Calvino and Celati.[7] There is a tension between their ideas which pulls the project in opposing directions, but this is precisely what animates the discussion. The directions the two men took after, and as a result of, this collaboration are more important than what the project itself achieved, and in this sense it is fitting that, materially, it 'came

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[5] Gianni Celati, 'Il progetto "Alì Babà", trent'anni dopo', *Riga*, 14 (1998), 313-21 (p. 314).

[6] To attempt to impose a date line between structuralism and post-structuralism is risky, but the publication of two seminal works by Derrida in 1967 and 1968 supports the claim that this period was pivotal. The essays concerned are 'Ce dangereux supplément' (1967) and 'La différance' (1968). Resident in Paris during this period, Calvino's involvement in French intellectual life is demonstrated by the introduction offered him by Raymond Queneau in 1968 to the 'Oulipo' group, an acronym for 'Ouvroir de littérature potentielle', of which Georges Perec was also a member.

[7] Of the eighteen letters in the journal which regard the 'Alì Babà' project specifically, all but four are from Celati to Calvino or vice versa, some including other addressees connected with the project.

to nothing'. It marked the annulment of certain established intellectual practices in order to open up the space for alternatives.

The established practices amount, in brief, to Calvino's rationalism, which buckles under the strain of the pull towards Celati's 'irrationalism'. In order to examine this, I shall concentrate on an essay which Celati wrote for 'Alì Babà', 'Il bazar archeologico'.[8] The title provides two examples of the oppositions the author sets up in the essay: bazaar versus museum, archaeology versus history. These are not, however, one-against-one oppositions: the argument is heterogeneity against homogeneity.[9] Celati begins by defining modernism as the attention to the fragments of previous experience: 'Da Rimbaud al Dada ai Surrealisti, l'imperativo categorico sul dover essere moderni si sposa con la passione per frammenti, oggetti, relitti d'un passato ormai privo di contesto, rovine della storia ormai perdute per la storia' (p. 187). He is keen to stress the decontextualization of these intellectual relics in order to express the necessity of a new approach: 'Ma con questi oggetti non c'è identificazione possibile [...]. Se cambia il valore d'uso, cambiano i codici, cambia il surplus di codificazione dato dall'inserimento dell'oggetto nella sua dimensione culturale. E questa dimensione può essere riarticolata solo in forma parziale' (pp. 188-9). Hence the contrast between the museum, where history is represented by a selection of items, conventionally endowed with 'value', which together tell a narrative of the past; and the bazaar, where randomly accumulated, often incomplete,

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[8] This essay is now included in Gianni Celati, *Finzioni occidentali: Fabulazione, comicità e scrittura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975 and 1986), pp. 185-215. Further references are to the 1986 edition.

[9] It seems a Derridean contrast between grand metaphysical concepts and the fragmentary play of difference (*différance*) which Celati is describing here: see 'Différance', in Jacques Derrida, *Margins Of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 1-27. His frame of reference also includes Benjamin, Blanchot and Foucault.

pieces, with little intrinsic value are the 'archaeological' evidence of disparate cultures of the past.

Celati specifies the implications of his theory for narrative: 'Giunti a questo punto, il raccontare, che è sempre recupero d'un passato che ci appartiene attraverso l'epica, attraverso una genealogia che fa di quel passato la nostra origine, cede il posto alla collezione, alla raccolta di tracce di sistemi scomparsi, la cui testimonianza è solo testimonianza d'un taglio' (p. 189). Bearing in mind when Celati is writing - the essay was not published until 1975, but was written in the 'Alì Babà' period - it is clear that his discussion of these ideas with Calvino had an influence on the latter's ensuing narrative works, *Le città invisibili* (1972) and *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1973), both of which are styled as fragmentary 'non-novels', drawing attention to the signs of past experience cast up randomly in alternative contexts.

Celati's essay seems to me to encapsulate a pivotal moment in the development of the idea of 'impegno'. His discussion inhabits an area encompassing the borders of a range of disciplines in the human sciences, and an area clearly demarcated from the realm of politics. However, the points he makes have striking relevance for any project involving the social role of literature. If the grand narratives of western thought (history) have been replaced by the traces of past realities washed up on the shore of contemporary culture (archaeology), then the grand narrative of 'impegno' - the singular commitment in literature to a political ideal - must also give way to an engagement with the 'minor' issues customarily denied political value. There is even

an indication that this fragmentation might be the fruition of the 'impegno' debate in the following reference to Blanchot (*L'entretien infini*):

> Il frammento come tale è un insieme non derivabile da una totalità precedente, ma scisso da una totalità originaria per effetto d'una interruzione: l'interruzione, dice Blanchot, non è un arresto del divenire, ma al contrario ciò che provoca il divenire 'nella rottura che gli appartiene'. Il divenire è un decorso di tagli, di interruzioni e di differenze. Il privilegio del frammento è quello della differenza pura, non riducibile a una forma negativa dell'identità. Ossia il frammento non può essere considerato per quello che non è (parte d'una totalità), quindi non è né negativo né positivo rispetto ad una totalità d'origine, bensì neutro ed esterno. (p. 193)

Applying this theory to the troubled course of the 'impegno' project, the collapse of the debate which Calvino witnesses in the 1960s could be interpreted as the 'interruption' which liberates the idea of commitment from the ideological straitjacket applied in the immediate post-war period (or the fault which precipitates fragmentation). The experiments with various types of 'impegno' in the 1980s and 1990s are its 'becoming', fruitfully different from the positive identity with which the idea originated.

As suggested above, fragmentation liberates the different, the marginal, those not accounted for by history: 'Una volta che le voci estranee, diverse, le voci che non partecipano alla coscienza, le voci della pazzia e dell'idiozia, acquistano diritto di cittadinanza al pari delle voci sagge, delle voci del buon senso, non c'è più possibile utopia di totalità che tenga, e neppure utopia in generale' (p. 195). In the context of Italian narrative in the 1990s, this relates directly to writing by immigrants (chapter eight). The 'voci estranee' of immigrants now have room to speak, and they style themselves as the voice of irrationality - the collective, narrative unconscious - in comparison with the reasoned order of the western literary tradition of individual

written works. The very notion of the 'bazar archeologico' hints at non-western cultures outside the realm (or empire) of mainstream history (though perhaps in a dangerously exotic and 'Orientalist' way), and writing by North African immigrants in Italy is perhaps the realization of this 'bazar': the never-yet-valued but valuable fragments collected from combing the beaches of the Mediterranean. They are 'oggetti archeologici' instead of 'storici' (p. 196) - the souvenirs of western development rather than the trophies of it.

The author himself does not acknowledge the relevance of this essay to the evolution of 'impegno', denying any reference to society in his work of this period. However, this denial is the now familiar product of hindsight, appearing in his letter of 1998 to the *Riga* editors. Celati cites Belpoliti's reference (in a letter) to the 'Alì Babà' project as 'un'idea di letteratura e un progetto di società', and comments: 'Nel nostro caso lascerei da parte il "progetto di società"' (p. 313). However, in 'correcting' Belpoliti with regard to the objectives of the project, he describes an urge common to the group, but articulated first by Calvino, to turn literature's attention outwards from its own self-contemplation, and to make it relevant in contemporary society:

> Calvino diceva che alla letteratura 'si può chiedere qualcosa di più', oltre al solito tran-tran dei libri di successo. Con ciò voleva dire che una letteratura chiusa nel suo ghetto di premi e di best-sellers, di cerimonie critiche e di pose letterarie, diventa priva d'immaginazione proprio perché non ha più nessun termine di confronto esterno. [...] Ma siccome quel 'qualcosa di più' che si andava cercando fuori dal ghetto riguardava la sua funzione (la funzione della letteratura), allora si trattava di chiedersi a cosa servono i libri, i romanzi, le poesie. (p. 313)

Celati is expressing here a commitment to make literature genuinely engage with the society of its readers. In the terms of the debate up until the 1960s, this may not qualify as a 'progetto di società', but in the terms of the essay he is glossing, this is a fragment of that past narrative of 'impegno' which has much to tell for the future.

Hindsight also prompts Celati to be superficially dismissive of the project in general: 'Mi fa impressione rivedermi com'ero, in queste lettere, che in fondo sono lettere tra amici che discutono sulle loro fissazioni' (p. 313).[10] He styles the project as a temporary intellectual over-indulgence on the part of ultimately unlike-minded individuals, which fortunately was never made public. Fortunately, because none of the participants can now be called to account for positions held in the past: and yet Celati is called to account by the *Riga* editors, and the dismissal which I have called 'superficial' is indeed the surface of an account of the project which plumbs nine pages.

The substance of the account is provided by the author's positioning of the project at an intersection of various strands of thinking which he traces back into the intellectual context of the time. The knot at the centre is the relationship between himself and Calvino, which he attempts to explain. He describes himself as pullulating with ideas deriving from his multi-disciplinary readings, and retrospectively rationalizes his intellectual restlessness in the following terms: 'era soltanto perché Calvino mi stava ad ascoltare con molta attenzione, e così mi metteva

[10] The letters referred to are those exchanged amongst the project's collaborators, which now constitute the central part of *Riga*, 14.

in vena di grandi esibizioni d'intelligenza' (p. 317). In addition to the reactive role described here - a tacit, paternal encouragement - Calvino has a proactive function, providing the reception which induces Celati's performance. Calvino's return on the relationship is the opportunity vicariously to draw upon the potential of the youthful literary *milieu* to which he can no longer gain access directly:

> Mi sono chiesto perché mi ascoltasse con tanta serietà. Un motivo era forse la sua convinzione di dover 'voltare pagina', lasciandosi dietro una facilità di scrivere che lui chiamava 'da scrittore domenicale'. Voleva darsi dei vincoli, rendersi le cose più difficili. La massa di idee che fluivano sul mercato e che io rimestavo in grandi minestroni, gli aprivano vedute di maggior complicazione intellettuale. (p. 317)

I would note here the emphasis on difficulty: despite the famous doctrine of 'leggerezza', Calvino is insistent on the hard work of writing ('leggerezza' is only achieved through diligent crafting). This emphasis is reminiscent of Vittorini's comments on literary labour, and prescient of the similar professional dedication of Tondelli and Tabucchi, for example, who are committed to the act of writing. My interpretation at the end of the previous chapter of 'impegno' as 'taking seriously the task of expression' rests on this supplementary definition of the word as 'diligence'.

The second notable feature of Celati's comments above is the metaphor of the 'massa di idee che fluivano'. Aquatic metaphors for large quantities or bodies are common, but in this letter Celati uses Calvino's own language on sufficient occasions to make it seem a coincidence not just of idiom but of consciousness. Explaining his interest in pop art, he uses a phrase redolent of 'Il mare dell'oggettività': such art expresses the 'detrito dell'ovvietà generale' (p. 318). He then gives an account of his own thinking, which accords with that of Calvino in the 1970s, concentrating on the

traces and signs of hidden realities, rather than essences: 'era un modo di affrontare vecchie questioni, spostando l'attenzione di fondo - non più fissandosi sull'essenza della cosa o sul significato o sul cosiddetto messaggio, ma concentrandosi sul momento della registrazione, della percezione, e sui modi in cui qualcosa giunge a noi, nella sua differenza assoluta' (p. 319). He ends with a sentence which could have been written by Calvino: 'Sono effetti che cerchiamo di decifrare nella massa dei detriti pulviscolari in cui gli eventi si dissolvono, lasciando dietro di sé soltanto ombre di ciò ch'era alla sorgente' (p. 319).

The quotations above demonstrate that there is an intellectual symbiosis beween Calvino and Celati in the 1968-72 period which has literary effects more complex than a pseudo-Freudian interpretation of paternal influence can encompass.[11] After this influential convergence, the route Celati takes is a modified continuation of his previous one. Belpoliti draws attention to Celati's interest in anthropology and other disciplines as alternatives to conventional literary and intellectual models, and defines his focus as the issue of narrativity. He describes articles written in the mid-1960s, in which, 'è evidente l'attenzione per le questioni della voce narrante e la pluralità dell'intonazione narrativa, mentre i brevi testi narrativi, che anticipano *Comiche*, dimostrano una stretta connessione tra il momento della riflessione e l'attività narrativa in senso proprio'.[12] Calvino is also deeply concerned, particularly in the 1970s and later, with the dynamics of story-telling, and the quest for new models is

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[11] The preface to the 1986 edition of Celati's *Finzioni occidentali*, written only months after Calvino's death, is dedicated to the author's relationship with Calvino. The heavily elegiac tone befogs the interesting commentary on the relationship, so for the purposes of this analysis, I have concentrated on the 1998 account.

[12] Marco Belpoliti, 'Calvino, Celati e "Alì Babà"', *Riga*, 14 (1998), 24-51 (p. 29). *Comiche*, as cited here, is Celati's first published narrative work (Turin: Einaudi, 1971).

what draws him and Celati together in the late 1960s, but there is a clear qualitative difference in their interests in narrative. Calvino's urge is away from the sea of flotsam towards the 'purity' which Benedetti describes: a narrative expression of an object - be it material, intellectual, emotional - which animates its quintessence. Celati's leaning is towards superabundance: epicurean transcription of the multiple voices discernible in the rich dialogue of folkloric communication. The 'mondo scritto' interests Calvino; the 'mondo non scritto ma parlato' Celati.[13]

Referring back to 'Il bazar archeologico', it is clear that Calvino's attention to traces and fragments focusses, in a modernist vein, on their essential quality, whilst Celati's urge is towards the postmodern accumulation of all this cultural bric-a-brac. At the heart of this is Celati's rejection of Calvino's rationalist faith in the quiddity of the thinking and speaking subject, as Belpoliti describes: 'Celati insiste sull'aspetto formale della regressione a svantaggio di quello psicologico o mitico, dal momento che la lettura di Calvino presuppone l'esistenza di una sostanza originale dell'Uomo, mentre per lui il linguaggio resta l'unica realtà a cui possiamo riferirci: tutto accade con e nel linguaggio' (*Riga*, p. 39). This leads Belpoliti to identify a similar modernist/postmodern split: 'Questo è il vero discrimine: Calvino, come si è detto, è figlio della cultura degli anni Trenta e Quaranta, Celati ha respirato a pieni polmoni il clima maturato al principio degli anni Sessanta; per lui non ha alcun senso l'idea calviniana di "guardare il mondo cadendo nella tromba delle scale" (1957), dal momento che questa è esattamente l'esperienza da cui parte' (p. 39).

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[13] The 'mondo scritto e mondo non scritto' became the focus of Calvino's attention in the mid-1980s. See previous chapter for details.

Whether this 'spaccatura' between Calvino and Celati prompts the latter to head in the direction of 'impegno' or 'disimpegno' is the question crucial to my analysis of their collaboration.[14] As I acknowledged above, Celati denies that the 'progetto di società' was of any concern to him at the time of 'Alì Babà', and Belpoliti reiterates this forcefully, using Celati's ideological indifference as further evidence of the theoretical difference between him and Calvino. Important for the latter is 'il problema della società (il nesso vittoriniano di letteratura e società); mentre per Celati il problema di possedere una visione sociale non si pone neppure, dal momento che anche la società umana è essa stessa effetto del linguaggio. Non solo: l'antagonismo tra il singolo e la società - intesa come insieme di regole - attraversa gli scritti critici di Celati di quegli anni (società, famiglia e regole di disciplinamento)' (p. 40). In my opinion, these two items of 'evidence' of Celati's lack of social concern in his writing are spurious, and can be deconstructed to make them demonstrate a certain commitment.

The first reason given is that society is itself an 'effect of language'. What is meant by this, presumably, is that, as an entity created with the purpose of 'managing' human interaction, society is a product of communication between human beings, and therefore an effect of language. That such a condition should negate the humanity or reality of society does not necessarily follow, however. To maintain that society is an effect of language and 'therefore' a commitment to its development is nonsensical is

[14] Belpoliti also draws a contrast between Celati and Pasolini, describing them as alter-egos to one another, who nevertheless played a similar role in their relationships with Calvino (*Riga*, p. 27).

to lash together two strips of thinking which cannot join: crudely, one pre- and one post-linguistic. That is, to accept that society is an effect of language is to accept a perception of humanity which takes as its starting point that human beings act linguistically in all their relations with others and with otherness, and that their very perception of self and other is a linguistic procedure. From within this linguistic consciousness, it is therefore impossible to retain a perception of the individual and society as discrete, 'natural' entities with identities which pre-exist and are independent of any linguistic representation of them. The perception of society as an effect of language is simply a modified perception of it - not an annulment - and does not preclude any commitment of an individual to issues deriving from society. Indeed, it modifies sensitivity to the experience of those issues.[15]

The second piece of 'evidence' of Celati's 'disimpegno' is his theme of the friction between the individual and society, and the negative appraisal of society this generates. Again, I think that to see society as a set of problems which need to be addressed, in order to make it less oppressive and hostile to the individual, is simply to express a new relationship with society: a discomfort with the structures established in the wake of World War II, which have been strained in unforeseen ways by economic and social changes, and thus appear outdated and inadequate in the social context of the late 1960s. This is a modification of the positive, creative attitude to society exhibited by Calvino and Vittorini in the 1950s, and not a rejection of society itself. To question social structures and to express the widespread disaffection with

[15] The problem here is similar to that surrounding Derrida's notorious declaration that 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte'. This is not a claim that nothing outside the text is significant but that all significance is signification, i.e. is experienced textually.

them can be interpreted as a committed act, if the interpretive community is also prepared to criticize its own conventions, and see 'impegno' not just in the post-war sense of creating blueprints for social renewal, but in a contemporary sense of raising critical awareness.

Where in Celati's writing is the evidence to back up my argument? Generally, I concur that the exploration of language is his main concern from the early 1970s onwards, but I would maintain that this is not an exclusive project but rather one which readily accepts the status of language as social currency. It would be mistaken to read Celati's celebration of the language of popular story-telling as a 'popularizing' move in the simplest sense. He does not see the use of such language purely as a way of realistically representing ordinary people, as did realism and neorealism - he is in fact aware of the rhetorical quality of everyday discourse and it is for this reason that he wants to put it into play. In this instance, he is interested in the language itself, independent of the 'real' people who use it. What is significant is the particular features of language which he picks out for special attention. Calvino comments on this in his 'Nota' to Celati's *Comiche*: 'L'ossessione d' "un mondo dove tutti giocano a correggerti" spinge Gianni Celati a far parlare nelle sue pagine le voci del rifiutato, dell'escluso, del rimosso. La sua scrittura è tutta gags verbali, lapsus, *malapropisms*, ecolalie, atti mancati. Celati la definisce "una lingua di pure carenze"' (*Riga*, p. 173; italics in text). Calvino then describes the genesis of this interest: the author's work as a provincial schoolmaster, where the children used the written Italian language imposed upon them with a powerful sense of irony, such that every ambiguity was a

protest at once recognized and stifled by the Italian teacher who corrected all the 'mistakes' (the oral facets) of their prose.

The comment and the meta-comment of the anecdote serve to reveal that Celati is interested in the 'underside' of language; firstly, in its own right, but secondly, as a social statement. He is clearly not unaware or unheeding of the social significance of the silencing of certain types of speech. His primary objective may be linguistic liberation, but its effect is a democratization of literary language which allows 'le voci del rifiutato' in a social and political sense to be heard.[16] This may seem an exaggerated claim to make for a writer-critic whose name has not been central in the recent history of Italian literature, but I hope to demonstrate that there is a clear vein of influence stemming from him and running through writers of the 1980s and 1990s. I shall first look at how the theory works in his own practice, that is, in one of his novels.

Lunario del paradiso[17]

This novel, originally published in 1978, was completely re-written for publication in 1996. I have chosen to concentrate on the recent version because I think it is useful to read it in the light of the theme of critical re-visiting which has dominated my discussion of the theoretical history of 'impegno'. The reason the author gives for the re-writing, on the cover of the 1996 edition, is that the story was

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[16] See Robert Lumley, 'Gianni Celati: Fictions to Believe in', in *The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barañski & Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 43-58, (p. 56). He too describes Celati's anti-élitist position.

[17] Gianni Celati, *Lunario del paradiso* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996). Earlier editions are the original (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), and a Feltrinelli edition of 1989 in the trilogy, *Parlamenti buffi*.

badly told, and failed to do justice to the experience recounted: 'Negli anni mi sono accorto che il libro perdeva colpi, era anche sdilinquito e vanesio, dovevo assolutamente riscriverlo'. The author is clearly separating two facets of the novel: its *fabula* and its *syuzhet*, or the experience and the telling of it.[18] The experience is fixed by Celati way back in the past: 'A vent'anni ero partito per una migrazione', but the telling is subject to re-assessment over the years.

Two aspects of this urge towards repeated self-appraisal are interesting. One is the demonstration it provides of the doctrine of literary professionalism which derives partly from Vittorini but is sharpened by Calvino. My second, connected point, is that the writing seems to need to move with the times: the re-writing is not simply aimed at a better rendition of the story in timeless terms, it is an updating of the story in order to supplement its meaning in a new social and critical context. The latest version is a critical commentary on the previous version as well as a new version: the dual vision of the moment of memory and the recounting of the memory to which Belpoliti referred is refracted to include a reflection on the recounting of the memory. This meta-narrative feature is diffused into the narrative itself, with the narrator repeatedly referring to the problematic task of communicating his experience to his readers. The layers of narrativity are thus called to witness within and without the text.

Narrative essentially becomes a *fabula* as well as the *syuzhet* of this novel, which vivaciously recounts its own telling. The narrator regularly addresses the

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[18] Russian formalist criticism draws a distinction between the event and the narrative of it, calling the chronological episode the *fabula*, and the narrative sequence of presentation the *syuzhet*. See V. Shklovsky and others, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. by Lee T. Lemon & Marion J. Reis (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

reader(s) directly, as 'voi che ascoltate'.[19] The quotation of Petrarch (*Canzoniere*, 1) has a literary impact to which I shall return, but notable first is the call to listeners, rather than readers. In the extensive commentary on narrative which the novel elaborates, it is oral narrative which is foregrounded. The narrator talks about the process of recalling and recounting, and regards this process as a contract with his 'reader': a relationship whereby the readership or audience makes demands for information, and he has the responsibility to satisfy those demands.

A further aspect of the narrative layering of the novel is its intertextuality, as exemplified above. It is dense with references to the classics of European literature - the literary transcriptions of stories whose origins are oral. These references are used in an ironic, boisterous way rather than as a solemn tribute or theoretical statement. The narrator sees himself as part of a 'great tradition', but this is not a legacy which burdens him. This epitomizes a tendency in narrative by younger writers to explore and exploit the self-referential aspects of writing. Though self-referentiality was the medal, later regarded as the albatross, around the neck of some experimental writing of the 1960s and 1970s, this could be termed a literary autism: a retreat into the text excluding communication with anything outside it. An example is Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*.[20] Again, it is Celati who adapts the precedent, foregrounding the oral-to-textual evolution of stories in a way which acknowledges

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[19] This technique is used, as conventionally in oral narratives or their transcriptions, chiefly at the beginnings and ends of episodes, or chapters. For example, at the beginning of chapter twelve: 'Comincia l'altra parte delle avventure di quell'anno lontano, e voi che ascoltate non dormite' (p. 52). The enticement of the reader at the end of chapter eight is also conventional: 'Voi che mi seguite tenete duro, il meglio della storia deve ancora venire' (p. 40).

[20] Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979).

the evolutionary contribution of the 'mondo non scritto'. Parts II to IV of this thesis will show that this trend has been further adapted by writers of the 1980s and 1990s.

The primary *fabula* of the novel represents another precedent for the 1980s generation: a young man leaves Italy to travel in northern Europe (Germany), and the adventures he has become milestones in his personal development. The theme is a conventional one, but the particular accent lent by Celati is innovative and influential. The accent derives from two factors: firstly, the travel topos - Celati takes an Italian youth abroad. The social significance of this is clear if the date of the trip is taken into consideration. Celati records that he was twenty years old when he left, so 1957 was the date of the trip. The dates of the so-called 'economic miracle' are usually set as the late 1950s to early 1960s, so it is early for a youth to have the means and freedom, and even the inclination, to make such a trip (although Celati describes himself as 'zaino in spalla e quasi senza soldi'). However, he did not publish his account of the trip until 1976, by which time access to Italian universities had been made universal and a strong, Euro-conscious student identity had been established in Italy.[21] In this social context, the independent discovery of Europe on a small budget has a much more immediate relevance, and this continues to be the case in the following decades. The topos of travel recurs persistently in the work of young writers of the 1980s and 1990s: it will feature largely in all the chapters of parts II to IV of this thesis.

[21] A series of educational reforms in the early 1960s abolished the entrance examination to universities, allowing open access. The number of university students almost doubled over the decade, creating a powerful student identity, but also resulting in the overcrowding and strain on resources which fuelled the protests of 1968.

Travel is subsumed in this and subsequent novels into the issue of youth. Again, the date of Celati's original journey is significant, because the 1950s is generally recognized as the decade which invented the teenager. This notion stems from American, and, by short extension, British culture: societies which recovered economically and politically from World War II more rapidly than literally war-torn countries such as Italy, and therefore could breed a sub-culture of economically assured, psychologically independent, and extrovert consumers of popular culture. Celati is ahead of his time once more in the experience, but punctual in the writing of it, in the sense that, despite the economic and political tensions of the 1970s in Italy, by the time of publication the notion of the teenager was well-established in Italy, if only as a factor of the Italo-American dream. Similarly, after the late 1960s, it could no longer be denied that young people had a voice, even if the student movement in Italy was less successful than elsewhere. Looking back on Italian literary precedents, the presence of a teenage (or twenty-ish) narrator or protagonist is rare. Certainly, children or teenagers feature centrally in wartime novels, precisely as cyphers of the psychologically distortional effects of war,[22] but the notion of a teenager as a legitimate and perspicacious narrating and interpreting subject is one which only gains credence and currency in the 1980s. To claim that Celati inaugurates the 'genre' of youth fiction which spawned the 'giovani narratori' would be hyperbolic, but Celati's figure of the bright, independent, young male is one which recurs in narrative of the

[22] Pin, in Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1947) and Erica, in Vittorini's *Erica e i suoi fratelli* (written in 1936 but published first with *La garibaldina* (Milan: Bompiani, 1956)) are examples of children who become prematurely and incongruously 'old'. The foregrounding of the young person's consciousness in adult memories of wartime is also common, e.g. Giorgio Bassani, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962), and Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare* (Turin: Einaudi, 1963).

past twenty years, becoming increasingly one of a social group who are not a sub-culture but protagonists in society.

The relevance of the 'youth' theme to the 'impegno' question is that the two notions have become, in a specific way, coterminous (hence the pertinence of writing a thesis on 'impegno' in the decade of the 'giovani narratori'). The obvious evidence of this is the student movement of the late 1960s and later, and the literature which this produced.[23] In the most direct sense, young people developed a voice with which to call for social change, and this initiative cemented their identity as a legitimate locus of political awareness and action. This is not, however, the way in which I see the two terms coinciding. Moving a step forward from this concept of youth as a political body in an active sense, we can see in Celati's *Lunario del paradiso*, and works of that vein which follow, an evolution of youth as a social commentator: the ironic critic of the adult establishment. Youth evolves its own language - the slang and in-jokes which change faster than those outside the circle can fathom - and uses it as the tool with which to undercut and criticize the stagnant language of legitimate discourse and the inadequacy of its structures. Just as, in Calvino's anecdote, the children Celati taught used their own dialect to express what standard Italian failed to recognize, so the 'linguaggio' of young people snaps at the heels of the 'lingua' of the establishment, causing it to stumble and reveal its maladroitness. This explains the

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[23] The novel of the period is Rocco & Antonia (Marco Lombardo Radice & Lidia Ravera), *Porci con le ali* (Rome: Savelli, 1976). Proof, perhaps, of a resurgence of interest in the literature of youth protest is the successful re-publication of the novel in Mondadori's 'Miti' series in 1996, but Lino Pertile comments that it ultimately affirmed conventional values, 'thus effectively undermining the ideological foundations of the youth movement the book purported to represent'. See 'The Italian Novel Today: Politics, Language, Literature', in Barañski & Pertile, pp. 1-19 (p. 10).

acute sensitivity to the spoken language in Celati's novel, and in those which follow his line: Palandri, Tondelli, Ballestra.

In this way, youth is a pressure group in the most positive sense of the term, forcing upon mainstream society an awareness of alternative aspirations and modes of behaviour, and hence a critical awareness of its own arrogant hegemony. To write from within the society of young people is an act of social commitment (a critique of the status quo) and of literary commitment (a research of new modes of expression). The problem in this revolutionary vision of youth is twofold: one, that if linguistic flexibility is the index and the instrument of the change youth can urge, then committing their 'linguaggio' to print is perhaps annihilating its potential; two, that, as the expansion of the 'giovani narratori' phenomenon suggests, the youth identity is all too vulnerable to annexation by those who do not genuinely speak its language. Complications of this sort will be highlighted in my discussion of the work of some of the 'giovani narratori', as I examine how the themes of youth and travel are combined with other issues by De Carlo, Tondelli, Ballestra, and Ramondino.

Boccalone[24]

This novel refracts the themes of *Lunario del paradiso*, and seems to me to be a landmark for the narrative of the 1980-1995 period.[25] Palandri has not been included in the body of this thesis because I do not believe the corpus of his work adds any

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[24] Enrico Palandri, *Boccalone* (Milan: L'Erba Voglio, 1979; Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988; Milan: Bompiani, 1997). I refer to the Bompiani edition. Palandri was born in 1956, and *Boccalone* was his first published work. He continues to publish narrative to this day.

[25] See Bruno Quaranta, 'Palandri: Cerco l'uomo sotto il muro di Berlino', in *Tuttolibri*, 1054 (17.4.97), 2. Quaranta records Tondelli's description of *Boccalone* as 'un libro che ha aperto la strada alla nuova letteratura degli Anni Ottanta'.

original insight into the issue of commitment in contemporary narrative, but this individual novel is significant. It combines what I might call the new Italian *Bildungsroman*, of which *Lunario del paradiso* is an example, with the *Zeitroman* - the portrait of an age. Celati's account of the development of his younger self is told in a fairy-tale style, including stock characters and fantastical episodes, which is partly an ironic comment on the 'real' story, but nevertheless attenuates its impact as the history of a period. Palandri attempts to convey the *Zeitgeist* of the late 1970s, and to comment on the 'phenomenon' of this particular period, and in doing so, he represents a further 'phenomenon' (of which Tondelli is another instance), which is the apparent need for such cultural artefacts which represent the *summa* of a period, generation, or decade.

Palandri's *Boccalone* clearly comes from the same mould as *Lunario del paradiso*. Subtitled *Storia vera piena di bugie*, and the title, the narrator's nickname, evoking a caricature, it stakes its own claim to the folklore tradition. The narrator, like Celati's, is an engaging innocent acquiring maturity not, in this instance, through travel in Europe, but through exploring the foreign-seeming world of Italy in the 1970s (specifically 1977, year of the second student uprising). Whereas Celati's narrator seems partly to create or maximize the dramatic circumstances in which he finds himself, Boccalone - a student at the DAMS in Bologna - is a reactive agent: a piece of litmus paper immersed in the events of 1977 in order to demonstrate the degrees of acerbity in the social environment. In his postface to the 1988 edition of the novel, the author comments that the context of the novel <u>is</u> the novel: 'L'io che parla in continuazione non si cerca e non si fonda, filosoficamente, una propria concezione

del mondo, è solo dialogo con l'esterno, anzi, dialogo dell'esterno, dei vari incontri, delle diverse pressioni sociali, cui quest'io porge un orecchio'.[26] The story is of a young man in his times, but the narrative balance is tipped in favour of the times, giving a powerful sense of the narrator's personality and his 'neuroses', but as the index of the character of an entire generation. Boccalone is instinctively 'committed', but in a non-militant, passive, and ultimately rather puzzled way.

As indicated above, the 1997 edition of the novel carries commentary by the author on two subsequent 're-visits' of the work, at nine-year intervals after its publication.[27] These postfaces record the author taking stock of his work towards the end of each subsequent decade. Palandri's reassessments, like Celati's comment on *Lunario del paradiso*, are striking in that they are testimony to a powerful ideological current which persists in the work, or, at least, in the author's perception of it, resisting the ideological closure which, in other cases I have discussed, the author's maturity and/or a political change of course have imposed. There are two preliminary differences to note between the postface for the 1980s and that for the 1990s. The earlier one is much longer (twelve pages, as opposed to two), and is more negatively critical of the novel, taking a greater creative and political distance from it. The latest is much more direct, and concentrates on the political reaction to the period portrayed in the novel. It would be crudely simplistic to read this as a clear demonstration of a withdrawal from 'impegno' in the 1980s, and a re-awakened social awareness in the 1990s, but it is interesting that in the 1980s, the author seems almost content to let his

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[26] Enrico Palandri, 'Postfazione all'edizione del 1988', in *Boccalone* (Milan: Bompiani, 1997), pp. 143-54 (p. 143).

[27] See previous note for details of the 1988 postface. The second commentary follows in the same edition: 'Postfazione all'edizione del 1997', pp. 155-7.

novel rest, as a document of his youth as a writer and social observer, whereas in the 1990s he exploits the opportunity of its re-publication to grind an axe which has become blunt since the 1970s.

Although the 1988 preface appears to carry some of the disclaimers made familiar by other such re-visitings of politically significant texts, in this case, it is not the critical presumption of including a political statement in a work of narrative which is rejected, but the ideology of the statement made. In short, Palandri is criticizing his own politics, rather than his writing, and is thus legitimating and continuing the political discussion. He describes his horror at that time of professionalism of any type, and comments that Boccalone's was 'una ribellione poco chiara negli obbiettivi e su se stessa, ma positivamente orientata alla costruzione di una distanza dai sistemi ideologici della generazione precedente [...]. Per questo ribellismo io non ho oggi sempre simpatia' (p. 144). He stresses the disingenuousness of Boccalone, and the presumption of the student movement as a whole: 'Al protagonista di questa storia pare che tutto dipenda dalla buona volontà, dal talento e dall'astuzia; anche questo mi irrita perché lì sotto io vedo oggi soprattutto una difesa retorica dei minuscoli privilegi della condizione studentesca' (p. 144).

This ambivalence to the novel dominates the postface, dramatizing conflicting pulls on the author: on the one hand, towards a critical maturity which is embarrassed by his youthful excesses, and on the other, towards an enthusiastic engagement with the ideological issues which concerned him then. It almost seems that the mature writer craves the renewed opportunity to tap the ideological energy of the 1970s. It is

telling that the ambivalence is most obvious when he talks about the confluence of interests at the moment of translating his ideologies into writing. For example, he records that, when completing the book, 'io aggiunsi ai ringraziamenti: e grazie a quelli che capiranno che io non sono uno scrittore che di stronzi è già pieno il mondo. È una frase che mi dispiace aver scritto, oggi, e in un momento così rabbioso' (p. 145). However, he goes on to say that in those circumstances, he would write it again, because it is representative of 'l'io che racconta questa storia' (p. 145). This exchange between past and present author-selves, between Boccalone and Palandri, articulates a repression which the 'mature' author is trying to impose upon an ideological principle which, in critical terms, may seem *passé* in 1988.

Palandri several times in this postface attempts to put 'una pietra sopra' the period of his first novel, for example: 'Ecco, di nuovo mi pare che la cosa più evidente sia il distacco, l'addio che questo libro dice a un mondo' (pp. 152-3). However, the issues which are still alive will not be buried until the end, where he romanticizes the novel and his retrospective gloss of it, discussing in a conventional way the connections between writing and death, and finally evoking a nostalgic image of the past, in which he pictures his friends of the 1970s disappearing around a corner out of sight, symbolizing rather unimaginatively the closure of that period. The impression with which the reader is left is that a political and narrative experience which contains very attractive but unmanageable elements for the writer has been boxed rather clumsily.

Hence the 1997 preface: the chance to sum up the novel after a further nine years of hindsight. Striking about this version are its passion and militancy. Palandri recuperates both the language of student protest ('il lutto', 'la vita spirituale' (p. 156)), and its system of values. He opens the piece with a paean to youth, celebrating its 'spregiudicatezza', resistance to convention, vitality and directness. Having mentioned at the beginning that the novel was criticized for giving too much importance to youth, he counters:

> Mi piacerebbe dare troppa importanza alla giovinezza, la verità è che la giovinezza non ha importanza, la storia e le società la ignorano e lei a sua volta esplora inconsapevole il proprio destino individuale e di generazione; solo voltandoci indietro possiamo intravedere i significati che portava come una promessa o un lapsus, come una frase detta troppo in fretta e che ha già fatto precipitare in avanti. (p. 155)

This seems at first reading rather anachronistic and naive, as if the author is a relic of the protest generations still banging the same drum in the 1990s. It is interesting that Palandri uses the term 'giovinezza', rather than 'gioventù': an abstract notion of youth rather than a name for the class of young people.

His defence of youth becomes sharper once he doubles his critical target, commenting on both his novel and the 1988 postface, and thus stressing that he is speaking with actual anger rather than nostalgia:

> Quanto nove anni fa mi è parso necessario chiosare, in modo anche apologetico, certi atteggiamenti di Boccalone e dei suoi amici [...], tanto oggi mi pare vada detto al contrario e con forza che non c'è stato negli anni '70 un'Italia di giovani mostri. Processi e grossolane ricostruzioni hanno ribadito periodicamente gli enormi pregiudizi ideologici che hanno criminalizzato gli anni '60 e '70. (p. 156)

He not only defends the 1970s as an autonomous experience, but also foregrounds critically the backlash which has maintained the currency of the experience of that

period in the 1990s. He presents the 1970s and its effects as the catalyst which triggers symptoms of a disease to appear, but the disease is latent in 1990s society and, this suggests, might manifest itself in other ways. The judiciary is singled out for specific criticism, and given the date of this preface, this must be a comment on the controversy raised by the degree of power exercised by judges in the 'Tangentopoli' affair. The message is that the issues of the 1970s are current.

This short and trenchant postface closes with a paragraph which combines the lyrical and the political:

> Boccalone è una storia di quegli anni, ma riguarda i giovani di sempre, le loro fughe d'amore, la loro voglia di comprendere e farsi conoscere. Io spero che continui a contraddire la miopia di chi vorrebbe ridurre quegli anni al terrorismo e la giovinezza a un desiderio. (p. 157)

This contrasts sharply with the end of the 1988 postface, where the closure seems permanent. Here, the author launches his work into the future: he endows the book with the potential to be active, to change people's thinking, although his claim is modest ('io spero...'). Again, it is not the course of history itself, but of the assessment of history, that he hopes to influence. The book is to be an antagonist in the process of narrating the story of a period in history, forcing a disruption of received opinion concerning that period.

In a sense, each edition of *Boccalone*, with its new authorial comment, is a re-phrasing of the text in the idiom of the current social context. Although this means that Palandri is pitching the novel according to the latest conditions of reception, I think it would be unreasonably cynical to interpret this as a mere marketing initiative.

I think it is a demonstration of a commitment on the part of the author to make the experience of his youth - clearly, the experience of a generation - continually relevant as his own and further generations read it. This is an idiosyncratic modification of the *Zeitroman* precedent: taking the novel of a time and re-tuning it in harmony with the times which follow.[28] The 1997 postface makes it clear that there are still issues from 1977 which remain pressing in the 1990s, and the positioning of the comment makes of this political point a hermeneutical one as well. This is because, as a postface, it is clearly intended to encourage reflection after the immediate reception of the text: a reflection which might simply involve thinking of the period portrayed in the narrative in relation to the present day. However, the position as postface also draws attention to the notion of interpretation after the fact: the interpretations we make with hindsight of interpretations made *ad hoc*. In this way, this novel is a landmark in that it is an active and ongoing depiction of a period: newsreel rather than a portrait. Palandri's commitment is in enforcing interpretation, on literary and socio-political levels: enforcing an engagement with the past and with the implications of our response to it in the present.

Celati and Palandri suggest some parameters for youth writing which 'takes seriously the task of expression', and so prepare the ground for the 'giovani narratori'. They open up a fault line deriving from Calvino, but they themselves break off in different directions. Some writers strike out earlier (Tabucchi follows a line stemming almost directly from Vittorini and Calvino), and other influences determine further

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[28] This gesture towards 'on-line' updating of the novel perhaps suggests a compromise between traditional publishing and the new potential for texts to be published on the Internet and modified *ad hoc* whenever, and by whomsoever, desired.

lines in contemporary Italian narrative (for example, De Carlo's 'Americanism'). Some writers, such as Ballestra, combine established influences with new (Leopardi, Celati and television talk shows). It is complex intersections of this sort which have caused the fragmentation of the 'impegno' question, to which I shall turn my attention in detail in the central parts of this thesis.

PART II: CHAPTER THREE

ANTONIO TABUCCHI: THE POLITICS OF SUGGESTION

Although often bunched with the 'giovani narratori', simply because he was writing successfully throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Tabucchi stands proud of any homogenized grouping of contemporary Italian narrative. At the simplest level, he is older than those to whom that label is normally applied, and he started writing in the 1970s. Born in 1943 (whereas De Carlo was born in 1952, Tondelli in 1955), the historical events of World War II are beyond his experience but crucial to his consciousness, whereas the younger writers tend to shun history. This sense of an attachment, even a responsibility, to twentieth-century history links him with the generation of writers which died out in the 1980s (Vittorini, Calvino, Sciascia, Moravia), and this connection is endorsed by his general conception of the role of literature, which is broadly definable as a 'humanistic' one: he seems to see literature as a means of understanding, and thereby improving, the human condition.

Such a description seems to cast Tabucchi in a mould designed in the immediate post-war period, and thus to suggest his work is anachronistic and somehow 'unrealistic'. His 'high'-literary credentials might bolster this interpretation: his writing is erudite, elegant, and metaphorical-allegorical, appearing to steer clear of the vulgar mundanity of everyday contemporary existence by use of nuance, fantasy, and exotica. This is indeed how the author is commonly (mis)read. He is regarded as the 'elderly' gentleman amongst the 'giovani narratori': charming and largely innocuous.

As I have suggested, this is a misconception, because Tabucchi's work conceals an acute awareness of cruelty and violence in human relationships which belies its exquisitely 'literary' façade. Politics trouble Tabucchi's writing. He is concerned both with political events as such, and with the way in which the behaviour of ordinary human beings in their day-to-day dealings with others is affected by the powers which regulate their experience. Literature has the potential to mediate powerfully in this relationship between hegemonic discourses and the individual subject: not only in a reactive role, affording a space for exploration of this relationship, but also in a proactive one, in that writing can express dissent and encourage change of opinion. This confidence in the impact of writing, unmitigated by concerns about the priority of other modes of expression in contemporary life, is perhaps the factor which differentiates Tabucchi most sharply from other recent writers, and which may strike the reader as naïve. I hope to demonstrate in this chapter that his commitment to producing a literature which tackles social issues is both formulated and executed with subtlety, and with a sensitivity to the possibilities of misunderstanding which is intelligently attuned to the times.

There is a clear progression of formal experimentation in the course of Tabucchi's writing. In the seventies, he wrote two novels of a broadly 'historical' nature, where chronicled events were mythologized into fable. In the eighties, he experimented with fragmentary 'racconti' exploring dreams, memories and story-telling. In the nineties, he has effected a synthesis of the two types, shifting from the 'racconto' to a hybrid 'racconto-romanzo', towards the traditional novel. His works of the mid-1990s, chiefly, *Sostiene Pereira* (1994), have been heralded as his most

'political'. There are manifest and sound reasons for this interpretation, but I aim to show that political themes are interwoven into the dense thematic fabric of his narrative throughout.

The course of this chapter will follow the three stages mentioned above. Tabucchi has been a very prolific writer since the 1970s, and constraints of relevance and space prevent me from dealing exhaustively with all his works. The two novels of the 1970s, *Piazza d'Italia* (1975) and *Il piccolo naviglio* (1978), and Tabucchi's most recent novel, *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro* (1997), are beyond my remit because published before 1980 and after 1995. The first and third in particular are significant for many reasons, but I shall use them as a references in discussing other works, rather than considering them in full. Whilst I cannot help but refer to the writer's debt to the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, I shall avoid detailed discussion of his critical works on the poet. *Sogni di sogni* (1992) and *Gli ultimi tre giorni di Fernando Pessoa* (1994) are musings on the consciousness of other artists whom Tabucchi admires, and, whilst they illustrate part of my argument, they are not central to it, so will be omitted. Nor will I discuss the earlier *I dialoghi mancati* (1988), because, again, it is partly an exploration of Pirandello and Pessoa, and, as drama, it falls outside the scope of my thesis. Two fragmentary collections published in the 1980s, *Donna di Porto Pim* (1983) and *I volatili del Beato Angelico* (1987), and the long 'racconto' *Notturno indiano* (1984), have been excluded because they offer little additional understanding to that gained from analysing the more substantial collections of this decade.

1980s: Racconti fantastici

The works of this decade which I intend to examine are the two collections of 'racconti', *Il gioco del rovescio* and *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza*, and the longer 'micro-novel', *Il filo dell'orizzonte*.[1] I have termed them all 'racconti' because the latest work mimics the composition of the carefully-crafted collections, following a single thematic thread which winds through a variety of cameo encounters. I shall survey the two collections first, identifying recurrent themes and stylistic features, then compare *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, which marks a modification of thematic direction, leading straight into the works of the 1990s.

Tabucchi's prefaces to the two collections explain their genesis and present the literary device, posited in the title, which underpins their unity.[2] Regarding the stories in *Il gioco del rovescio*, he explains, 'tutti, sia gli uni che gli altri, sono legati a una scoperta: l'essermi accorto un giorno, per le imprevedibili circostanze della vita, che una certa cosa che era "così" era invece anche in un altro modo' (p. 5). The first story, which Tabucchi acknowledges to have 'un riflesso di autobiografia' (p. 5), explains the circumstances of this revelation, attributing the 'gioco' to Pessoa. Maria do Carmo, the recently deceased friend of the narrator, told him of her childhood game, the *juego del revés*, and introduced him to Pessoa, who she claims 'è un genio perché ha capito il risvolto delle cose, del reale e dell'immaginato' (p. 13). On her death her husband

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[1] Antonio Tabucchi: *Il gioco del rovescio* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1981); *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1985); *Il filo dell'orizzonte* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986). A second edition of the first collection, including three new stories, was published by Feltrinelli in 1988. Quotations are from this edition.

[2] See Maria Pia Ammirati, *Il vizio di scrivere: letture su Busi, De Carlo, Del Giudice, Pazzi, Tabucchi e Tondelli* (Catanzaro: Rubbettino Editore, 1991). Ammirati identifies Tabucchi's para-text as an opportunity to reveal the story's origins in a reality experienced directly or vicariously by the author. The para-text is one means of positioning the story in a space between fact and fiction.

implies that the narrator's perception of Maria may have been the opposite of his own: 'Vorrei toglierle un'illusione, disse, quella di aver conosciuto Maria do Carmo, lei ha conosciuto solo una finzione di Maria do Carmo' (p. 21). The note she has left for him bears only the word SEVER, which, reversed, reads 'reves', meaning either the reversal game, or dreams, depending on the language used.[3] The reversal game does not result in the rejection of the original meaning in favour of its single, exact opposite, but in a multiplication of possible meanings. Similarly, the turning of Maria's life into its 'opposite', death, is not the end of a story but, literally, the beginning of this story and of the collection. Reversal is a means of avoiding closure and expanding possibility. By connecting this technique with dreams and death, and with literature, Tabucchi creates a nexus of meaning which informs much of his writing: in short, writing allows us to look at things from the 'other' side.

The stories of *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* expand upon this release of meaning. In his opening 'Nota', Tabucchi remarks on his baroque taste for misunderstandings: 'Malintesi, incertezze, comprensioni tardive, inutili rimpianti, ricordi forse ingannevoli, errori sciocchi e irrimediabili: le cose fuori luogo esercitano su di me un'attrazione irresistibile' (p. 7). The 'equivoco' is perhaps more productive than the reversal: situated similarly in the gap between the identity of an object or person and its interpretation by another, it can encompass a whole sphere of possible meanings.[4] The writer highlights the importance of this specifically for writing by

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[3] There is also the possibility, not mentioned by the narrator, that an interpretation in English is relevant, perhaps echoing the husband's attempt to terminate all traces of the relationship between the narrator and Maria. This seems unlikely, however, since the point of the 'gioco del rovescio' is to extend discussion.

[4] See 'Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi', in *Piccole finzioni con importanza: valori della narrativa italiana contemporanea*, ed. by Nathalie Roelens & Inge Lanslots (Ravenna: Longo, 1993), pp. 147-

describing the disparate sources of his stories: some were told to him by others, some inspired by dreams and fantasies, some are drawn from his own experience. He wishes too that some could be re-told by others (Henry James and Kipling are cited).

Tabucchi thus presents himself as a receiver and interpreter, de-coding and re-coding messages. These collections are each the intersection of a number of literary cross-beams loaded with intertextual reference, which reinforce the structure of each text. The stories of *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* in particular are all inspired by literary works (some mentioned in the 'Nota'): 'Piccoli equivoci senza importanza' refers to Greek tragedy, 'Anywhere out of the world' to Baudelaire, 'Rebus' to both Proust and the 'giallo' genre. In a sense these two collections are encyclopaedic macro-texts, encapsulating a world of literature which has autonomy from the 'real' world and seems, to a degree, self-sufficient and self-perpetuating. Is this literary self-referentiality 'typical' of the 1980s, suggesting that the 'real' world is irrelevant to writing?

Some of the stories of these collections superficially suggest that the answer to my question is yes, in that they focus on the bare bones of communication. In *Piccoli equivoci*, 'Any where out of the world' concentrates on printed messages. The title itself stems from Baudelaire, carrying various other references to the French poet, but these are neutral blocks of language, which bring no extra meaning to their new

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63. In this discussion, Tabucchi claims that, in contemporary society where the concept of sin has been relativized, ambiguity is the only mode of transgression: 'bisogna contentarsi appunto del "piccolo equivoco", bisogna ricorrere all'ironia, bisogna ricercare il paradosso' (p. 159).

context.[5] The title quotation is similarly found at random by the narrator whilst leafing through a newspaper. 'Meaningless' though the phrase appears, it acquires meaning in its reader's mind:

> Ma tu non hai bisogno di sapere altro, perché la frase si trascina dietro, come un fiume in piena trascina i detriti, rottami di parole che la tua memoria va ordinando chiaramente, con una calma che ti gela. (p. 75)

The power of memory to execute methodically a system of meaning from an innocent collection of fragments is figured here as almost tyrannical. Tabucchi is pointing out that there can be cruelty in the way language operates, precisely because it does not work in isolation, but provokes associations which the receiver of messages is forced to confront. Language, in collaboration with memory, enforces a re-cognition which can be punitive.

The past is the predominant locus of all Tabucchi's stories: events in the present trigger more or less articulated memories, often from childhood. These memories are characterized by pain. Two good examples of this are 'Lettera da Casablanca' and 'I pomeriggi del sabato' in *Il gioco del rovescio*. The first is a letter from a transvestite cabaret singer to his estranged sister. Lepschy describes the letter as 'homely',[6] but I would argue that there is something precisely *unheimlich* about the account, which has the air of a confession or testament. The writer remembers his and his sister's childhood, symbolized in his memory by the palm tree outside their home, which they named Giosefine, the name he has now adopted: the 'homely' naming of a domestic

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[5] See Patrizio Tucci, 'Una metamorfosi di Baudelaire', in *Metamorfosi Mostri Labirinti: Atti del Seminario di Cagliari, 22-24 gennaio 1990*, ed. by Giovanna Cerina and others (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991), pp. 453-68. This provides a detailed analysis of Tabucchi's deployment of phrases from Baudelaire.

[6] Anna Laura Lepschy, 'Antonio Tabucchi: Splinters of Existence', in*The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt Barañski & Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 200-18 (p. 204).

reference point is made strange by its transferral to a trans-sexual estranged from his familiar physical constitution. There is a hint of some shameful, possibly violent action by his father, with which the writer has come to terms, and he asks his sister to do the same. Again, domestic security was ruptured by the intrusion of behaviour which was unfamiliar, but this rupture has been awkwardly re-domesticated. In 'I pomeriggi', the child narrator records a long, languid summer haunted by his little sister's visions of his absent father passing the house, measured by his mother's grief, and punctuated by his own relentless drilling of Latin grammar. As in 'Casablanca', neurotic reactions to the past are harboured by domesticity.

Memory is also embittered in *Piccoli equivoci*.[7] 'Il rancore e le nuvole' examines the genesis of resentment within the protagonist, a literary academic. He learns about politics by experiencing class difference, when he attends university as a young, impoverished father surrounded by well-off, carefree students:

> Padri ricchi, tradizione liberale, famiglie di Partito d'Azione: il loro progressismo era un lusso, essere di sinistra un lusso ancora maggiore. Per lui no, era stata una conquista: un viaggio penoso, sofferto, ostacolato da rispetti umani, da convenzioni, dal timore di una madre devota, dalla remissività di un padre con troppi figli da sfamare per occuparsi di politica. Questo era il suo modo di essere di sinistra: concerneva <u>l'offesa</u>, il risentimento e la rivincita, non aveva niente a che vedere con l'ideologia teorica e astratta, geometrica, dei suoi giovani compagni. (p. 86; underlining added)

This description calls to mind directly Vittorini's 'mondo offeso', and addresses the same class division between the working class and intellectuals. Tabucchi complicates the issue by presenting the attempt of a member of one class to assimilate into the

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[7] See Stefano Tani, *Il romanzo di ritorno* (Milan: Mursia, 1990). Tani comments on the changing mood of the last five stories of this collection: 'a cominciare da "Il rancore e le nuvole", hanno voci e intrecci più concreti e intensi' (p. 158). See also Laura Lepschy, 'The Role of Memory in Antonio Tabucchi's *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza*', in *Antonio Tabucchi: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Bruno Ferraro & Nicole Prunster, *Spunti e Ricerche*, 12, 1996/7, 61-70.

other as a mutilating experience. The protagonist exercises his own rancour by exploiting those who help him, such as his professor and his wife. His intellectual energy is spent on causing offence to those whom he perceives to have caused his offence (in the sense of offendedness). 'Rancore' is the 'offence' of the past which refuses to be placated, and is an 'equivocation' of other terms explored by Tabucchi, in these and later works, to describe the languid but debilitating distress felt by the individual in response to a painful event of the past. The gentler term used is 'saudade' - a term borrowed from Pessoa[8] - meaning something like nostalgia, but in later works, the emotion carries a greater moral charge, and figures as 'rimorso'.

The above is only one example of the strain of political reference which resonates through these two collections of stories, becoming stronger in the second. In *Il gioco del rovescio*, the title story carries a mention of the narrator's political activities in Portugal, where he worked clandestinely (on the 'reverse' side), and in 'Dolores Ibarruri versa lacrime amare', a mother speaks in a confessional monologue to a journalist seeking details of her son, killed for political reasons. In *Piccoli equivoci*, the political theme is raised in the first story. The narrator is inspired by the trial he is attending to remember political discussions and activities amongst his group of student friends, presumably in the 1960s. The trial itself concerns politically-driven terrorist acts, and the accused and judge are members of this old group, whilst the narrator seems to be attending in the capacity of journalist. All are replicating the roles they played in a student production of *Antigone*. This complex coincidence is an example of a 'piccolo equivoco senza importanza' (a phrase he and friends coined as

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[8] See Maria do Carmo's explanation of the term, in 'Il gioco del rovescio' (*Il gioco del rovescio*, pp. 9-24 (p. 12)).

students), the importance of which has been maximized by the passage of time. The friends are locked in the implications of a past misunderstanding, and each must accept his responsibility:

> Ho proprio pensato che tutto era davvero un enorme piccolo equivoco senza rimedio che la vita si stava portando via, ormai le parti erano assegnate e era impossibile non recitarle; [...] anche il mio semplice guardare loro che recitavano la loro parte, anche questa era una parte, e in questo consisteva la mia colpa, nello stare al gioco, perché non ci si sottrae a niente e si ha colpa di tutto, ognuno a suo modo. (p. 16)

Guilt, as evoked here, is a concept which starts to feature in this collection and is prevalent in Tabucchi's works of the 1990s. In three other stories in this collection, it emerges with reference to memories of the years of fascism in Europe. I shall concentrate on 'I treni che vanno a Madras'.[9] The narrator's travelling companion on a train to Madras tells him a story, giving himself the name of a Jewish character from a fable, Peter Schlemihl. In the context of Tabucchi's fantastical travel-tale, he gives a realistic account of his physical inspection at the hands of a German doctor, and of the statue of an Indian divinity on the doctor's desk, its legs making the circle of the swastika. According to the doctor, this represents the circle of life which may allow the Jew to be recycled as a member of a purer race in his next life. 'Schlemihl' comments that it is the circle of life which might close at any time. When the narrator later reads of the murder of an ex-Nazi doctor in Madras, he presumes to know the identity of the murderer. In the final paragraph, the narrator endorses Schlemihl's retribution and uses the telling of the story to acknowledge his own participation in the whole (hi)story of persecution:

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[9] The other two stories are 'Aspettando l'inverno' and 'Gli incanti'.

> Non escludo che la mia immaginazione abbia lavorato più del consentito. Ma se avessi indovinato quale era l'ombra che il signor Schlemihl aveva perduto; e se mai gli capitasse di leggere questo racconto, per lo stesso strano caso che ci fece incontrare quella sera in treno, vorrei che gli giungesse il mio saluto. E la mia pena. (p. 117)

Evil, remorse, guilt, pain - the 'big' metaphysical concepts which concern Tabucchi - are veiled in these two sets of stories by fantasy. Tiziana Arvigo voices the widely-held assumption that this is the model for Tabucchi's approach to such themes, until his last two novels which represent a 'svolta civile', towards 'una scrittura più *carnale*, dove l'aggettivo è da intendersi nell'accezione di Kermode: scrittura che esibisce in maniera diretta il proprio senso e abbassa notevolmente il tasso di letterarietà presente nelle prove precedenti'.[10] Whilst the 'letterarietà' remains in *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, I think this novel is otherwise the precursor to the most recent novels because of a certain brutality in its presentation.[11] In other words, I would question the possibility of identifying a moment of 'svolta': the 'carnal' and the 'spiritual' (to continue with Kermode's dialectic) are present in all Tabucchi's writing, and differences between individual works are of relative weight rather than absence or presence: *Sostiene Pereira*, the most 'carnal' of the novels I shall discuss, is imbued with 'letterarietà'.

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[10] Tiziana Arvigo, 'La narrativa italiana degli anni Novanta', in*Nuova corrente*, 120 (1997), 377-414 (p. 395). She refers to Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On The Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[11] See Andrea Borsari, 'Cos'è una vita se non viene raccontata?: Conversazione con Antonio Tabucchi', in *Italienisch*, 26 (1991), 2-23 (p. 4). Tabucchi identifies *Il filo dell'orizzonte* as the beginning of a more intense investigation into evil and resentment.

Il filo dell'orizzonte is a 'giallo' (as is *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro*). The investigation into an elliptical other person - the search for a 'self' to occupy an anonymous corpse - leads in a circle, through a procession of identities, back to the investigating self. The search is thus experienced as a quest for life through death. As with earlier works, the 'para-text' of this novel puts weight on particular aspects of its 'equivoci'. Firstly, the opening quotation of Vladimir Jankélévitch: 'L'essere stato appartiene in qualche modo a un "terzo genere", radicalmente eterogeneo all'essere come al non-essere' (p. 7). Lastly, a comment from the 'Nota a margine' at the end of the text, referring to the link between Spino - protagonist of the novel - and Spinoza, and asserting that Spinoza carried the 'filo dell'orizzonte' in his eyes:

> *Il filo dell'orizzonte, di fatto, è un luogo geometrico, perché si sposta mentre noi ci spostiamo. Vorrei molto che per sortilegio il mio personaggio lo avesse raggiunto, perché anche lui lo aveva negli occhi.* (p. 107; italics in text)

Death, in this novel, is this 'third' element; a space into which the memory of life extends to allow a form of being beyond bodily existence. The special position of death in relation to life is accentuated by the use of the present perfect tense in the narrative, encapsulating a mere slippage of present into past. Death functions as a 'pre-text' in many of the earlier stories, but in this novel it is the *modus vivendi* of the narrative and of the protagonist. It is the story of a dead man, uncovered by a man whose livelihood depends on death (Spino is a mortuary assistant).

The realistic engagement with death contributes to the 'carnality' of this novel. It opens with a description of how the drawers holding bodies in a mortuary work and of

how the bodies look, depicting a 'magazzino della vita' (p. 9) where human life is finally levelled to a state of empty equality. The corpse which Spino is dealing with is that of an unidentified vagabond, killed in a police shoot-out. The surroundings of the mortuary are the squalid and decaying docklands of a large city (probably Genoa), populated by huge rats which he believes are attracted by the mortuary. Death here is not a dream or an 'evasione' but a grim reality. The 'spirituality' lies in the sense that the mortuary is a transitory space, where time and identity are parenthesized. The protagonist is first introduced simply as 'lui', unnamed, but described as 'il loro estremo compagno' (p. 10). This adjective sums up Spino's position: he is at the extremity of existence, inhabiting a no-man's land which is the preserve of the dead. The topographical horizon is a cypher of this in the novel. Spino is constantly aware of the expanse of the sea stretching away from the closed environment of the city, and the seagulls which occupy the space between the city and the horizon seem, like him, to patrol the sensitive territory between 'life' and 'beyond'.

Taking the inscription on a ring removed from the body as his only clue, Spino embarks on a series of increasingly bizarre encounters, in his efforts to construct a life story. His interlocutors - a priest, a tailor, an ageing accountant, a spinster schoolmistress, a pianist in a seedy dockside bar - contribute chapters of a life-story of emigration, bereavement, destitution, but enduring kindness. There is a very clear and disarmingly simple 'message' about class here. The search for 'Nobodi' is an investigation into the margins of society: both the dead man himself and the people who knew of him are the 'good' people who survive unassumingly on the edge of a

society which is generally indifferent or positively hostile to them.[12] In Vittorini's terms, it is the 'mondo offeso' in which the 'più uomini' struggle to preserve dignity. Class division is exposed dialectically by death: whereas the mortuary is a private place in which all are equal (at zero), a cemetery where Spino attends a mysterious appointment towards the end of his quest is a public place in which class divisions are ostentatiously confirmed, with the aristocracy, bourgeoisie, intellectuals and workers all interred in separate areas. Spino comments: 'È curioso come l'Italia ottocentesca abbia fedelmente riprodotto per la coreografia della morte la separazione in classi attuata nella vita' (p. 91). A written inscription on a tomb provides the information sought from this 'meeting', and affirms the Vittorini-esque theme of the dignity of the human spirit: 'Muore il corpo dell'uom, virtù non muore' (p. 94).

The exploration of an existential 'third dimension' in this novel has a literary parallel: Tabucchi investigates a space where factual writing reaches into fictional. Journalism (newspaper reports of Nobodi's death) and biographical witness statements (the information supplied by those who knew Nobodi) are subsumed into a quasi-autobiographical, quasi-fantastical story, tinged with 'giallo'. A further narrative referent is the visual image: Spino's knowledge of films informs his interpretation of reality (he initially calls Nobodi, 'il Kid' (p. 27), after a film character), and a family photograph is a key to the investigation, which unlocks the story of Nobodi's life.[13] Tabucchi thus pushes back thematic and formal horizons, beginning an investigation

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[12] This theme of the rich and morally sound life of the 'popolo' is one which dominates Tabucchi's writing from his first work, *Piazza d'Italia* (Milan: Bompiani, 1975).

[13] See chapter four of this thesis for comparative comments on Tabucchi's use of photography.

into 'marginal' territories of various types which is continued in later works, particularly his most recent novels.

1990s: Romanzi impegnati?

I use the question mark above because, as I have said, *Sostiene Pereira* has been identified as a 'political' novel, but rarely have critics questioned what is meant by the term and whether it refers to something genuinely new or different in the author's work.[14] I hope to show that *L'angelo nero* and *Requiem* are also factors in a general inclination towards a more direct and 'worldly' writing, which is, however, discernible even in the earliest of Tabucchi's work.[15]

The salient difference between the stories in *L'angelo nero* and earlier ones is their density: they are longer and more rigidly structured.[16] They are occupied by evil in various manifestations: external threats, past disasters, personal guilt, political violence.[17] The first story, 'Voci portate da qualcosa, impossibile dire cosa', is clearly a descendant of 'Any where out of the world', discussing how phrases or messages picked up at random can be appropriated by the listener and used to create further stories. The recollection of the past which a chance phrase inspires leads to a confrontation with a dead friend. The guilt which was associated with memory in *Piccoli equivoci* is now an intense, malignant disturbance which the narrator tries to

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[14] Antonio Tabucchi, *Sostiene Pereira* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994).
[15] Antonio Tabucchi, *L'angelo nero* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1991) and *Requiem*, trans. by Sergio Vecchio (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994). The original was written in Portuguese (Lisbon: Quetzal, 1991).
[16] For example, the final story, 'Capodanno' (pp. 107-52), is forty-five pages long and divided into twenty-three brief but intense chapters.
[17] Lepschy also identifies a greater seriousness in this collection, and sees it as a combination of techniques tested in earlier writing: 'the greater political commitment of the early novels is injected into enigmatic fragments, all now imbued with a powerful sense of discord and evil' (Lepschy, 1993, p. 217).

transfer to Tadeus, his 'black' guardian angel, or guilty conscience. The narrative is in the second person, dramatizing the debate between the narrator's consciousness and the personification of repressed conscience. The alliteration on the consonants of the personal pronoun and second-person verb endings illustrates the viciousness of the narrator's denial in the following passage:

> E sai anche che ora ti sta tentando. Il suo invito, subdolo e maligno, è a suo modo una sfida, una tentazione, e dici: Tadeus, quel giorno eri tu con un'altra automobile, fosti tu a convincere Isabel a fare quella cosa, ti incaricasti tu di tutto, tramasti tutto, organizzasti tutto, fosti tu a preparare la sua perdizione. (p. 23)

The 'saudade' of the earlier collections has become a more dangerous resurgence of the past, but, like nostalgia, there is something attractive in the siren call of memory (the black angel), evoked here and in later works in the stress on temptation.

With the exception of 'La trota che guizza fra le pietre mi ricorda la tua vita',[18] which deals with a writer's bitterness, and the cruelty this engenders, the remaining stories of this collection are strongly involved with political events, and particularly the violence which seems inseparable from power. 'Notte, mare o distanza' is reminiscent of 'Piccoli equivoci senza importanza', in that it centres on a group of student friends who are committed to both literature and politics. At their centre is a character again named Tadeus, who is again an ambiguous touchstone figure, the conscience which steers but derides the members of the group.[19] During a discussion of poetry, one of the young men proposes a toast:

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[18]The title of this story, and its elegiac mood, are redolent of Montale. Tabucchi acknowledges his debt to the poet in the 'Nota', attributing the notion of the 'angelo nero' to Montale.

[19]He is, as in his later manifestation in *Requiem*, a figure between life and death, as illustrated by his comment about poetry - 'è un buon viatico' (p. 32) - which becomes a refrain of the narrative, suggesting that literature is a means of extending life into death.

> Alzò il bicchiere e con voce che avrebbe dovuto essere augurale, ma che risultò cupa, disse: al novembre del millenovecentosessantanove, mese della caduta del salazarismo. Fu strano come il novembre si fece presente, evocato da quelle parole. (p. 35)

The black shadow cast over the evening by this evocation of the political past presages the politically-motivated events which occur as the students go home. They are stopped by a man in a car with a gun who threatens and insults them because of their alleged Communist allegiance and, claiming he is from the political police, searches them and then takes them to collect their documents. He gives the young people a 'lezione politica' (p. 45), first using typical fascist rhetoric to 'teach' them to love their own country, and then telling them how to dominate other races using sexual power, a lesson which he illustrates with a brutal account of his rape and murder of young African girls.[20]

This brutal realism is thrown into relief by a fish ('cernia') which appears at the window of the 'policeman's' car, then falls in the gutter where it starts to suffocate until Joana saves it. She and Tadeus return to his home where the two are transported on the fish's back upstairs and beyond in a timeless spiral. The author sees the fish as a metaphor of the unconscious - a psychoanalytic manifestation of the resurgence of the past: 'l'immagine di derivazione psicanalitica del pesce che sta nel fondo e si trova a contatto con il fango e che ogni tanto affiora in superficie'.[21] The injection of this item of fantasy into a realistic account allows the narrator to question the role of the imagination in re-presenting memory, and the implications this has for story-telling. When the fish appears, he acknowledges: 'Ma questo dipendeva dall'immaginazione di

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[20] This incident, and particularly its rhetoric of virility, are replicated in *Sostiene Pereira*, when Monteiro Rossi is murdered.

[21] *Italienisch*, p. 20.

chi pensava a come avrebbero potuto essersi svolti i fatti quella notte. Così, a quel punto, la sua immaginazione produceva una cernia' (p. 39). This shifting of responsibility becomes a refrain of the story: 'Chi immaginava come dovevano essersi svolti i fatti quella notte...' (p. 41); 'Ma che strano: colui che pensava tutto questo...' (pp. 41-2), etc.. This insistent rejection of authorial responsibility shifts the onus onto the reader, who must acknowledge her conditional identity as the 'chi' imagining the events.

The fourth story in this collection, 'Il battere d'ali di una farfalla a New York può provocare un tifone a Pechino?' again uses the frame of political realism to examine the role of the receiver in the fabrication of a story. Its 'laboratory' is defined by the three Aristotelian dramatic unities: the narration lasts the duration of the interview, which takes place in a closed room with only the distant, muffled sounds of a city filtering in, and it is a dialogue between two men identified only visually ('l'uomo con i capelli grigi', later given the codename, 'signor Farfalla', and 'il signore vestito d'azzurro'), who collaborate to construct the tale. The man in blue, clearly in control, encourages his interlocutor to recount a story, which, although clearly beginning as the account of a real experience, is glossed by him as the telling of a possible story. The conditional tense predominates, for example: 'il compagno Beretta mi avrebbe aspettato [...] Io sarei passato e lui sarebbe entrato' (p. 84). The account which 'Farfalla' gives is of a robbery involving a shooting, and it alludes to his past connection with a political movement. It appears that 'Farfalla' is a political prisoner and a 'pentito', being coerced by an experienced interviewer into confessing a crime he did not necessarily commit.

On a second level, this is also a personal investigation, turning on the issue of 'pentimento' - a version of the 'saudade' and 'rimorso' addressed in earlier works, and here given a judicial inflexion. The index to this is the 'soprannomi' the interviewer assigns. He refers to the theory of fractals, evoked in the title, and links the interviewee to the butterfly to demonstrate to him that he has responsibility: his conditional response to his interviewer will produce a chain of responses which will eventually bring someone 'to justice'. At the end of the story, he names himself, 'dottor Coscienza', confirming that he has acted as guide in the process of coaxing into the public domain the guilty secrets of 'Farfalla'. As in the other stories, he is the guardian angel or superego which guides the individual. As in the other stories, he is an equivocal presence, who exerts a tyrannical power over the individual consciousness. 'Coscienza' explains, 'un suo movimento modifica il frattale, caro signor Farfalla, per questo deve battere le ali come si deve' (p. 89; underlining added). This last phrase carries an echo of institutional coercion which makes it less a moral message than a threat from a power-holder to his subject. This ambiguous equilibrium encapsulates the sense of the story.

The final story, 'Capodanno', clearly derives from stories of childhood and memory, such as 'I pomeriggi del sabato' and 'Gli incanti'. It has the same tone of possibly idyllic childhood occasions (a party to celebrate the New Year, memories of summer parties) tainted by a deep-seated memory of violence, to which is associated guilt, and in this case, an urge towards revenge. The dream with which the story opens suggests that the boy protagonist's father was a fascist killed by the Resistance and

thrown into the lake at Salò. This seminal violence manifests itself brutally elsewhere in the story: a minute description of the skinning of a hare, a rat dying in a trap, a rotting fish sent to his mother as a reminder of her husband's guilt. These, and the connotations of the cellar of the house, where his father was killed, are constantly present on the borders of the child's consciousness, goading him towards some sort of action to expiate his father's guilt.

Tabucchi turns his attention in this collection to evil, as manifested within the individual and between individuals in society. He voices a strong moral commitment in the writing of this book:

> Ho scelto questo tema perché il male esiste nella vita e perché credo che uno scrittore debba affrontarlo. Del resto non ho mai scritto niente di consolatorio. Ho sempre scritto dei testi che si misuravano corpo a corpo con i problemi del mondo e, arrivato ad un'età in cui mi rendo conto che il male esiste, ho ritenuto necessario e doveroso affrontarlo.[22]

It is interesting that, while using the broad metaphysical concept of 'il male', Tabucchi is calling for a direct and specific response to it. There is a distinct urgency to his commitment, rendered by the use of the present tense, and while this states no specific manifestation of evil in contemporary society, there is a strong suggestion that the author feels its presence acutely in the period of the writing of these stories. In the closing story of the collection ('Capodanno'), Tabucchi pins his itinerant thoughts about the sense of regret linked with the past to the specific history of fascism in Italy. This connection informs the novels of the 1990s.

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[22] *Italienisch*, p. 2. Tabucchi describes this as a difficult collection to write, taking him four years.

Requiem is perhaps Tabucchi's most complex and suggestive work. Subtitled *Un'allucinazione*, it has the fantastical air of some of his earlier writing and presents the brutal themes of the works of the 1990s in a manner more 'equivocal' than that of *L'angelo nero* and *Sostiene Pereira*. In view of this indirectness, I shall limit my discussion of it to some brief comments focussing on the parts most relevant to my thesis. Remorse figures largely in the story, and it is at the heart of the 'blackness' with which the protagonist aims to come to terms. Evil is again associated with an ambiguous character named Tadeus, who reminds the protagonist of actions of the past for which he should feel remorse, but who personally seems to evade his own guilt in relation to these events (here, the suggested suicide of a woman named Isabel). Tadeus attributes blame to a venereal disease: '*è stata tutta colpa dell'herpes zoster*' (p. 40; italics in text). A copyist reproducing sections of Bosch's *Le tentazioni di Sant'Antonio*[23] explains to the protagonist that 'herpes zoster' was a venereal disease at the time of St. Antony, and he likens it to remorse:

> Le dico una cosa, penso che l'herpes sia un po' come il rimorso, se ne sta addormentato dentro di noi e un bel giorno si sveglia e ci attacca, poi torna a dormire perché noi siamo riusciti ad ammansirlo, ma è sempre dentro di noi, non c'è niente da fare contro il rimorso. (p. 79)

This is precisely the accusing finger from the past which Tabucchi brings to life in his other works of the 1990s, and he proceeds to link it directly with writing, driving home in his fiction the point made about authorial responsibility in the interview quoted above. He describes a trip the protagonist makes to a country house outside the city where the novel is set (the only excursion in a story which adheres

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[23] The title of the painting pinpoints the theme I referred to earlier of the dangerous fascination exerted by memory.

closely to the Aristotelian unities). It was here that the narrator wrote a story which, when it became real, was the cause of deep regret to him.[24] This was a lesson in the dangers of writing, and a demonstration that writing does make a difference, and not necessarily a positive one. It is one of the most disturbed and disturbing passages of the book:

> E poi: quella storia mi stava cambiando la vita, l'aveva già cambiata, dopo averla scritta la mia vita non sarebbe più stata la stessa. Era quel che mi dicevo tra me, chiuso là di sopra a scrivere quella storia balorda, una storia che qualcuno, dopo, avrebbe imitato nella vita, trasferendola sul piano del reale: ed io non lo sapevo, ma lo immaginavo, non so perché immaginavo che non si devono scrivere storie come quelle, perché c'è sempre qualcuno che poi imita la finzione, che riesce a trasformarla in verità. (p.90)

Tabucchi draws attention to the real and immediate effect of writing, by means of a personal and troubling recollection. This theme is demonstrated more publicly and confidently in his next novel.

Sostiene Pereira focusses on a character who could well be the narrator of *Requiem*: ageing, overweight, physically and psychologically ill-at-ease, with existential concerns and a professional and personal involvement with literature.[25] The difference is that this character is now placed in a very specific historical context, which affects him deeply on psychological, philosophical and professional levels. The setting is Lisbon in summer 1938, and the story evolves in response to the tension emanating from the Spanish Civil War 'next-door'. There is a powerful sense of an

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[24]'Storia di una storia che non c'è' in *I volatili del Beato Angelico* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1987) is the description of the slow genesis of a book which the author eventually destroyed, throwing it into a storm at a seaside house in Portugal. This story seems to be echoed here.

[25] In his 'Nota' to this novel, the author explains the genesis of the protagonist, based on a Portuguese journalist, exiled in Paris, whom Tabucchi met there. This journalist had also managed to publish an article denouncing the Salazar regime. Tabucchi describes him as 'un personaggio in cerca d'autore' (p. 211), whose story Tabucchi recorded: hence one suggestion of who is the receiver of the 'testimonianza'.

evil - fascism - fermenting under the skin of the continent of Europe, of which Spain is only the first eruption: Portugal is held in stasis under the dictatorship of Salazar, Italy and Germany are mentioned distantly, and France is increasingly perceived as the only antidote - the place where the liberal values of the Revolution hold strong. Pereira is a cultural commentator on a Catholic newspaper, which operates under the unacknowledged control of the regime. He believes that his involvement in culture and literature, particularly literature of the Nineteenth Century, exempts him from any responsibility to respond to the political realities of his time. Only when he comes into contact with a young activist, Monteiro Rossi, and his militant girlfriend, Marta, does it start to become apparent that his existential discomfort is partly a political resistance to the values of the current regime, and not a wider, context-free, philosophical concern with the soul, as he had maintained.

Tabucchi portrays in detail the reality of living under a right-wing dictatorship: Pereira suspects, accurately, that the caretaker of his office building is an informant; there is a permanent military presence in the streets of the city; a provincial market worker is killed because of his political affiliations; a local Jewish butcher's is vandalized and daubed with racist graffiti. Pereira's response to this situation in the early chapters of the novel is to repress his own dissent: he subsumes his sense of outrage at the killing of the market worker into his metaphysical preoccupation with death; he listens to the left-wing arguments of Monteiro Rossi and Marta, but insists politics do not concern him because he is a literary journalist and an old man; when Manuel, the waiter in the cafe where he lunches, comments on the political news (which is kept out of the newspapers), he refuses to enter into discussion. He

experiences the political oppression as a personal problem, feeling exhausted, encumbered by his flesh and stifled by the heat of the city in summer. He internalizes a political reality in order to avoid responding to it in any active, public way.

Other characters in the novel act as 'agents provocateurs', urging Pereira in the direction of his political misgivings. Monteiro Rossi forces him to assent to anti-fascist resistance by getting himself into difficulties from which Pereira is obliged to deliver him, seemingly out of paternal indulgence. Marta's demands on him are more direct: she questions his political ideals and voices her own, encouraging him to recognize that, unconsciously, he is a proto-Marxist, or at least, an 'anarchico individualista' (p. 97). Ingeborg Delgado, a German-Portuguese woman whom Pereira meets on a train, is a Jewish exile awaiting a visa for the United States, and it is she who most succinctly symbolizes the injustices being perpetrated by European governments and who most directly identifies Pereira's responsibility to act. He responds to her story with his customary excuses of intellectual disengagement, but she reminds him that, as an intellectual, he is in a position to encourage change (note the imperatives): 'Dica quello che sta succedendo in Europa, esprima il suo libero pensiero, insomma faccia qualcosa' (p. 112).

These pro-militancy influences are counteracted by characters who seek to suppress Pereira's political self. The meeting with Ingeborg Delgado happens on his return from a visit to an old university friend, Silva, whom he had hoped would respond thoughtfully to his concerns regarding European politics, the police state in

Portugal, the neglect of public opinion. Silva dismisses all these as distant irrelevances, claiming the notion of public opinion to be an Anglo-American contrivance, irrelevant to southern Europeans who simply respond to whoever appears strongest. When Pereira insists that, as a journalist, he needs to be able to inform the public properly, Silva tells him a cultural journalist has no such obligation. Similarly, the editor of Pereira's paper - another confident, virile character - makes every effort to keep Pereira in the closet he himself claims to inhabit in the early part of the novel: that of a small-time cultural journalist who questions nothing.

As the language I have used suggests, there is a discourse regarding sexuality which commentates the political theme throughout the novel. The characters who encourage Pereira to 'come out' as a politically-committed individual are all tempters to whom Pereira responds on a sexual level, to a degree. Marta's appearances in the novel are marked with the icon of her 'spalle dolci e ben squadrate' (p. 27); Ingeborg Delgado is 'una signora bella, bionda, elegante' (p. 70). Monteiro Rossi, and later, Dr Cardoso, have boyish physical features which capture Pereira's attention: chiefly, the hair which falls forward over their brows. Pereira insists in the narrative that these two men remind him of himself as a youth - hence the fascination - and to some extent they do represent the man he might have been, and the son he might have had. Yet there is something more suggestive about the relationships between them and the protagonist than this explanation will cover.

Examining the 'oppressors' can cast some light: they all try to push Pereira to be sexually, instead of politically, active. Silva tells him to stop worrying about politics and find himself a woman, using the editor of the *Lisboa* - who is with an unattached, attractive woman at the same luxurious hotel as Silva - as an example of the efficacy of such a 'remedy'. The thugs who murder Monteiro Rossi at the end of the novel interpret Pereira's lack of sexual activity as proof that he is a latent homosexual, explaining his support of the young activist as sexually rather than politically motivated. This correlation of sex and politics in the novel is linked to the iconography of masculinity peddled by fascist ideology, and Pereira is presented as a-sexual in the same way as he is a-political: disturbed and attracted by the possibility of being 'committed' in some way, but uncertain of how or whether to follow his instincts. The novel tells the story of a clear shift from disengagement to engagement on a political level, but sexually, Pereira remains non-committal.

Dr Cardoso, the doctor who treats Pereira at a thalassotherapy clinic which he is advised to visit for a physical cure, acts as Pereira's psychoanalyst, and he is the only person to question directly his patient's sexual activity (Pereira responds with embarrassed silence). Like Marta, he is armed with theories and clear in his own convictions.[26] Unlike Marta, he does not force these upon Pereira, but rather encourages his patient to articulate his worries and to identify their provenance. Pereira admits that, though he is superficially contented with his past and present life, he harbours an inexplicable sense of remorse. Probing for the event in the present

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[26] Cardoso 'replaces' Marta in the novel, in the sense that Marta adopts a disguise and goes 'underground' half-way through the novel, just as Cardoso abandons his white coat and his professional detachment and starts to act as a friend, confidant, and, ultimately, assistant to Pereira.

which triggered this resurgence of the past, the doctor makes Pereira identify Monteiro Rossi and Marta as the catalysts. Though he has repeatedly dismissed their political commitment, they could, Pereira fears, be morally right, which would destroy the validity of his past and present existence, and the integrity of his belief in literature (at this stage, he still prefers to perceive literature and political commitment to be antithetical). Cardoso pacifies Pereira by explaining the theory of the 'confederazione delle anime', whereby each human subject is a composite of various personalities rather than a unique, individual whole. According to the doctor, Pereira is witnessing the emergence of a new, politically-minded 'io egemone' in the coalition of his personality.[27]

After this encounter, Pereira begins to act more consciously against the regime, and he acts through words. In tacit response to the encounter with Ingeborg Delgado, he had already translated *Honorine*, a short story by Balzac, for his cultural page, believing that a story about 'pentimento' may encourage someone to reflect. Pereira describes it as 'un messaggio nella bottiglia' (p. 78): a collection of words, emitted in a tentative and risk-laden manner, but in the good faith that another human being might receive and respond to it.[28] It is a story about 'pentimento': Pereira articulates a personal repentance for not so far having taken a political stance, and hopes that others will be encouraged by it to reflect on the significance of their actions. The stories he subsequently selects to translate and publish become a chart of the gradual

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[27] Cardoso attributes this theory to a group of French 'médecins-philosophes' (p. 122), reinforcing the impression that France is the locus of free and creative thinking.

[28] Vittorini, in his 'Nota' to *Conversazione in Sicilia* (Milan: Bompiani, 1941), suggests the same metaphor: 'immagino che tutti i manoscritti vengano trovati in una bottiglia'.

'outing' of Pereira's militant 'io egemone', as he proceeds from Balzac to Daudet, to the more blatantly political Bernanos. The choice of French authors is a radical gesture in itself, in a political climate where France is unpopular, and it brings the journalist into conflict with the editor of his newspaper, whilst it earns him the affection of Cardoso.

The series of short stories translated by Pereira is shadowed by the series of advance obituaries for great writers, which he employs Monteiro Rossi to write. It transpires that the more militant Marta is the real author of these pieces, and accordingly, they represent a growing catalogue of twentieth-century political literature, reviewed from a politically critical point of view. D'Annunzio, Marinetti, and García Lorca are all included. As each article arrives, Pereira judges it unpublishable, because of its political stance, and yet he keeps each one in a special file. The reader is aware that this file represents a growing body of 'evidence' of his political sympathies, both as material to be used against him in public, and in private, as a reminder of the tight relationship between politics and literature which he has stubbornly denied. It is a literary political conscience in a folder.

The accumulation of this 'evidence' relates to Pereira's discussion with Padre Ántonio, who, whilst forced to toe the institutional line, gives details of the Church's complicity with the fascist regimes. The priest frames this discussion in terms of intellectuals and commitment, telling Pereira about French intellectuals who are acting, in the form of writing, in support of the Basque clergy. He cites Mauriac,

Maritain, Claudel and Bernanos, including a description of Bernanos which is particularly pertinent, bearing in mind the subtitle of this novel (*Una testimonianza*). He says: 'il Vaticano non lo può sopportare perché lui è un vero testimone' (p. 141).

Incremental shifts in the balance of Pereira's personality, from neutrality towards left-wing commitment, accelerate until the balance is definitively tipped by the brutality of Monteiro Rossi's murder in Pereira's flat, at the hands of three thugs claiming to be political police. This direct experience of the extreme of political oppression and brutality causes Pereira to make his first direct and extreme act of public militancy. With the help of Dr Cardoso, who poses as the censor approving Pereira's article by telephone, he publishes in the *Lisboa* an account of Rossi's murder.

This account is the set-piece of the ongoing examination of literary technique in this novel. It is a bitter irony that, having hired the young man to write obituaries of great writers, his employer has to write his obituary. It is Pereira's tribute to Monteiro Rossi and to the political commitment he enacted that he gets this one published. The piece is a direct, factual and unembellished account of the events of the previous night. It contains messages to the police, to the authorities, to the people, and to Marta. It is this communicative function which Tabucchi wishes to highlight. The difference between a bare record of events and reportage, the difference which makes reportage non-factual, but still non-fictional, is that it seeks a response. It is the creation of this response which makes literature active. Instead of casting 'un

messaggio nella bottiglia' into the tide, in the hope someone might respond, circumstances now dictate that Pereira smashes the bottle over the head of his readership, enforcing a recognition of endemic political violence by means of violent writing.[29]

Producing a response pre-supposes responsibility. Once a writer has deliberately provoked a reaction, he cannot deny his action. Pereira acknowledges this by signing his obituary for Monteiro Rossi, whereas he repeatedly ducked this responsibility when publishing translations in the newspaper. Tabucchi opens up the question of the ethics of journalism to the wider issue of the ethics of writing. At what level of 'fictionality' may a writer abdicate responsibility, or does the very act of writing for a reader establish a relationship with inherent rights, responsibilities and shifts of power? Tabucchi also questions to what degree the reader is accountable. If the writer has created a space in the text for some sort of response, surely the reader cannot read with impunity, but must respond to the challenge?

The title of the novel introduces a refrain which sustains the tempo of the novel.[30] As a title, an opening and closing phrase to many chapters, and a repeated tag to sentences of the narrative, it creates a frame which sets the reader at an ironical

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[29] That such an act is violent, not only against those who merit retribution, is suggested by the conversation Pereira has with the foreman at the print-room of the*Lisboa*. Pereira invokes the length and solidity of their relationship in order to persuade his friend to publish the article which he recognizes to be dangerous, and then tricks him by means of the phone call from Cardoso. Pereira thus betrays a friendship and puts his friend's livelihood and perhaps his life at serious risk.

[30] The possible connotations of this phrase have provided critics with much material for discussion. In *Spunti e Ricerche*, 12, see Monica Jansen, 'What about Pereira? Can He Be Trusted? A Testimony of "true fiction" in *Sostiene Pereira*' (pp. 202-14) and André Sempoux, 'A Note on the Phrase "sostiene Pereira"' (pp. 215-6).

distance from the protagonist. This distance is augmented, especially in the first half of the novel, by the narrator's technique of persistently questioning the protagonist's 'testimony', and by the omissions which disrupt its consistency (Pereira refers to but refuses to recount his dreams).[31] The reader is made to wonder whether Pereira's account can be sustained, because the repetition of 'sostiene' casts doubt upon its solidity and authenticity.[32] The sub-title of the novel - *Una testimonianza* - brings the account into the public domain, carrying demands of verisimilitude and connotations of accountability. By noting the empirical verifiability of the story in his 'Nota', Tabucchi gives weight to the 'testimonial' sense of the novel.

The receiver and assessor of the testimony is the reader. Not, however, 'The Reader' in a simple reader-text-author relationship, but the reader as one in a spectrum of receiving positions, where author, narrator, other witnesses and other readers all have a place, and responsibility, the function of responding to the text, is delegated. Tabucchi wants the reader to accept responsibility as a critic and a juror, not to suspend disbelief willingly, but to question the relationship between the facts and the account of them. He calls into crisis the opposition between the subjectivity of the storyteller, that is, 'Sostiene Pereira', and the objectivity of the witness, that is, 'una testimonianza'. In so doing, he raises the matter of the ethics of narrative, and suggests that writing and reading are morally charged acts.

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[31] The fact that Pereira conceals the content of his dreams points to an interpretation of the account as that of a patient to a psychoanalyst (such as Cardoso). Omissions and distortions permit the analysand to sustain the impression of herself which she holds and wishes to convey.

[32] There is a link here with the use of the conditional in the 'farfalla' story (*L'angelo nero*). Both techniques are used to draw attention to the process of fabricating 'stories' intended to be factual accounts.

That *Sostiene Pereira* is concerned with politics, in a worldly sense, is undeniable, given the intensity with which Tabucchi examines the response of an individual to a political process. That it is intended to have a political significance in the 1990s is also undeniable: the novel was written in 1993, months before Berlusconi formed a government comprising the MSI, a 'neo-' or 'post-' fascist party, and Lega Nord, a party whose policies are based on broadly 'racist' stereotypes and jingoistic celebration of the validity of one group of people in relation to another for reasons of birthplace. Political extremism, racism and nationalism are as much 'current affairs' in Europe as they were in the 1930s. Portugal's position alongside a country where civil war had already erupted may be intended to reflect Italy's position alongside the disintegrated Yugoslavia in the 1990s. I think Tabucchi's point is more general, however: that Europe is in danger, and that its past needs to be remembered and responsibility for it recognized if a repetition of the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s is to be avoided.[33] In this way, *Sostiene Pereira* is the urgent and direct articulation of suggestions about evil and remorse raised tangentially in earlier works.

In setting his novel in the late 1930s, Tabucchi surely has in mind the debates of this period regarding 'impegno'. This novel is to some degree a response to Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* (written in 1938-39): they have in common the distant threat of the Spanish Civil War, the thinking man troubled by political worries, the concern

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[33] See Lepschy, 1993, p. 215. She quotes an interview with Tabucchi from *La Stampa* in 1991, in which the author expresses his discomfort with 'questa correzione della storia che si tende a fare in una società opulenta, cinica e totalmente impermeabile alle questioni morali'.

with food and sex, the notion of the 'messaggio nella bottiglia'.[34] *Sostiene Pereira* concentrates on Vittorini's problem of defining the place for commitment in literature, but he sets the 'impegno' debate itself in context, with the reader at an ironical distance from it. Tabucchi's response of the 1990s is not Vittorini's response of the 1940s: literature, Tabucchi suggests, can tell us nothing. It is the persistent activity of questioning which he considers to be a committed act: the only sort of commitment possible in a period when assumptions about the integrity of politics and of literature have been eroded. This represents a modern, or postmodern, 'rovescio' of the notion of commitment: to be committed is to inspire not conviction but doubt.[35] Hence the connotations of doubt in the title of this novel, the persistence of questions in the narrative, the political unspecificity of Monteiro Rossi's activities, motivated more by love and goodwill than by ideology. Any concrete and conclusive political message in a literary text can no longer be sustained.

Conclusions

In a sense, my conclusions about *Sostiene Pereira* are my conclusions about Tabucchi. His subsequent novel, *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro*, takes from its predecessor ideas such as bearing witness, building stories, and the role of journalism, and pushes them in the direction of the specific notion of justice. The continuity of names draws attention to the continuity of Tabucchi's moral and literary investigations, and as I have demonstrated, such interconnection is a feature of all the

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[34] References to Vittorini are direct in *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro*. The protagonist, Firmino, plans to do academic research on the author.
[35] See my conclusion for further discussion of postmodern scepticism.

writer's work. For these reasons, I do not consider it to be opportune or even possible to give any summative judgment of Tabucchi's work: he clearly has more to tell.

There is, however, one point about Tabucchi which I think needs to be stressed, regarding the 'message' about systematic questioning which I have described above. To encourage doubt seems understated, undemanding, weak; but bottled up in this message is a degree of anger which belies the atmospheric gentility of much of Tabucchi's writing. To enforce doubt is to call the reader to account and to disrupt complacency, and this can hurt. With increasing acuity in later works, anger is contained in the para-text of the novels: as 'fiction', the message may or may not be clearly received, but the notes and prefaces are used to unbottle the 'fact' that the stories have a basis in lived experience. Tabucchi can easily be mis-read or under-read - moderately challenging reading for those enjoying 'vacanze intelligenti' - but I think his para-textual comments (in later works in particular) direct the reader to read and re-read the uncomfortable or unexplained aspects of his stories and to question her interpretations both of the stories themselves, and of human behaviour, individual and collective. As a writer, Tabucchi's commitment to society is expressed through the commitment he makes to his individual reader by demanding from him a commitment to read and to respond.

PART II: CHAPTER FOUR

ANDREA DE CARLO: 'GIOVANE NARRATORE'

As my title suggests, I think that De Carlo is the quintessential 'giovane narratore'. This may seem a contradictory claim, given that I have said in my introduction that I consider the term devoid of essence, but I shall try to explain my judgment. Critics, journalists, and readers seem to share a handful of basic interpretations of the term, chiefly: young, publishable, new. De Carlo fits: in the decade of the 'giovani narratori' - the 1980s - he was aged twenty-eight to thirty-eight; he has been a success in commercial terms, and his productivity is impeccable (a novel every two years, approximately); he published his first novel in 1981, he rejects the literary past (especially the Italian tradition), rejects narrative experimentalism, rejects 'impegno'. This deliberate 'un-Italianness' is the reason why Martin McLaughlin declares that 'in no sense can he be regarded as paradigmatic of the so-called "giovani narratori"'.[1] Whilst it is true that he does not represent a new 'national' mode of writing in the clearest sense, I think his very rejection - both thematic and stylistic - of an identification with Italian culture is the main factor which seems to make him fresh, representative of a younger, non-Eurocentric generation, and, above all, marketable.

The absence of meaning of the label I have applied to De Carlo paradoxically lends meaning to his position, because his work exploits meaninglessness. I have

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[1] Martin McLaughlin, 'Andrea De Carlo: The Surface of Consciousness', in *The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt Barañski & Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 75-88 (p. 76).

characterized his 'newness' above as rejection rather than projection, and this is part of a conscious acquiescence in the emptying of the space of literature of all the features with which previous decades of writers had tried to fill it. This is only to a very limited extent a Calvino-esque *tabula rasa*, in the style of *Le città invisibili*:[2] it is not purity which is left but mundanity. As I have said, this is a narrative strategy: De Carlo aims to express the absence of reference points for young people of the 1980s. It is therefore fitting that the term to describe him be itself non-referential.

There is a sort of 'commitment' possible in this ostentatious ambivalence. As I have suggested, De Carlo is trying to express the quiddity of being 'i giovani': of living up (perhaps 'down') to the assumptions made about the apathy of young people in contemporary society, and of searching for ethical hooks on which to hang a general adolescent ambition in a society which neuters 'causes'. In Italy, the student movement had had its last surge in 1977, the workers' movement had been crushed by the defeat at FIAT in 1980, and the bomb at Bologna station in 1980 marked the end of a decade of terrorism and political extremism: the society De Carlo writes about is one exhausted by causes. De Carlo's 'commitment' is to show how an individual who cares, in some inchoate and inexpressible way, is expected and implicitly instructed not to care by a society which is afraid of militancy. De Carlo's protagonists are isolated individuals caught in the current of the 'riflusso', who might have some faint inclination to swim against it, but lack the training or the immediate assistance and encouragement to do so. The writer uses some fairly explicit political and social references to try to express this, and so produces novels which are more clearly

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[2] Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili* (Turin: Einaudi, 1973).

'political' in content than perhaps any others of the period. Whether this makes him 'committed' is a question I shall try to address in the course of this chapter.

In the fifteen-year span covered by this thesis, De Carlo produced eight novels.[3] To deal with them all in one chapter would be limiting and tedious, so I have chosen to concentrate on his 'Italian' novels. Travel is a major theme of the writer's work, and four of the eight novels are set in the Americas. Although this change of setting is partly a strategy for taking a different perspective on core issues, it is Italian society which seems to anger De Carlo most acutely, and so to produce the more interesting writing (though not necessarily the best), and the writing which has the most relevance for my particular research. The single exception to my exclusion is the writer's first novel, *Treno di panna*, set in Los Angeles. Specific reasons for including it should become apparent in the course of my analysis, but the general one is that I think it remains his most successful work. The exclusion of the American novels creates a gap in the middle of the decade, but the works included date from 1981, 1982, 1989, 1991 and 1993, and so facilitate understanding of the parabola of the writer's approach over the period.[4]

To avoid repetition, I shall first expose some of the main characteristics of De Carlo's writing, in terms of content, style and attitude. If this third category seems nebulous, I hope my analysis will make clear that 'atteggiamenti' are crucial to the author's presentation and reception of characters, and to their response to their worlds.

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[3] Since 1995, he has published *Di noi tre* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997).
[4] The works are *Macno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1984), *Yucatan* (Milan: Bompiani, 1986), and *Uto* (Milan: Bompiani, 1995). The first two are discussed in detail in McLaughlin's study (1993).

I shall examine how the treatment of these categories alters from novel to novel, chronologically, before concluding with an assessment of De Carlo's 'commitment'.

Characteristics

The salient feature of De Carlo's narrative is its generational identity. I have said above that he writes about youth, but towards the end of the 1980s in particular, it becomes clear that he is narrating a specific generational experience. The narrator of all his texts is a clear figure of the writer, although his age, until *Arcodamore* (1993) seems to remain at a constant twenty-something.[5] Given the regularity of De Carlo's production of novels, this means that he effectively maps the 'state of the nation', or 'state of the national (youth) consciousness' as the 1980s and 1990s progress. He places the individual against the backdrop of contemporary Italian society, and assesses the interaction of the two.

The individual's response in the novels is characterized by an overwhelming passivity. De Carlo's narrators are passengers in life, achieving only by virtue of accidental precipitation into fruitful encounters. They experience an essential detachment from reality and inability to communicate with others, and this is not a withdrawal by choice but a failure to make contact because reality does not readily offer them a place. All the novels are concerned with forming an identity and making a mark in a society which seems inherently homogenizing and hostile to individuality. The sulky narcissism and insecurity of adolescence seem to be perpetuated, even

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[5] There are two exceptions to these 'rules': in *Macno* (1984), there is no 'io narrante', and the protagonists are a woman, Liza, and Macno himself, who is to some extent a figure of the customary narrator; in *Uto* (1995), the narrator is a teenager (a prototype of the familiar central male).

nurtured, by a social system which is insensitive. Anger is met with indifference and turns to brooding.

De Carlo does not hesitate to identify the features of modern society which seem to annul action in its inhabitants. Environmental pollution and waste, consumerism, politics, the media, education, religion, are all criticized in detail and with vehemence in the novels. Some of this criticism is parenthesized and made contingent by placing it in the mouths not of the narrators but of others, who often have private, self-serving motivations in protesting. In this way the purpose and the effect of protest - of commitment - are smothered. Protest becomes another political strategy and a way of deferring genuine protest, and those who feel stifled by this have no means of expressing their frustration: their words have been annexed by the 'system' they seek to attack.

This seems to put De Carlo's protagonists in the position of socio-cultural 'minorities' who have no platform of their own to speak from. This is part of what the author is saying about de-politicized youth, but he complicates the position further. He cultivates the equivocality and the passivity of his potential 'protesters', so that no clear distinction between 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' is possible: every victim has to some extent offered him- or herself to the oppressor, every abuse is partly exploitation of a given opportunity. This is a feature of interpersonal and sexual relationships as much as of individuals' interaction with society in the novels. The desire for power motivates human relationships and holds them in an uneasy but benumbed balance

between giving and taking, sympathy and cruelty. Idealism exists only faintly - or rather, persists doggedly amidst a more or less embittered realism.

Such existential concerns are features mostly of the 'Italian' novels. The 'American' novels raise approximately the same socio-political issues (the power of the media in *Macno*, environmental damage in *Yucatan*, the politics of influence in *Uto*), but the foreign environment functions as a spotless laboratory in which to analyse the problems, clear of the seemingly endemic compression of issues in Italy. This disencumbering of the narrative also has stylistic causes: in adopting American lifestyles the author also adopts an American style, which Calvino (in his blurb for *Treno di panna*) identifies as deriving from 1980s 'hyper-realist' painting. The narrative is concerned with perception and observation, scanning the surface of reality with a photographic eye and registering images rather than absorbing meaning.[6] This style remains in the 'Italian' works, but tends to become associated with psychological revelation rather than pure sensual experience. Language is often identified in the novels as a symptom of the hypocrisy and posturing which ensure the stagnant status quo in Italy. As an antidote, America also provides a linguistic model: anglicisms, slang and unpoetic cadences are used to undercut the traditional verbosity of Italian writing. De Carlo's prose is terse, economical, almost scientifically precise, and prone to peculiar Anglo-Italian neologisms, such as the verb, 'zipparsi'.

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[6] De Carlo trained as a photographer and has directed films. The author has commented that *Yucatan* was based on his own experience of filming novels by Castaneda with Fellini in the Yucatan. See Cornelia Klettke, 'A colloquio con Andrea De Carlo', in *Italienisch*, 33 (1995), 2-23 (p. 19).

The evocation and exaggeration of the visual is De Carlo's strongest and most individual talent, and although it perhaps works best when employed in American settings - a culture De Carlo seems to consider liberatingly superficial - I think it clashes with the weight of the Italian tradition in a way which is more revealing. A characteristic flaw in De Carlo's novels is his propensity to clichés. When, in particular, he is investigating alternatives to the Italian urban lifestyle he knows and handles well, he has a tendency to import stereotypes wholesale into the narrative, be they philosophies, habits, linguistic idioms, even names. The reader may anxiously anticipate an ironical undermining of the clichés in the novels, but is generally disappointed. The fabrication and deployment of such modern myths could well be a textual strategy itself - part of the fascination with surfaces to the deliberate exclusion of all complexity - but if so, it fails. There is a certain glitter to the superficial narrative of individual characters, or to the empty dialogue between laconic young people, but the bloc descriptions of, for example, a family of cultural stereotypes in *Uto*, dull the writing more than do its quarrels with contemporary Italy, in my opinion.

Calvino praised De Carlo's first novel for its avoidance of cliché, in his unusually detailed blurb for the back cover. Calvino also advised De Carlo on polishing the prose of this first work.[7] The relationship between the two writers is well-known and well-documented, at least from the point of view of Calvino's involvement.[8] An interesting absence from the commentary on the relationship is the perspective of De Carlo. Most critics concentrate on the reasons for Calvino's

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[7] Two letters from Calvino to De Carlo, commenting on the text of *Treno di panna*, are included in Italo Calvino, *I libri degli altri: Lettere 1947-1981*, ed. by Giovanni Tesio (Turin: Einaudi, 1991), pp. 627-30.

[8] See McLaughlin, 1993, p. 75.

attraction to De Carlo's approach: broadly, the 'leggerezza' of his prose and of his observation of human behaviour. Clearly, Calvino's endorsement was a huge boost to the younger writer, and endowed him some 'high'-literary credibility, but the 'patronage' relationship appears to have been largely one-sided. De Carlo mentions his gratitude to Calvino in interviews, but with the air of paying obligatory homage to a figure of the past. Indeed, a comment quoted by McLaughlin suggests that Calvino has the status of a respected teacher: 'Italo Calvino insegna:...'.[9] When Klettke puts it to him that Calvino was a 'punto di riferimento', the writer responds: 'Ma non tanto. Devo dire che io ho avuto a che fare con lui pochissimo. Lo stimavo molto come scrittore [...] Però apparteneva anche a una generazione di scrittori che non credevano più nel romanzo.'[10] In other words, De Carlo puts 'una pietra sopra' Calvino, implying that he was interesting in his time but now almost irrelevant. It is therefore misleading, I think, to overstate the connection between the two writers, particularly as the style of De Carlo's later novels generally shifts away from the purity which Calvino admired, as I have commented above, and their structure emulates the traditional novel which Calvino and his generation worked hard to transcend. De Carlo's status as 'giovane narratore' evidently entails sealing the tomb of his literary father.

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[9] McLaughlin, 1993, p. 87. The interview was originally published in *Panorama*, 8.10.89, p. 143.
[10] *Italienisch*, 33, p. 16.

The Novels

'Esordio'

Calvino's intervention undoubtedly helped precipitate *Treno di panna* to rapid success, translation into various languages and production as a film.[11] The text has an openness and flexibility, derived from its American setting and internationalist outlook, which would facilitate such diffusion. Whilst dealing with similar themes, it has a lightness and effortlessness of delivery which later novels fail to attain. The lassitude which seems to weigh on later characters appears here as a youthful freedom from responsibility and an ironic rather than morose detachment from society.

How the Italian narrator, Giovanni Maimeri, comes to be in Los Angeles is not fully explained - he arrives there from Hawaii to stay with friends made when travelling in Spain, with vague ambitions, shared by the young people around him, of breaking into the film industry. This gives a sense from the outset that the individual's life is governed by chance rather than will, and that he acquiesces in this lack of control. The structure of the novel reflects this: it comprises eight chapters which vary dramatically in length (from two to seventy pages), becoming longer as the novel progresses. This gives a sense that the narrator is carried by the course of events and is powerless to order his own story. The narrator remains a refugee and outsider when he finds a job, albeit in an Italian restaurant, because the other waiting staff are Mexican. He is an observer, able to view both others and himself objectively. The narrator examines his own presence in the restaurant, in relation to the clients, as he slips

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[11] Andrea De Carlo, *Treno di panna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981). The film, directed by the author, appeared in 1988.

between visibility and invisibility. The reader is made a spectator too, attentive to visual more than cognitive perception.

Such intense observation is not a technique of communication but of estrangement, or even tyranny. The penetrating look is voyeuristic, imposing power and placing the observed in a position of passive ignorance, whilst the observer attains a contextualized omniscience by means of the observed.[12] The end of the process requires the annihilation of the human objects of observation to clear the perceptive field for sublime awareness of the observing self:

> Mi pareva di essere sullo specchio ribaltabile di una macchina fotografica mentre chi la tiene in mano gira l'anello della messa a fuoco su una distanza ravvicinata. I miei contorni si dissolvevano progressivamente. (p. 67)

It is a depersonalizing strategy which the author explicitly links to photographic or cinematic technique. This shift of the narrative medium - from writing to photography - is also a tactic for estranging the reader. By suggesting that the author is not a flesh-and-blood fellow human but, ideally, a part of a device for producing images, and this not a textual device but a visual one, he disrupts the reader's familiarity with both text and author.

The 'packaging' of dialogue in this novel is another technique deployed in order to exclude the reader. Conversation between the characters is itself limited and superficial, and works to accentuate distance rather than establish communication. De

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[12] See Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1987). Feminist film theory discusses 'the system of the look', whereby the woman on screen is the object of the voyeuristic spectator's gaze, as are the objects Giovanni scrutinizes from behind his notional lens. Gender makes some difference to the quality of 'the look' of the narrator in De Carlo's work, but his gaze penetrates every object, human and material, and is equally imposing on all.

Carlo prefers to deliver the narrator's synopsis of conversations rather than to reproduce the dialogue itself, so preventing the reader from participating in the dialogue. An example is a 'conversation' between Giovanni, newly arrived, and Tracy, as she drives him and her partner, Ron, from the airport to their home:

> Mi chiedeva 'Come va, allora?', oppure 'Com'era la Nuova Guinea?'. [...] Un paio di volte ha detto 'Stai benissimo'. Ho risposto 'Anche voi due state benissimo'. (p. 9)

This categorization of their interaction both emphasizes its banality and awkwardness, and puts the narrator in the position of analyst. He participates in social intercourse at a minimal level, but analyses it with maximum speed and objectivity. This technique brings the reader too under his power: prevented from experiencing the other characters 'live', she must read according to the narrator's version. The narrative is not his account of events but his commentary on them.

This detached viewpoint lends a crystalline clarity to otherwise 'heavy' themes of the novel. The narrator repeatedly refers to the traffic pollution in the suburb where he lives, particularly when he stays in Tracy and Ron's cramped flat underneath the freeway, with cars constantly thundering overhead. He draws attention to the partly self-engendered stress which his friends suffer in their relentless attempts to find their 'break' into the entertainment industry, and to the squalor which is the experience of the majority in this town as they strive to gain access to a lucky minority. He portrays intimate relationships, particularly that between himself and Jill, hostess at the restaurant, as vacuous, distant, ultimately cruel. His ability to observe rather than feel these conditions seems to be what helps him to make the break which the others miss. He drifts into English teaching, into lessons with the clumsily-named film star Marsha

Mellows, and thus into the Hollywood social circuit. The novel ends at a fashionable party, with the narrator again contemplating his own masterful detachment. He is in a position, physically as well as socially, to look down on the city of Los Angeles spread below him, and to tread on the head of a famous director or actor, asleep by the swimming pool, should he wish. Detachment has gained him power.

The prose and the plot of this novel create a sense of simplicity and effortlessness which also characterizes the narrator. The ability of the writing and of the protagonist to avoid involvement and engagement with anything is impressive. This is the paradox of this novel, which makes it still the writer's best: that the narrator's superb lack of commitment to anything, including the reader, is handled elegantly enough to create a type of engagement between the reader and him.[13]

Giovanni is a successful seducer, in many senses, who provides a model for all De Carlo's narrators or protagonists, and the ironic detachment of the narrative style is recreated in various ways in later works. This first novel thus functions as a touchstone.

The 'model' narrator of *Treno di panna* is transferred to Italy, and specifically Milan, in De Carlo's second novel, *Uccelli da gabbia e da voliera.*[14] The narrative opens with the same casual air as the first, set in America and the action triggered by forces beyond any control the narrator can find it in himself to exert. He fails to see a red traffic light, crashes his car, abandons it and his girlfriend, and is picked up by his

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[13] In *Uto*, De Carlo tries to repeat this effect, and in terms of the character of Uto, succeeds. The success is mitigated by the context in which Uto operates, which, as I have said, is clumsily composed.
[14] Andrea De Carlo, *Uccelli da gabbia e da voliera* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982).

brother, after his father's intervention, and installed in Milan. Car accidents are significant in De Carlo's work, and are frequently the catalysts to action, as here.[15] The fact that they are, precisely, accidental, reveals the apathy of the characters: they need to be precipitated into changing their lives. The fact that they are accidents which could be avoided also reveals a self-destructive impulse in this languor. Finally, the sheer noisy, cataclysmic violence of a car crash, or of a car driven to its destruction,[16] is a neat vignette of all De Carlo's criticism of waste and pollution in a mechanized society, and of the suppressed violence which regulates human behaviour, but can only be released at moments of acute crisis. The image of a man driving a car towards its, and possibly his own, destruction, seems to encapsulate the combination of desires for power, escape, and extreme physical challenge - eros and thanatos - which drive the contemporary (male) individual, according to De Carlo.

Fiodor's arrival in Milan is experienced as entry into some sort of prison or 'gabbia'. It has a completely different atmosphere from America - an enclosed, suffocated city smothered in layers of smog. De Carlo's home city is in his fiction the index of everything which is wrong with modern society: pollution, corruption, waste, hypocrisy, stagnation. The novel follows Fiodor as he tries to build a life in this city, urged by his brother along a conventional career track from which Fiodor shrinks in discomfort but to which he initially acquiesces. He similarly slides into a relationship with his American boss's wife, Sue, whilst longing for the demanding alternative

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[15] Fiodor has a second accident in this novel, which reveals the identity of his mysterious pursuer (Elvio); Mario's 'motorino' incident introduces him to Guido in *Due di due*; Vittorio symbolically loses control of his Range Rover in *Uto*.

[16] A Volkswagen in *Tecniche di seduzione*, and a Porsche in *Arcodamore*, are both 'driven to death' by the narrators.

represented by Malaidina, sister of his friend Mario. At the end he makes an effort and follows Malaidina to Athens, but until then, he languishes in a dull passivity which has none of the bright irresponsibility of the narrator in the previous novel. Sue voices the reader's frustration when she asks, 'Come fai a essere così incerto e vago e poco convinto di qualunque cosa? Come fai a non avere la *minima* idea di cosa vuoi fare?' (p. 148; italics in text).[17]

It is Sue, as a foreigner, who also draws attention to the political and social mess which Italy is in. She not only refers to the corruption and institutionalized inefficiency which paralyze the movement of the state, but also to the more dangerous menaces which this facade conceals and fosters, and to the violent frustration this engenders (shootings, strikes, bombings, kidnappings). Her diatribes create a vivid picture of Italy at the end of the 1970s. She makes a point which De Carlo reiterates elsewhere: that the crisis is endemic in Italian society and that the main reason for the helpless despair his characters exhibit is the lack of some single person or element to blame. Comparing Milan to New York, she says, 'Ma almeno lì sembra che qualcuno sia in controllo della situazione. Qui invece non si capisce nemmeno più cosa succede, va tutto per conto suo come capita' (p. 104). Malaidina echoes her, voicing the frustration of young Italians for whom the future holds no prospect of improvement: 'E anche quelli degli altri partiti sono lo stesso schifo di gente, e se andassero al governo sarebbe la stessa cosa identica, così non c'è verso che cambi mai niente in questo posto' (p. 169). As I said in my opening remarks, both these passages of social

[17] Italicized words are a feature of dialogue in all De Carlo's novels. He uses this emphasis to accentuate the idiosyncracies of language use: a subject which he discusses in this and other novels.

critique are given to characters other than the protagonist to express: he does not comment. The reader is made to feel that it would be possible, even rewarding, to care, but that it is always for someone else to take that role.[18]

The lighter parts of this novel are those where De Carlo addresses issues related to writing. For example, he holds up for critique a cliché of modern writing with the following vignette of a young writer, Ocennini. It is partly a self-parody, as Ocennini describes his novel with features which relate it very closely to De Carlo's works:

> Angelo è uno del '68 che ha fatto anche il '77, ed è in crisi per il riflusso e il terrorismo e tutto il resto, e decide di misurare le sue perplessità ideologico-esistenziali di fronte a questo fantasma mostruoso dell'America. (p. 64)

It is also a parody of writing in the slavery of theory (and of Calvino?):

> Dice 'Quello che mi interessava era scrivere una storia senza storia, dove le parole invece di creare immagini si autodefiniscono nel vuoto, e il lettore è costretto ad analizzarsi e leggersi dentro invece di cercare una facile evasione nel libro'. (p. 64)

Both of the above descriptions expose to ridicule types of writing which are in some ways 'committed'. In the first work described, the protagonist responds to a specific social situation by deciding to explore and test his own feelings. In the second, the reader is called to account, being made to read 'responsibly'. De Carlo is thus rejecting the main literary options explored in preceding decades - ideological psychodrama and narrative experimentalism - and implicitly declaring that the only option is to be 'non-committal'. To pretend a book can change the way individuals think is, he suggests, simply pretentious.

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[18] In this novel, the protesters are women, and their motives seem to be genuine; in later works, men make the criticisms, often with self-seeking motives. This difference illustrates the uncomplicated view of gender difference which informs all the writer's work.

This rejection of commitment can be seen in Fiodor's response to Malaidina's social criticism. It is less the substance of what she says than the quality of her diction which engages him. Malaidina, who seems to stand for vitality, energy and an alternative to urban suffocation, introduces the 'gabbia' of the title of the novel, commenting that modern apartment blocks are boxes which suppress the life of those who inhabit them: 'delle vere gabbie di energia' (p. 53). Fiodor notes as she speaks the freedom and vitality of her language use: 'La sua sincerità è così fisica, così poco basata sulle parole, che quello che dice è solo un ornamento alle sue espressioni, come un nastro colorato su un regalo' (p. 53). By saying this, he seems to make her social criticism merely an adjunct or an adornment to her physical seductiveness. Later in the novel (pp. 175-6), he appropriates her metaphor and twists its sting to make it no longer an illustration of the dangers of urbanization but a deliberately superficial privileging of sensuality over sense. Bringing the 'gabbia' metaphor into the linguistic realm, he identifies units of language as 'gabbie' assembled to hold thoughts, images and sensations with the aim of representing or reproducing them, but ultimately inadequate to convey sensual experience. Language, he suggests, is a social tool which encapsulates physicality and makes it serviceable to a spiritually imprisoned society; whereas he and Malaidina respond to each other and to reality by other sensory means, which offer some measure of freedom.

This privileging of an essential physical communication between individuals (specifically sexual partners), which appears to circumvent the strictures of other forms of human communication, represents a simplistic interpretation of language which recurs in later novels. That Fiodor and Malaidina's flight to Australia at the end

of the novel is figured as escape to a 'voliera' rather than to complete freedom, might be interpreted as an acknowledgement that such intimate, sensual communication remains a language of a sort, and therefore subject to structural limits. There is certainly a sense of some obstruction to total fulfilment in this relationship: a shortcoming which features in all sexual relationships in De Carlo's novels. It is one subtlety which gently undercuts the unsophisticated use of stereotypes, and which is never directly addressed or resolved. It is therefore one of the more interesting aspects of the writer's work, but it is threatened with suffocation by the clichés which often occupy the text.

Experiences of Italy

Due di due introduces a new phase in De Carlo's writing.[19] This and later novels are weightier than the first four in terms of length, specific political content and 'philosophical' comment. The result is more serious and intense writing, which fights with clichés and heavy-handedness. *Due di due* is an ambitious project aiming to contextualize the indifference and sense of exclusion of the writer's generation. Whereas other novels evolve in a time-span of months or at most a couple of years, this novel is something of a *Bildungsroman*, tracing the formation of the two protagonists against the background of two decades of Italian history.

The opening paragraph of the novel introduces a state of inertia familiar in De Carlo's characters, but voiced by a much younger, more vulnerable individual. Mario's spectatorial isolation seems painful and incomprehensible:

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[19] Andrea De Carlo, *Due di due* (Milan: Mondadori, 1989).

> La prima volta che ho visto Guido Laremi eravamo tutti e due così magri e perplessi, così provvisori nelle nostre vite da stare a guardare come spettatori mentre quello che ci succedeva entrava a far parte del passato, schiacciato senza la minima prospettiva. (p. 9)

An identification between the two boys develops from this shared sense of alienation from a society which seems introverted, indifferent to its youth, and sustained by entrenched prejudices. Any youthful energy is deflected by this archaic system which seems impervious to the subversive energies which elsewhere are disrupting the status quo. For Guido, the Rolling Stones are a sign of life, of the possibility of feeling a sense of purpose, albeit destructive:

> 'Era la *vita*' diceva.'C'erano questi cinque pieni di energia e di rabbia e divertimento per quello che facevano, senza nessun riguardo e nessun obbligo e nessuna spiegazione o simulazione di ragionevolezza per nessuno'. (p. 17; italics in text)

The repeated negatives demonstrate that there seems to be no genuine alternative to the society from which the younger generation feel alienated: nothing to fight <u>for</u>, only to fight against. Guido's role models are admired not for representing something intrinsically positive, but for their annihilation of oppositional pressures. Self-realization seems to be a matter of subtraction rather than addition, of shedding rather than accumulating experience. Guido is fascinated by foreign literature, music, films, because he perceives Italy and particularly the Italian language ('troppo rigida e artificiale' (p.17)) to be peculiarly resistant to change. Again, his interest is aroused not because the music etc. that he admires is British or American, but because it is <u>not</u> Italian.

De Carlo tries in this novel to explain the psychological development of young people in the specific social context of the 1960s and 1970s, and so, in a sense, to

justify the detachment of earlier protagonists such as Giovanni and Fiodor. Guido is this novel's version of that same character. One of De Carlo's seducers, he has an innate talent for magnetizing people of both genders by means of his intense attention to them. Guido's impulse, as a teenager, is to find a mode of engagement with society, although it is a violent and antagonistic means of involving himself, rather than a cooperative one. He explains to Mario his technique for escaping isolation: 'Lo so come ti senti. È come essere dietro un *vetro*, non puoi toccare niente di quello che vedi. Ho passato tre quarti della mia vita chiuso fuori, finché ho capito che l'unico modo è *romperlo*' (p. 24; italics in text).

This impulse towards what might be termed constructive destruction is enmeshed in this novel with the social context: the Italian education system, culture and politics. When Guido (followed by Mario) breaks out, it is symptomatic of a wider movement, as the frustration of the youth population erupts in the public demonstrations of 1968. The contrast between the weighty, mechanical and uniform older generation and the energetic, agile and subversive younger generation is conveyed visually in Mario's first account of a demonstration:

> I ragazzi guizzavano e saltavano, traccheggiavano in passi laterali e passi all'indietro, tagliavano la strada in diagonale; i poliziotti galoppavano dritti come tori da corrida, sulla spinta di un'onda quasi esaurita. (p. 44)

De Carlo records the diversion of this generational surge into manageable channels. Guido is initially an active participant in student politics, but becomes increasingly disillusioned with the way that the forms and procedures come to mimic those of the

traditional political system which they sought to subvert.[20] Hierarchy and partisanship control the operations and discussions of the new groups, and work to exclude radical revolutionaries such as Guido who refuse to subscribe to schools of thought. The writer balances the subtleties of the individual character (Guido's innate idealism and alienation) with the public situation of the backlash against change. Guido abandons school just after a moralistic media assault in response to the Piazza Fontana bomb of December 1969 has imposed closure on the protest movement.

Travel provides the genuine opportunity for Guido and Mario to 'live', but, as I have said, the tension created from smothered resistance in the homogenizing social climate of Italy powers the best of De Carlo's writing (such as the early part of this novel), and the utopias he sets up in 'exotic' locations tend to be banal. Greece (Lesvos) is portrayed as the paradise it perhaps authentically seemed in 1970s culture: a cosmopolitan environment free of rigid social structures, material concerns, and moral scruples. Dialogue - a medium De Carlo circumscribes in his sharpest writing - becomes central to the narrative previously characterized by sullen silence and awkward detachment. The potential weaknesses of this section are exacerbated by the fact that Mario narrates this novel. Whilst Guido capitalizes on the opportunities offered by the escape from Italy, Mario's linguistic ability is less than his friend's, and 'free love' brings him little more than jealousy. He cannot participate fully in the multi-national alternative 'society' of youths which coalesces on the island, and this isolation is characterized by incomprehension and powerlessness, rather than by

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[20] Fabrizia Ramondino makes the same observation in her novel about the protest movement, *Un giorno e mezzo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1988). See chapter seven of this thesis.

understanding and power, as is the isolation of De Carlo's successful outsiders. He leaves Lesvos to meet his Italian girlfriend, Roberta, in Athens, so capitulating to his previous lifestyle, and this action is the catalyst to a nervous breakdown. During the period of his illness, which closes part one of the novel, his stepfather dies, and this event marks the start of the upturn from the nadir of his fortunes.

The second part of the novel aims to follow Guido and Mario into adulthood, through the 1970s and into the 1980s, and to shift the balance of their relationship, with Mario being the reference point and stronger character, and Guido the insecure dependent. The death of Mario's stepfather (always kept at a distance by the appellation, 'il marito di mia madre') triggers a revolution in Mario's character. The removal of this oppressive presence, who seemed to bar Mario from any direct relationship with reality and with his mother, allows him to 'rompere il vetro' and engage with life. This death allows the birth of Mario into active adulthood: 'Avevo voglia di reagire, occupare una parte di spazio senza più esitazioni; diventare adulto' (p.181). There are clear psychoanalytic undertones to this obstruction of the boy's development, endorsed in other novels, where a male presence stands between the narrator and his self-fulfilment, in the form of a woman.[21] These undertones are not developed, however, and thus remain rather commonplace and inconsequential.

His stepfather's death bestows upon Mario the financial means to set up his own life, by buying a piece of land with two decrepit houses, where he establishes a horribly cosy self-sufficiency with the partner, Martina, and other friends who

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[21] Examples are Polidori, in *Tecniche di seduzione*, and Cerino in *Arcodamore.*

conveniently slot into his lifestyle. 'Le Due Case' becomes the locus of the firm foot of a compass, the other foot of which is Guido, who drifts in and out of various relationships around the globe, in a state of permanent dissatisfaction which is the product of his persistent idealism. Mario is by far the less compelling of the two central characters and the accounts of the development of the Due Case cooperative are tedious. The political events of this period, which may have provided a dramatic counterpoint to the rural idyll, are omitted from the narrative. The domesticity is only interesting when disrupted by Guido's visits, and it proves powerless to domesticate him, even when he stays there to write and becomes involved, inevitably, with Martina's sister, Chiara. Just as the static foot of a compass inclines towards its moving counterpart, the narrative is primarily controlled by Guido, even from a remote distance, because he has seduced the Due Case community sufficiently to make them attentive to his every geographical move and mood swing, and he sustains this control through his irregular correspondences and visits. The setting of the second half of the novel at 'Le Due Case' is a structural problem in the narrative, because it is only interesting when the characters' and reader's attention is projected away from it towards Guido.

The account of Guido's literary career is one of the main 'distractions' of the second half. De Carlo, in a transparent version of his own experience, makes observations about the sheer difficulty of the activity of writing: to write a good, vital novel seems to require anger, derived from an abrasive relationship with society. This negative energy is, however, neutered by the publishing industry and media, who work to mould Guido into a stereotype. They are determined to present Guido as an

angry young man, representative of a disillusioned generation (a 'giovane narratore'): a newspaper headline describes his novel as 'L'AGGHIACCIANTE TESTIMONIANZA DI UNA GENERAZIONE PERDUTA' (p. 291). Guido is infuriated that his genuine and persistent anger is presented as a youthful outburst, as if the context which engendered it were ephemeral and contingent, rather than an ongoing condition which still demands attention: 'Ho scritto una storia contro *Milano*, non un diario giovanile a uso di sociologi dilettanti' (p. 291; italics in text). It is interesting that Guido-De Carlo objects specifically to the packaging of his fiction ('storia') as documentary ('testimonianza', 'diario'). This appears to be another backlash against 'impegno' on the part of the author, rejecting any form of story-telling which is directly referential. However, his story was meant to accuse or protest against a specific social reality ('una storia contro *Milano*'). De Carlo implies that the middle ground he seeks is the recuperation of the nineteenth-century novel: that is, a good, rounded story, with a message. This is borne out by his comments about Calvino which I quoted earlier, and by his assertion in the same interview that he has a 'senso un po' ottocentesco' of what the novel should be.[22]

This novel seems to meet that objective, and has proved extremely popular.[23] The reason for this is not because it contains the author's best writing, but because of the experience it charts. In one sense, this is an experience of adolescence with which any modern teenager could identify, but it is also a generational experience. McLaughlin comments:

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[22] *Italienisch*, 33, p. 21.

[23] Despite being nearly ten years old, the novel has returned to the top ten bestsellers' list in 1998.

> As Calvino's generation felt the need for THE novel of the Resistance, so the generation that was born in the 1950s would like to see THE novel about the protest years and their legacy. De Carlo's last work of the 1980s makes a reasonable claim to be that novel.[24]

'Il sessantotto' remains a subject of debate in Italian culture, as a symbol of the hope for a cultural and psychological modernity seemingly bypassed by the material modernity that was achieved rapidly in the late 1950s and 1960s. It is also a symbol of failure, and the intensity of the persistent fascination of the 'sessantotto' phenomenon is perhaps explained by the sense of guilt that a generation was not equal to the task of seizing on the opportunities available. In this sense, De Carlo's novel is 'THE' novel of the generation, because, in its whole approach, it reproduces and justifies, or even sanctifies, that failure to commit wholeheartedly to the task in hand. Eco's *Il pendolo di Foucault*, published a year earlier, questions the period in a much more subtle and demanding way, and its relative lack of success is possibly due to the fact that it exacerbates the complexity of the topic.[25] De Carlo's novel provides no solution, but it describes the period in a way which is accessible, predictable and ultimately consolatory. As McLaughlin suggests, it presents itself as the definitive account, and so implies closure.

Tecniche di seduzione is probably De Carlo's most directly political work.[26] He exposes and criticizes the political establishment in Italy, and the social practices it has generated, both directly, in the invectives delivered by Marco Polidori, and subtly, by allowing such practices to absorb the whole of the story: it is a novel about a novel which is appropriated by an archetypal representative of the establishment. In this

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[24] McLaughlin, 1993, p. 87.
[25] Umberto Eco, *Il pendolo di Foucault* (Milan: Bompiani, 1988).
[26] Andrea De Carlo, *Tecniche di seduzione* (Milan: Bompiani, 1991).

way, it is also a novel about writing. As in *Due di due*, good writing is seen to be born from some lack or dissatisfaction which fuels an aggressive and abrasive style. When the conditions of writing are too comfortable and the writer too conscious of his craft, that is, when the narrator, Roberto, becomes a 'professional' writer in Rome, his work is mundane and lifeless. De Carlo also examines writing in the context of the modern publishing industry, allowing the business of writing to be treated like any other business in this society and to be prone to the same corruption. One of the many instances of seduction in this novel is the seduction of literature by politics, or political behaviour. This is not, then, a cerebral and 'high'-literary self-referentiality, but a worldly self-awareness.

The criticism of contemporary Italian society is straightforward and comprehensive. The novel begins in Milan, but is chiefly situated in Rome at the turn of the decade (1980s-90s), which De Carlo portrays as the heart of the corrupt old system, at the zenith of opportunism before the 'Mani Pulite' operation began to dismantle it. Polidori is Roberto's mentor, and his set-piece criticisms concern issues familiar in De Carlo's novels, such as the environment, urban squalor, human hypocrisy. What is new in this novel is the specificity of the attacks on certain sectors of the establishment, and particularly politicians. Polidori, at a smart Roman party, recounts to Roberto various instances of corruption of which he is personally aware:

> Polidori per esempio mi ha indicato il presidente di un ente per gli aiuti ai paesi in via di sviluppo, ha detto 'Con i soldi per salvare dalla fame gli etiopi è diventato uno degli uomini più ricchi di Roma. E ha fatto dei magnifici regali al segretario del suo partito, naturalmente'. (p. 116)

He proceeds to give a grotesque description of the characteristics of the politicians of each major party. First the Christian Democrats:

> Se li guardi bene hanno quasi sempre labbra secche, nasi disidratati da assuefazione cronica. Sono rigidi di movimenti, con le giunture saldate dall'artrosi, le spalle strette, le ginocchia che si piegano solo sui cuscini di raso degli inginocchiatoi. (p. 117)

Then the Socialists:

> Hanno queste labbra tumide, queste mani grassocce e questi nasi carnosi, queste guance gonfie. [...] Sono stati loro a portare il sesso allo scoperto nella politica italiana, dopo vent'anni di masturbazioni all'ombra delle sagrestie. (p.117)

There is something formulaic and glib about this criticism: it is intended to enhance the prestige of the critic in the listener's perception, rather than to sharpen his opinion of the third parties who are under magniloquent attack. Polidori is the social critic of the novel, but his declamations are perfectly choreographed to become part of a rhetorical performance concerning exclusively his own seduction of his 'victim' and using extrinsic socio-political issues merely as instruments of this *tour de force*. The criticism of Italian social mores is thus put to the service of those very mores: Polidori undercuts the moral high ground he pretends to stand on, subsuming the role of protest into the functioning of the system. Roberto describes Polidori's complicity:

> Tutti lo salutavano appena ci avvicinavamo, subito dopo che lui me ne aveva parlato come di mostri. C'era una consuetudine tra loro, nei sorrisi e nelle strette di mano, e rendeva ancora più irreale l'atmosfera. (p. 118)

Roberto is seduced. When greeted with admiration because of his association with Polidori, the complicity embraces him too: 'Ogni volta ne ero lusingato, malgrado il disgusto che provavo per loro' (p. 118). De Carlo suggests in this and

other novels that everyone is a part of this social system and benefits from it in ways difficult to renounce, making change a complex and perhaps ultimately unfeasible objective. The ambiguity of which Roberto accuses Polidori near the end of the novel ('È che sei ambiguo. Che sei intriso di ambiguità come tutti i bastardi che in ogni campo si mangiano questo paese' (p. 353)) is a mode of being in this society, an anthropological given, which allows the individual to lie somewhere between commitment and *laissez-faire* acquiescence. There is no moral right and wrong: Polidori is an exploitative and hypocritical fraudster, but Roberto is his passive, if not compliant, victim. This is precisely the ambiguity which propels De Carlo's narrative about Italy, and which, as writer, he exploits, by exposing the flaws of Italian society and declining to comment on them directly.

Arcodamore is De Carlo's first heavily introspective and psychological novel.[27] It is also, rather too predictably, his first love story and his first attempt at portraying a female protagonist in intimate detail. The narrator, Leo, is divorced and in his early forties, and the novel seems to be a quite self-conscious and short-sighted departure towards a more 'mature' thematic. The relationship between Leo and Manuela is littered with the sort of misunderstandings and communication barriers which characterize important sexual relationships in all De Carlo's works, but the difference is that they are presented as meaning something. The tension between the two lovers is much greater than in previous works because it is not only perceptible through physical manifestations: here, the attentive eye of the viewer probes beneath the surface to register psychological features.

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[27] Andrea De Carlo, *Arcodamore* (Milan: Bompiani, 1993).

The subtext of the novel concerns political events in Italy - the ongoing scandals of 'Tangentopoli'. The state of complacent opportunism and self-preservation which De Carlo depicted as typical of Italian society in *Tecniche di seduzione* has now been shattered by the investigation into corruption and malpractice between politicians and businessmen, exposing a rotten social framework. The narrator wanders in and out of Milanese 'salotti' where television screens seem to play a constant, grotesque pageant of arrests, investigations and suicides of prominent politicians.

The oscillating passions of the relationship between Leo and Manuela are enmeshed with the sordid and violent political goings-on, the crux of this connection being Mimmo Cerino: Manuela's ex-partner, media personality, and corrupt owner of a hostel to help young drug addicts. Manuela's association with him forces her, and so Leo, to face the darker side of his superficially brilliant, media-friendly world. Violence spawns further violence: when Cerino feels threatened, he attacks Manuela's home, prompting Leo to get into a street fight with two of his men and then to seek out Cerino himself, whom he finds hanged in his apartment. Leo reveals this to Manuela, and they have their most violent and cruel fight. In this way, the barely-suppressed violence of the political scene is shown to be not just a backdrop to their relationship but an intrinsic element of it. De Carlo draws attention to the interplay between foreground and background, and I think there is more to this strategy than the rather mundane correlation between power-games in both the personal and public contexts. In a sense, the author is questioning the possibility of commitment: the two spheres clearly interconnect, but how, he seems to be asking, does an individual

project himself into those connections? The question is if it is possible to make a difference.

Addressing politics directly appears to be no solution. De Carlo again in this novel uses an outspoken political critic as an 'Aunt Sally'. Leo's cousin, like Polidori, complains about the opportunism and self-interest of politicians, about the inherently corrupt nature of Italian people, about the power of the media and about the self-preserving acquiescence of the electorate, but this is the expression of an 'atteggiamento' and the cousin is as tolerant of his lot as is any of the people he criticizes. The narrator himself listens, feels anger and disgust at the environment he inhabits, but takes no sides. Again, there is no moral high ground: Leo openly reveals his own anger and violent impulses and connects them to those which he describes in Cerino and his men, and he recognizes that he as much as any other is a product of this polluted environment.

The stylistic means by which the tension of this novel is sustained is the intense descriptive attention used elsewhere. The narrator is a professional photographer who has renounced portrait photography, finding human subjects too demanding, and prefers to specialize in 'still-life' studies of scrupulously designed household goods. Manuela inspires him to seek inter-human contact, and this is expressed photographically, in that she poses for him and he produces more searching and compelling work than he believed himself capable of. The metaphorical parabola is clear: as Leo is trying to get under Manuela's skin by means of his art, the author is trying to get under the skin of 1990s Italy by means of his writing. In re-working the

photographic analogy used implicitly and explicitly in earlier novels, De Carlo is perhaps trying to point out that he has re-worked his own techniques, to create a writing which makes connections rather than elegantly proscribing them. He aims to express a commitment to the subjects to whom he addresses his art: indeed, he makes them equal subjects, rather than objects of his gaze. In comparison with the tyranny of *Treno di panna*, this is a democratic 'look' which seeks a response and an engagement. The problem is that the author loses focus when he becomes too close to his 'subjects', and his writing becomes imprecise.

Conclusions

> Abbiamo voluto rifiutare un mondo preesistente con cui non ci identificavamo, che vedevamo anzi come molto oppressivo. Però poi, dalle macerie di questo mondo non è uscito un mondo migliore.[...] credo che molta dell'ideologia della corruzione sia proprio figlia, paradossalmente, anche del sessantotto, della contestazione.[.|..] Tutto sommato si è arrivati non a una ricostruzione di un sistema di valori alternativo a quello precedente ma a un modo di sopravvivere furbescamente fra le macerie. (*Italienisch*, 33, pp. 12-13; underlining added)

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, De Carlo is in many ways typical of the 'giovane narratore', and this explanation of his 'generation' is also a narrative of his own work. He started by being self-consciously anti-traditional, anti-Italian, even anti-narrative, in the sense that he recounted a succession of events and impressions rather than telling the stories of the experiences of individuals. Mid-career he explored the social phenomenon of 1968, in order to try to explain the sense of isolation felt by him and the contemporaries he portrayed. Later works look at ways of subsisting in the post-'revolutionary' rubble, using the battered structure of the traditional novel.

'Sopravvivere furbescamente' is a key phrase, I think. The verb, the mode of being, is predominantly passive - survival denotes an acceptance of forces beyond the subject's control - but it is dogged, persistent. The adverb, the supplement, is weakly active: to be clever, knowing, demands some self-awareness, derived from observation. The survival instinct is ultimately selfish, and the qualification of 'furbo' accentuates the sense of putting oneself before another, capitalizing on the weakness of another individual or of social structures. The phrase encapsulates the politics of expediency and self-interest which characterized Italian society in the 1980s and early 1990s, and encapsulates the author's mode of writing. In order to illustrate why I consider De Carlo to be the one amongst all the 'giovani narratori' I shall discuss who is genuinely 'disimpegnato', I shall compare his work briefly with other writers who, because of common themes or tactics, appear to share his 'fault line'.

Calvino and Tabucchi, in different ways, demonstrate that exploration of the psychological experience of an individual subject in a specific reality, without necessarily being politically explicit, can carry a moral charge. They show how to 'sopravvivere intelligentemente', perhaps: to be 'furbo' is to get round something, but to be intelligent is to get inside it.[28] A comparison of the shared theme of photography demonstrates the difference between Tabucchi and De Carlo. The latter (until *Arcodamore* at least) uses the lens as a means of perceiving the minute details of surface reality, but retains a gap between the viewing subject and the viewed object. Photography is an objectifying technique. Tabucchi sees a photograph as a frozen

[28] For example, Palomar's persistent attempts to understand the world by means of observation: Italo Calvino, *Palomar* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983).

moment in a life story which precedes and succeeds the image, and detailed study of it brings the life into being. The viewer enters a dialogue with the viewed: photography is a subjectifying technique.[29]

Tondelli, perhaps more obviously a fellow 'giovane narratore', shares with De Carlo the theme of travel. When De Carlo's protagonists travel, mostly to America, they remain detached from their new environment: they observe it avidly, but see their own image reflected back intact, or even with its contours and determining features sharpened. Tondelli's characters (see my next chapter) travel to similarly 'first-world' destinations (mainly northern Europe), but what might be experienced as familiar and unchallenging is in fact used as an opportunity to test the individual personality. Tondelli's characters look around and perceive everything as different (the crisp, salty, northern air is often evoked), and their response is to allow this difference to permeate themselves in a two-way exchange which expresses a modern, extrovert, social consciousness.

A stylistic comparison between Tondelli and De Carlo expands this point. Both writers cultivate banality, expressing the potential meaninglessness of modern, middle-class existence partly by means of the modernized, middle-brow novel (Tondelli's *Rimini*, to be discussed in my next chapter, is his main example of this tactic). Tondelli deliberately adopts mediocrity as a position from which to call that very mediocrity into crisis, and he makes this critique clear to the attentive reader. De

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[29] See chapter three. The issue of response-responsibility in photography is raised in *Il filo dell'orizzonte*.

Carlo appears to cultivate mediocrity as an end in itself, and if this is in fact done with the ultimate intention of ironizing the banality of contemporary life, of contemporary literature, of the reader's and writer's expectations, then he makes little perceptible effort (after *Treno di panna*) to engage the reader's complicity.

De Carlo's work demonstrates perhaps better than any other I shall study that commitment is a factor of the relationship between author and reader. *Treno di panna* modifies the reader's perception and forces him to confront a social, generational condition because the author is conscious in every word of the text of the effect that word might have on the reader. The reader's response is controlled in a way which is not comfortable but careful. In later works, when the author seems to fall back into the well-worn form of the traditional novel, the words of others - of political journalism, of literary criticism, of sociological documentation - are grafted onto the text carelessly. Despite the content of these adjuncts, which might seem to be 'committed' in a conspicuous and conventional way, their formal effect is to disengage reader from writer. To be non-committal is undoubtedly a feature of the generation whose commitment had failed them, but to express this effectively demands a commitment on the part of the writer. Without this subcutaneous energy, the fault line which stems from Calvino, and other potential connections (with Tondelli, for example), all peter out at De Carlo.

PART III: CHAPTER FIVE

PIER VITTORIO TONDELLI: A DIFFERENT APPROACH

> Ero in un angolo, sullo sgabello, le spalle appoggiate al muro. Ero a parte, ma ero nella posizione migliore per essere presente.[1]

It is important, I think, to retain this image of being at once present and absent, inside and outside, whilst considering Tondelli's writing. It is not an equivocal fluctuation between two positions, but a constant condition of achieving full presence by means of a strategic absence. It is the condition of the observer, detaching himself from the scene to attain a perspective which allows a thorough examination of that scene, so generating a cognitive or emotional participation. It is a position of isolation, but this very isolation is determined by the relation of the individual subject to the group, so that it pre-supposes a possible inclusion. It is a position of difference, but again, a difference defined only by comparison to a 'norm', so that the difference derives from a primary identification. This co-dependency between detachment and engagement differentiates Tondelli's observational position from that of De Carlo's truly aloof protagonists (see previous chapter).

My reasons for selecting Tondelli's work for analysis in this thesis are partly related to this 'difference'. I see him as deriving from the major fault lines in 'impegno', clearly traceable to Celati and even back to Vittorini, because of his profound commitment to maintaining the relevance of literature in contemporary culture. There are various facets to this commitment which I hope to uncover in the

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[1] Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *L'abbandono* (Milan: Bompiani, 1993), p. 287.

course of this chapter. Reception of his work has been peculiar, however. The corpus of his works is in some ways a compendium of literary devices, all different in their scope, and this has elicited piecemeal critical reaction which tends to focus on the novelty of the individual texts rather than on the potential impact of the composite project. The value of this whole is greater, I think, than the sum of its parts, and a balanced consideration of it is overdue.

My aim, however, is not only to 'do justice' to Tondelli's work in itself, but also to call contemporary criticism to account, and demonstrate that the issue of the fragmentation of 'impegno' in the 1980s and 1990s is relevant on the response as well as on the production side. Tondelli himself complains of the lack of a genuinely 'equal' (equal to the task) critical community, and a comparison with the situation in the 1940s and 1950s, when the 'impegno' question arose, supports his argument. Calvino and Vittorini, and others, were critics as much as writers (and indeed, self-critics, as chapter one demonstrates), who generated a culture of debate. The community into which contemporary writers release their work seems to receive passively rather than respond creatively, and there is very little sense of a collaborative effort to increase understanding of literature's place in the postmodern world. Tondelli, in various ways, strikes at the heart of this problem, but only a limited and marginal community of interlocutors seems to notice this.[2]

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[2] Secondary texts concentrating on Tondelli are scant. Criticism of his works mostly takes the form of contemporary newspaper articles and reviews, of which both a comprehensive bibliography and survey can be found in Fulvio Panzeri & Generoso Picone, *Tondelli. Il mestiere di scrittore: Una conversazione-autobiografia* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1994).

Biography seems to be a further obstacle to critical clarity. Tondelli published first in 1980 and died in 1991, of the disease with which 1980s youth culture was branded. He appears to encapsulate all too neatly a decade which he spent much of his creative energy expressing and analysing, hence the risk of reading him according to a cultural stereotype, ticking off individual texts against a check-list of 1980s cultural phenomena. Criticism of later texts (especially *Camere separate*) stresses their summational themes and tone, in order to seal the conclusion of a life with that of the decade. Sensitivity clearly needs to be shown to the representation of death in later works, but to use this as a justification for trimming off the loose ends of the writer's work is brutally to curtail potential.

I shall begin my analysis of Tondelli with some further general remarks about themes and approaches, before considering his works in broadly chronological order. Although I complained above of critics' tendency to approach Tondelli's works selectively, both limits of space and my wish to shift reception of Tondelli onto a more sensitive footing cause me to limit the texts I deal with, and to weigh my attention unequally. I have tried to privilege works less commonly analysed, and in so doing have excluded *Pao pao*.[3] *Dinner Party*,[4] the writer's only published dramatic piece, has been omitted because, as drama, it falls outside the scope of my thesis (though disruption of generic boundaries is part of Tondelli's project), and because it adds little to issues raised by the narrative.

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[3] Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Pao pao* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982). See Diego Zancani, 'Pier Vittorio Tondelli: The Calm After The Storm' in *The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt Barañski and Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 219-38 (pp. 228-32).
[4] Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Dinner party* (Milan: Bompiani, 1994).

General remarks

First of all it is necessary to explore further the nature of Tondelli's isolation. The metaphor of the isolated observer, referring to the writer in relation to reality, is nothing new,[5] but in Tondelli's case, it can be applied also to the relation between the writer and his stories, and the writer and his profession. Tondelli is a quasi-presence in his texts, whether he writes in first person singular, plural, or third person. Fulvio Panzeri attempts to explain the process of the writer's involvement as follows:

> Non è protagonista dell'azione, ma permette che l'azione possa svolgersi, o meglio, possa trovar corpo in un'immagine letteraria precisa, altamente definita, fluttuante tra espressionismo caratterizzante e nitido impressionismo.[6]

This definition slides into rather ill-defined and opaque terminology. I cannot claim to define the process any more clearly, but a helpful guide is perhaps the concept of 'im-mediacy'. That is, Tondelli aims to render any scene immediately, creating vivid images of surface detail and using the language of contemporary life to make a direct connection between the scene and the reader, in which the writer's presence is virtually annulled. Virtually, because Tondelli is present in the scene too: he mediates, not in the sense of being a middle-man between two separate entities but in the sense of being part of the medium. He is author and character at once, in and out of the text.[7]

This elliptical use of autobiography has powerful implications for any consideration of Tondelli as a 'gay writer'. Whether he is in any sense committed to exposing gay issues is a recalcitrant question, as demonstrated by the scarcity of

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[5] Pavese regarded himself as a partial outsider, and Calvino explores the relationship between writing and detachment in much of his later fiction.

[6] Fulvio Panzeri, 'Nota', in Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Un weekend postmoderno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990), p. 601.

[7] There are characters in all Tondelli's works who seem to be figures of the writer, e.g. Bruno May in *Rimini*, Leo in *Camere separate*, Didi in *Dinner Party*.

secondary writing which addresses it. In the edition of *Panta* dedicated to Tondelli,[8] the only contributor to discuss explicitly the relationship between the writer's work and his homosexuality is Furio Colombo, and his exploration is tentative and inconsequential. Diego Zancani makes useful comments regarding *Altri libertini* and *Camere separate* specifically, but the aims of his chapter do not allow for any more comprehensive exploration of the question.[9] The writer's sexual orientation is not, of course, 'essential' to his writing, but given that Tondelli quite systematically foregrounds homosexual love in his writing, it seems surprising that critics dare not speak its name.

In a sense there is a resistance in Tondelli's novels (less so in the journalistic writings)[10] to any issue-bound approach to the text. This is not merely a projection of the reader-critic's discomfort in balancing between an open response to a matter the writer brings to attention, and a potentially reductive, essentialist reading determined by a biographical detail - though this discomfort probably plays a part. The resistance is genuinely there in the text, manifesting itself in the virtual impossibility of formulating any clear argument concerning Tondelli as a gay writer. There are undoubtedly several possible explanations for this, but I shall concentrate on two factors.

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[8] Fulvio Panzeri (ed.), *Panta. I nuovi narratori: Pier Vittorio Tondelli*, 9 (1992).
[9] See Zancani, 1993.
[10] Arguments about the attitudes of society towards homosexuals are more straightforwardly put in the shorter journalistic pieces in *Un weekend postmoderno*. For example, 'Bar Lina' (pp. 106-7) describes how a raid on a gay club makes public the presence of gays as an integral sector of the vacation population in Rimini.

The first relates to the principal point I am seeking to make in this chapter, that is, of Tondelli's difference. The very word has a particular resonance when relating to issues of both gender and sexual orientation. It is the 'difference' which, in the negative, can be made synonymous with being 'queer', 'abnormal', 'unnatural' and so on, but which, in the positive, can be the index of an alternative, of disruption of a prescriptive norm - a 'queerness' to be sought after and re-claimed.[11] This sense of difference is a powerful subtext to the web of reference relating to the term in Tondelli's novels, and largely informs the other significances of the term. I shall discuss this further with relation to *Camere separate*.

The second mode of resistance has been explored by Christopher Robinson.[12] He argues that 'gay' fiction is engaged in re-educating the reader to produce a fragmented reading, rather than one concerned with conclusions and unities. Referring specifically to Tondelli, he questions that the novels are as linear as they seem. The validity of this argument is demonstrated in general critical response to the two major novels (*Rimini* and *Camere separate*), which are perfunctorily described by almost every critic as 'conventional', realistic novels. In fact, both novels mimic a conventional structural unity but undermine it by subtle differences, such as the conventionally unnecessary descriptions of Rimini in the eponymous novel (see below). Robinson accurately points out that in *Camere separate*, relational references relate to nothing, and times and places shift so that the narrator cannot be placed. He

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[11] See Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

[12] These ideas were presented in a paper entitled 'Re-educating the Reader: Fictional Strategies and Gender Issues in Contemporary "Gay" Fiction' at a conference on 'Fictions Today' at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2nd-4th July, 1997.

suggests that the texts disrupt realist expectations and force the codes of reading to be re-coded. In my comments so far, I have used visual and mental images, a neologism (im-mediacy), and rejection of standing judgments to try to say what seems to be fundamentally unsayable about Tondelli's work. Robinson's theory is the beginning of an explanation of why there seems to be no adequate language to describe it: but only the beginning, because although I accept that homosexuality may be one fundamental 'difference', Tondelli indicates other powerful differentiating factors.

Another issue prone to misreading which should be addressed is Tondelli's generational identity. As mentioned in my introduction, there is a risk of pinning the label of 'writer of the 1980s' to Tondelli and leaving him as an exhibit in some notional museum of twentieth-century literature. His writing does indeed work to define that decade, but it is a mistake to define him by it. In an interview, Tondelli himself, as 'outsider', problematizes the concept of a generation and of generational progression, suggesting that the specificity of ambitions and achievements with which each generation credits itself is one of the illusions of youthful narcissism, and that in fact each generation repeats an essential process of psychological and emotional maturation.[13] As an 'insider', however, Tondelli thrives on this energy and presents it in his writing as one of the definitive qualities of youth. The 'younger generation' has a clear identity in his work, and he considers age a defining factor in the being of the individual and of social groups.

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[13] 'C'è il rischio che tutto si ripresenti uguale per ogni generazione...Con le stesse umiliazioni, con le stesse difficoltà, con le stesse pulsioni utopiche' (Panzeri & Picone, p. 57).

This attention to the contemporary social climate raises the question of whether or not Tondelli is 'impegnato'. Tondelli's response to this question is the following:

> Mi considero infantilmente apolitico, con la perversione del bambino amorale che 'non conosce'. Questo non vuol dire che io sia uno scrittore disimpegnato, perché credo ci sia un risvolto sociale nei miei libri. Essere impegnato per me vuol dire far scoprire cosa significa seguire la propria natura e il proprio istinto, saper essere sinceri con se stessi e pieni di desiderio e di voglia di amare e di cambiare il mondo, anche se io non posso dire in che modo. (Panzeri & Picone, p. 58)

The language of this definition is rather hackneyed 'psychobabble', but it expresses Tondelli's attraction to the chaotic energy of youth. More importantly, it highlights from the writer's side the reader's problem I spoke of above. Tondelli admits, 'io non posso dire': there is a lack of an accurate language to express the sort of commitment he feels, and which is shared, he suggests, by his 'generation'. He wants literature to have a social role but the term 'impegno' has been discredited and the language of 1960s-1970s self-realization is inadequate. To tell the stories of it is perhaps the only option.

Linked with this is his mission (to use that word is not to exaggerate) to encourage young people to write, in the form of the 'Under 25' project, which I shall discuss. My reason for raising it now is that it adds a perhaps surprising dimension to Tondelli's 'impegno', which is useful to retain as a background for considering his work. He stresses that 'questa attività fa parte del mio impegno di scrittore', and goes on to describe how it performs a vital social function:

> Per me, fare letteratura non significa solo scrivere, ma anche pubblicare. Significa lavorare sui testi di questi ragazzi, chiedere di riscriverli, correggerli e aiutarli nella pubblicazione. In un certo senso, è un lavoro collettivo che mi ripaga dell'estrema solitudine in cui sono costretto quando a scrivere sono io. La

> letteratura è attuale perché è ancora il mezzo più economico e il processo produttivo più semplice che le persone abbiano per esprimersi.[14]

The resonances of Vittorini in this passage are striking: the idea of a collective enterprise, aiming to endow the culturally dispossessed, and the sense of guilt connected to 'private' writing, which the public role of writer goes some way to expiate. Tondelli's perception is more attuned to commercial interests and less 'romantic' than Vittorini's, but there is a sound professional ethic which takes the froth off the 1980s hype surrounding young authors and reveals a serious public role for the writer, much in the way Vittorini conceived of it.[15]

In order to see how Tondelli's 'impegno', amongst other factors, is 'different', I shall now progress to his own works.

The Texts

Altri libertini[16]

> Così è restato cattivo sangue anche se al Posto Ristoro ci si dimentica piano piano di tutto perché la vita è davvero vita cioè una porcheria dietro l'altra e allora è come sbattere giù merda ogni giorno che poi ti dimentichi che fa schifo, e ne diventi magari goloso. (p. 14)

The above sentence helps explain the impact this work has, both on the individual reader and on the wider reading public (it was banned for obscenity when first published). Its subject matter packs the first punch, tracing an infernal odyssey in the youth culture of the 1970s, involving drug abuse, violence, prostitution, rioting. The

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[14] *L'abbandono*, p. 47.

[15] See part I, chapter one of this thesis.

[16] Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Altri libertini* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980).

second blow is formal: the vocabulary and style express in the most immediate way the language of this subculture. This language reads like graffiti on the page, and like graffiti, it is aggressive and presumptuous.[17]

This is probably the most commented and controversial of Tondelli's works (apart from perhaps *Rimini*). Most critics praise it for its accurate portrayal of a generation.[18] Many see it as a youthful and self-indulgent outburst, a piece of linguistic bravura aiming to shock in a self-limiting and ultimately banal way. Stefano Tani dismisses it with characteristic cynicism: '*Altri libertini* è una raccolta di sei racconti che viene fatta passare per romanzo per motivi di vendibilità.'[19] It is correct that the six episodes are stylistically and thematically individual, but they have a composite unity in that they each concentrate on one group or individual amongst a 'class' of 'libertini'.

Although Tondelli is seen as a typical writer of the 1980s, and this first work, published in 1980, seems to fit that scheme neatly, Tani points out that *Altri libertini* describes the youth culture of the 1970s, and is thus a retrospective exercise which imposes a sort of closure on that decade. He takes De Carlo's *Treno di panna*,[20] published a year later, to represent the opening of the 'giovane narrativa' and a literary way forward into the new decade, because of its American setting and stylistic thrift.

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[17] For a detailed analysis of this work's 'lessico', see Diego Zancani, 'Pier Vittorio Tondelli e le strutture linguistiche di *Altri libertini*' in *I tempi del rinnovamento: Atti del convegno internazionale 'Rinnovamento del codice narrativo in Italia dal 1945 al 1992', Leuven-Louvain-La-Neuve-Namur-Bruxelles, 3-8 maggio 1993*, ed. by Serge Vanvolsem and others, 2 vols (Rome and Leuven: Bulzoni and Leuven University Press, 1995), I, 739-754. Particularly striking is Tondelli's use of repetition, exoticisms and dialect, and of neologisms created by fusing words, e.g. 'vecchiaroba', 'enzobiagi'.
[18] Natalia Aspesi, Massimo D'Alema, Mario Spinella are quoted in this context in Panzeri & Picone.
[19] Stefano Tani, *Il romanzo di ritorno* (Milan: Mursia, 1990), p. 200.
[20] Andrea De Carlo, *Treno di panna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981). See previous chapter.

This simplistic assessment of the two works fails to take account of the complexity of Tondelli's text. His foregrounding of the chaos of the closing decade is partly an attempt to make the reader respond to this past. It is a text which bites the bullet of the 'anni di piombo', refusing to start 'afresh' in the new decade.

It is interesting to consider the obscenity charges in the light of such commitment to the past. Of course, the language of the stories and the nature of particular scenes are the public cause of objection, but there is also a case for claiming that, two years after the Moro affair, with the Christian Democrat hegemony of the late 1970s starting to make space for socialism, and the economy recovering from the oil-related seizures of the 1970s, the 'public' did not want the dirty linen of the last decade wafted past its face again.[21] Baudrillard talks of the 'scene' as being the acceptable arena of public life, where politics, the law, and the 'establishment' act out their rituals: the 'ob-scene' is the shadowy wings, where the mastery of play and the management of illusion is lost, and empty surface remains.[22] He relates this specifically to Italy in the 1970s, describing terrorism as the 'ob-scene' where the great political symbol of Aldo Moro was rendered meaningless - an empty corpse. This theory fails to take account of the possible meanings which the emptiness of the corpse itself carried - the sense of waste, loss, failure which makes the 'affare Moro'

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[21] The bombing of Bologna station in August 1980 was a brutal reminder that the decade of terrorism had yet to end. The narrator comments in *Pao pao*: 'il fatto di Bologna con quelle cento e più storie distrutte ci atterrí, erano anni insomma che non succedevano cose del genere' (p. 113).

[22] Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. by Philip Beitchman & W.G.J. Niesluchowski, ed. by Kim Fleming (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990).

still a recurrent subject of political debate and a powerful symbol of an era - but it has some bearing, I think, on the reception of Tondelli's first work.[23]

Tondelli's 'obscenity' was perhaps precisely to show off on centre-stage the empty margins of 1970s society, beyond the familiar performance of public life. The world of *Altri libertini* is one where illusion is annulled and there is a banality (remarked upon by several critics)[24] which is paradoxically meaningful because, like the seemingly empty corpse of Moro, it tells us something about the inadequacies of public life. The 'novel' is not a comfortable read because the activities portrayed and the language used to render them deny all illusion, nuance and enigma; but to pass off one's discomfort as a reader as the banality of the writing is to pass the buck. Tondelli is, I think, trying to point out the reader's responsibility to recognize the society which the 1970s helped to create and which cannot be neutralized by setting the year counter to zero.[25]

There are other sides to Tondelli's depiction of the 'ob-scene' or anti-social. The first section, 'Postoristoro', from which I quoted above, is probably the darkest, describing in detail the activities of drug addicts, pushers and prostitutes around a provincial railway station. Other episodes achieve a Calvino-esque 'leggerezza' by means of irony and attention to superficial detail. 'Mimi e istrioni', recounted by a

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[23] Zancani (1993, p. 220) rightly points out that 'of the main preoccupations in Italy at that time only one seems to be treated in a prominent way and in the first person: drug abuse; the other, political terrorism, is not mentioned'.

[24] For example, Maria Pia Ammirati, *Il vizio di scrivere: Letture su Busi, De Carlo, Del Giudice, Pazzi, Tabucchi e Tondelli* (Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 1991).

[25] See the conclusion of my previous chapter for a comparison of Tondelli's and De Carlo's exploitation of banality.

suitably collective 'noi narrante', describes the political, creative and recreational activities of a group of friends: three girls and a transvestite.[26] Their activities are all typical of the trends of the 1970s: they work for a free radio station, have 'autocoscienza' sessions, are involved in performance groups and political discussion groups, and use the terminology of psychoanalysis and of revolutionary politics ('la Virginawulf' and 'Happenings').

Critics perhaps overstate the carnivalesque quality of Tondelli's writing, but with reference to his early works, the analogy is valid.[27] What the writer expresses is a comprehensive 'rovescio': attempted reversal of a political order, of a socio-cultural order, of a literary-linguistic order, night rather than day, hallucination rather than consciousness, promiscuity rather than monogamy. The positive element which he retrieves from the negative excesses of the 'ob-scene' is the subversive exuberance of the protest culture of the 1970s. *Altri libertini* is, despite appearances, a work which concerns itself deeply with a practical sort of morality - questioning rather than dictating it. It presents the (im)moral standards of a fading decade and thus calls into crisis the reference points of the rising one.

Rimini[28]

Published in the middle of the decade, it is a chronological coincidence typical of Tondelli that this seems very much a mid-way work, between the experiments in

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[26] The title foregrounds the theatricality of the group's pursuits, which is perhaps what makes this story less 'ob-scene', in Baudrillard's terminology.
[27] Tani reads this carnivalesque quality in the context of a Padania tradition reaching back, via Celati, as far as Ariosto. Celati's influence on Tondelli is indisputable (he is mentioned in both the novels and the 'cronache'), but the Ariosto connection seems tenuous.
[28] Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Rimini* (Milan: Bompiani, 1985).

subversion which are his early works and the organic text of his later career. It is also 'middle-of-the-road', with a wide appeal and a certain lack of individuality which probably helped to make it a commercial success. This neatness makes me uncomfortable, and critical response to the novel suggests that other professional readers find the novel impenetrable: Ammirati feels that the complex structure overreaches itself; La Porta finds it 'irrimediabilmente *fredda*' (italics in text).[29] Zancani's comments (1993) are most revealing: he starts by describing it as 'a rather complex novel' (p. 232), then half-way through his analysis, it is 'a kitsch novel quite suitable for seaside reading' (p. 233), and his conclusion is that it is 'a rather artificial work which tends to become too baroque' (p. 234). He keeps returning to the same feature - the layered quality of the work - but on each return cannot articulate what is interesting about this feature, and thus ultimately dismisses it as meaningless. This is the 'problem' with *Rimini*: it troubles the reader with a nagging sense that there is something more going on beneath the polished surface.[30] I shall try to identify means of penetrating this surface.

Rimini is in fact a collection of short stories wound together to make a novel. Its narrative technique is cinematic (Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* and *Prêt à porter* come to mind), in the sense that the various stories are played out in short, juxtaposed 'scenes', in one location, the Adriatic riviera, and they appear to intersect accidentally. The central story is that of the Milanese journalist Marco Bauer, who is sent for two

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[29] Filippo La Porta, *La nuova narrativa italiana: travestimenti e stili di fine secolo* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995), p. 45.

[30] The cover of the paperback edition (1987) reinforces this impression: a stylized figure of a woman on a beach stares laughingly at the viewer, wearing mirrored sunglasses. The viewer-reader is dazzled by surface.

months to Rimini to edit the summer supplement of his newspaper.[31] His work leads him into other stories, such as the 'suicide' of a senator, Attilio Lughi (and the 'giallo' behind it), and the death of a young, gay writer, Bruno May. Further stories progress independently, but cross the central one by chance: Beatrix Rheinsberg's search for her missing sister, Claudia, and a relationship between a nightclub saxophonist and a mother on holiday with her children.

The importance of the location where these stories are played out cannot be overstated. Rimini is not just a geographical locus but a topos which signifies on every level of the novel. In structural terms, it is the unifying factor of the work, the site where the various stories combine into a novel. In psychological terms, the topos is a utopia, signifying the ideal fruition of all the desires which thousands of individuals bring to it. It also becomes a dystopia, where, in the spirit of carnival which the holiday resort encourages, these desires reveal their darker underside, and eros transmutes into thanatos. In socio-cultural terms, Rimini is the melting pot where different nationalities and social groups meet on the same level, their differences temporarily suspended in the egalitarian state of vacation. The riviera in summer is a *tabula rasa* where vacation literally means a state of emptiness, in which vacating the home and workplace and the normal trappings of identity leaves a clear space for the free play of desire.

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[31] *Rimini* opens with Bauer in the humid newsroom in Milan, feeling oppressed by the heat and his seemingly stagnant career and personal life. On both thematic and stylistic levels, there is a striking resemblance between this and the opening of De Carlo's *Tecniche di seduzione* (Milan: Bompiani, 1991). The opening of *Camere separate* describes the author looking down on a city from a descending plane, a technique used by De Carlo in *Treno di panna* and later, *Uto* (Milan: Bompiani, 1995). These are both stock images of a specific type of consciously disaffected, modern narrative, which Tondelli uses ironically.

The place of vacation is in fact filled with hordes of people from different countries, classes and generations, all cramming their desires into this 'vacant' space. This is the Rimini-*Rimini* nexus: in the resort and in the novel, vacancy provides the gloss for richness, or banality masks meaning. The place is the key to the novel. This is demonstrated by the fact that the passages which seem to stick out of the smooth surface of the narrative, the flashes of intensity in what is otherwise, as La Porta says, an uncharacteristically cold novel, are those in which Tondelli concentrates on conveying the essence of Rimini. The following account of Bauer's first impressions of the town is an example:

> Ragazze seminude che sembravano uscite da *Cleopatra* o *La Regina delle Amazzoni*. Altre invece addobbate secondo un look savanico e selvaggio: treccine fra i capelli lunghi e vaporosi, collanine su tutto il corpo, fusciacche stampate a pelle di leopardo o tigre o zebra messi [*sic*] lì per scoprire apposta un seno o una coscia. Vecchie signore ingioiellate che slumavano avide dai tavolini tutto quel panorama di baldanza e prestanza fisica e mostravano con orgoglio le rughe sul volto e la pelle grinzosa sulle braccia, simboli di tante altre e ben migliori stagioni, simboli del trionfo del navigato e del vissuto sull'inesperto e sull'ingenuo. (p. 40)

Such windows of avid cultural anthropology in the continuum of rather dispassionate chronological narrative illuminate the whole text in a rather strange way. At first they seem to 'show it up' by revealing Tondelli at his expressive best. Second thoughts suggest, however, that they illuminate the text in a more critical sense. The analysis of the cultural phenomenon of Rimini and all it represents about affluent middle-class society throws into relief the rather vapid story of Bauer etc., revealing it to be the ideal middle-brow, disposable, beach novel for precisely the

holidaying class Tondelli is describing. *Rimini* thus becomes a self-criticizing novel: the text performs a neatly-tied and controlled set of conventional stories, but the sub-text, as exemplified above, disrupts this neatness and questions the reader's motives (again, the mirrored sunglasses on the cover might be significant). In perhaps another instance of the 'code-breaking' tactics Robinson describes, Tondelli appears to supply a consumable novel but in fact questions the reader's appetites.

A simpler facet of 'commitment' in this novel is that Rimini serves as an index of 1980s Italian culture. Tondelli's emphasis has changed from being the mouthpiece of disaffected youth (in *Altri libertini*), but in this novel there is again a plurality of voices which express the experience of being a certain age and in a certain place in a certain decade. Through the various intersecting stories the author describes the ideals and idiosyncracies of a country trying to bury the difficulties and threats of the 1970s under a heap of consumerist benefits, reaped from the success of 'made in Italy' in the 1980s. The story of Senator Attilio Lughi's career is a micro-history of Italian post-war politics, which throws the ebullient individualism of the mid-1980s into ironic relief, and, post-'Tangentopoli', seems prescient. Lughi's story encompasses all the characteristic issues which the 'Mani pulite' investigations in the early 1990s brought to light: political favours in return for building contracts, sprawling unofficial networks of public power and influence, the corruption of even right-minded individuals, the easy silencing of isolated dissent, and suspicious suicides.

Despite the subtlety of this novel's interrogation of cultural and literary stereotypes, as described above, it is undeniably flawed. Clichés abound, and although

they might be intended to consolidate the banality theme, most are clumsy rather than complex. The worst cluster around the women characters: Beatrix's trite self-discovery (the quest for her younger sister becomes a quest for herself), and Bauer's colleague, the almost comically super-seductive Susy. It is because Tondelli never seems to handle women characters well (he rarely attempts to) that I think these examples are the products of bad writing rather than of deliberate kitsch exaggeration. It is also because the second way in which the novel is flawed is that there are more 'typically' Tondellian characterizations which sully the surface gloss, in a way which seems to drain energy from the narrative. The best example of this is the story of the isolated writer, Bruno May. A chapter in the second part of the novel is dedicated to the story of the breakdown of his love affair, and is the most emotionally intense chapter of the entire work, almost constituting a 'racconto' in itself. It seems to lead away into a different narrative genre - the genre of *Camere separate* - where there are no protective layers of ideas, just painful, direct truth. It therefore mitigates the clever vulgarity which this novel seeks.

Camere separate[32]

Tondelli's last novel is undoubtedly his most powerful and most structurally coherent. Whereas previous works are choral, this is symphonic, concentrating on a single, central theme of the relationship between the narrator, Leo, and his dead lover, Thomas, but re-interpreting this theme constantly according to different perspectives. The novel is in fact divided into three 'movimenti', in which there are separate

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[32] Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Camere separate* (Milan: Bompiani, 1989).

segments rather than sharply delineated chapters, and this structure sustains the pace and unity of the work.

Time is made relative to the central theme. The novel spans a period of approximately ten years, and the narration proceeds not chronologically, but by flashbacks to the immediate and the distant past. This discontinuous technique allows time zones to merge seamlessly into one another. A good example comes from the first movement, 'Verso il silenzio', when an account of Thomas and Leo's first night spent together is followed by a description of Thomas waking in the morning. Only when, seven lines into this description, there comes a reference to 'il braccio in cui ha infilato l'ago ipodermico', and then to a 'flacone di glucosio' (p. 34), does the reader realize that there has been a leap of about three years in time, and Thomas is dying in hospital.[33] There is irony in this juxtaposition of the joy of the start of their relationship with the pain of its end. The shift from the almost triumphant irony employed by Tondelli's early narrators to the bitter variety here measures a general shift in tone.

As indicated above, the controlling principle of the novel is the death of Thomas. This event imposes upon the narrator a solitude which the novel works to explore. In the course of this exploration, it becomes clear to him that the solitude was not so much imposed by this external event as confirmed by it. This is the essential paradox of the 'camere separate': the complete and consuming devotion to another has

[33] This is a further example of what Robinson describes as 'code-switching', and of the alternative, self-determining system of relations which operates in this novel.

the effect of distancing and isolating the individual, so that the single feels acutely so within the couple. About half-way through the novel, in the second 'movement', the narrator articulates his awareness of this problem:

> Sapeva, fin dall'inizio, che mai lui [Thomas] avrebbe potuto essere 'tutto'. Per questo chiamava il loro amore 'camere separate'. Lui viveva il contatto con Thomas come sapendo, intimamente, che prima o poi si sarebbero lasciati. La separazione era una forza costitutiva della loro relazione. (p. 101)

The idea of separation refers to being in separate rooms of the same building, being separate individuals in an intimate couple: in other words, it is not a total, divisive separation, but a subtle expression of difference within a wider sameness (similar to the isolation/participation tension I described at the beginning). This ambiguity is at the core of Tondelli's argument about homosexuality: that is, it is a love which in almost every way mirrors heterosexual love, but because of the single modification of it involving two people of the same gender, it is regarded as something different - a misfit. Leo points out that the image of a relationship which he and Thomas present is seen by society as a flawed reproduction of a 'normal' sexual relationship, rather than a demonstration of an alternative. Precisely because it is almost the same, its difference is accentuated and made contentious.

There are several occasions in *Camere separate* where Leo discusses the lack of recognition and legitimacy for gay relationships. For example, Leo is not considered close enough to Thomas to be involved when he is dying ('family' only). Such examples of Tondelli specifically raising the issue of public attitudes to homosexuality in his texts are relatively rare, and they demonstrate how this

discussion is subsumed into a wider exploration of the notion of difference, so resisting analysis as an issue *per se*. The most interesting 'diversion' of the issue is in the third 'movement' of the novel, when it is linked with the question of writing.

Exploring his feelings in the wake of Thomas' death (in the second 'movement'), Leo comes to believe he has an inevitable urge towards cruelty, and in the final section of the novel, he understands this destructive capacity as a function of his role as a writer. Initially, he sees himself as some sort of parasite, sucking the life from those he loves. This impression is contextualized, though not contradicted, by the memories of two incidents. The first is a ferry trip from Greece to Italy, where Leo observes a group of young, confident, international travellers. He feels alienated and irritated by them at first, but his position of detachment, as in the quotation with which I opened this chapter, allows him to achieve a sense of participation through observation. This is dovetailed into the recollection of a conference of admirers of Kerouac in the United States, where a similar congregation of young, unpretentious people confirms his faith in literature and in the society which literature can create: 'stavano tutte insieme, celebrando un rito senza fasto e senza magnificenza, un rito semplicissimo e proprio per questo fondamentale: la sopravvivenza della letteratura' (p. 211).

This recognition of the fundamental social role of literature allows Leo to see why he experiences an intrinsic alienation from human society. 'They' are united by reading, but he is constantly elaborating a text-in-process, rather than dealing directly

with others, and this, rather than his homosexuality or anything else, is what makes him 'different':

> La sua diversità, quello che lo distingue dagli amici del paese in cui è nato, non è tanto il fatto di non avere un lavoro, né una casa, né un compagno, né figli, ma proprio il suo scrivere, il dire continuamente in termini di scrittura quello che gli altri sono ben contenti di tacere. (p. 212)

Writing seems to involve a fundamental isolation from the self and from the other, whether this be an individual or society *en masse*. To be a writer is to be essentially and permanently in a separate room.

The sense of writing as an index of difference is linked in this novel with homosexuality, creating a synthesis of ideas which goes some way to propose or, more unassumingly, to expose a mode of 'gay' writing, which, as I explained in my introductory comments, resists theorization. I shall nevertheless attempt to describe how it functions as a system of references.

Writing shares with homosexuality the characteristic of being perceived to be something marginal, unrecognized, beyond the experience and comprehension of most: a non-profession, like a non-relationship. Both are mysterious and private, and therefore somewhat threatening or at least disturbing to the *status quo*. They are ab-normal pursuits simply because norms barely exist in which they can find legitimacy. Whilst both can be punished by the law in extreme circumstances, they are generally executed in a grey area somewhere between restriction and licence, which equivocality can burden both activities with an inherent sense of guilt. This situation of tolerated illegitimacy is true also for many of the other activities of young people

which Tondelli explores - drug-taking, political radicalism, illicit parties, fast driving, etc.. In this way, the discussion of writers and homosexuals in their 'separate rooms' broadens into an analysis of desire, which is the impetus behind all these activities which threaten to undermine the 'norm'.[34] However, the intense concentration on the twin 'demons' of writing and homosexual love in Tondelli's last novel indicates that these are for him the fundamental instances of difference, of which other expressions are refractions.

This novel demonstrates a type of 'commitment' entirely different from earlier works. It is closer to the literal meaning of 'impegno', in the sense that the author seems to entrust himself to the reader, exposing himself intimately in a way which begs recognition. As I mentioned in my introductory comments, there is a Vittorini-esque guilt here that writing is anti-social and disruptive, and the author is willing to share his misgivings: professional ethics are put under discussion. On a different level, and on the response side, there is a more robust type of commitment. The novel foregrounds a homosexual relationship in a way equal to the representation a heterosexual relationship might have in a 'conventional' confessional novel. The fact that the process of coming to terms with this relationship determines the narrative structure - in other words, that a homosexual relationship writes the novel - is a strong statement about the generative properties of a desire conventionally seen as unnatural.

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[34] Desire underpins the much-commented 'religious' theme of this novel. The possibility of Christian faith is discussed in depth, but rather than seeking a religious 'justification' for his own experience, as some critics have suggested, I think the author is trying to re-claim the spirituality of physical love from its repression by the Church. Spirituality, rather than religion, is the issue, to which I shall return later in this chapter.

Un weekend postmoderno[35]

> Queste pagine del *Weekend postmoderno* costituiscono un po' il sottotesto dei miei romanzi. Rappresentano realmente il laboratorio.[36]

Tondelli's comment goes some way to explaining why it is important to consider this work alongside his strictly 'narrative fiction'. The subtitle of *Un weekend postmoderno* is *Cronache dagli anni ottanta*, suggesting a collection of documentary rather than literary texts. The subject matter is the same as that of Tondelli's novels, as a sample of the category headings illustrates: 'Scenari italiani', 'Rimini come Hollywood', 'Affari militari', 'Giro in provincia'. It might therefore be considered a concordance to the author's narrative. However, the thematic structuring points to the meticulous architecture of the work: it has a narrative cohesion, which the author describes as 'un andamento romanzesco'.[37] As an organic textual unit its function and identity is greater than its discrete parts might suggest, and in this sense it might be considered Tondelli's most innovative work.

The scope of *Un weekend postmoderno* is its key feature. *Altri libertini* attempts to take stock of a decade, but retrospectively, in the terms of the next. *Pao pao* and *Rimini* each take a synchronic dip into a specific chronological and social context, and *Camere separate* represents a personal coming to terms. *Un weekend postmoderno* is much more comprehensive in that it genuinely charts a period, including articles written in every year of the decade. It is not a retrospective critique or justification, but the progressive and articulated summation, reported *ad hoc* and from the inside, of the trends and aspirations of a society. It is truly eclectic, covering

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[35] Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Un weekend postmoderno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990).
[36] Tondelli, in Panzeri & Picone, p. 61.
[37] *ibid.*, p. 62.

fashion, music, literature, politics etc. It is the ultimate reference document for Tondelli's fiction and for the decade, and in this sense is more a macro-text than a sub-text.

There is a sense that this work is trying to be 'all things to all men', and this, I think, is its impact. 'Postmodern' in its celebration of 'low' culture, it is a democratic text, which appears to exclude nothing and to legitimate the attitudes and lifestyles of what might guardedly be called the 'common' people. In a piece entitled 'Storie di gente comune', Tondelli ironically proposes a version of neo-realism for the 1980s and 1990s:

> Gente che costituirebbe a prima vista una massa anonima ma che, se indagata con solo un poco di attenzione, riserverà molte sorprese e curiosi aneddoti: insomma, gente di cui vogliamo raccontare per rendere il doveroso tributo allo zavattiniano incanto del quotidiano che da sempre ci avvince, come se ci trovassimo, insomma, in un travolgente remake neorealistico, in una metafisica dell'effimero e del banale. (p. 47)

Tondelli uses, or abuses, a certain rhetoric here, but he is making a generally sincere point that the people who interest him, and who inspire him to write ('di cui vogliamo raccontare') are the 'gente comune'.

The 'postmodern' irony lies in the difference that the 'gente comune' are no longer the poverty-stricken, urban working classes of traditional neo-realism, but, in the 1980s, the affluence-stricken children of the provincial middle-classes.[38] This is a class-unconscious realism for a post-political generation. The concept of the collective is a consumerist one concerning leisure-time pursuits and materialist aspirations,

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[38] The question of class, as related to the broad topic of postmodernism, will be discussed in my conclusion.

rather than a communist one concerned with labour-related issues and impetus for reform. It is a pop-cultural rather than political collective.

The idea of rampant consumerism gives a political sense to the carnivalesque so prominent in Tondelli's work. The grotesque excess which is traditionally characteristic of carnival is contiguous to the excess which had already become inextricably associated with 1980s western European culture before the decade was over. Beneath the frivolity of the 'postmodern weekend', Tondelli is accounting for the culture and society of the decade, and the material weight and complexity of the text itself encapsulates this. La Porta comments on this almost dizzying optimism:

> Quello che colpisce subito è l'assoluta mancanza di selettività (il volume, tra l'altro, è un poderoso mattone di più di 600 pagine, benché di agile consultazione): dice di sì a tutto, non sai se per generosità o per debolezza o per scelta stilistica o per curiosità onnivora (o per tutte queste cose). (p. 49)

Un weekend postmoderno is perhaps the bible of postmodernity.

L'abbandono[39]

This collection is to some degree the 'sister' piece to *Un weekend postmoderno*, gathering together the *Racconti dagli anni ottanta.*[40] It stands in the same sort of relationship to the earlier collection as *Camere separate* does to *Rimini*, in that it is a contemplative, melancholic and very personal account of the chaotic, collective experience described in the earlier work. *Camere separate* and *L'abbandono* are written from the point of view of a writer.[41] *L'abbandono*, as, to a lesser extent, *Un weekend postmoderno*, allows the reader to enter the 'laboratorio' of

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[39] Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *L'abbandono* (Milan: Bompiani, 1993).
[40] The front page of the volume bears the title, *L'abbandono / Un weekend postmoderno 2.*
[41] In his postface to the collection, Panzeri describes it as 'un viaggio al centro della scrittura' (p. 291).

Tondelli's writing, in that passages included in each are evidently drafts or versions of passages from the novels. It contains some of Tondelli's best writing, for example, 'Un racconto sul vino', and some of his most personal and moving pieces, such as 'Pier a gennaio'.[42]

Like *Un weekend postmoderno*, *L'abbandono* is not a fragmentary collection, but a clearly conceptualized project with its own internal architecture. The relation this text has with *Un weekend postmoderno* lends it a structural significance in some inchoate Tondellian textual system, which is reinforced by the intra-textual symmetry of the collection itself. It is a literary response to the socio-cultural experience documented in the earlier collection, this time charting the decade in the terms of one man and his literary activity. As the title suggests, it contrasts the isolation of the writer with the festive participation denoted by a 'weekend postmoderno', and so sets up a problematic relation between 'scrittore' and 'popolo'.

The relation is problematic in the same sense as the 'difference' paradigm with which I began: the texts are structurally similar but *L'abbandono*, the writer's text, stands apart, participating via observation. The 'abandonment' frequently explored in the text is the abandonment of a lover by the beloved. This begs the question whether Tondelli felt abandoned as a writer by the society he also seems to love: to which the answer, I think, might be that he does feel abandoned but is not disaffected. He seems to want to continue to serve the body that beats him back, but whether this is due to

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[42] In this latter, the splitting of the writer's personality into the narrator and Pier is an echo of *Camere separate*.

magnanimity or masochism is a 'loose end' to which I shall return in my conclusions. It is a question left open by these last two self-edited texts:[43] the magnanimous side is the all-embracing *Un weekend postmoderno*, whilst the masochistic side is the pained *L'abbandono*.

'Under 25'

The three volumes which make up the 'Under 25' project have to be included in this discussion of Tondelli because they represent an important aspect of his sense of 'impegno', both 'letterario' and 'civile'.[44] As comments in *Un weekend postmoderno* and *L'abbandono* demonstrate, Tondelli invested a great deal of energy in this initiative to encourage young people to write. In an environment where the term 'giovani narratori' expresses a strategy in the marketing of literature more than a genuine creative phenomenon, Tondelli's commitment to making really young people, without established literary aspirations, consider reading and writing, stands out in ironic relief. Whether the project was 'successful' is not my concern here, and the criteria for such success could be various.[45] What is important is what it tells us about the rest of Tondelli's literary activity.

Tondelli sees the project as a practical democratization of literature. Although he admits that the methods of advertizing the project were perhaps limited, his aim

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[43] Panzeri edited the published version of *L'abbandono*, but he stresses that the collection had been designed by the author. See 'Per una poetica del frammento', pp. 291-7, in his postface.
[44] The works are all edited by Tondelli and published by Transeuropa, Ancona. They are: *Giovani Blues (Under 25 I)*, 1986; *Belli e perversi (Under 25 II)*, 1987; *Papergang (Under 25 III)*, 1990. Silvia Ballestra co-edited a fourth collection, *Coda* (1996): see next chapter.
[45] In the 'Under 25' section of *Un weekend postmoderno*, Tondelli responds thoughtfully to the varied criticism regarding the project. He recognizes the shortcomings of its hasty presentation, but defends rigorously the motivating concept.

was to give a platform to the sort of 'ordinary', literally provincial, young people whose pursuits he describes in *Rimini* and *Un weekend postmoderno*. He stresses the collective dimension of the project, declaring that 'la sua forza risiede non tanto nella forza di un singolo testo, quanto nel fatto che il testo in questione è una singola intensità di una lunghezza d'onda collettiva'.[46]

Tondelli also insists on the importance of the 'lavoro letterario'. This is the language of all his writing on the project: he sees it as a 'hands-on', demanding, workshop of writing, rather than an indulgence in adolescent navel-gazing. Indeed, he criticizes, with uncompromising sarcasm, the stories of this latter type which were submitted. He stresses that literature has a use value, and is not just a marginal diversion for young people. Reading and writing are modes of experience, and the continued re-working and re-writing of the 'Under 25' texts - the labour of literature - is a way of getting to grips with life.

There are two important effects of Tondelli's commitment to youth literature (not only in the 'Under 25' project but also in his own works). The first concerns his legacy. The stories selected to make up the three volumes mostly tap into a vein of youth literature which derives distantly from Kerouac and passes through Tondelli's early works in particular: they are concerned with sex, violence, music, drugs, and express an alienation from the adult world, and a sense of a vacuous existence. The 'first division' (to maintain the football metaphor) 'giovani narratori' of the 1980s, such as De Carlo, rejected the expressionistic immediacy of this sort of portrayal of

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[46] 'Scarti pubblicati' in *Un weekend postmoderno*, p. 338.

youth for a more detached and minimalist approach. In the later 1990s, however, there has been a well-publicized return to this vein in the form of the so-called 'pulp' or 'cannibale' fiction of writers such as Niccolò Ammaniti and Enrico Brizzi (and, in a different way, Silvia Ballestra).[47] It would be an exaggeration to claim that Tondelli was instrumental in bringing in this 'new wave', but the 'Under 25' project is at least illustrative of it.

The second effect concerns legitimacy. Tondelli's project not only rejected the 'giovani narratori' hype, but actually worked to recuperate youth literature. As an established writer turning his energy to promoting young writers, rather than a publishing executive, Tondelli lent some lost legitimacy to youth literature within the cultural spectrum. Gabriele Romagnoli (*Panta* 9) describes how it made young writers publishable, and this would not have happened 'senza un progetto che legitimasse la loro voce, non in quanto singola, ma in quanto collettiva' (p. 201).

Other projects

Tondelli's commitment to cultural vitality is demonstrated in other projects, mostly unrealized, in which he was instrumental. One, 'Mouse to Mouse', was connected with the 'Under 25' initiative.[48] This was the title of a series of works by young writers, to be selected by Tondelli and published by Mondadori from spring 1988. Its aim was to bring to attention areas of contemporary culture not normally associated with literature (e.g. the fashion world, showbusiness), and, like 'Under 25',

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[47] Ballestra's career was launched by Tondelli, being one of the rare women included in the 'Under 25' volumes. Her first publication was a story in *Papergang*.
[48] Panzeri describes the project in *Panta* 9 (pp. 205-6).

to demonstrate the relevance of literature for young people. Only two titles were published in the series, but Tondelli had specific plans for extending the eclectic collection.

The remaining projects were concerned with producing two texts. The first, *Biglietti agli amici*, was first published in 1986.[49] A typically quirky enterprise, this was, as the title suggests, a collection of prose writings addressed to friends of the author and intended for very narrow circulation. Copies including the names of the chosen friends were sent to them, whilst 'un centinaio di copie',[50] carrying the friends' initials only, were released for sale. The concept seems vividly Tondellian, adapting an eighteenth-century notion of a private text for use in a consumerist society where economics dictate that production is rarely small-scale. The appeal of the concept to the author seems to be its community element, and the artisanal character of the production process: 'l'autore tende a creare, con piccoli editori-amici, un laboratorio in cui il trasformarsi di un testo in libro sia un'avventura di solidarietà, impegno e divertimento'. He thus makes what seems an exclusive concept of the literary experience seem inclusive, and his own plans (referred by Panzeri) to produce a full-scale edition of the work bear witness to his keenness to maximize the circle of his 'friends'.

Sante Messe was intended to be another such 'miniature', small in size, scope and diffusion, in which the author intended to 'raccontare "in prosa poematica"' the

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[49] Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Biglietti agli amici* (Bologna: Baskerville, 1986). A new edition, edited by Fulvio Panzeri, was published by Bompiani in 1997.
[50] Quotations regarding this text are from Panzeri, *Panta* 9, p. 79.

Masses he had recently attended, culminating in an account of his own funeral service.[51] As I have already indicated, to interpret the author's interest in 'religion' as some sort of death-bed conversion is, I think, to misread. He is clearly interested in spirituality, and in this particular case, perhaps in the ritualistic and theatrical aspects of religious practice, but his faith is too eclectic to be accommodated by institutionalized Christianity.

The interest in speculating what this text might have been is limited: these 'micro-texts' are important firstly because they testify to the unique energy Tondelli dedicated to literature, manifested in this desire to explore many possible types of text, produced in response to many different, not always 'literary' experiences, and to be read in many contexts. Secondly, I think they were envisaged as fitting into some textual super-structure which, as I suggested above, appears to be taking shape in the later part of Tondelli's life. These are precisely the loose ends which I think should not be cut off from consideration of Tondelli, but they are no more than 'loose' indications of future directions.

Conclusions

To be as audacious as Tondelli, in terms of content and form, demands no fear of failure, and he certainly falls flat in some of his works. How can this almost child-like willingness to try everything (the magnanimity I described above) be 'committed'? Palandri has not the answer but the question when he describes the

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[51] Panzeri describes the project in *Panta* 9, p. 173.

difficulty of categorizing a writer who first published at the end of a highly ideologized decade:

> Dopo tante intrusioni della politica nella scrittura, dove mettere un autore proiettato con eguali simpatie verso i sottoproletari eroinomani e i giovani dandy di un'epoca post-politica, libertino eppure intensamente religioso? (*Panta* 9, p.19)

The answer is, I think, not to 'put' or place Tondelli anywhere, but to accept his seeming contradictions. His 'commitment' is to throw himself into a variety of 'causes', social and literary, but throwing oneself at something implies the risk of damage, to the object and, chiefly, to oneself. Hence the 'failures', and hence the sense of woundedness which pervades *Camere separate* and *L'abbandono*. Magnanimity and masochism are reconciled in this 'impegno' which could roughly be defined as caring enough to risk getting hurt. This seemingly unsophisticated attitude might be lent credibility by its affinity with Rorty's 'neo-pragmatist' exploration of how to fuse the desire for self-realization with the desire for just community.[52] He considers the two desires incommensurable, but demonstrates that they can both be accommodated by means of irony. Tondelli is perhaps like Rorty's 'liberal ironist', prepared to dedicate himself to beliefs he recognizes as contingent. The 'liberal' Tondelli declares:

> Ho profondamente bisogno di una continua 'ritestualizzazione' del mondo. Perché il mondo così com'è non va bene. Occorre un cambiamento. E bisogna crederlo possibile. Un libro, un buon libro, non cambia il mondo, però cambia il suo modo di parlare. E forse anche il modo di sentirlo. (*L'abbandono*, p. 11)

The 'ironist' casts doubt:

> Ma il vero problema, che in alcuni momenti della mia vita sento come drammatico, è che un libro non basta...Scrivere anche seriamente, anche duramente, non risolve. Mi sento allora molto inutile. (*Tondelli. Il mestiere di scrittore*, p. 59)

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[52] See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Rorty sees the 'liberal ironist' as the response to an age of self-doubt; Zancani comments of *Altri libertini*, 'the whole book is marked by anxiety'.[53] François Wahl identifies the same feeling, and offers a specific explanation:

> PVT [*sic*] possedeva una conoscenza - un'esperienza - senza pari della cultura 'marginale', cioè di costumi, musica e testi, che gli permise di fissarne per sempre la voce. Questa cultura, però, mai riconosciuta come propria da PVT, scomparve dai suoi ultimi libri. Curiosamente, l'autore non possedeva un'altra cultura, e questo lo costrinse a molteplici variazioni [...]. Tutto sommato, si manteneva sulla posizione definita dai sartriani 'del traditore', la posizione, cioè, dello scrittore che non appartiene al mondo degli scrittori, che dà conferenze pur raccogliendo, da quel mondo, solo la durezza. (*Panta* 9, p. 253)

Wahl is mistaken, I think, in suggesting that marginal culture abandoned the writer in his later works. It is perhaps not the marginal culture of *Altri libertini* which appears in works such as *L'abbandono*, because such a culture had largely been subsumed by the mainstream by the late 1980s, but, in so far as youth culture is still conceivable as 'marginal', it still figures largely in the late texts.[54] The crucial point which Wahl exposes about Tondelli's anxiety is his perceived isolation from a community of writers. This anxiety originates in the gap where the writer who is so intimately connected to the society he writes about notes that ultimately he cannot identify himself as part of it. He is not <u>one</u> of them, but 'one of <u>them</u>' - outside the group and subtly different, because he is a writer. It is doubled when he finds himself isolated from his own kind.

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[53] Zancani, 1993, p. 226.

[54] For example, the last section of *L'abbandono*, entitled, 'Quarantacinque giri per dieci anni', presents an index of pop records for each year of the decade.

To understand why the author should feel isolated involves examining the community to which he seems so clearly to belong. Through his work with 'Under 25' in particular, he has supported a new literary 'tradition' which looks outwards, but derives from Italian culture and feeds back into it. His presentation of contemporary Italy is almost folkloric, exaggerating the colour of provincial life, and the Italian authors he praises - Arbasino and Celati - share this interest. Tondelli is often described as writing under American influence,[55] and this is valid in so far as his general literary background is concerned (he refers to Kerouac as seminal), but his contemporary cultural reference points are all European, and it is certainly metropolitan northern Europe towards which his characters gravitate.[56] European and American cultures, especially youth cultures, are of course co-dependent in the postmodern world, producing a disembodied, dispatriated culture operating in a supra-national no-man's land, and encompassing literature, pop music, fashion, information culture, etc.. Tondelli embraces this, but I think he carries a distinct sense of belonging to a national and continental culture, which differentiates him sharply from De Carlo, for example. One source of the sense of isolation might be his not belonging wholeheartedly to 'postmodern' culture, because he feels rooted to a national literary past.[57]

The local 'tradition' which he has nurtured appears to respond him as one of its own. As I have said, analyses dedicated to him by 'professional' critics are scant and

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[55] e.g. Zancani, 1993, p. 220.
[56] The fact that the 'Under 25' texts and their spin-offs are published by a company called 'Transeuropa' endorses my point.
[57] It is interesting that the writers with whom he identifies (Kerouac, Arbasino, Celati, Isherwood, Bachmann) are mostly exiles, emigrants, travellers - 'misfits' of some sort. The strong Italian identity in much writing of the 1980s and 1990s is discussed in my conclusion.

piecemeal, but there are collections of impressions, tributes, appreciations, memories, interviews, by young 'amateurs' - in the style of scrap books or student reviews. These texts represent the continuation of a dialogue, or a workshop, on youth culture.[58] They are idiosyncratic and very personal: the voice of the 'fauna d'arte' Tondelli sought to represent. Larry [*sic*] comments 'non conoscevo PVT [*sic*]. Conoscevo però molte persone che avevano con lui rapporti professionali e di amicizia...seguivo il percorso delle sue idee e dei suoi gusti'.[59] In other words, he is familiar with the uniquely influential 'Tondelli-effect', but not with the writer himself. This puts Tondelli in the position identified by Wahl: participating in the cultural community but not being part of it. It is the position of my opening quotation.

Tondelli's isolation from the eclectic 'amateurs' is a generational gap, I think: by the late 1980s, he is in his thirties and they are teenagers or twenty-somethings. Knowing youth culture as he does, he knows ten years is a sizeable distance - and he knows he is dying - so he is pushed into the position of fading, respected spectator rather than participator. His isolation from the 'professionals' is a gap between high and 'low' (or popular) culture: critics seem to lack the cultural apparatus and the language to respond to him on an equal level. This leads me back to the 'scrittori e popolo' dialectic of the post-war period, and to return there is not an anachronism because, as I have shown, Tondelli is concerned with contemporary versions of the questions of that period. Tondelli's isolation can be interpreted according to this dialectic: he is a writer who has moved towards the 'popolo', by trying to make writing

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[58] Examples are Bruno Casini (ed.), *Tondelli e la musica: Colonne sonore per gli anni ottanta* (Florence: Tosca, 1994), and *Panta*, 9.
[59] Larry, 'P.W.E.I. (Pop Will Eat Itself)', in Casini, pp. 104-5 (p. 104).

a part of 'pop' culture; but he has been abandoned by an intellectual culture which no longer understands him. He is thus stranded: he inhabits the palace of culture with the two groupings in their own wings, but between them, he is confined to a separate room.

PART III: CHAPTER SIX

SILVIA BALLESTRA: IRONY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Born in 1969, Ballestra is the youngest of the native Italian writers I discuss, and youth is what she writes about. 'About', suggesting a circumlocution, is perhaps misleading: Ballestra writes from within youth, dealing with the subject rather than representing it. Using a particular type of irony, she manages, like Tondelli, to combine the intimate camaraderie of a participator with the critical perspective of an observer, openly denigrating the 'qualunquismo' and 'menefreghismo' widely attributed to her generation and its literature. Anthropology, the study of human customs and societies, informs Ballestra's writing. She treats as tribal totems the exterior statements of affiliation by which young people 'read' each other - hairstyles, items of clothing, reading material, means of transport - and thus elaborates an exhibition of the sub-divisions of youth culture which is at once comic (irony) and sociologically sensitive (anthropology).

These interests reveal her association with Celati, the 'archaeologist' of culture, to whom, like her mentor Tondelli, she refers admiringly.[1] Clear though their influence is (I shall refer to specific instances in the course of this analysis), it should not be overstated. Ballestra's difference lies firstly in the intensity of her complex involvement in the text: the author simultaneously flaunts and guards her identity as narrator, and the reader - often addressed directly - is expected to participate in this

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[1] Ballestra's first published work was a piece in the third of Tondelli's collections of young writing: Pier Vittorio Tondelli (ed.), *Papergang (Under 25 III)* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1990). She also pays tribute to him in 'Intrappolato in questo rock', in Fulvio Panzeri (ed.), *Panta. I nuovi narratori: Pier Vittorio Tondelli*, 9 (1992), 329-35.

game, continually modifying his engagement with narrator and characters. Secondly, this kaleidoscopic relationship is coloured by language which mixes slang and regionalisms in a combination which gives an impression of improvisation but is in fact scrupulously measured. That Ballestra should be identified by both distance and dedication seems contradictory, but I hope to show that, in ways different from Tondelli, she makes irony an instrument of engagement.

Ballestra also stands out with regard to marketing classifications. Her first works appear in the 1990s, when the 'giovani narratori' are an ageing breed. 'Pulp' or 'cannibale' writers have provided the hype of the 1990s, but the defining quality of their work, deriving from Quentin Tarantino's film, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), is violence - a subject Ballestra largely avoids. Familiarity with the televisual and cinematic image, and inhabiting a society of young people with a- or anti-social tendencies, are shared themes which 'pulp' writing distorts in particular ways, but Ballestra herself is clearly 'post-giovane' and 'pre-pulp'.[2] 'Punk' is a term she uses to refer to the radically oppositional attitude of her central characters, and, by extension, of her narrative style. It is a limited caricature, but I shall use it occasionally to denote this particular aspect of her work.

Her contemporaneity and label-challenging eclecticism perhaps explain the near total lack of critical material dealing specifically with Ballestra's work. Her name appears frequently in print, usually in lists of examples of new, young writing, but

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[2] 'Pulp' writers, such as Niccolò Ammaniti and Aldo Nove, published their first novels after 1995. Ballestra's works to date were all published between 1991 and 1994.

analyses of her works are scarce. Filippo La Porta dedicates to her just over a page of generally positive commentary.[3] He pairs her with Enrico Brizzi, judging these two to be 'forse più significativi' (p. 71) than other 'generational' writers of the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as the more famous Lara Cardella.[4] The tentative quality of this statement suggests that it is too early to assess Ballestra's significance as a writer; a reservation voiced more bluntly by Giuliano Manacorda in his (selectively) updated history of contemporary writing: 'Fare i nomi dei più giovani è un vero rischio; ne azzardiamo a puro titolo di cronaca alcuni - Sandro Veronesi, Massimo Onofri, Silvia Ballestra, Enrico Brizzi... sui quali, e sugli altri, il futuro potrà dire assai meglio di noi.'[5] Obviously, Ballestra may yet produce a number of works which modify interpretation of the embryonic 'corpus' existing now, but the three volumes available are original narratives of a specific social and literary period, and analysis of them is, I think, a 'risk' worth taking.

Ballestra's first work, *Compleanno dell'iguana*[6], comprises a 'novella' or long 'racconto', of barely one hundred pages, followed by five short stories. There are only tangential thematic and stylistic links between the stories, leaving the sense of a hastily-collated portfolio of publishable material, rather than a self-defining collection. The novella is entitled 'La via per Berlino', and is the kernel of the novel which she

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[3] Filippo La Porta, *La nuova narrativa italiana* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995), pp. 71-2.
[4] Brizzi's novels, more 'pulp' than Ballestra's, include *Jack Frusciante è uscito dalgruppo* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1995) and *Bastogne* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1996). Lara Cardella became famous for publishing *Volevo i pantaloni* (Milan: Mondadori, 1989) at the age of eighteen. La Porta likens her 'prosa ruvidamente diretta' (p. 70) to that of Ballestra.
[5] Giuliano Manacorda, *Storia della letteratura italiana contemporanea, 1940-1996*, 5th edn, 2 vols (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1996), p. 939.
[6] Silvia Ballestra, *Compleanno dell'iguana* (Milan: Mondadori & Transeuropa, Ancona, 1991). The involvement of Transeuropa in the publication of Ballestra's first two works is a reminder of Tondelli's influence on her career.

subsequently wrote, *La guerra degli Antò*.[7] The remaining stories similarly expose themes and styles which are explored in the later works, particularly the more cohesive collection, *Gli orsi*.[8] To neglect this first work totally would be a disservice to the author, but I think it is more useful to focus on the two later works.

La guerra degli Antò

Ballestra's second work continues the biography of a provincial teenager, Antò Lu Purk, begun in 'La via per Berlino'. The narrator's attention to Antò is diffused in this work, in the sense that she uses him as a narrative axis around which to wind a range of literary and cultural-political issues which lend complexity to the novel. Antò himself is lent more dimensions by the increased narrative presence of his three friends (also called Antò), particularly the 'intellectual', Antò Lu Zorru, who functions partly as Lu Purk's conscience. The other two, Lu Mmalatu and Lu Zombie, are his lack of conscience- the character Antò might be if he did not make an effort to engage with life.[9] In this way, the four represent alternative realizations of the 'Antò' phenomenon, or the different faces of provincial modern youth. The style is that of the novella - dynamic and ironic - but the novella's exploitation of melodrama is tuned into a parody of soap opera in particular, the moral and political implications of which are foregrounded.

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[7] Silvia Ballestra, *La guerra degli Antò* (Milan: Mondadori & Transeuropa, Ancona, 1992).
[8] Silvia Ballestra, *Gli orsi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 'I Canguri', 1994). I quote from the 1996 edition in Feltrinelli's 'Universale Economica' series.
[9] The nicknames highlight regional identity and personal characteristics mythologized within the 'Antò' tribe: Lu Purk is fascinated by the travelling fun-fairs which tour his region in the summer; Lu Zorru is a crusading journalist; Lu Mmalatu works in a hospital; Lu Zombie is permanently semi-conscious.

The 'story' is that Antò (Lu Purk) has moved to Amsterdam from Germany, where he had escaped at the end of the novella, following a dismal experience of student life and the amputation of a leg after an accident on a building site.[10] His friends and family have no idea of his whereabouts. In the opening paragraphs, the sequel is positioned in relation to the previous work: for example, the reader is reminded of the accident: 'da meno di cinque mesi hai subìto un'amputazione alla gamba destra' (p. 9). This collocation of the two works is deliberately clumsy, performing a parody of soap opera techniques of continuity. Another facet of the text-television correlation is the direct address from narrator to character, in the style of a television interview, for example: 'Con le donne hai avuto un rapporto sempre inautentico e superficiale, non è così?' (p. 9). The questions are rhetorical: in the manner of a television interview used to present an individual to an audience in a predetermined light, they are a performance of the social ritual of becoming acquainted.

I have used the term 'correlation' above to describe the textual references to television broadcasting in this novel, for want of a better term. Such a term is lacking probably because this is not an established technique, and this novel is, I think, the first in Italian which attempts such an extensive 'correlation'. In a way, Ballestra is presenting television as a metaphor of written narrative, but this term fails to describe adequately the way in which the two media subtly run in parallel in this novel, constantly and consciously providing a running commentary on one another. It is in

[10] Student life in both the first two works revolves around DAMS in Bologna - a genetic link to Celati-Palandri-Tondelli - as is the topos of escape to northern Europe.

roughly the second half of the novel that the correlation is closest, when a television programme in Italy dealing with 'real-life' cases of missing persons takes up the search for Antò Lu Purk. Ballestra's use of such an example is clearly intended to draw attention to the way in which television broadcasting claims to be a communicator of real events, treating facts on a neutral, non-interpretive basis, whilst clearly modifying them by 'programming' them. An indicator of the narrator's lack of faith in such 'hyper-factual' broadcasting is that the programme title changes on each of the twelve times it is mentioned in the text, examples being 'Può aiutarci a ritrovarlo?' (p. 157), 'Perché cavolo si è nascosto?' (p. 187), and 'Inseguite quel bastardo!' (p. 220).

Before the first episode of this programme is described, the narrator warns Antò that he is being pursued, and in doing so, brings the narrative up to pace with television, effectively putting the two media in competition. She tells him: 'i fatti, qui, si svolgono in tempo reale, e mentre io parlo di te la realtà televisiva fa e disfa i destini della gente a rotta di collo. Ah, per caso sai chi ha ucciso Laura Palmer?' (p. 142). She explicitly refers to television as having manufactured its own parallel class of reality, and the last question in this quotation is her ironic 'proof' that television is as real as 'life'.[11] A further twist is that the 'tempo reale' she refers to is also an autonomous, self-defining reality - that of her novel. The two media are notionally fused when the narrator creates a 'live' link whereby the text becomes the television

[11] The question refers to David Lynch's cult television drama, *Twin Peaks* (1989), in which the murder of a young girl, Laura Palmer, became the subject of intense public speculation. The series was itself a parody of the soap opera genre.

programme's vehicle: 'A 'sto punto te la dò in tempo reale come sempre. Aspetta un attimo che alzo il volume, così sentiamo tutti e due' (p. 143).

As the sustained 'simultaneous broadcast' of novel and television proceeds, Ballestra uses this layering effect to expose the layers of reality the different media create. When the studio presenter hands over to a report from Antò's home town, Montesilvano, the reader is made to see, through the 'screen' of the narrative, literally a screen within the screen of the television: 'il maxischermo interno dello studio ci ritrascina - tutti quanti ne siamo - nella fiction, ancorché di stampo neorealistico, per così dire' (p. 146).[12] The 'fiction' referred to is the representation created by television of Antò's friends and family, another edition of the 'fiction' created by this novel. At the intermediate level of the studio, there is a further layer: a mini-melodrama is played out with the *dramatis personae* of the presenter, Raffaella Raffai,[13] her incompetent co-presenter, Luigi Di Maio, who 'grows' as a character during the course of the programmes, and the 'chorus' of the camera crew of Rai's regional office in Chieti, whose drama consists of their ongoing efforts to impress head office with their innovative camera-work. This meta-fiction suggests that the reproductive potential of television might be infinite.

The investigation of the referential possibilities of television has clear political and cultural implications, since television is probably the most popular source of information about world affairs in modern society. This particular edge is explored in

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[12] The reference to neorealism is an ironic reminder of the literary-historical arguments concerning faithful representation of 'reality'.

[13] This name is clearly a play on that of Raffaella Carrà, a popular Italian television presenter.

the novel using the example of the Gulf War: the war which involved the economic and military weight of the western world, whose civilians experienced it mainly by 'remote control' - through television reportage. Ballestra capitalizes on this satirical potential by demonstrating throughout this novel that the Gulf War was a televisual, rather than political, event for young people. The first indications of this are the adoption of the idiom of the war. For example, when Antò Lu Zorru is fleeing Italy, having received a (hoax) call-up for military service (in the Gulf), his thoughts in English reveal that his conception of the war derives from hearing it reported: 'un'unica immagine radioattiva si incunea nella mente in tumulto del fuggiasco: "War in the Gulf!"' (p. 21).

Subsequent references to the war in the novel are almost exclusively transcriptions of its reporting, by CNN and Italian channels. The most interesting comment is a long passage in chapter seven, which suggests the impact of television journalism by constructing an elaborate and glamorizing build-up to the 7pm news on Tg3. It begins with a tangential reference to the 'mother of all wars' metaphor:

> Sullo schermo compare il padre di tutti i giornalisti di Rai Tre, Italo Moretti; una telecamera di regia inquadra per un secondo la redattrice Rosanna Cancellieri che la testa rilucente del direttore Fabio Curzi ha voluto, stasera, al computer delle notizie d'agenzia. Perché i giornalisti di Rai Tre *ruotano*, non sono come fossili del Tg1 e Tg2. (p. 74; italics in text)

This avid transcription of the progression of screen images denotes a relationship of intimacy and trust with the people and techniques of the media: even physical description is tele-mediated (Curzi's baldness conveyed by the reflection of studio lights on his head). There follows a long and detailed description of the properties of the desk used in the Tg3 newsroom, culminating in, '([...] *Dio* che redazione, se solo

si potesse raccontarla tutta, se solo non si andasse fuori tema!)' (p. 74; italics in text). This last comment is ironic: she is not deviating from the subject at all, because such involvement with the operations of the medium is clearly a prerequisite of the faith in its message. The narration of what is on screen continues, so that the television narrative of events in the Gulf and Ballestra's narrative become one 'tema'.

The investigation into popular involvement in the Gulf War is part of a discussion of commitment which pervades the novel. The roving plot assesses the possible degrees and modes of engagement, by means which include the interplay of personalities within the quadri-partite Antò character, but the super-textual key is the ongoing 'dialogue' between the narrator and Antò Lu Purk. This represents a prolonged attempt to make him relinquish his self-pitying introspection and start to engage with life (a sharpening of the same inchoate theme in 'La via per Berlino').

The crux is in chapter four, when she asks Antò why he spends his life doing nothing:

> Sì, intuisco, nel contempo c'hai la mente prigioniera di un rovello febbrile: 'Conferire o non conferire alla mia vita un senso?', ma mica lo so se basta. Anzi, a volerti essere sincera, credo proprio che non basta. Perché se desiderassi riscattarti *sul serio*, dovresti impegnarti ma un casino di più, guarda. (p. 30; italics in text)

Her paraphrase of the 'to be or not to be' dialectic is an ironic allusion to the literary precedent for making a tragedy (melodrama) of adolescent angst. In stating that intellectualizing the question is not enough, and demanding a more 'serious' and active 'impegno', she is again well aware of the literary origins of the argument and is therefore not only insisting that it is necessary to participate in life (not just as a viewer of the 'life' presented by television), but also knowingly commenting that it is possible for literature to encourage or enact such a commitment.

The narrator also puts the reader 'on the spot' in this novel. After analysing the genus of 'i truzz' (the Bologna students), she sets out to establish the function of her novel. She first mocks the reader - in the plural here, perhaps suggesting a wider audience: 'Desideravate forse fare un giro, eh, nel pianeta giovani? Magari sì, magari sì, immagino' (p. 90). She then associates this negatively with a recent television series which attempted to do the same: the implication is that adults are prurient voyeurs of youth life and its issues, seeking self-gratification rather than genuine insight. She claims that young people should be understood in terms of their environment and development, rather than having imposed upon them criteria conventionally deemed significant: 'Dipendesse dalla sottoscritta, l'ultima puntata del vostro viaggio nel pianeta giovani non dovrebbe affatto dedicarsi alla Politica, al Rifiuto del Lavoro, all'Ideologia, all'Utopia, ma, essenzialmente, all'Antropologia' (p. 91). Her objective is to realize a description of youth in its own terms - something which she achieves literally by linguistic manipulation. Politically, this is a continuation of the initiative first proposed by the student movement of 1968, and therefore it is no coincidence that she leads the narrative into a detailed discussion of the student protest of the early 1990s, the 'Pantera' movement. She views some of its pretensions with characteristic irony, including her own: 'Come dite? Oh, yes, anche la sottoscritta c'era, sia pure appartenente al genere di persone che tengono a fare le distaccate' (p. 92). However, she willingly identifies herself within a pressure group, and endorses the importance of writing as an instrument of protest.

This passage is one of the personal digressions which become increasingly frequent as the novel proceeds, and provide a complex, sometimes vertiginously referential, counterweight to the superficial drama of Antò's family and friends. Incidents from the 'story' are systematically correlated with her own experience, so that the political impact of them is endorsed. Property ownership, an issue raised in her first work, is again a subject of protest with relation to 'i truzz'. They are exploited by ruthless landlords whose avarice forces their tenants to live with faulty and dangerous domestic appliances. The theme is then picked up with reference to the narrator's own accommodation, and personalization makes the protest more acute. A description of her own room and of her disrespectful treatment by her proprietors leads into a long invective against housing management in Bologna, and criticism of the city administration which prides itself on its provision of social services.

These autobiographical interludes also allow the narrator to discuss writing, from the comic practicalities of her problems with publishers to abstruse speculation on the significance of writing. An example is a bizarrely self-referential debate with Mimmo and Cesaretto (she inserts herself into her fictional world) about whether they are all 'nella fiction' or 'nella realtà' (p. 135), in the course of which the progress of this novel is narrated. The narrator describes the work to her friends, saying it is about students, but not them, because 'voi studiate solo nella fiction [...]. Nella realtà fate finta di studiare' (p. 136), and she comments, 'Comunque, fortuna che questa è la fine della prima parte' (p. 136). In this sudden *reductio ad absurdum*, the overloading of layers of reference causes the collapse of the narrative structure. However, the end of the first part announced by the narrator is not 'officially' realized, as the chapter

numbers run on consecutively and the narrative continues as before. There is an interruption in the sense that the relationship between narrator and reader has been tested, causing a degree of estrangement which conditions the response to the ongoing story.

In the last three chapters of the novel (beginning chapter nineteen), the narrator re-enters the story as a character and this triggers a second narrative breakdown - the end of the novel. The comments she makes are again almost indecipherable, expanding the reader's sensitivity to the question of the writer's position by obfuscating rather than clarifying the issue. The sequence begins with Fabio di Vasto, one of 'i truzz', going to visit Silvia 'Ballestrera' in her 'alloggio-sarcofago' (p. 236) - a reminder of the theme of profiteering housing management. A confessional tone is immediately created because the visit takes place in the middle of the night, and the narrator imparts personal information (in the third person, regarding the 'Ballestrera' character). Night-time is when 'la sua personalità più coraggiosa si assopisce con lei e tutte le distanziazioni ironiche vengono meno (e i filtri, e gli straniamenti)' (p. 240). This seems to be the preface to some 'straight' talking, although in presenting herself as a character rather than the narrator, she is retaining one narrative 'filtro'.

Fabio di Vasto, presented throughout as 'committed' in a well-meaning but formulaic fashion, accuses the author-character of 'menefreghismo' (p. 256), and she counters that he reproduces pre-programmed slogans and in fact is confused about whom exactly he considers to be responsible for social problems and why:

> Sempre slogans, semplificazioni, generalizzazioni... Io invece, guarda, nel mio piccolo, vabbè, lo ammetto, nun so un cazzo, però almeno lo ammetto. Non

> vado in giro a fa' finta di conoscere le Verità Essenziali, non solo, indicarle proprio col dito, nominarle ogni due secondi persino sorseggiando un caffè, trattando chi ti sta attorno come pezze da piedi. (pp. 258-9)

This is a sketch of her 'manifesto' - or deliberately, anti-manifesto - a defence of political imprecision which allows for a more flexible and accommodating awareness.[14] This humanistic concern is equated with the study of the humanities when Fabio attacks her for studying languages rather than political sciences, a subject he wears as a badge of engagement. She responds, in summary, by claiming that other disciplines - for example, anthropology and literature - lead to a greater understanding than can politics and sociology. When pressed to explain the significance of communism, she satisfies her interlocutor by using linguistic, rather than political, expertise, creating the sub-divisions of 'comunismo reale, labiale o gutturale' (p. 262). Whether she understands what she means by this is not important: Fabio is reassured. It seems clear that what he receives is no more than a palliative - a new set of slogans for him to deploy. Ballestra is foregrounding epistemological systems which cast their net much wider than contemporary society, where the media thrive by producing slogans and theories, and incorporate the whole process of human development as expressed culturally, rather than politically. An anthropological rather than political 'impegno'.

The conventional conclusion of the novel is performed by a return in the last chapter to Antò's Lu Purk and Lu Zorru, who are about to be repatriated from Amsterdam. This winding up of the story contrasts with the weightier conclusion,

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[14] Vattimo's theory of 'pensiero debole' may be a 'weak' referent here. See Gianni Vattimo, 'Dialettica, differenza, pensiero debole', in *Il pensiero debole*, ed. by Gianni Vattimo & Pier Aldo Rovatti (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983), pp. 12-28.

which is the author's discussion of her art in the penultimate chapter. The levels of writing co-exist to the end, in the sense that the 'story' of the 'Antò' frames and encloses the story of Ballestra, but the impact of the latter is such that it resists closure, opening the reader's thoughts to further discussion, whilst the 'story' is definitively resolved. Indeed, Antò and friends, protagonists of the first two works, do not re-appear, whilst the thematic and stylistic questions posed in their background with increasing insistence are foregrounded in Ballestra's third work.

Gli orsi

La Porta, in his brief account of Ballestra's works, leapfrogs her first two and concentrates on this, her most recent, claiming that '[essa] testimonia un *passaggio* importante, anche se ancora non definito' (p. 71; italics in text). *Gli orsi* is a collection of seven short stories which in a sense marks a 'passage', because it attenuates the centrality of the 'punk' genre, in favour of a more measured, perhaps 'mature', exploration of a variety of themes, from a perspective of detachment which is thoughtful as much as ironic. I think it is less a moving on than a realization of potential suggested in the earlier works, as a comparison between the first collection of stories, *Compleanno dell'iguana*, and this one, reveals. As a collection, the first barely coheres because of the stylistic and thematic differences between the stories, which divide roughly into two types - 'punk' and lyrical. *Gli orsi* takes these elements and combines them more subtly to produce an orchestrated ensemble of stories which create a dialogue of common themes and references amongst themselves. The result is a textual unit which has much in common, structurally, with the short story collections

I have discussed by Tabucchi (e.g. *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza*), and thematically, with Tondelli's 'romanzo-raccolta' (*Altri libertini*).[15]

The first story, entitled 'Gli orsi (63-93)' is an excursion into Ballestra's world - that of the young writer in a culture in which the young writer has iconic status. It opens with a quotation from Leopardi: 'Se si dovessero seguire i gran principii prudenziali e marchegiani di mio padre, scriveremmo sempre sopra gli argomenti del secolo di Aronne'. The mere evocation of Leopardi sets a high-literary framework for the account, but the content sets the tone for the more realistic theme in the story, of the young artist's struggle to work in an established critical environment. Hence the date margins given in the title, which mark the period in Italian literature which, whilst seeking renewal, has inevitably created its own critical shibboleths. Though this is never fully explained, it seems that 'gli orsi' is the name given by Ballestra to her 'genus' of young writers and critics, and in using this as the title of the whole work, it is clear that all the stories refer in some way to the business of being a young writer. A marker of this is that 'la pelouche' is a signifier (with no clear signified) which crops up in other stories, and the cover of the 1996 edition, featuring a lilac teddy bear, confirms that the bears in question are, or can be, soft, synthetic toys rather than roaring wild beasts.

The specific referent of the dates in the title is revealed at the beginning of the story, when the narrator receives a phone call from a DAMS professor, Renato

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[15] Ballestra's familiarity with Tabucchi's work is signalled by an ironic reference in *La guerra degli Antò*. Fabio di Vasto revs his 'motorino' engine at a traffic light: '"Via, via, per i volatili del Beato Angelico!" tabuccheggia il nostro' (p. 61).

Omissis, inviting her to speak at a conference at Reggio Emilia on literature in the 1963-93 period. The list he gives of participants - musicologists, the television pop channel, Videomusic, and 'giovani critici delle pianure' (p. 10)[16] - conjures up a cultural environment which is familiar. The story seems autobiographical, until the conversation ends abruptly when the professor's friend, Tiziano, whose home and telephone he is using, returns unexpectedly and apparently attacks the professor, referring to a lost pen. This is all reported from the other end of the telephone line, creating a distancing and distorting effect. The argument between the professor and his friend is an unexplained fragment of a 'giallo', and the verisimilitude of the main story is thrown into doubt by this fantastic intrusion. The narrator attempts to fuse the two levels by discussing antiques dealers in Bologna and suggesting the lost pen might be found there, but the pretence of practicality is belied by the incongruity of the discussion, and, in retrospect, by the fact that this motif of antiques is, like the 'pelouche', one of the odd, winking cursors which crop up occasionally in the course of this text.

The 'incipit' of the story is repeated: the narrator describes a second phone conversation, with the 'giovane poeta e falso amico Giuseppe Caliceti' (p. 13), which is a satire on how to get ahead in literature, referring to conferences, publicity, pandering to famous critics and parading youthfulness. Again, the quasi-realism of the conversation crashes into fantasy when Professor Omissis, whose home and telephone Caliceti has been using, returns home and brutally terminates the conversation.

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[16] This is a reference to Celati's collection of tales about north-central Italy, *Narratori delle pianure* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1985). The multi-media mix of participants describes the sort of creative community Tondelli sought to foster.

After these abortive introductions, the story embeds itself in the literary-critical environment of contemporary Italy. The narrator's preparations for the conference involve a summary of literature of the past three decades. Celati and Tondelli are foregrounded because works by them will feature at the conference, and Arbasino makes an 'appearance' from Rome by video recording. Ballestra capitalizes on this multi-media opportunity, describing the 'star' quality afforded by the screen appearance (she likens Arbasino to Freddie Mercury). His reception is also affected by the medium, in the sense that this video intervention seems to captivate, unite and motivate the audience much more effectively than the 'live' presentations by other literary figures. Arbasino gives an account of the cultural benefits of 1963 and the importation of structuralist thought, and the hyperbole of the medium affects the message to an extent:

> La bibliografia e i meriti sono sterminati, l'importazione di idee, effetti, dispositivi, più che grandiosa; in pochissimi anni sprovincializzando a colpi di revolverate entusiastiche e lacanismi e psicologismi e genettismi il Pecorame Muto che aveva caratterizzato la cultura italiana prima, durante e dopo il Ventennio. (p. 24)

Other literary 'elders' are presented negatively, however. When 'l'orso Gioele' reads some of his work, which Leonetti assesses, 'viene accusato banalmente di essere un ex sessantottino' (p. 28). Balestrini, chairing the session, attempts to open the critic's mind: '"Ma no, no, Leonetti," interviene Balestrini. "Qui il '68 non c'entra. È la Pantera. Siamo negli anni novanta, Francesco."' (p. 28).

This first story is, I think, Ballestra's attempt to familiarize the reader with the environment in which she lives and works, the natural habitat of the 'orsi'. It is a

balanced account of the positive aspects of being a young writer - the sound critical history and inspiring literary 'fathers' - and the demoralizing obstacles. The main block to literary progress is clearly the absence of a receptive and broad-minded critical community. Although it is suggested that her contemporaries, particularly those involved in music, are constructive and creative critics on an informal level, there seems to be no 'accredited', public forum for such interaction. In presenting her writing in a collection prefaced by a highly personal account of what it is to be a producer of such work, and drawing attention to the critical vacuum, Ballestra is putting the onus on the reader to think hard about what young writers have to offer.

The centrality of young writing to this collection is reinforced by the fact that the story central in the collection (fourth of seven), and by far its longest (forty pages), is largely about writing. Entitled, 'Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)', it consists of a brief encounter between the narrator and another young, female writer, Silvana Libertini, at a football match, followed by samples of the latter's writing, faxed to the narrator, and the narrator's critical discussion of them. The narrator is initially in a state of disillusionment, and refers again to Leopardi, in order to illustrate her inadequacy: 'Io con gli amici scambiavo i giornaletti splatter tutti popolati di bei teschi e tibie e metri cubi di sangue rappreso, e intanto il recanatese alla mia stessa età aveva già tradotto *La Batracomiomachia* e il *Primo Libro dell'Odissea* e il *Secondo Libro dell'Eneide* [the list continues]' (p. 84). She laments the absence of literary referents after Leopardi, and the loss of the tradition of writing as expression, replaced by visual images and 'un fottio di parlato giovanile che colava come un magma incandescente e abbrustoliva tutti i filamenti intelligenti del cervello' (p. 84). Despite her own attempts

in this and previous work to make literature of these raw materials available in her contemporary cultural environment, there is little irony in this 'confession', and it seems that she genuinely questions whether writing has a future.

The new writing from Silvana Libertini restores her faith (transmission by fax accentuates its newness): 'a me le pagine di Silvana Libertini parevano interessantissime, delle cose ciniche e nuove e anche pochissimo sentite e - insisto, *non* sono un critico - ma per me molto più interessanti di un testo, pure interessantissimo, quale *La Torta* di Leopardi. Almeno credevo' (p. 88; italics in text). Despite the disclaimer above, in describing the fifty pages of text, the narrator adopts a critical tone, mocking its youthful pretensions, but praising its subtler strengths: 'Densità d'intenti, speranza, razionalità politiche e critiche' (p. 89). This sober and balanced assessment, and the Silvia-Silvana connection,[17] suggest that Ballestra is attempting an objective analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of her own work (in this sense the collection might be a rite of 'passage'). This interpretation is supported by her explanation that she presents Silvana's writing as a diary because of the voyeuristic opportunity it offers to 'guardarsi vivere' (p. 90). This is an ironic reference to the act of meta-observation she is committing here: not only is the author of 'Silvana's' text watching herself live, but the author herself, in adopting the mask of 'Silvana', is watching herself write (about watching herself live).

[17] It could be that the surname, Libertini, is a reference to Tondelli's *Altri libertini* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980), which clearly has linguistic and thematic influences on Ballestra's work (see previous chapter).

Silvana's story itself leads the reader into a fantasy world the generic models of which might be the psychological horror story and science fiction. Its narrator (in Paraguay) watches a mime by two almost identical artists, one of whom she later sleeps with. During the course of the night, the artist metamorphoses, physically, into a variety of character-types of different nationalities, often manifested as two characters in one. He disappears in the morning, stealing her purse, and when she reports this to the hotel receptionist and to a police officer, they too become involved in the chain of metamorphosis, until the mutation becomes decomposition, and the body before her disintegrates. It is made clear in this final stage that the episode is a political allegory. The narrator asks the creature who sent it to torment her, and comments: 'Comunque, se vi mandano i ladri della prima repubblica, i vostri mandanti sono ridotti peggio di voi' (p. 98). When the creature responds that 'la politica qui non c'entra' (p. 98), she responds using language which makes the allegory clear: 'Il vostro lurido corpo politico ha ridotto il paese in ginocchio sui gomiti e adesso venite a dirmi che la politica non c'entra?' (p. 98). This monstrous parody of a body is a figure of the deformation of the Italian state brought about by the expedient role-playing of politicians, and exposed by 'Tangentopoli'. The decomposition of the creature/s produces a stench, which the narrator says she will leave as a contribution towards its/their next election campaign. They interpret this in good faith and say something good will come of the filth they find themselves in, suggesting perhaps the blind optimism (narcissism) of First Republic politicians. They intend to continue their careers: 'Noi, francamente, spereremmo ancora di salvarci con l'aiuto di un pelato. Come si dice, chi vedrà vivrà' (p. 99).

This political allegory also has a literary reference. The enigmatic prophecy of this last quotation echoes the prophecy of the 'veltro' in Dante's *Inferno*. This association is confirmed by an ensuing argument, which makes repeated reference to *La Divina Commedia*, about whether the last sentence is a syllogism,. The reader is effectively instructed to use Dante's work as an intertext here: the physically denatured creature is like a Dantesque sinner, and it is used, as are some of Dante's sinners, to make a direct comment on the corruption of the contemporary Italian political class. Ballestra / Libertini suggests that she is using *La Divina Commedia* as a model for a politically committed literary text.

The reference to Dante's text is sustained, to the extent that the allegory is doubled: this story is both a political allegory and an allegory of Dante's (allegorical) text, a re-writing of it in a new context, using specific points of coincidence with the original version. The closure of the episode at nightfall is Dantesque- 'Calò la notte' (p. 99), as is the detailed and *Purgatorio*-like description of the consistency of the night and of the dawn, described as 'l'ora azzurra' (p. 99). This metaphor might have a political referent in addition to its literary one, the blue suggesting 'Forza Italia'. The description of the hour is elaborated: 'Quel nastro di tenebre fra la falsa alba e la vera' (p. 99). This might support the 'Forza Italia' interpretation, suggesting that Berlusconi's government represents the 'false dawn' of Italy's new republic. However, it might refer to the difficult period before the 1994 elections, when the new parties were still forming, and the 'Tangentopoli' investigations were at their height, hitting Craxi, Andreotti, Gardini, Debenedetti. This second interpretation is borne out

by the description of 'l'ora azzurra' as the time when criminals decide to confess and suicides prepare to commit the act.

These alternative interpretations suggest two possibile identities for the 'pelato': Craxi or Berlusconi. At this stage, the first is the more likely explanation for two reasons. First: the narrative closes with a rather impenetrable comment about a period of alternating light and darkness, which could not be interrupted, 'neppure per un breve istante, con il nome di un solo craxiano che non dovesse un po' a tutti dei soldi indietro' (p. 100). Second: the politicans of the old order would be more likely in the closing days of their hegemony to assume that Craxi could never be definitively ousted from Italian politics than that Berlusconi might allow the conditions in which the old order operated to persist.[18] The second story sent by Silvana, however, lends weight to the Berlusconi interpretation. It is a purely political comment - a series of mathematical tables which turn out to be predictions of election results. The final paragraph associates the 'pelato' with the television industry: 'La profezia sulle elezioni in Italia all'epoca del trionfo delle TV commerciali: "Verrà un Pelàto," diceva la Cinquantunesima Profezia. "Un Pelàto in diretta sulle pelose ali della notte nera"' (p. 113). The description of the wings sustains the allegory of Dante, and perhaps refers to the support of the neo-fascist MSI party which helped Berlusconi into government. It could be that the 'pelato' is an open symbol of a certain type of politician, and the equivocality of its reference is intended to demonstrate that

[18] Interpretation here depends on when the story was written. It was first published in October 1994, when Berlusconi was in government and Craxi in exile, making both versions feasible.

Berlusconi and Craxi are another two-headed monster (the two were associated before 'Tangentopoli' began).[19]

On the outside of this dense political allegory is the frame of Ballestra as its critic. Sickness and degradation feature also in this story: the narrator and her friend, Giunco, live in her flat, awaiting Silvana's faxes. They live in increasing squallor as they neglect themselves and their surroundings in favour of their literary activity, and this condition is explicitly related to the thematic of Silvana's story by imagery of metamorphosis. This has two manifestations, the first being that the narrator becomes slug-like, dragging herself around the floor of the flat, leaving a viscous trail; and the second, that she and Giunco become one critical being, like the double-figure of the story. Giunco states this explicitly: 'Io e Polonio siamo una persona sola, ormai' (p. 109). Polonio is the name the narrator gives herself, and the reference to *Hamlet* is again a cypher of the 'to be or not to be' debate. Ballestra is perhaps comparing the intellectual and text-possessed existence of the critic unfavourably with the world-wise (Paraguay), communicative (faxes) activity of the politically-engaged writer. This suggests that the Silvia-Silvana 'pseudo-couple' is a further manifestation of the double-entity motif, and that, to save herself from the degradation caused by prolonged self-critical introspection (as confessed personally in the opening of the frame story), she might let Silvana lead her outward.

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[19] The fifth story of the collection, 'Intervistare Bret Ellis (F.P.)', is also a satire on 'Forza Italia' society, and, as the title suggests, its fashionable taste for American minimalism.

The second story of *Gli orsi*, 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!' also has a political subtext in which the pre-'Tangentopoli' political class are figured in lurid fantasy. This is combined with an autobiographical theme, in the form of a memory of childhood. The story has a Tondellian flavour in that the basis for the fantasy is the summer-time occupation of the coastal resort of Cupramarina by the middle-aged middle class of middle Italy. Ballestra translates the Tondellian theme into the idiom of science fiction, presenting the summer visitors as alien invaders and using the familiar sci-fi metaphors of reptiles and marine creatures which the title introduces: 'Così, tutto il centro di Cupramarina era alluvionato di alieni e zombie inimmaginabili, con pelli grinzose di tartaruga, musi di rettile, tripli menti' (p. 33).[20] The visual immediacy of these images is supported by the references to films which punctuate this story, for example: 'Ricordate le tecniche di occupazione messe in atto dagli invasori dell'ultraspazio ne *Il dominio dei mondi*?' (p. 33). It is interesting that she makes of this comparison more than a casual reference - in fact, she implicitly uses science fiction cinema as an analogue throughout this description of the invaders. The celluloid image is the principle frame of reference of her writing, so that the story can make some claim to be a multi-media product.[21]

The story of the aliens is a political allegory. The narrator links the invaders to a protest familiar from her earlier works: 'In genere i mostri invasori vivevano di rendita, da tempi immemorabili proprietari di terre, appartamenti nei centri storici delle grandi città, scuderie. Insomma, beni che avevano ignorato la rivoluzione

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[20] There are resonances here of Tondelli's descriptions of the 'fauna' of the Adriatic resorts in *Rimini* (see previous chapter).

[21] Whereas television was the principal referent in the novel, it is cinema which provides a 'key' to this collection.

industriale' (p. 34). The point she is stressing is that this class of privileged Italians, and their lifestyle, are alien to her generation and, by implication, to postmodern culture. The political edge of this issue is sharpened as the story progresses. The narrator escapes preparations for a party in honour of the invaders to visit a nearby river, and comments on the degradation of the water and its wildlife due to pollution. The aliens are persistently described as being radioactive, contaminating their environment and its inhabitants, and here, the pollution of the river is explicitly linked to them: 'il regno vegetale del posto stava per essere violato dai mostri' (p.41).

That the invaders also wield political influence is suggested by the narrator's father's relationship with them: 'loro lo tenevano in vita soltanto perché da anni prometteva di versare una certa somma di denaro a favore dell'intervento degli Usa in Italia' (p. 35). Ballestra is exposing a wide social stratum consisting of politicians and the business-people and landowners whose capital helps them maintain power, by means of a complex system of superficially social associations. This is precisely the class which 'Tangentopoli' attacked, and it seems feasible to interpret this story as an attack on this 'alien', 'monstrous' culture of corruption and self-advancement. It is a demonstration of the author's anthropological interest that she should present its perpetrators as a race of their own, their physical features and habits corresponding to their psychological make-up.

The last three stories of the collection are combinations of personal memory with other themes. The remembrance of girlhood imparts a 'feminine' tone to the narrative, reinforcing the author's presence as female narrator in every story, in

contrast with the predominance of male characters and an elliptical, ungendered narrator in previous works.[22] Ballestra makes ironic reference to feminist theory (see below), in a way which entertains the idea of a gender-specific relationship with writing without ever making it axiomatic. Similarly, in the Antò stories, the false machismo of referring to women almost exclusively as 'prustitute' is exposed without ever suggesting that the women concerned are any less prone to self-delusion or stereotyping. The predominance of a female narrator who is clearly a representation of the author in *Gli orsi* is an indication that she writes as herself. That this is not himself seems to be an accident which affords some differing perspectives but makes no absolute difference.[23]

'1974' recognizes the importance of the 1970s for feminism: 'c'erano stati quei referendum importantissimi sul divorzio e l'aborto, cose di una certa civiltà mai più viste dopo' (p. 130). The focus of the story, however, is the right- versus left-wing violence of the 'anni di piombo', as perceived by a child. The journey into memory is more pointedly feminine in the story, 'Cari, ci siete o no?', which concentrates on the matriarchy in the narrator's family (the father is a peripheral figure, referred to throughout as 'Norman Bates'). The main story is a comedy of domestic manners, in the style of the narrative of Antò's family in Ballestra's second work.[24] 'Nonna F.' (to whom *Compleanno dell'iguana* is dedicated) provides the focus for a contemporary

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[22] An exception is a story entitled, 'Svelto! Più veloce!' in *Compleanno dell'iguana*, in which a melancholic description of a lonely seaside summer imbued with resonances of childhood has the tone of earlier Italian women writers, e.g. Rosetta Loy.

[23] This ironic attitude to femininity and feminism will be discussed comparatively in chapter seven.

[24] An analysis of her mother's idiolectic manipulation of language includes an explicit reference to the previous novel, sealing a matriarchal linguistic pact: 'fa parte di un lessico parlato solo da mamma mia e nonna, o, nel caso delle fettine panate, da mamma mia, nonna e la mamma di Antò Lu Purk' (p. 72). The latter promised on television to cook these for her son if he returned.

re-working of the tradition of women's story-telling: 'io a nonna F. l'ascolto sempre con la massima attenzione in quanto Fonte Monumentale per le storie di fantascienza, gotico rurale, e specialmente un genere nuovissimo che credo di mia invenzione, il gerontothriller' (p. 64).[25] The narrator reveals that her own capacity to abuse literary convention derives from this matriarchal source. 'Nonna F.' watches television, especially soap operas, almost constantly, and it is suggested that this concentration effects a synthesis of the television stories and her own domestic gossip. Although this idea is presented humorously, it is an originally pseudo-feminist comment on the common theme of the relativizing effect of the 'reality' created by television.

The final story of the collection, 'La fidanzata di Hendrix da piccolo' is an excursion into recent and distant memory which brings the narrator full circle back towards the future. This creates a teleological narrative course which suggests that the tale has a moral - and indeed, if not a single message, it is certainly imbued with a strong moral sense, supported by the unmediated first-person narration throughout.[26] The story takes place in a railway carriage, and evolves, in roughly three phases, from isolation to participation. In the first, the narrator (clearly, the author) enters a compartment occupied by five black African men. Their 'difference' - racial, sexual, cultural - is stressed: 'erano in cinque, immaginai del Senegal e della Costa d'Avorio, tanto compiutamente silenziosi e austeri che invece di limitarsi a occupare cinque sedili sembrava regnassero, come impassibili prìncipi consanguinei, su altrettanti troni' (p. 140). The silence and self-possession of the men speaks a cultural division,

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[25] Perhaps 'gerontothriller' is the genre of the sci-fi/horror stories, such as 'Lettere a Polonio', and 'Cozze marroni'.

[26] La Porta identifies this story as a departure: 'ci fa intravedere e ci fa ascoltare qualcosa di *diverso* dal microcosmo familiare (per quanto esteso) dell'autrice' (p. 72; italics in text).

and enjoins a powerful sense of self, which sets the tone for this first 'phase'. The narrator dozes and has a series of thoughts about her own identity, which inevitably includes her writing: 'avevo compreso che nel mio destino c'era soprattutto... al diavolo, avevo compreso che nel destino dell'arte contemporanea... che nel destino di tanta gente c'era soprattutto la scritta a lettere di fuoco *pelouche*...' (p. 142; italics in text).

The significance of this is not explained, but there are various suggestions. Firstly, the '*pelouche*' corresponds to the 'orsi' of the first story, sealing a referential loop in the collection which suggests that this is the macro-image of all the stories. Secondly, the progression from 'orso' to '*pelouche*' (bearing in mind the cover photograph) is from a wild animal to a toy, and thus perhaps, from angry young person to child. If this image is the key to the text, then the implication is that the prevailing theme of childhood in these stories is the author's exploration of a deeper and more personal source of selfhood and of writing, in preference to the epoch-specific and generational experience predominant in earlier work. The foregrounding of her own cynicism in this self-reflective moment is perhaps a tacit comparison of a youth's disaffection with a child's faith. She asks: 'Cos'altro non funzionava, nei miei cinici racconti?' (p. 142).

The '*pelouche*' image is the augury of the next phase of the story, which begins when a party of schoolchildren enter the compartment. Their irruption into the scene introduces a gradual mollification of the division which existed in the compartment (facilitated by the departure of all but one of the African travellers). The arrival of a

new 'tribe' provisionally unites Ballestra and her fellow traveller in their common difference as adults, but the children's wary observation of them confirms the cross-sections of difference persisting in the micro-community of the compartment, before their innate ebullience starts to buffet these barriers: 'Io mi sentivo come un dio, là dentro, ma l'Essere più osservato dalla pipinara incandescente era proprio il fratello in garza di Abidjan' (pp. 145-6). Amongst the children are the 'piccolo Hendrix' of the title, and 'la formosetta', a girl with shiny white sandals and pink-painted toenails, who later declares herself his 'fidanzata'. This depiction of the children as mini-adults - partially-realized promises of a glamorous, 'rock 'n' roll' adulthood - is one of the ways in which Ballestra applies some of her 'punk' thematic to this analysis of children and their effects, which without an ironic edge would risk becoming vapidly sentimental.

An argument over a piece of chewing gum which 'il piccolo Hendrix' retrieves from a pocket precipitates the third phase of this story, in which the cultural barriers in the compartment are dissolved. The rudimentary 'rock couple' fight over who should have the gum and the African man intervenes to give the boy a lesson in altruism. This breach of the silence amongst the adults establishes communication amongst the three social groupings in the compartment, although the narrator initially argues against the other adult over the principles of who should chew the gum. She gives 'Hendrix' and his 'fidanzata' a gift each: a musical key fob in the form of an electric guitar for him and a small soft-toy rabbit for her. This is a materialization of the 'pelouche' theme, and the narrator acknowledges with remarkable candour that she has 'gone soft': 'la felicità di quella bambina non riuscirò a scordarla e francamente

mi auguro di non scordarla, se capite cosa si prova noialtri cinici in determinati momenti dell'esistenza' (p. 152).

The last page of the story is suffused with a sense of human community, absent of any irony or distance, and the narrator is quick to recognize the potential for hyperbole: 'fuori c'era il cielo più azzurro che i miei cinici occhi avessero mai visto' (p. 153). The narrator and the African traveller annul their differences as he tells her about his own family, opening up his world before her: 'ascoltai incantata le storie che quel padre aveva da raccontare sulla sua famiglia e sui figli' (p. 153). He tells her she should have children, and points out that 'Hendrix' and his friend could well be hers. She replies that she hopes so, one day, and ends the story: '"Con tutto il cuore," gli dissi. "Guarda"' (p. 153).

That this collection is sealed with the writer's wholehearted dedication to a maternal future is almost unbelievable in the light of the irony of most of her earlier writing which seems to render any 'commitment' provisional. It is made credible by her customary self-awareness and an irony which allows her to laugh at her own abandonment of the shield of cynicism. This work ends with a morally sound, humanistic message: does this mean Ballestra is set to follow this new-found 'cuore' down the Tamaro path to wholesome narrative? I doubt it. I would reiterate that the 'passage' which *Gli orsi* undoubtedly represents is a progression from potential to realization rather than a change from one project to another. And 'impegno' is the constant in this progression. From flashes of commitment in *Compleanno dell'iguana*, to the more robust commitment in *La guerra degli Antò* not only in exposing how

young people live but also suggesting how they should engage with life, to the traditional morality, abrasively applied, in *Gli orsi*, there is a clear pattern of development. A similar movement from interludes of lyricism in a cacophony of 'punk' dialogics to a more harmonious symphony of stylistic registers can be traced.

There is, however, more of an edge to this *ad hoc* conclusion of Ballestra's career than the above narrative of literary evolution implies. The *pelouche* is synthetic: is the sentiment of this last story genuine or manufactured sentimentalism? The last line of her last work voices this query: '"Con tutto il cuore," gli dissi. "Guarda"'. The good faith is 'guarded'. Of course, the last word is often a confirmatory one, reinforcing in conversation the sentiment of the preceding statement. However, positioned as it is here, as the 'last word', its effect is to disrupt the conviction that the declaration 'Con tutto il cuore', standing alone, would have. Its meaning and the sentiments of the last part of the story ensure that it does not contradict the preceding statement, but, just as the 'soft' toy is not to be trusted, the position of 'guarda' dilutes the absolute nature of the statement and suggests there is more to say.

Conclusion

The conclusion of Ballestra's latest work to date has approximately provided the conclusion to my analysis, since her general literary significance remains an open question. To demonstrate the significance in this thesis of her work, I shall summarize the fragments of 'impegno' which she offers up. First, political commitment: in this sense, she is perhaps the most traditional of all the writers I have studied in that she

addresses recent political history directly, and with an identifiably left-ish attitude, although she satirizes the shenanigans of party politics. The political crisis of the early 1990s figures large in her narrative, and by treating it allusively but with a potent, ethically-charged undercurrent of disgust, she makes her point much more effectively than De Carlo, for example. Second, moral commitment: in this sense again she echoes, at several reverberations' remove, the conviction of Vittorini and the early Calvino (and Tabucchi) that literature should reflect how people live and demonstrate how they might participate positively in the society around them. Her particular attention is to young people, the group in post-1960s society who most exhibit disaffection and purposelessness, and in this sense, she is clearly situated along the Celati-Palandri-Tondelli fault line. Stylistically too, she is of their 'genus', sampling some of the most canonical literary forms and artists - melodrama, allegory, Dante, Leopardi - in ostentatiously present-day contexts. This transvestism is carried off with spectacular linguistic acuity and dialogic elasticity.

This literary commitment pushes the fault line onwards, in that, more even than Tondelli, she is dedicated to fighting literature's corner in a culture in which literature seems to have been knocked out cold by other, louder forms of word-craft. Her particular innovation is to do this not by claiming literature's right to fight in a different, 'heavyweight' league from other media, but by climbing into the public ring and facing them one-to-one. The passages in *La guerra degli Antò* in which she fuses television's narrative with her own constitute a clear statement that she knows the 'rival' medium intimately and is equal to the task of negotiating with it. By appropriating its techniques to her own ends, she demonstrates that the literary word is

as flexible and contemporary as the broadcast or journalistic one. Similarly, if music threatens to dominate as a mode of expression amongst young people, she is willing to work with it and exploit its expressive potential to her own literary ends.[27]

This assertiveness, tempered by doubts about her own literary credibility, means that Ballestra presents herself to her readers on an equal footing, as demonstrated by addressing the reader one-to-one and presupposing of her a certain familiarity with contemporary Italian youth culture. This contrasts with the detached tone of De Carlo, and gives a more genuine definition of a 'giovane narratore'. Like Tondelli, Ballestra is clearly committed to making literature a viable means of expression for young people, and she has made a practical contribution to his initiative by editing a fourth volume of 'Under 25' stories since his death.[28] The ways in which she differentiates herself from him are also ways in which she introduces a modernized 'impegno'. The first is quantitative: her awareness of the other media which dampen the impact of literature in contemporary culture is more acute and her efforts to update literature more direct and audacious. The second is qualitative: she recuperates within her commitment to literature a more traditional political commitment, which is again surprisingly explicit. She demonstrates that young people of the 1990s are politically conscious and that writing about this in fiction is viable. A Vittorini-esque 'impegno' would take itself too seriously to be taken seriously by 1990s readers, so Ballestra adapts her 'impegno' to a more sceptical cultural context by using irony. She is wise to the anthropology of reception.

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[27] A recurring complaint in *La guerra degli Antò* is that her publishers are too mean to allow her to include a music cassette with the text, in order fully to express certain moods.

[28] Silvia Ballestra and Giulio Mozzi (eds), *Coda: Undici 'Under 25' nati dopo il 1970* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1996).

PART IV: CHAPTER SEVEN

WOMEN WRITERS: INDIFFERENT?

As I said in my introduction, a chapter on 'women writers' risks being a ghettoization, imposing upon authors a literary and political 'confinement' for a reason that might be seen merely as a biological accident. The same danger is inherent in my herding of 'immigrant writers' under that heading. The risks of these methodological decisions are outweighed by their benefits, I think, in that they offer the opportunity to supplement our understanding of commitment, and to test the 'fragmentation' thesis. These two groups of writers potentially have no interest in re-interpreting political commitment to make it more subtle, unassuming, postmodern, as do other writers I have studied. They may need to make specific, collective claims to a re-consideration of their status within society, and so have every reason to reclaim the territory of a literature of protest, however unfashionable and even naïve that might seem.

In looking at 'women writers' as such, I want to find out whether and how their gender influences their subject matter or style, and whether such a connection constitutes a 'political' edge to their work. To do so is to go fishing in a minefield: feminist theory and philosophy have problematized the act of writing for women in a gesture of liberation which also loads any potential text by a woman writer with a pre-packaged sub-text. It no longer seems possible for a woman writer to be indifferent to her 'difference'. The writers I have selected are those who suggest either feminist

arguments or women's issues.[1] I shall consider texts by three Italian women writing in the 1980s and 1990s: Francesca Sanvitale, Fabrizia Ramondino and Francesca Duranti. These writers precede and even circumvent the 'giovani narratori' label, having started publishing in the 1970s and continued to this day.[2] My reason for choosing longer-standing writers is to see to what extent women who experienced the heyday of Italian political feminism - the 1970s - are influenced by this background, and how any feminist themes respond to the subsequent 'de-politicization' of both literature and social issues. The weight of my analysis falls on novels by Duranti, because her work seems most acutely to vivify this process of change and exploration.

In a sense, I am attempting to trace a female fault line, because the disintegration of 'impegno' which I have charted implicitly excludes women writers, who were not at the centre of the debate in the 1940s and 1950s. Authors such as Fallaci, Maraini, and Morante have followed their own course - not a-political but political in a more personal way than their male counterparts. Sanvitale, Ramondino and Duranti stem directly from this tradition, whereas the more recent and resounding names in narrative by women whom I have excluded, such as Cardella, Tamaro, Capriolo, are explicitly new, different and unaccountable to the literary past: Ballestra 'represents' this tendency in my thesis.[3] In the works selected, I shall use three main relationships important in feminist theory as yardsticks by which to measure the

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[1] Some refinement of terminology is required in this sensitive area. I use the terms, 'women', 'womanhood', 'women's issues', to discuss this topic in the most general and a-political way. I take 'female' to be an adjective of biology, 'feminine' of culture and socialization, and 'feminist' of politics or literary theory.

[2] They are older than most of the 'giovani narratori': Sanvitale was born in 1928, Ramondino in 1936, and Duranti in 1935.

[3] I use inverted commas because all these younger writers have very different projects, so that Ballestra represents them only in so far as women's issues, as generally understood, appear to influence her writing very little.

writer's commitment both to 'women's' issues and to social or political issues in general: women and history, women and society, and women and writing. These are not sticks to beat the writers into my own scheme: as this chapter will demonstrate, each writer promotes these themes to varying extents, and indeed, as a preliminary indicator, the three themes in turn could be attached to Sanvitale, Ramondino and Duranti respectively.

Italian feminism

In order to understand the political and theoretical significance of these writers' work, it is necessary first to contextualize it. Italian feminist practice and thought have a specific history which influences, I think, the practice of women's writing. I will therefore preface my analysis of the literature with a brief exploration of Italian feminism.[4]

Italy's position with regard to feminist theory is ex-centric. Peripheral to the two main streams of feminist thought, the Anglo-American and the French, feminists in Italy have been in a position to adopt selectively the ideas in circulation, and to adapt them to the specific cultural reality of womanhood in Italy. The 'indigenous' brand of feminism is practical, political, even contingent, and lies uncomfortably with imported academic theory. The presence since the 1970s of very active and effective women's action groups, and absence of academic 'women's studies' departments attests to this.[5]

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[4] For fuller details of groups and movements, see Paola Bono & Sandra Kemp (eds), *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[5] Analysis of how feminism has been culturally adapted in Italy is provided in Zygmunt Barañski & Shirley Vinall (eds), *Women and Italy* (London: Macmillan, 1991). A synthesis of the Italian feminist movement and women's literary history is provided in Sharon Wood, *Italian Women's Writing 1860-1994* (London & Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone Press, 1995).

Hence a certain healthy suspicion amongst many modern Italian 'women writers' of this classification. Sharon Wood records that many of them reject or qualify the term: Duranti claims to be 'neutro', and Sanvitale writes 'as a woman' but will not define what that means.[6] This vocabulary of suspicion and provisionality describes a clear difference from any traditional literature of protest: none of the writers I shall discuss seems to consider herself a spokeswoman for her gender. What they present is their own interpretation of how it is to live and write as a woman, and only by association is this a collective experience.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the Communist party explicitly addressed the 'questione femminile', in response to the demands of women who during the war had begun to take part in history and social change, rather than just providing its support network. The party, however, became a spokesperson, generally a spokesman, for the feminist cause, thus subsuming women's interests into its own general agenda. It was a feminism in men's terms, offering women access to the men's workplace, rather than seeking a creative alternative to the traditional model of womanhood. After 1968, many feminists became particularly disillusioned with the failure of the PCI and smaller left-wing groups to make any substantial progress regarding women's issues, and they decided to speak for themselves.

Feminism in the 1970s concentrated on specific political issues and was very successful in securing legislation on matters of personal freedom: divorce (1974), abortion (1978), sexual violence (1979-80). At the same time, women were starting to

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[6] Sharon Wood, *Italian Women Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 19.

develop a philosophical feminism, considering women in relation to women. The concept of 'consciousness-raising' was imported from America ('autocoscienza' in Italy): women gathered in small groups to discuss the emotions and experiences which they felt to be central to their being and which found no forum for discussion in their domestic or social lives. The aim was to develop a solidarity of female experience, making women aware of issues hitherto suppressed or dismissed, first on an individual basis and then as recognition of a common phenomenon.

In the 1980s, an initiative began to move beyond equality to difference. This came in the wake of international, and especially French feminism, and, as evident from its terminology, responds to post-structuralism. The main source of this in Italy is the Diotima group in Verona (begun in 1983).[7] Diotima explicitly draws on the philosophy of Luce Irigaray, exploring the question of difference. Sexual difference is considered as something to be discovered and produced in western thought, in which the thinking subject is traditionally presumed to be neutral, unsexed in the act of thinking. The masculine dominance in western philosophy means, however, that this neutral is implicitly masculine. Masculinity is the norm, whereas femininity is something bracketed off and ab-normal.

Adriana Cavarero, the most prominent spokeswoman of Diotima, elaborates a detailed theory of difference.[8] She describes how women must supplement the 'neutro

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[7] The group is characteristic of Italian feminism in that it is regionally-based, engaged in constant dialogue with other regional groups (especially in Rome, Milan, Naples); it comprises women from a variety of backgrounds (academics, poets, schoolteachers); and it publishes usually as a collective. My primary source for their thinking is Adriana Cavarero and others, *Diotima: il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987).

[8] Adriana Cavarero, 'Per una teoria della differenza sessuale', in Cavarero and others (1987), pp. 43-78.

universale' in order to create a female subject, but this addition is in fact a subtraction, acknowledging a fundamental lack or absence. The result is that a woman has to express herself in a foreign language, thinking another's thoughts and speaking another's tongue. It is a language in which she is always already positioned and predicted: 'Si pensa in quanto pensata dall'altro' (p. 49). This creates a distance between a woman and the language she speaks, and this gap is the locus of a language of women:

> In questa distanza si conserva come possibilità la lingua mancante, un bisogno di traduzione che giace nella lingua straniera come desiderio di ritorno alla lingua tradotta, e tuttavia mancante, presente solo nella traduzione come un originale non perduto, ma piuttosto mai concesso. (pp. 52-3)

There is no sense that a women's language can be formulated: Cavarero advocates rather that women speak the 'foreign' language, giving voice to their own 'strangeness' to the language through use of it. In this double-edged, ironic position women can express themselves, rather than be expressed.

Women's linguistic subjecthood is thus a virtual presence on the threshold between neutrality and the male doxa. This notion accords with the theory of the 'becoming-woman' as a liminal area of sexual indeterminacy, where subjecthood is undefined.[9] Deleuze and Guattari, and others, have identified it as a valuable space from which to re-think the thinking subject, but as Rosi Braidotti points out, this claim should be treated with suspicion, lending itself as it does to femininity being annexed as a position for a male philosopher to toy with.[10] Women's interest, against the flow

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[9] On the theory of 'becoming', see Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988), pp. 275-9.
[10] Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance*, trans. by Elizabeth Guild (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

of post-structuralist thought, is not in effacing the subject - because there is no feminine subject as yet to efface - but in establishing the feminine, albeit as a function rather than an essential subject. This suggests that 'femininity' is a position favourable to writers with specific messages to communicate, who want to be identifiable as subjects. 'Femininity' is perhaps one remaining option in postmodern culture for the 'committed' writer (though that does not necessitate that the writer be female).

Establishing difference is, according to Diotima, the way beyond equality, which is too often the subsumption of one mode of being by another: 'un'integrazione mutilante' (p. 32). Instead of the horizontal homogenization of consciousness-raising, they propose 'affidamento': a process whereby a woman in a stronger position - in terms of experience, prestige, knowledge - offers her support and guidance to a woman in a weaker position.[11] An economy of exchange is established, based on a material need, but this more practical and efficacious model of relations dimly reflects the patriarchal and morally-discredited system of patronage so entrenched in Italian society. Diotima are well aware of the risk of emulating hierarchical relations by emphasizing difference, and therefore stress that any valorization of disparity is based on mutual assessment rather than on external criteria.

The archetype of the powerful female role model in 'affidamento' is the mother. The relationship between mother and daughter is the difficult nexus of relationships

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[11] See Renate Holub, 'Weak Thought and Strong Ethics: The "Postmodern" and Feminist Theory in Italy', in *Annali d'Italianistica,* 9 (1991), 124-43. Holub uses the concept of 'affidamento' as an example of the originality and ethical rigour of Italian feminist philosophy.

between women: for Irigaray, Diotima's primary source, it is the darkest point of the 'dark continent' of femininity. Braidotti summarizes her position:

> The site of origin and also of differentiation, beyond symbolization and therefore productive of never-ending mystifications, the mother-daughter relation is set up by Irigaray as the prototype of the conflict as well as the passionate bond that connects women to each other. Rivalry and envy as well as passion and recognition are part and parcel of female identity and they all bear on the mother-daughter bond. (p. 259)

This concept of motherhood is central to the writing of Sanvitale and Ramondino.[12] I now turn to my selected texts, to assess whether writers have taken the opportunity to assimilate feminist theory with other concerns in their work, and whether this represents a specific type of commitment.

Francesca Sanvitale

Madre e figlia[13]

Sharon Wood analyses this novel thoroughly, in conjunction with Ramondino's *Althénopis*, examining their representation of motherhood.[14] There is little I can add to her analysis as such, and in part I shall re-tread the ground already covered by her, but I do so with the aim of situating the novel within the corpus of Sanvitale's work of the 1980s and 1990s, and specifically, within the context of her commitment, to feminist or broader social issues. I am moving towards a perception of this clearly feminine, if not feminist, novel, as a rite of passage in a creative itinerary which progresses into areas mapped by women's issues but not confined by them.

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[12] See Ursula Fanning, 'Mother in the Text, Mothering the Text: Francesca Sanvitale and Fabrizia Ramondino', *The Italianist*, 14 (1994), 204-17.
[13] Francesca Sanvitale, *Madre e figlia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980).
[14] 'Clytemnestra or Electra: Renegotiating Motherhood', in Wood (1995), pp. 232-53.

Madre e figlia operates around a shifting between separation and union, two into one and one into two. The title suggests that mother and daughter can be one person: every mother is a daughter and every daughter a potential mother, both to her own offspring and to the mother who also depends on her. The work is an autobiography of a daughter, Sonia, but this demands that the life of her mother, Marianna, also be told, because the one cannot exist independently of the other. The linearity of the life story is lost, as the movement of the narrative pulsates in circuits which repeatedly refer back to the mother as source. The history is enclosed in a loop, with the novel beginning and ending with a vision engendered by the death of the mother. Theoretically, this is already a feminist move: an incorporation of objective, linear, historical time into the subjective, cyclical, biological rhythm of female time.

It is clear from the outset of the novel that the symbiosis between mother and daughter, a pre-natal system of mutual nurturing, becomes a struggle for power once released from the safety of the womb into an environment where individual identities must be established. The mother-daughter relationship is presented as a desperate wrangling which tries to reconcile love and hate, gratitude and resentment, identity and difference. Even when Marianna is physically weak, in her final battle with cancer, the relationship between Sonia and the young doctor who comforts her is held at bay by the mother-controller. The intensity of their rivalry is such that it endows a third party with symbolic status, transforming him from doctor into trophy. It is a feminine version of Girard's 'triangle of mimetic desire', whereby the pursuit by two desirers of a third object is much less to do with the attractiveness of the object itself,

than with the value that object and the pursuit of it add to the pursuers.[15] If A (here, Marianna) desires B (the doctor) then C (Sonia) desires him too, in order to be emulate A, whose desire in the meantime is fuelled by the competition represented by C, so that a reciprocity and a communion, albeit partially antagonistic, is achieved not between A and B or B and C, but between A and C, by means of the passive 'object' of desire, B. The difference in *Madre e figlia* lies also in the fact that this is not a 'natural' contest between two individuals who seek a mate, but an anti-natural parody of the supposed bond between mother and daughter.

This convolution of the relationship is also stressed in acutely physical terms. The mother and daughter's bodies speak loud and clear in the text: again, there is a point fundamental to French feminism to be made here, which is that part of the project of creating a feminine subject is to dismantle the Cartesian and phallogocentric separation of mind and body and to push the woman's body, as part of her being, into the speaking subject. This is no warm celebration of female sexuality: the bodies in the novel are torn and disfigured, painful and bleeding. Marianna suffers breast cancer and a mastectomy, and Sonia an abortion and miscarriages. The juxtaposition in the text of the abortion and mastectomy stresses that these violences happen essentially to one body, the one body which produced the mother and daughter pair. As such, the suffering appears to be part of a biological destiny, the mother's hideous gift to her daughter, or 'the curse'.

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[15] René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and The Novel*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

Men in the novel are not benevolent, but neither are they powerful enough to inflict these injuries on women. Women seem to will pain upon themselves, and men are merely functions of this violent desire, as is the doctor in the passage I discussed above. Another example is Marianna's sexual history. Her first fiancé, Fritz, already had a lover who killed herself when he announced he would marry Marianna, leaving Fritz too guilty to marry. A self-destructive rivalry between two women creates the tragedy, and the man merely acts in function of their desire. Marianna then had an affair with a 'bell'ufficiale', Sonia's father, who was married and whose wife consequently launched a vendetta against the mother and child. Again, he is eclipsed by the passionate rivalry between two women. Marianna and Sonia are forced into a life on the run, made outlaws by the immediate sentence of a woman who judges according to emotion rather than reason, flouting the law instituted and administered by men: 'Erano delinquenti, braccate dalla legge e dalla vendetta. Le inseguiva una donna con la rivoltella che voleva ammazzare la bambina' (p.23).[16] The twist in the tale is that the father invented this vendetta to force the pair out of his life, but this is disclosed later in the novel as a virtually irrelevant detail, because the behaviour of the women involved has been rationalized in the self-governing anti-logic of female passion.

Sanvitale frequently addresses the issue of writing and representation. An example is Sonia's first trip to the seaside:

> Per la prima volta Sonia vede il mare. Con quali sentimenti ed emozioni l'avrà visto? Guardo la madrepora azzurra accanto alla conchiglia carnicina, sul mio

[16] Wood points out the melodrama in this image of the vendetta, and indeed a sub-text of melodrama runs through the work of all three writers I shall discuss, and is made super-textual in Ballestra's writing. Perhaps melodrama portrays the drama of women's emotions, and thus an attempt to overturn the hegemony of the reasoned classical tragedy of men.

> tavolo, che sono i reperti del mare. Come una poesia? Come il suo Olimpo? (p.82)

This is more than a fairly standard literary topos drawing attention to the problem of expression. By stepping as writer into the text and sharing the expressive challenge facing her, Sanvitale illuminates the process of fusing the writer and character's subjecthood. It is a way of posing in the text Diotima's theoretical question of the female thinking and writing subjects: how to express a woman's perception of these objects. The focus on 'sentimenti ed emozioni', rather than cognition, is an affirmation of the value of affective interpretation as a challenge to phallogocentrism. The reference to seaside objects in the writer's immediate reality creates a direct link between her experience and that of the character, and this solidarity is endorsed by the 'feminine' resonances of the objects themselves: the linguistic echo of 'madrepora', and the evocation of coral and shell, suggested here as traces or fragments discarded on the liminal space of the shore. The sensual, 'flesh-coloured' shell seems to be the site of the 'becoming-woman'.

The exploration of womanhood in this novel is perhaps a textual exercise in 'autocoscienza', foregrounding and exploring issues central to the experience of women but marginal or excluded from traditional literature, and including the problem of women's writing. The novel also has 'neutral' political credentials: in the background of the intimate history of women are the social and political realities of the period which the narrative spans. Colonial struggles in Algeria and Ethiopia, and floods in Florence, are events which are relativized but not obliterated by the relationship which determines the novel. They function as reference points, in a

special sense: like blurred but reassuring landmarks perceived by someone riding a fast-moving carousel. Their objective 'reality' is sensed as something valuable and even salvific, in comparison with the gut-wrenching subjective hyper-reality of the mother-daughter interdependence. Wood (1995) also identifies a narrative of social history embedded in the stratification of stories of Marianna, her aristocratic family, and her society: 'the narrative is an account of a family in decline, a story of disintegration, fragmentation and decadence which echoes the history of a nation's struggles to find its own identity' (p. 238).

This is, however, gender-free icing to a hard-baked feminine cake. The feminist interpretations the novel demands may seem limiting and simplistic in the light of the dissolution of essentialist feminist theory which has taken place since the early 1980s, but in its own contemporary context, the impact of its commitment to feminist issues would be striking. A comparison with one of the mainstream 'inaugural' novels of the decade - De Carlo's *Treno di panna* (1981) - illustrates with almost disconcerting vividness the difference in the interests of men and women writers at the time. De Carlo made an impact by withdrawing presence and passion, whilst Sanvitale's impact is almost physical, as the anguished female body slams into the text. The male writer surrenders the subjecthood which the female writer is fighting for.

Verso Paola[17]

This novel appeared just over ten years later, and the gender balance is, superficially, reversed: a masculine consciousness (not dissimilar to a De Carlo

[17] Francesca Sanvitale, *Verso Paola* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991).

protagonist) takes centre stage, pushing the feminine to the peripheries of his existence. The women in the novel - the man's wife and his lover - are characterized only in terms of his perception of them. The story tempts interpretation as a critique of phallogocentrism from the 'inside'. Firstly, it tells of a train journey: a clearly defined linear progression towards 'Paola' - the name of a town, but clearly significant as a female name. Secondly, as the journey proceeds, Italy is gradually revealed through the train windows, and the phallic significance of the train journey is accentuated by a sense that the country (Italia - again, a name with female resonance) is being penetrated in order to discover its intimate secrets. Lastly, the protagonist is obsessed with language, and with the most structurally rigid, logocentric manifestations of it. He is an academic specialist in languages and literature, who uses his expertise to achieve sexual gratification. Before leaving his lover at the station in Bolzano to make the journey to his wife in Paola, he takes her through an elaborate linguistic seduction based on the Latin names of the trees in the station gardens:

> Un gioco paradossale, un colloquio tra due bocche e due linguaggi; un duetto dove la vittima, prima costretta, cresceva ad ogni richiesta e con il proprio sentimento fronteggiava il padrone che l'aveva iniziata ed era come se lui la svelasse ad ogni albero e ad ogni nome. (p. 23)

The superbly rigid Latin lexis is used as another instrument of penetration. There is a double patriarchal colonization here, both immediate and historical, in the sense that not only is the woman being made to conform to and even enjoy the authoritarian rule of the language, but nature itself (a feminine noun), represented by the trees, has been brought under its jurisdiction by being ordered within the system of difficult, tongue-twisting, artificial names. Latin, Sanvitale suggests, is the quintessential patriarchal language.

What appears to have been set up is a feminist dialectic rigid in itself, but Sanvitale successfully problematizes this potential 'gynocentrism' in a variety of ways. Firstly, the penetration of Italy is interrupted by the train coming to a standstill, and even the knowledge achieved by this partial journey of discovery is superficial. What is experienced by means of a train journey through Italy is a tourist tableau, a stereotype. A more intense and committed investigation is needed if the full complexity of the country is to be understood. In the background of this idea, the sexual metaphor still echoes, and I think Sanvitale is saying something about the possible limits of sexual communication. However, this is nuance: what she is clearly and angrily foregrounding is the state of contemporary Italy. For example, arrival at Bologna prompts reflection by the author on the 1980 bomb, and on the other Italy hidden behind the nostalgic period façades of the railway stations:

> L'Italia è un susseguirsi di luoghi che dal treno sembrano armonici e composti per il meglio [...]. Scendendo dall'osservatorio in corso, il quadro oleografico e un po' all'antica si deforma in uno stridente contrasto delle componenti prima armoniose; un aggrovigliarsi di fatiche, di comportamenti anomali, di una vita civile abbandonata alla prepotenza e alla rabbia. (p.43)

Unmitigated images of squalor multiply: when the train stops in Rome, Sanvitale depicts a modern chaos in which predatory groups of teenagers prowl through the underground, against the babble of different languages and dialects spoken by the crowds of immigrants marooned in the station. The rats of which the protagonist has a phobia are the symbols of voracious, anarchic, 'underground' life.

I have said that the privileging of social over sexual critique mitigates the feminism of the tale, but the situation is more complex, because it is not simply a case

of two separate themes jostling for centrality. The two are combined by means of characterization. The protagonist is not likeable but neither is he particularly culpable, and his psychosexual disorders are inextricably linked with what Sanvitale portrays as a psychologically disturbed society - the rats mentioned above metaphorically seal this link. His lover is barely present and his wife absent from the story, and the reader learns little enough of them to bolster any instinctive sympathy one might feel for the objects of the protagonist's fantasies. By neutralizing the distinction between good and bad, victims and oppressors, and particularly by dissociating female and male from any 'essential' correlation with such oppositions, Sanvitale deconstructs the very notion of bipolar difference between female and male which the structure of the novel superficially erects, and points out that human beings are potentially all equally corrupt or corruptible, and that 'difference' is therefore something to be investigated with subtlety. This is confirmed when the story closes with the train stuck indefinitely due to a strike. The passengers do not protest because they are accustomed to it. The passivity and ineptitude of the protagonist is purely a symptom of a national disease - they are all cogs in a rusty, clapped-out machine. The train is by now a symbol of an industrialized, 'progressive' society which has become impotent.

Sanvitale has a specific point to make about gender as related to history. This becomes evident when the relative status of the 'fictional' protagonists and the socio-historical backgrounds in the two novels discussed so far are compared. In *Madre e figlia*, the central 'couple' stand in stark relief against their social context. They are connected to it in the ways I described, but they seem to function independently of history. In *Verso Paola*, however, the male protagonist is clearly a product of his

society - another corrupt cell in a diseased organism. This is perhaps a social comment in itself, suggesting that the disasters and events mentioned in *Madre e figlia* are perhaps discrete slashes in the otherwise strong fabric of social history in the post-war period, whereas the problems of 1980s society in *Verso Paola* are endemic. More significant than this is the second, 'feminist' inflection, which is that the women in the earlier novel clearly see themselves and are to be seen as ultimately isolated from history, living out their own private 'history' in a cycle which sometimes brushes against the public chronicle; whereas the man in the later novel belongs to history. This idea loops back directly into the Diotima problem of women speaking the language of men, which writes the story of men - History.

These two novels stand like ironic brackets at either extremity of the 1980s - vehemently 'committed' novels which draw attention to the parenthesis of the 'riflusso'.[18] Sanvitale explores in each issues raised by feminist theory, but then takes this project a step further by pushing questions of personal history and of subjecthood into the public domain.[19] She implicitly refuses to consider a commitment to feminism and to the wider problems of contemporary society separately - she refuses to be a woman writer or a political writer - but instead makes the two coterminous. The private is pushed into the public domain, but the statement thus made is more than the 1960s mantra of 'the personal is political', which suggests a one-way re-

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[18] See Ann Hallamore Caesar, 'Francesca Sanvitale: Investigating the Self and the World', in *The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt Barañski & Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 184-99. Caesar observes that the sequence of Sanvitale's works consistently keeps pace with history: 'each narrative ends at the point at which fictional time and real time correspond' (p. 184).

[19] Sanvitale's monumental historical novel, *Il figlio dell'impero* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), which she wrote after *Verso Paola*, is the *summa* of a composite critique of patriarchal society, but from the point of view of all those 'subject' to this system, not just women.

consideration, applying techniques used to understand politics to the relations between individuals. What she is laying claim to instead, I think, is a more complex re-consideration whereby the personal and political are used to deconstruct each other. The reader is thus forced into a critical self-awareness whereby s/he learns to question the 'givens' of masculine/feminine, fact/fiction, public/private.

Fabrizia Ramondino

Un giorno e mezzo[20]

Ramondino's *Althénopis* (1981) is, as I have said, comparable to Sanvitale's *Madre e figlia*, and has been thoroughly analysed by Wood (1995) in that context.[21] *Star di casa* (1991), at roughly the same distance from the first novel as *Verso Paola* from *Madre e figlia*, re-tells the story of a female child's development within an awe-inspiring southern Italian matriarchy, placing the accent this time on the girl's development of independence from the feminine norm. Both are revealing novels in their own right, and particularly interesting because they add a regionalist inflection to the feminist theme of the limits tradition places on individual development. Limits of space have led me, however, to include only one novel by Ramondino in this chapter - *Un giorno e mezzo* (1988). This novel differentiates itself from other writing by women of this period in that it attempts to re-assess a specific politico-cultural moment from the vantage point of subsequent experience (political and personal). De Carlo attempts a similar synthesis in *Due di due*, and Palandri in *Boccalone*. I have

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[20] Fabrizia Ramondino, *Un giorno e mezzo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1988).

[21] See also Jonathan Usher, 'Fabrizia Ramondino: The Muse of Memory', in Barañski & Pertile (1993), pp. 166-83, and Adalgisa Giorgio, 'A Feminist Family Romance: Mother, Daughter and Female Genealogy in Fabrizia Ramondino's *Althénopis*', in *The Italianist*, 11 (1991), 124-49.

selected this particular novel by Ramondino in order to see whether a woman writer looks back 'at' anger differently from a man.

The title of the novel plays on the term, *mezzogiorno*, and it has an air of popular theatre which is markedly southern, telling the story of an older generation of declining Neapolitan aristocrats as the background to a young generation of political activists, all gathered in the 'Villa Amore', the once-splendid home of a once-prosperous Neapolitan family. The 'giorno e mezzo' is a weekend in September 1969, when the younger generation gather to discuss the protest movement. This is the 'autunno caldo' of the workers' movement - the period of most heated protest - but the student movement has had its climax (in 1968), so that the more familiar association of autumn with decline is relevant. The Aristotelian dramatic unities are almost respected: the action ostensibly concentrates on the projects of the young activists, but is easily distracted by their non-political problems and those of the declining upper-class society around them; the place is the villa, but its own structural disunity (it is now subdivided into assorted dwellings) is a measure of the geographical mobility of the cosmopolitan student community it temporarily houses; the time-span is fifty per cent longer than it ought to be. As these quasi-unities suggest, another sense of the title is, I think, that of overspill or autumnal over-ripeness. The themes of the novel - student protest, upper-class society, various types of social and sexual relationships - have all, in different senses, outstretched the limits of their usefulness.

The 'Villa Amore' is thus a symbol of disintegrating political and sexual orders. By housing in it the two putative 'new orders', or anti-orders, of radical left-wing

politics and 'free love', the author is able to expose the changes and the continuities in the social and sexual politics of the two generations. This novel has a healthy population of male and female characters, and it explores relationships between and within the sexes. Feminine sexuality is ultimately foregrounded, and is problematic, but the women of this novel are not confined to the repressive solidarity of the matriarchy, as in Sanvitale and Ramondino's novels of motherhood. A mother-child relationship is explored - between one of the central characters, Costanza, and her daughter, Pio Pia - producing the familiar themes of alienation and defensiveness: 'La bambina infatti aveva deciso di abitarla, prima nel suo corpo, poi nella sua casa' (p. 29). The child is also a source of tension between female friends: Costanza and her friend Erminia have different views of motherhood, which dramatize the general personality differences between them, and make the child an element of antagonism.

The third central character is different in terms of age, gender, class, mentality. The author inserts the character of Don Giulio Amore, a self-deluding relic of aristocratic 'galanteria', into the circle of the young political militants in order both to mock the social and sexual pretensions of a past generation and to expose the comparable lasciviousness of the younger men and thus the hypocrisy of their claims to newness. The sub-text of the jargon-ridden political debate is sexual attraction. Despite the high-minded purpose of the meeting, its only action and achievement is the pairing off of a number of sexual partners. An exchange between Dario and Hutta is a concise dramatization of the inherent sexism within the student protest movement. He has dismissed as irrelevant the child-care issue scheduled for discussion. When

Hutta challenges him, he responds with neolithic sophistication, noting her sexual attributes then trying to intimidate her into silence:

> Hutta si alzò in piedi di scatto, parandosi davanti a Dario. Per il caldo si era tolta la giacca di jeans ed era rimasta in maglietta, una maglietta nera e scollata che aderiva al petto abbondante e le scopriva le braccia. Dario, colpito, la fissava, come se prima non l'avesse mai vista. Ma subito lo sguardo gli si spense e chiese con freddezza: - Volevi dire qualcosa? (pp. 19-20)

Ramondino thus dramatizes the continued failure of radical political movements (the Communist party in the post-war period and the student movements of the 1960s) genuinely to take account of and advance women's issues. Politics is shown to be still, clearly, a man's world. She implies that this is not only a problem for women: if a movement styling itself as radical and regenerative has failed to disrupt conventional hierarchies, and the received wisdom which supports them, in order to create opportunities for women, then there is little reason to believe that it has made a genuine difference for any other social groupings.[22]

The backlash of the sexual revolution is also exposed. For the young men and women, the ready swapping of sexual partners lives up to the title of 'free love' only in a practical sense: emotionally, it is a source of anxiety and thus a constraint. For the women, as Erminia illustrates, there are also physical binds: far from being 'liberated', they are trapped into a cycle of monthly anxiety and frequent abortion. The gamut of feminine histories attached to the Villa Amore, marked by symbolic names (Partorina, Maria, Irene, Viola, Lucia), weave a text of delusion and suffering, but dogged survival instinct, which is not cut but continued by the 'modern' sexual standards of

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[22] Guido, in De Carlo's *Due di due*, draws similar conclusions (see chapter four), but De Carlo's novel barely explores the limits of the sexual revolution.

the 1960s generation.[23] Ramondino suggests that women like Erminia and Costanza are victims no less than the more obviously oppressed women of earlier generations. Their victimization is more complex because they choose to live like this under the impression that it represents true freedom of choice and liberation of desire, and fail to recognize that desire itself is capable of a tyranny as cruel as less ambiguous demonstrations of authority. In this sense there is a continuity with the other 'matriarchal' novels: female sexuality must be handled with care. Male sexuality appears to be more transparent, though still a source of anguish to the women characters.

A comparison with similar *Zeitgeist* novels by men reveals, I think, that Ramondino re-visits the period with a specifically female hindsight. The critique of the ultimate conservatism of the student movement gains strength and acuity when applied from a woman's point of view. The novel is more than an anti-manifesto, though. By situating her critique of the student movement in the 'Villa Amore' rather than 'in aula', she relativizes it within an ongoing drama of human interaction. Repetitive regional history is the nemesis which brings up short the hubristic pretensions of specific political ideologies. This is not pure 'gattopardismo', because change is clearly both desirable and inevitable, but change for change's sake - change used to express youth, virility, ambition, rather than to make a difference in the lives of people whose opportunities are limited - is a distortional excess and another instance of overspill.

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[23] See Usher, p. 180. He points out that Irene, a peripheral character in the story, functions as a touchstone of 'ideal' commitment: active and conscientious in a practical, unassuming, profoundly effective way.

Francesca Duranti

Whereas Ramondino and Sanvitale represent a continuum of political commitment, imbued to varying degrees of intensity with specifically women's issues, Duranti handles political issues only in as much as they inform or impinge upon the process of writing, which is her primary concern. Wood (1995) includes Duranti in her final chapter, entitled 'From Feminism to Post-Modernism', pointing out, accurately, I think, that any automatic association of writing and reality is, for Duranti, outdated and irrelevant. This privileging of writing itself as the only 'reality' which writing may rely on does not, however, dictate that she be indifferent to social issues or specifically to femininity. What I aim to demonstrate in the course of this analysis of four of her novels is that she develops a very potent image of the woman writer in a clearly-defined contemporary social environment, partly by means of an intense but understated dialogue with feminist theory. Like Tondelli, perhaps, she makes no claims to be representative or to know any experience of life other than her own, but in exposing her own life on the written page she is making a bold statement which is in itself a sort of commitment for the postmodern age.

La casa sul lago della luna[24]

The title of this work is already the title of another, fictitious, novel, *Das Haus am Mondsee*, by Fritz Oberhofer. A chance reading of a review of this captures the imagination of Duranti's protagonist, Fabrizio, and he resolves to locate, translate and revive the novel, so establishing his own literary career. Duranti's novel has received

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[24] Francesca Duranti, *La casa sul lago della luna* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1984).

thorough critical attention, to which I can add little, so I do not intend to analyse it in detail here.[25] I have included it for two principal reasons: firstly, to show that by the mid-1980s, Duranti had already rejected forms such as the *Bildungsroman* and historical novel, in favour of the exquisitely postmodern novel about the process of writing novels. Vinall opens her analysis of Duranti's work with comments on the author's preference for the traditional, well-made story, rather than the experimental novel of previous decades. This is, I think, a valid point, but I would add that there are increasingly strong meta-narrative currents in Duranti's texts, revealing that her preference for story-telling is itself meant to tell the reader about stories. In form this text is not fragmentary, as is Calvino's *Se una notte*: it is given a solid novelistic shape by the literary quest it describes. In this sense, it is comparable to Eco's *Il pendolo di Foucault* (which it pre-dates by five years), charting an elaborate fiction, referred to as 'il piano', which is extrapolated from a fragment of text from the past, whilst also building a detailed identikit picture of the modern Italian literature industry.

My second reason for focussing briefly on this novel is its portrayal of modern men and women. In Sanvitale and Ramondino's work, men are largely peripheral creatures, providing a framework in which to explore the opportunities and threats of relationships between women. It is possible, as I have shown, to map the issues addressed by these two writers onto feminist theory. In Duranti's novels, the consciousness of a woman generally takes centre stage (although several of her protagonists are men), but male characters loom large, even or especially when they

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[25] In addition to Wood's analysis (1995, pp. 254-74), see Shirley Vinall, 'Francesca Duranti: Reflections and Inventions', in Barañski & Pertile (1993), pp. 99-120.

are physically absent. Men, in the world Duranti portrays, are, quite simply, a problem; and for reasons which have less direct association with feminist theory than with modern women's magazines. This is not to belittle her approach because there is nothing clichéd or superficial about the problems she raises. The difference is partly their immediacy and persistence, and partly a 'postmodern' shift towards 'low' culture: the author seems to be asking the reader to put aside anthropological and psychoanalytical theories, and explain how exactly a professional woman with an absorbing career also succeeds in managing the mysterious joint enterprise known as marriage.[26]

Duranti's use in this novel of a 'Girardian' triangle illustrates her perspective on gender relations. Whereas Sanvitale appropriated such a triangle by making women the subjects of desire, Duranti maintains the traditional structure of male subjects and female object, but makes the woman wise to it. The protagonist, Fabrizio, is a leftover of the aristocratic past subsisting in the present, and his childhood friend, Mario, socially his 'inferior', is now a successful publisher. The class imbalance instates a history of rivalry and envy, or mimetic desire: each is attracted by the attributes the other displays and which he wants to appropriate for himself. The third component of the triangle is Fulvia, Fabrizio's girlfriend. Duranti installs her in precisely the position of the Girardian object of desire - desired for what she signifies as an adjunct of the personality of her pursuer - when she describes why Mario suppresses his attraction to her: 'forse solo per escludere l'ipotesi che Fulvia avesse rimesso in moto

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[26] Duranti's second novel, *Piazza, mia bella piazza* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1978), is a painful account of a failed marriage (see Vinall), and themes of divorce and failed relationships recur throughout her novels.

un vecchio meccanismo collocandosi nella stessa lista di cui avevano fatto parte il triciclo di Fabrizio, la sua nursery, il té con gli *scones*, la biblioteca, l'alfetta' (p. 37). Fulvia 'manages' the triangle, knowingly playing the role of the controlled - continuing to provide Fabrizio with emotional support in her relationship with him - as a means of taking control over his personal development. She is the agent of the novel, the force which makes things happen, and Fabrizio's unconsciously patronizing label for her - 'l'angiolino guerriero' - expresses the author's wiseness to the sort of sleights of tongue which credit women with qualities defined as such in masculine terms, and implicitly attainable only to an endearingly limited degree by women.

The second part of the novel leads from the fiction set up as described so far into the metafiction of the 'original' novel of the same title, as Fabrizio elaborates a career and a persona for himself based upon the writing of Fritz Oberhofer. A second Girardian triangle is established in this realm, leading to a further comment on gender. The two subjects of mimetic desire are now Fritz and Fabrizio, and the third place comes to be occupied by Maria, the lover of Fritz fabricated by Fabrizio in order to plug a gap in his biography of the Austrian author.[27] Fabrizio narcissistically plunders his acquaintance with real women to create a composite being - his ideal woman. Again, she seems the absolute object of desire, but, like Mario with whom she is associated by name, and Fulvia by position in the triangle, her passive acquiescence is a mask. This fiction or construct - that is, something which should by definition have

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[27] Duranti clearly plays on the 'M'/'F' initials, although there are no transparent patterns. An equation of the letters with 'maschio' and 'femmina' works only to a limited extent: Fabrizio is dependent on Mario and Fulvia in the first part, and on Maria and Fritz in the second. In each part there is a model of each gender, but the initial swaps sides. In later novels, the initials, 'A' or 'A.R.' are attached to male characters, with no clear significance.

no being but in the terms of its creator - becomes the controlling principle in the relationship. Wood makes the obligatory mention of Frankenstein's monster in her analysis of this text, but it is also worth noting that Mary Shelley's novel comments not only on the creative process but on the role of gender within that process. Shelley's monster is produced by a male creator whose fantasy of perfection outstrips his capacity to control: the monster embodies his monstrous egotism. The author licences the clear parallels between this sort of creation and the biological creative process carried out by women, but implies that men give birth to monsters of the mind. To draw attention to the names Mary Shelley and Frankenstein is perhaps facetious, but I think Shelley's novel is a more substantial intertext to *La casa sul lago della luna* than is generally supposed.[28]

Fabrizio's Gothic monster is made postmodern in that it is a figment of the imagination supported and even adopted by the media industry, which feeds the fiction in the interests of creating its own profit-making 'stories': creativity becomes involved in a spiralling *reductio ad absurdum*. This is figured in the third part of the novel, which takes place at the 'Lago della luna' or 'Mondsee', in the home of the final woman-controller, Petra. Petra's world has a perfect geometry of space crystallized by the austerity of Petra's physical presence, her silence or formulaic speech, and the cold minerality suggested by her name (there are resonances of the sterile Arctic ice-scapes of Shelley's novel). Fulvia tries to break the incantation but Fabrizio fails to respond, and is left in his landscape of self-negated creativity.

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[28] Shelley's novel fits into the sub-text of melodrama which, as I suggested earlier, seems to underscore these novels by women. The era of the melodramatic 'Gothic novel' in English literature was the one which legitimated women as readers and writers.

Duranti's achievement in this novel is to yank Italian narrative into the postmodern world (as other writers of the 1980s have), and most commentaries concentrate on its exquisitely postmodern credentials. This is probably the novel's greatest impact; but there is a great deal being whispered between the lines about women. In one way, the author is also trying to yank feminist discourse into the 'post-feminist' world - a project which her other novels continue. I shall point out the ways in which I think this is demonstrated in these later novels, before attempting to summarize what the general movement is.

Effetti personali[29]

Both *Effetti personali* and *Ultima stesura* have female narrators, who are writers and who are divorced. In both, writing is the focus of the tension between the woman and the man: it jeopardizes the relationship by occupying the woman's attention at her partner's expense, but is also the means by which she establishes an identity of her own, rather than as an adjunct to her partner. Both novels begin with the issue of naming. In *Effetti personali*, Valentina's ex-husband removes his name-plate from the door of their apartment, as he vacates it, and thus removes the last vestige of her identity, leaving her 'vacant' too. Duranti uses this typically practical, quotidian example to raise the theoretical question of a woman's subjecthood:

> Non avevo - ne mai avevo avuto - occasione di poter veramente dire *mio*; o di pensare *mio*.....ora per la prima volta vedevo che l'inevitabile conseguenza era di non saper più da che parte cominciare per dire *io*, ecco tutto. (p. 11; italics in text)

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[29] Francesca Duranti, *Effetti personali* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1988).

Writing presents itself as the opportunity at least to perform subjecthood - writing the 'I' - if not genuinely to possess it. Her previous professional activity was to research her husband's works - her intellect and expertise were expressed as his 'I'. Now she decides to use her knowledge of Slavic languages to interview the fashionable writer, Milos Jarco, and so to proffer an 'I' purporting to represent herself. The novel becomes the record of Valentina's apprenticeship in self-expression. Once the journey to Jarco's unspecified eastern European country is complete, the narrative takes the form of Valentina's diary recorded on tape, to be written 'up' later. It is first-person reportage, interspersed with direct addresses to her ex-husband and her mother, between whose influences she starts to build her identity. This might be interpreted as a direct dramatization of the 'becoming-woman', putting forward a subject in the space between private voice and published text.

The 'story' itself is that her professional quest is frustrated and her personal one fulfilled - to an extent. Jarco turns out to be non-existent, himself a 'fiction' created by a co-operative of writers, one of whom, Ante Radek, Valentina has an affair with. This staging of the 'death' of the author is a postmodern coup not unexpected of the author of *La casa sul lago della luna*. It has a broad political significance in that the annulment of individuality which such a quintessentially communist, co-operative enterprise involves is ultimately judged by Valentina a sacrifice too far. The lack of materialism and capitalist ambition in the country she visits is experienced initially by Valentina as a stimulus, but she comes to realize that it is indeed a lack - a large-scale equivalent of the blank oval left on her apartment door when the name-plate was

removed. She needs individual identity: subjecthood is too great a gain to be relinquished by those who are not accustomed to possessing it.

This sub-textual dialogue with feminist theory is reported in edited highlights in the text itself, in the form of Valentina's dialogue with her mother, an active feminist of the 1960s generation. Valentina repeatedly expresses an alienation from this sort of extremism which is also part of a general alienation from her mother. Feeling empowered by her 'masterful' seduction of Ante Radek, she acknowledges her debt to feminism: 'Fino a ora non mi aveva mai neppure sfiorata, forse a causa di uno strano rimbalzo che ha fatto di me, allevata nel cuore del movimento, la più scema della mia generazione' (p. 83). This is a step in Duranti's move towards 'post-feminism', I think. Militant feminism seems anachronistic in a climate of pervasive a-politicism ('rimbalzo' / 'riflusso') in the 1980s, but this does not preclude seeing the militancy of the past as a crucial developmental phase, after which comes the subtler process of 'coming to terms' which this novel explores.

Post-modernism, post-feminism and post-communism are all brought together in this novel. Duranti presents the solution she is seeking as a deconstructionist alternative to polar oppositions. If modernism was a reaction to tradition, feminism a reaction to the patriarchy, communism a reaction to industrial capitalism, then the 'post-' versions should ironize the two extremes in each category. The east-west political and economic divide is equated with the female-male one, and in the gap between the two, Valentina seeks a compromise:

> È possibile che non ci sia nessuna ragionevole e realistica via di mezzo...Non esiste nulla di stabile, umano, possibile, tra la voracità arrampicona da un lato e

> la fine di ogni patto tra l'uomo e le cose dall'altro? Tra far l'amore da padrone e farlo da servo, anzi, più spesso da serva? (p. 126)

Although she concludes that 'difference' is irreconcilable - she cannot live in a communist society nor sustain a relationship with another man - Valentina points out that in the breach between the two sides, lies potential: 'lì comincia la commedia' (p. 167). 'Commedia' unites subversion of social hierarchy with an artistic or literary genre.

Ultima stesura[30]

The 'commedia' is perhaps this next novel. It is the most ludic, self-referential and structurally subversive of Duranti's novels, but also the most intimate and private, presented as the last draft of an edition of short stories, which comes to be an 'edition' of herself. Autobiographical chronicles of present-day thoughts, events and reflections on the past are interchanged with presentation of the author's past writings which provoke these reflections. It is the recording of her personal history as a writer, and part of the game is that the writer-protagonist is part Duranti (they are her own short stories) and part fictional character, Teodora Francia. Her status 'as a writer' is a problem tackled in the opening. In addition to the question of borrowed identity in the form of the names of two husbands, there are the names identifying her literary works, and nicknames attached to her at various points in her life. The result is a composite identity, made up of different women in different contexts. These identities assemble around two poles of 'scrivere' and 'vivere' - life as a writer and life as a woman - and again, a compromise is sought.

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[30] Francesca Duranti, *Ultima stesura* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1991).

The stories themselves contain many of the themes of the other novels: triangles of desire, intrafamilial and intersexual relationships, the culture industry, writing. As the 'novel' proceeds, the italicized interventions of the author as self-editor become increasingly frequent and her individual consciousness begins to emerge in the 'fictions' as well as in the commentary. This is acknowledged in the opening of the seventh story: '*Il settimo racconto è autobiografico e non ha titolo. Potrebbe anche essere scritto in corsivo*' (p. 133; italics in text). 'Vivere' thus infuses 'scrivere', but this is experienced not as the sought-after compromise, but as a destructive wrangle. 'Scrivere', as in *Effetti personali*, signifies the self, establishes identity, writes the 'I'; but it is only a provisional 'I', borrowed from the 'neutral' (male) subject, and associated with the alien name which appears on the book cover and covers the gap of female identity. The 'I' which is familiar is the domestic one, which goes by someone else's name and never expresses itself in writing. In a more complex, feminized version of the creation parable described in *La casa*, *Ultima stesura* charts the growth ('stesura' in Italian gives the sense of spreading something out) of writing: the woman creates and nurtures an entity which reciprocally empowers and nurtures her, but to the exclusion of others. The suggestion is that ideally, in isolation, this relationship could sustain the woman totally, but on being forced into a social context it is seen to be narcissistic and solipsistic. It is a specifically feminine image of mother-child 'self'-sufficiency - a natural symbiosis which pre-dates and resists socialization.

There are Lacanian resonances to this picture of the pre-Symbolic order, when the child and mother still correspond in a-social or pre-social bliss.[31] This interpretation is borne out by a specific image in the early stories in this 'novel', in which the threshold between the two worlds of 'scrivere' and 'vivere' is a mirror. Each time the narrator leaves her study to greet her husband and son returning home, she looks at herself briefly in the mirror. Lacanian theory identifies the 'mirror stage' in a child's development as the passage from the Imaginary order to the Symbolic, that is, from the pre-linguistic identification with the mother to the linguistic order where individual subjecthood is recognized for the first time, and with it, the need to express and differentiate oneself: the 'nom du père' introduces language, hence communication, hence socialization. It is the 'nom du père', introducing sexual differentiation, and a Lacanian word-play produces the 'non du père', the prohibitions which socialization entails, or patriarchal law.

This theory has clear connections with Duranti's conception of the difference between 'scrivere' and 'vivere'. Her writing is her private being: she is enclosed in the womb-like space of her private room and of her creative consciousness. It is not a pre-linguistic space because she is writing; but she is writing pre-publication, in a language which precedes the 'nom du père' - the adoption of the 'I' which is not hers. Hence the significance of the title - this is the work in the last stages of its 'Imaginary' state, before it becomes public and published in the 'Symbolic' order. The tension between the stories and the commentary is a questioning of the Imaginary and Symbolic, worrying at the distinction between writing subjects . This is the

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[31] See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966).

interpretation of her passing 'through the looking-glass' in the terms of 'scrivere'. In the terms of 'vivere', the theory still functions. The most mundane interpretation of her mirror-glance, checking if she looks 'all right', is the reflex acknowledgement of the pressure to conform to masculine standards of feminine significance. She perceives her son to be part of her (in the 'Imaginary' order), but her husband is an adversary: 'Marco invece è fuori di me, diverso da me, misterioso, inquietante' (p. 50).

Having tried alternative 'modi di vivere' as the work progresses, the author-protagonist tries another 'modo di scrivere', by starting an affair with a bestselling writer, Attilio Radi. Disgusted by his incestuous desire for his sister and by his formulaic production of bestsellers, she wants to see him use his perverted passion as a stimulus for more exciting writing, thinking that what she lacks as a writer is a 'drago infernale' which seems the prerequisite for great literature. He fails to do this, so she decides to appropriate it to her own ends. The reptilian image is implicitly phallic, and refers to Radi's sexual desire, conveying a clear sense that she thinks that to write successfully she needs to write 'as a man'.[32] This literary version (subversion?) of penis-envy leads her nowhere, and she decides that 'scrivere' and 'vivere' are irreconcilable:

> *Non posso vivere senza scrivere. Non posso scrivere senza vivere. Non posso vivere e scrivere contemporaneamente....Vivere vuol dire lasciarsi prendere dalle cose, immergersi; scrivere vuol dire starne fuori, con un cannocchiale, un microscopio o magari una lorgnette.* (p. 161; italics in text)

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[32] See Stefania Lucamante, 'Intervista a Francesca Duranti', in *Quaderni d'italianistica*, 15 (1994), 247-55. Duranti refers twice in this relatively brief interview to 'il fatto che la mia mamma non mi voleva bene' (p. 249), attributing her writing skills to negative experiences such as this. It is interesting that the ugly source of good writing in *Ultima stesura* has masculine qualities, whereas in her own life it is a specifically feminine issue.

This seems superficially to contradict the Lacanian interpretation above, but ultimately confirms it. 'Vivere' is what she does naturallly, as herself, as a woman. 'Scrivere' requires that she stand outside herself, in the 'I' of the publishable writing subject, which does not belong to her. It is the impossibility of being at once inside and outside oneself (speaking Cavarero's 'foreign' language) which this text dramatizes. Yet the text has been written; yet again, only in 'draft' form. Writing as she lives, as a woman, is possible in so far as it remains in a private space. When it enters the 'Symbolic' order, as the complete, published text, then it becomes problematic.

The novel ends in loneliness, rejection and a suicidal vision, in which she throws herself off a balcony and wheels through the air with the symmetry displayed in the cartwheels she remembers performing as a child at the beach. This is reminiscent of the 'commedia' within the 'tragedia' at the end of *Effetti personali*. It is a vision of desperation in which the narrative crumbles into stream of consciousness, ending in quotation of Molly Bloom's final words in *Ulysses*:

> *...e mentre la ruota si staccherà dal balcone prima girando lentamente, poi sempre più veloce come un fuoco artificiale, se ne avrò il tempo sì dirò sì voglio Sì*. (p. 164; italics in text)

The cyclical, wheeling motion is a specifically feminine image, endorsed by the orgasmic repetition. Whether we interpret this as hysteria (etymologically, a female condition), or 'jouissance', it is a profoundly feminine ending: repetitive and unpunctuated, conveying meaning by rhythm and sound, rather than by logical explanation, it is explicitly anti-phallogocentric. The repetition of 'sì' imparts a decisively positive note: her answer to the question of whether 'scrivere' and 'vivere'

can be reconciled? Perhaps yes: if a way to write 'as a woman' can be found (and Woolf's 'stream of consciousness' is one model).[33]

Progetto Burlamacchi[34]

By contrast with this dense and nuanced exploration of writing and femininity, Duranti's final novel in the period of my research seems rather empty. It merits discussion because in it the writer musters the piecemeal suggestions of a more mainstream type of 'impegno' which are present in earlier novels (chiefly, *Effetti personali*). The novel aims to be a critique of the Italy of the early 1990s, exposing not only the entrenched, historical corruption which 'Tangentopoli' made public, but also the hypocrisy of 'Tangentopoli' itself, which she views as a media spectacle engineered by the same sort of practices which sustained the system it claims to call into crisis. Unlike De Carlo (*Arcodamore*), she makes no explicit reference to 'Tangentopoli' itself, preferring to create an allegory in which the original of a statue of Christ, endowed through a miracle on the cathedral of Lucca in the Ninth Century, only to disappear in medieval times and be replaced by a fake, is found by a teenage boy, Ruggero, in his decrepit family home. Aided by a school teacher who has developed a computer programme which re-writes history on the basis of alternative choices or outcomes at critical moments; by media figures of varying degrees of cynicism who latch on to the story; and by his mother, grandmother and sister, themselves each involved for very different reasons, he aims to stage a modern miracle. In restoring the lost statue to the city, whilst exploiting the persuasive

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[33] I make references to English-language literature advisedly: Duranti herself, in interviews, asserts that the use of language in 'Anglo-Saxon' literature is a model Italian writers should aspire to (e.g. Lucamante, p. 250), and she cites as authors who influence her style Henry James, Joyce, Austen.
[34] Francesca Duranti, *Progetto Burlamacchi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1994).

capacity of the media, he aims to restore 'faith' to contemporary society (a secular faith inculcating a civic morality).

The project fails. The message is that the 'new' moral fortitude of the 'Tangentopoli' generation is ephemeral and insincere. The only proselyte in the novel is the male television presenter, Alvise Furlanetto, whose consciousness comes to dominate the narrative. Attracted to the 'progetto' merely as a scoop, his cynicism is turned to faith by the dedication of the others involved, and it is he who manages the staging of the 'miracle'.[35] By the end of the novel, he is no longer one of the country's most popular presenters, but is marginalized on late-night shows on obscure networks, because of his reforming zeal.

This is an ethically-correct, and 'committed', attempt to address the issues of a specific moment in Italian society, forcing a historical re-assessment upon which to base a prospective resolve to change. This is 'strong thought' and I think contemporary readers are conditioned to resist it.[36] Fragments of 'impegno' are palatable, but block instructions on how to think, or re-think, are hard to swallow.[37] 'Strong' thought is also associated with phallogocentrism, and the dominance of a male consciousness in the narrative, whose aim is to seduce a whole society into thinking as he does, only

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[35] In a self-referential twist with overtones of Ballestra, the television programme which Furlanetto uses as a vehicle for his 'miracle' bears the title of Duranti's second novel, *Piazza, mia bella piazza.*

[36] Responding to different texts and contexts, Holub (see note 11) comes to a similar conclusion regarding the most recent Diotima projects: 'her propositions are perhaps an all too strong ethical program' (pp. 140-1), and 'Diotima's all too radically ethical story' (p. 141). The repetition is a measure of the anxiety which commitment seems to provoke in the current intellectual climate, and Holub evokes the 'safe' (but not desirable) possibility that Diotima's theory will prove 'conveniently colonizable by hegemonic transculturalism' (p. 141).

[37] A comparison between Tabucchi's suggestive association of present and past in *Sostiene Pereira* (published in the same year as *Progetto Burlamacchi*) and Duranti's heavy-handed medieval allegory, illustrates my point.

toughens the reader's resistance. There is potentially here an inverted allegory of 'impegno': an individual with authority cannot exploit this power to convert an 'audience' to his way of thinking. If this is what Duranti is suggesting (nudging at Berlusconi), then the novel could be saying something original about commitment, about communication, and also perhaps about the remnants of patriarchal dominance. Unfortunately, the rigid and over-styled allegory stifles such questions.

Conclusions

Drawing these three women writers together, I think it is possible to trace an alternative process of fragmentation, a parallel text to the narrative of commitment in recent 'men's' or mainstream writing. All these writers are themselves part of the mainstream, and all of them have something to say about a 'neutral' commitment to political issues. Sanvitale revisits history, placing her stories in the context of History and commenting critically to varying degrees on social development. Ramondino takes a more specific sounding of history, highlighting regional issues and examining the phenomenon of the student movement. Duranti dialogues sporadically with contemporary history, even though in *Progetto Burlamacchi* she approaches this via medieval history.

For all of them, this gender-free, general commentary on society runs parallel with a concern with women's issues. A parallel process of fragmentation can be identified, in that Sanvitale approaches women's issues in the most feminist (i.e. ideological or militant) way. Ramondino's approach is a slightly watered-down version of the same. Duranti, whilst lacing her texts with interesting suggestions of

feminist theory, superficially presents issues relevant to contemporary women in their everyday lives - less feminist than feminine, or, as already suggested, less Irigaray than *Marie-Claire*. At the same time, she balances male and female characters in her texts, presenting a community of men and women who generally fail to communicate successfully, but nevertheless aim to co-exist, unlike the men and women in Sanvitale's novels, who seem to exist in spite of each other.

I would not presume to try to define the 'post-feminist', but I think that Duranti probably paves the way for it, and its realization comes in the works of younger writers such as Capriolo and Ballestra, who seem to dissolve gender almost without trace.[38] They do not reject or neglect feminism, but rather pick it up piecemeal and play with it in the postmodern pastiche of theories, genres, texts and ideas which constitutes their (otherwise very different) works. The capacity to be objective about feminism is what Duranti introduces, I think. Sanvitale and Ramondino seem passionate about women's issues and ways of writing 'as women', in the way that 'scrittori impegnati' of the post-war period were passionate about communism and neorealism.[39] Duranti edges towards a dispassionate attitude which Ballestra and Capriolo perfect. Sanvitale and Ramondino experience a clear gender difference, which Duranti 'defers' and the younger writers turn into indifference.

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[38] Wood (1993) records that Capriolo 'will not hear of her work being considered "women's writing"' (p. 19). An example of Capriolo's dissolution of identity is *Il doppio regno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1991).
[39] The discrepancy in dates is explained by the later emergence of feminism. The move from wholehearted to mitigated commitment in the mainstream takes fifty years, whilst feminism experienced an accelerated evolution from tidal wave to 'riflusso' which is demonstrable even within the limited date-span of this thesis.

PART IV: CHAPTER EIGHT

IMMIGRANT WRITING IN ITALIAN: A FRAGILE ENTERPRISE

Immigrants are, as I said at the beginning of the previous chapter, an example of a social group who may well have an axe to grind by means of writing. Absent from the 'impegno' debate at its origins, immigrants are in a sense the new 'underclass': whilst Vittorini and others worried about the social and cultural inclusion of the working class, the group perhaps most strikingly excluded from the community in contemporary Italy is, precisely, the *extracomunitari*.[1] In political and literary terms, they appear along no 'fault line': they are part of a socio-cultural phenomenon new to Italy in the 1980s,[2] and their creative influences are, as I shall demonstrate, complex. In this way their work functions as a counterpoint to the re-interpretations of commitment that I have discussed elsewhere in this thesis: a zero-degree distillation of issues about writing and politics against which to test the compounds of issues which other writers carry forward. To use their work merely to illuminate the work of 'indigenous' writers would be, however, to colonize their creativity and silence their protest. Whilst exposing critically work by other writers, writing by immigrants is also an isolated instance, in the contemporary context, of literature with a manifest and urgent socio-political referent - a literature which hopes to bring about change. Rather than being situated on a fault line, immigrant writing is perhaps better expressed as an island

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[1] The term *extracomunitari* refers, of course, to individuals from countries which are not members of the European Union (ex European Community), but this draws attention to the fact that they are doubly excluded, from the immediate, Italian, social community, and from the larger politico-economic bloc.

[2] For details, see Jacqueline Andall, 'New Migrants, Old Conflicts: The Recent Immigration into Italy', *The Italianist*, 10 (1990), 151-74. See also Vanessa Maher, 'Immigration and Social Identities', in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. by David Forgacs & Robert Lumley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 160-77 (p. 161). She records that at the end of 1992, 57.3% of foreign residents in Italy were from non-European developing countries.

produced by the shifts in the continental plates which the fault lines mark.

The overwhelming impression derived from these texts written by immigrants in Italy is one of fragility. First, the fragility of their existence as immigrants in a European country, where they must live in a no-man's land (they are predominantly men)[3] just beyond the confines of the law, of the economy and of the community. As immigrant writers, their fragility is accentuated (almost literally) by the precariousness of expressing themselves in a no-man's language; a language not their own but adopted piecemeal in order to be able to communicate with its native speakers. Hence this rather fragile 'canon' of texts, a self-selecting canon comprised of the only works I can find published by African immigrant writers.[4] They total seven and were all published between 1990 and 1995, by different publishing houses and with different emphases ranging from sociological enquiry to novelistic fantasy.

Interpretation of such hybrid texts is a fragile enterprise partly because they span genres, but also because of the post-colonial discomfort provoked by attempting to apply established critical strategies to texts whose origins are unfamiliar. Of course, comparative study of literature by 'third-world' authors,[5] written in or translated into

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[3] Although women make up at least fifty per cent of the immigrant population in Italy (see Maher), none has written about her experiences, as far as I know. Of the sixteen 'witnesses' whose accounts are transcibed in the collection, *La terra in faccia* (see below), eight are women. The history of women's immigration into Italy is longer than that of men, but they have generally been brought into domestic service, so that their knowledge of the Italian language remains limited.

[4] I found an initial list of works published by immigrant writers in Gian Paolo Biasin, 'Gelato e peperoncino', *Forum Italicum*, 29 (1995), 103-13. More recent works were brought to my attention when I contacted the publishers of the texts on the original list.

[5] 'First' and 'third' worlds - like terms such as 'west'/'western', 'developing'/'developed' - carry a history of meanings which makes them problematic. To attempt to define 'correctly' what they signify would be to compound the confusion, so I shall use them as the expedients they are, but with inverted commas to indicate their inadequacy and acknowledge the arguments around them.

European languages, is nothing new, but the case of these particular texts in Italian is different. The writing is a new phenomenon (the blurb for Salah Methnani's *Immigrato* describes it as 'il primo racconto sul mondo degli immigrati visto dall'interno'), it reflects an actual social reality (the massive influx of North African immigrants into Italy in the late 1980s), and expresses a special relationship between Italy and the Maghreb countries. There is no specific colonial history behind this relationship: it is a contemporary bond formed of geographical proximity, cultural links (Italian television channels are received in North Africa) and, in the south, shared climatic and economic conditions.[6] Italy is, in a sense, a buffer zone between 'first' and 'third' worlds, the first landing stage across the Mediterranean. The issues of post-colonial criticism are background issues in relation to a very specific inter-cultural experience in the foreground.

The fragility of the enterprise of the critic in this context is reflected in the paucity of secondary material on the subject. Analysis of francophone immigrant writing provides useful points of comparison, but does not illuminate the Italian situation with any precision. Armando Gnisci appears to be the only critic in Italy paying serious attention to these writers.[7] He approaches the texts from the perspective of a comparative critic, concentrating on a Steiner-esque philosophical overview of the 'phenomenon', rather than on detailed and individual textual analysis. Such an

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[6] Andall makes the point that the comparatively limited colonial influence of Italy in the 'third world' has resulted in a lower rate of immigration than countries such as France and Britain, but that the general experience of colonialism nevertheless conditions the attitude of Italians towards immigrants (p. 152).

[7] Gnisci teaches comparative literature at La Sapienza University, Rome. He edits the journal *I quaderni di Gaia*, and has published three volumes on this topic, *noi* [sic] *altri europei* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991), *Il rovescio del gioco* (Rome: Sovera, 1993), and *Creoli meticci migranti clandestini e ribelli* (Rome: Meltemi, 1998). All further references are to *Il rovescio del gioco*.

approach generates some useful general principles, to which I shall refer, but obliterates the textual differences between the various works, which, in my opinion, are fundamental to any understanding of the significance of these texts within contemporary Italian literature.

The fragility of the primary texts is made apparent by the paratextual scaffolding which is used to support them. All but one were written in Italian, but they have dual authorship or are edited, transcribed, or simply introduced by another, Italian, writer/commentator.[8] The exception is Mohsen Melliti, whose first novel, *Pantanella*, is presented by a North African francophone writer, Rachid Boudjedra, and is a translation from the original Arabic, and whose second, *I bambini delle rose*, carries no paratext. Superficially, this sanctioning of the texts seems a reversal of the centre/margin power balance: the immigrant element who is marginalized in society is made central in the text, whilst the native accustomed to having a central voice is made marginal. What appears to be a reversal may well, however, be a reinforcement, in that the commentator is implicitly privileged with an authority which weakens that of the author. The journalists and editors who collaborate in these works seem to feel a need to justify their publication by spelling out their significance.

A positive interpretation of the paratextual content of these works rests on an exploration of the meanings of introduction in a social context. Gnisci dedicates a large part of *Il rovescio del gioco* to an exploration of the notion of hospitality. Risking a

[8] The practice of having an established writer endorse or introduce the work of a new one is common in Italian publishing (e.g. Calvino and De Carlo), but in the case of these immigrant writers, the involvement of the 'patron', rather than being a comment on the completed text, is generally instrumental in the production of the work.

rather suspect essentialism, he reaches into the Maghreb nomadic tradition of hospitality, a reciprocal concept which incorporates the notion of hospitability. Host and guest equally have the responsibility to make themselves materially and spiritually open to the other, and the right to depend upon the other's respect for his/her own integrity. From this premiss, Gnisci elaborates a useful definition of hospitality as a process of negotiation, in which difference, in a deconstructionist sense, is not a fixed, bipolar opposition but a continual shifting of perspectives. Interpreted thus, the introductions to the works by immigrants are the locus of inter-cultural negotiation, where author and reader are invited into a dialogue with the 'other' (Italian or African), previously considered incomprehensible, while the editors/commentators act as interpreters.

The approach of the commentator predisposes the reader to a certain reception of these texts. For example, Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Dove lo Stato non c'è* and Pap Khouma's *Io, venditore di elefanti* are both introduced by journalists (Egi Volterrani and Oreste Pivetta respectively), and *Dove lo Stato non c'è* and Salah Methnani's *Immigrato* are described in the editorial commentary as originally journalistic projects. Attention is therefore drawn to the chronicle aspect of the narrative. *La terra in faccia*, a collection of autobiographical accounts, is framed with statistical data and analysis of immigrant life in Genova, and so becomes a sociological document rather than a collection of short stories. In *La promessa di Hamadi*, the text, peppered with footnotes, is followed by eighty-six pages of data including a glossary of terms, demographic information, interviews and exercises based on the narrative, thus making it an 'edizione scolastica' rather than a novel. The framing is not necessarily a distortion of the effect of the

original narrative, but it emphasizes the hybrid potential of these texts: they are all fundamentally narratives of a specific life experience, and can become not just stories but also histories, diaries, or testimonies.

Finally, the implications of writing in a foreign language must be considered. If a writer makes the effort to use another's language to express himself, entailing the use of an interpreter, it must mean that he is not writing in a void, but intends to elicit a response from a language-specific community. Although the texts themselves may not seem radical, as an immigrant, implicitly an intruder, to appropriate the language of the host country in order to analyse its society is a potentially subversive move.[9]

The Texts

I have considered these texts as a group because of their 'lowest common denominator'of being texts by immigrant writers. Beyond this, the texts are very distinct from one another.[10] In this section, I shall discuss in detail those which use the experience of immigration as the basis for creating a novel in its own right, excluding those which are concerned chiefly with the sociological phenomenon - that is, *La terra in faccia* and *La promessa di Hamadi*.[11] I shall describe briefly Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Dove lo Stato non c'è*, and Pap Khouma's *Io, venditore di elefanti*, but the main part of

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[9] Chinua Achebe, a Ugandan writer, captures this potential when he warns, 'Let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it'. See his essay, 'Colonialist Criticism', in *Literature and The Modern World*, ed. by Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 271-79 (p. 274).

[10] The authors are all African, but of different nationalities. Ben Jelloun is Moroccan; Methnani and Melliti, Tunisian; Khouma and Moussa Ba, Senegalese. *La terra in faccia* contains accounts by immigrants from a global variety of countries, identified only by their nationality.

[11] Giuliano Carlini (ed.), *La terra in faccia* (Rome: Ediesse, 1991); P. A. Micheletti & Saidou Moussa Ba, *La promessa di Hamadi* (Novara: Istituto Geografico De Agostini, 1991).

this chapter will be a detailed analysis of the works by Methnani and Melliti, which are the most interesting texts in this group, and those most relevant to the issues raised elsewhere in this thesis. In conclusion, I shall consider these writers in the context of contemporary Italian narrative.

Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Dove lo Stato non c'è*[12]

Ben Jelloun is set apart from the other authors under consideration because he is already an established literary figure.[13] He is part of a firmly-rooted tradition of writing about and from the Maghreb in France, and translations of his works (and others) represent the adoption of this tradition in Italy. Suggested by the editor of *Il Mattino* and published by Einaudi, who already publish Ben Jelloun in translation, the project of *Dove lo Stato non c'è* is sanctioned by the literary industry. The short stories recount not a struggle for survival in a foreign country, driven by necessity, but an expenses-paid journalistic assignment, driven by curiosity.[14]

It is interesting that the Italian newspaper imports an outsider, even a 'double' outsider (a Moroccan long resident in France) to analyse domestic problems, as if indigenous or 'western' eyes are so accustomed to the manifestations of endemic problems, such as corruption, that they cannot perceive them clearly. This is the boldest instance of something which writing by younger immigrants touches upon: the

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[12] Tahar Ben Jelloun & Egi Volterrani, *Dove lo Stato non c'è: Racconti italiani* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991).
[13] See Jacqueline Kaye (ed.), *Maghreb: New Writing from North Africa* (York: Talus Editions & University of York, 1992): 'The most famous and most translated Maghrebian is Tahar Ben Jelloun who has not lived in the Maghreb since childhood and who is an unashamed compiler of myths and clichés about Moroccan life more suited to a tourist handbook - yet he sells well' (p. 7).
[14] Egi Volterrani refers to the project in his introduction as 'un'indagine nel Sud d'Italia', although he claims that it is not journalistic, but 'finalizzata a una produzione letteraria'(p. VI).

critique of Italian society developed by seeing it through the eyes of an outsider. The wide-eyed observer sees the rough underbelly of Italian economic success, and, more generally, of 'first world' consumerism. What is 'north', 'developed', 'first world', is revealed to be, in places, as 'south', 'under-developed', 'third world' as the geographical south. The immigrants, referring to the direction of their migration, see the east/west difference (perhaps a 'western' concept) in terms of south/north, as if being born somewhere north of an ill-defined and shifting 'equator' - which, ironically, underlines inequality - endows the individual with the birthright of prosperity. The 'mito del Nord' is a glittering mirage, slipping further into the distance as the immigrant crosses geographical, then economic and cultural, deserts.

The immigration issue is incorporated into Ben Jelloun's study in a story entitled 'Villa Literno'. This is a town referred to in most of these novels, being 'home' to thousands of immigrant workers, mostly Tunisian, during the tomato harvest. It is the place where, in August 1989, an immigrant was shot dead during a robbery by locals, a key event in the history of immigration in Italy. Ben Jelloun's story stresses that racism is a product of the environment created by a neglectful government. The presence of strangers exacerbates existing problems for which they become scapegoats, but the blame rests with 'lo Stato', which created such an environment. In this way, Ben Jelloun subsumes the immigration issue into the general question of the 'mezzogiorno' and makes it an Italian issue. He reinforces his position as an outside commentator, but denies his cultural specificity.

The final story of the collection, 'Pietro il matto, Pietro il saggio', contains an

affirmation of Maghreb culture. Pietro, an itinerant story-teller, pays tribute to the tradition of North African story-tellers, particularly Moha, the cultural archetype.[15] He repeats the instructions a Moroccan story-teller told him: 'Mi ha detto: "Pietro! [...] La nostra parola non deve essere né amara né triste. Deve dire la verità e insegnarci a rompere il silenzio" ' (p. 185). An unembellished account of reality is equated with resistance and action, compared with a pervasive silence which preserves a pernicious status quo. Ben Jelloun, from his privileged position, thus acknowledges kinship with a strain of immigrant literature which aims to create a response by recounting life stories, rather than elaborating complex fictions upon a political agenda.

Pap Khouma, *Io, venditore di elefanti*[16]

Khouma's narrative can be read as paradigmatic of immigrant experience. It is outward-looking, practical, and stylistically economical, as the opening lines suggest: 'Vengo dal Senegal. Ho fatto il venditore e vi racconterò che cosa mi è successo' (p. 11). Of all these texts, this account represents the most thorough exposition of the breadth of the experience of being an immigrant in Europe. Khouma sets his own odyssey in the context of the migration of an entire sector of the west African population, presenting himself as spokesperson, in the ordinary sense of the term.[17] This community consciousness allows him to describe in more detail than others the solidarity amongst immigrants, and the political initiatives which this produces, and his

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[15] Monia Hejaiej, *Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunis* (London: Quartet Books, 1996) gives details in her introduction of the tradition of the professional male story-teller who makes a living from narrating in public places. Pietro identifies himself with his Moroccan counterpart, Moha, and sees their role as that of a social commentator: each recounts 'le ferite del suo paese' (p. 184).
[16] Pap Khouma, *Io, venditore di elefanti: Una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano*, ed. by Oreste Pivetta (Milan: Garzanti, 1990).
[17] I shall examine a more complex use of a spokesperson in the narrative when discussing Melliti's *Pantanella*.

tone is militant: 'Abbiamo imparato a farci sentire, a spiegare perché siamo in Italia, a sostenere le nostre rivendicazioni, le nostre proteste' (p. 130). The novel ends, in a chapter entitled 'Bambini', with a vision of the future in which generations of Senegalese and other immigrants will be an established sector of a multi-ethnic Italian society.

This work is probably the least 'literary' of the novels by immigrants. There is no exploration of the imagination, or of the act of story-telling, as there is in Melliti's and Methnani's work. There is some attention to the psychological effects of the immigration experience, but this is explanatory rather than introspective, and there is little analysis of the implications of immigration. In a sense, the particular type of collaboration in this textual enterprise has created a particular type of text. A journalist transcribes the testimony of an immigrant: it is more concerned with fact than with fiction. Compare this to the partnerships which produce Methnani's *Immigrato* and Melliti's *Pantanella*: in the first, a novelist assists the writer by reviewing the original text, concentrating on the wordcraft rather than the facts.[18] *Pantanella* is translated from a complete novel by the author, and introduced by a fellow novelist. If it is possible to talk about the ownership of texts or of stories, then I would say that Methnani and Melliti are the owners and authors of their personal stories and of the texts which derive from them, whereas Khouma and Pivetta release Khouma's story from his personal experience and lease it out for general public use.

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[18] According to the publishers, the text was 'rivisto dopo' by Fortunato, i.e. the latter's involvement was corrective rather than creative.

For all these reasons, *Io, venditore di elefanti* is perhaps the most overtly 'political' of these texts. It stamps the political issue directly onto the page, and derives its existence as a text from precisely this action, rather than from any imaginative engagement with the reader. Whereas Methnani's and Melliti's texts suggest and work to create an 'ideal reader', Khouma's ideal is to address a readership, in journalistic style. I am attributing these intentions to Khouma, but it may be Pivetta who is their source. Presumably with the best of intentions, he is using Khouma to make a political point which he feels is urgent. He acknowledges this in his introduction: '*Pensai che sarebbe stato giusto fare qualcosa, magari scrivendo, per denunciare, attraverso le voci di quei ragazzi, le responsabilità del nostro Paese e qualsiasi atteggiamento razzista*' (p. 8; italics in text). The spokesperson of the immigrant population is also Pivetta's spokesperson. One speaks, one writes, but is one manipulating another?[19]

Another factor which contributes to the 'unliterary' quality of this work is clearly a result of its being a transcription of a spoken account: it is not well-written. It is unengaging and at times incoherent, and does not have the self-defining inner 'logic' which unifies even the most unconventional novel. It is tempting to question why it has been published, and indeed re-printed five times. The answer, I think, is Garzanti. The endorsement of one of the major publishing houses, and the involvement of a well-known journalist, endow it with instant authority. Published in September 1990, it is one of the first two texts by immigrants to appear (*Immigrato* came out in the same

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[19] Writing on literature of the 1980s by Turkish 'Gastarbeiter' in Germany, Arlene Akiko Teraoka describes a similar struggle for control over immigrants' texts, whereby all claims made about them, even by 'sympathetic' commentators, are strategic and political. 'Gastarbeiterliteratur' is, she says, 'contested territory'. See Abdul Janmohamed & David Lloyd (eds), *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 299.

month), and this precocity could be interpreted cynically as an attempt by Garzanti to propagate a new publishing trend. As approximately the first expression of a situation demanding attention, this documentary work merits publication, but in terms of the literature of immigration, Methnani and Melliti are by far the more rewarding writers.

Salah Methnani, *Immigrato*[20]

Salah Methnani's novel traces a journey up and down the Italian peninsula, and, as Gnisci points out, this is the reverse of the standard westerner's journey through Italy, from north to south.[21] Methnani encounters the seemingly uncivilized and undemocratic south before he proceeds, disillusioned, to the centres of consumerism and wealth. The intention of moving on is rarely expressed, rather a new chapter opens in a new city, with a sense of dislocation and inevitable provisionality. The titles of the chapters of the novel constitute a bald list of names of eight Italian cities, which traces a loop between the opening and closing chapters situated in Tunisian cities, whose names in the titles are preceded by the preposition 'a', denoting a sense of placement, to contrast with the relentless displacement of the narrator's sojourn in Italy.

Noting the psychological significance of his journey, Methnani comments, 'ho pensato che risalire l'Italia corrispondeva, nella mia personale geografia, a una discesa nel Sud di me stesso' (p. 42). The author traces a personal quest for maturity and approaches the phenomenon of mass immigration as a psychological as well as a socio-economic issue. He draws attention on the first page of the novel to a fundamental

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[20] Mario Fortunato & Salah Methnani, *Immigrato* (Rome: Theoria, 1990). Previous to this, Methnani published a translation of short stories by Mohamed Choukri: *Il folle delle rose* (Rome: Theoria, 1989).
[21] Gnisci, 1993, p. 25.

sense of homelessness which has its roots in his childhood, involving his parents' separation and his own education at a distant 'collegio'. He describes the effect of this isolation: 'Ci sentivamo in una specie di esilio, in un limbo' (p. 9). The link between being exiled from the family and exiled from the home country is emphasized, complicating any easy equation between emigration and a sense of not belonging. As Melliti also demonstrates, emigration/immigration is a state of mind as much as a political status.

The novel begins and ends in Tunisia in the company of the author's father, who inspires in his son an interest in Italy and sanctions his departure, then receives him on his return to assess the effects of the experience. Methnani is drawn to Italy initially by its language. This sound, rather than any rational cultural or economic reason, implants in him an ambition to go to Italy: 'in quell'anno, per la prima volta, sentii parlare dell'Italia. A dire la verità, non sentii parlare proprio dell'Italia: sentii l'italiano' (p. 9). The Italian language retains its quality of a spell as the child matures: phrases from old films seen on RAI television punctuate his thoughts, though he has no idea of their meaning; his first experience of Italy itself is a brief, wonderful, ferry trip to Sicily, where he visits museums and churches. In this way, Methnani makes it clear that the 'mito del Nord / dell'Occidente' genuinely develops as a myth. It is not just a socio-economic ideal which attracts the ambitious adult in a 'developing' country, but a system of ideals constituting an entire alternative mode of being, which is suggested to the individual at an early age, and in which he invests his faith (it does seem to be all men in this case).

As this suggests, there is here a twist to the equation between working class and immigrant 'class' which I posited in my introductory comments. Methnani clearly comes from a privileged background, and sees his emigration not as the chance to scrape together a living which he cannot hope to find at home, but rather to use and broaden his skills and knowledge in a society different from his own, but for which he feels well-prepared. His is a parody of the traditional world tour of the educated, European, young man, intended to bring maturity and self-knowledge through interaction with foreign cultures. Rather than being 'character-building', the trip charts the gradual disintegration of the character's integrity as an educated, cultured, literature graduate into a faceless immigrant whose existence is either denied, or considered excessive. As the title of the novel indicates, this is the story of an/any immigrant. The European class system is sufficiently powerful and self-determining to annul any class privileges which the immigrant may bring with him, rendering all incomers equal as 'out-castes'. The immigrant experiences the irony within 'western' liberal democracy.

As their self-esteem collapses, the immigrants begin to drink, to brawl, and, in some cases, to steal and deal in drugs. The first time this happens, Methnani notes that, as he and two other Tunisians become more drunk and argumentative, they abandon their native Arabic: 'Per qualche strano motivo, invece che in arabo, comunichiamo in italiano. Il che sembra sottolineare il carattere sconnesso e sotterraneamente litigioso delle nostre parole' (p. 24). The foreign language seems in its essence to voice a feeling of dislocation (dislocution). Linguistically and psychologically speaking, they are 'not themselves'. A further cypher of this self-destruction is Methnani's abandonment of his fluent knowledge of Italian in favour of pidgin 'vu' cumprà'-speak, in order to be able

to sell to customers who expect linguistic incompetence.

The final chapter of *Immigrato*, entitled 'A Kairouan', closes the loop of the narrative by describing Methnani's first trip home to Tunisia, to recount his experiences to his father. Although the son is telling his story, the atmosphere is one of silence, and the conversation - a prompted monologue - takes place in darkness. The dynamics of the narrative relationship are illustrated by the following description of the father's tacit eloquence:

> I suoi movimenti silenziosi, misurati parevano suggerire una pausa, un bisogno di riflessione. Io allora tacevo per un poco. Il buio della sera, interrotto in lontananza dalle luci della città, in quegli istanti si gonfiava. Aveva una consistenza, una sua sonorità ondulata. Non so a che cosa pensasse mio padre. Non riuscivo neppure a scorgere l'espressione del suo viso. Avevo anzi l'impressione che ci tenesse a nascondersi. D'un tratto, lui diceva: 'Poi...'. Io riprendevo a raccontare. (p. 123)

This response is experienced by the son as a barrier, only to be crossed by means of his narrative. The story signifies an opportunity to create a relationship between the two men, and to re-create the individual from the story of the 'immigrato'. Methnani is explaining the life of an immigrant in Italy, but his father is listening between the lines to hear the story of his son. The immigrant story is one immense circumlocution, which animates and accentuates a silence where something fundamental is <u>not</u> being said. The 'moment of truth' is constantly deferred by the impetus of the narrative: a Derridean 'différance' is being enacted between the two men.[22]

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[22] Derrida identifies two tendencies of the term 'différance', one temporal and one spatial. The first refers to a suspension which delays the accomplishment of a desire; the second to a distance between subject and other. Language represents the present, the subject, in its absence from the site of utterance, and thus enacts a deferred presence. These ideas are a fraction of the whole Derridean 'différance' discussion but they illuminate usefully the tentative 'rapprochement' of father and son here, mitigated

The sense of deferral is stressed at the end of the novel: the closure seemingly imposed by the return to Tunisia is in fact a parenthesis. Describing Kairouan, Methnani explains that the word means 'encampment' in Arabic, and notes the air of provisionality which the city's construction imparts: 'Le sue case, la Medina, le strade, le piazze paiono, da un momento all'altro, dover riprendere il loro cammino' (p.127).[23] He arrives on market day, an event which accentuates the air of mobility in the city. The sense of movement which animates all these texts by immigrant writers prevails.

Mohsen Melliti, *Pantanella*[24]

As stated above, Melliti's first novel is the only one amongst these texts by immigrants in Italy which is translated from a manuscript written in the author's mother tongue. According to its Italian publishers, the text was read in its original version by an Italian editor and recommended for translation. They claim that it was never intended to be published in Arabic, and, although it has been impossible to verify this with the author, this claim seems reasonable, given that high rates of illiteracy and use of several dialects necessarily limit the readership of texts in classical Arabic. If then, the text was written to be translated, the intention of sending a 'message' to Italian speakers, or, at least, of bridging a cultural gap, is clear. The text cannot be bilingual, but it attempts to come as close as possible to being so, by using words and phrases in Arabic in the text, and by describing if not reproducing dialogues in other

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by words. See 'Différance', in Jacques Derrida, *Margins Of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 1-27.

[23] The word 'cammino', as the expression of an essentially nomadic existence, is crucial to Melliti's *I bambini delle rose.*

[24] Mohsen Melliti, *Pantanella: Canto lungo la strada* (Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 1993).

languages. In a sense, the printed words on the page are Italian, but the reader hears their reverberations in a plurality of languages.[25]

Rachid Boudjedra, in his introduction to this novel, emphasizes the immediacy of its link between the lived experience and the written page, and hints that it demands a different type of reading: 'E l'esperienza che Mohsen Melliti ha riversato sul foglio bianco è singolare e splendida perché si serve di una lettura povera per le questioni e le problematiche e di una lettura ingenua che divide l'umanità in buoni e cattivi' (p. 7). The 'ideal reader' of this text is a 'subsistence' reader, who will take from the text what it offers, rather than one who will exploit its thematic and stylistic features in order to extract the maximum intellectual profit. The author's 'intention', if any, is to disrobe the western reader of her cultural supplements (the Empire's clothes?) and teach her to read in another culture. This puts reader and characters on an equal footing, where they are each reading the 'other' (Boudjedra says 'questi personaggi spiano "l'altro", l'italiano' (p. 8)).[26] The text is a meeting-place of a number of strangers, amongst whom the reader is possibly 'strangest'.

An example of how the reader's literary assumptions are eroded is an image which recurs in Melliti's writing. I quote the first instance in *Pantanella*: 'I bicchieri erano come coppe piene d'acqua pura e fresca offerte a un viaggiatore nel deserto

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[25] The intrusion of Arabic into Italian, together with the use of slang, obscenities and violent language, is perhaps a linguistic expression of resistance. Such techniques are common in African francophone writing. See Laïla Ibnlfassi & Nicki Hitchcott (eds), *African Francophone Writing: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford & Washington: Berg, 1996), p. 4.

[26] Boudjedra has elsewhere coined the phrase 'voyageur-voyeur' to express the visual way in which the two cultures experience each other. The Orientalist traveller-observer has been superseded by the African assessing Europe, and the 'western' world is the curiosity. See chapter three of Ibnlfassi and Hitchcott.

infuocato dal caldo estivo, vuotate a grandi sorsi perché l'acqua non scappasse via' (p. 13). This simile may seem hackneyed and lame, but, pre-reading and prejudice put aside, if we try to map the figure to its original experience, then the simile comes to life.[27] It is more than just a cliché: it expresses the fundamental, literally vital importance of water. This point is reinforced when the immigrants succeed in digging down to the water main, in order to bring fresh, running water into the Pantanella building. This represents an important development in the life of the community, and the euphoric reaction to its discovery indicates that it has a profound psychological significance derived from its purely practical one.

Though Melliti describes a community made up of a wide variety of nationalities, and their struggle to establish themselves in Rome, 'la Pantanella', the old grocery warehouse where they have set up their community, is a metaphorical space as much as a physical one. It represents an alternative, mixed and provisional community which both emulates and mocks the well established society around it. Though the city of Rome surrounds the building, and there is a limited exchange of individuals - Romans coming into the community and immigrants going into Rome to seek work - 'città' in the narrative denotes not Rome but the Pantanella building and its community. This is where the immigrants can enjoy a sense of 'citizenship', with an unofficial and strictly limited 'permesso di soggiorno'.

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[27] 'We' and 'us', used generally in literary criticism, suggest complacency and élitism. However, in this context, to neutralize the difference between me and the immigrant writer I am discussing, and, by extension, between 'us', the European community, and 'them', the provisional multi-cultural community within it, is to deny the difference in which their writing finds its voice. I therefore use the pronouns wherever a cultural difference is operative.

The 'città' encapsulates its inhabitants' difference. Despite being a fixed point on the skyline of the city, this island of ethnicity is the site of an essential nomadism: everyone there is there temporarily, waiting to move on or return to where they came from, and their residence is precarious, threatened by police surveillance and raids which could make their subsistence unsustainable.[28] In one way, the immigrants' home represents an ideal community, in which people of multiple countries and continents perform a vital and active cultural exchange. The opening scene of the novel describes a 'united nations' of song:

> Un ritmo arabo e africano suonato su pentole da cucina. Un pakistano invitò un napoletano nel cerchio a ballare. Alle canzoni marocchine seguirono quelle algerine, tunisine, arabe, fino a quelle pakistane, indiane, africane e asiatiche. Era il mondo intero a cantare. (p. 14)

This utopia is ironized by its context, however. The ideal community exists upon the pre-condition that its members are excluded from the real community which surrounds it. The singing of songs expresses a difference which, under these circumstances, is exchanged willingly, but under everyday circumstances, is rejected.

Melliti uses several terms in referring to the inhabitants of the 'città', and these combine to convey the complexity of being an 'immigrant'. 'Immigrato', the most commonly used term, carries a sense of invasion, and, as a past participle, a sense of an action, a dis-placement, completed. The relationship implied is that between the established insider and the presumptuous outsider. 'Emigrato' carries a sense of extraction and switches the relationship to that between the exile and his/her home, whilst retaining the sense of finality rendered by the verb form. 'Emigrante' perhaps

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[28] The title and subtitle encapsulate the combination of stasis and movement. *Pantanella* denotes a fixed place, whereas *Canto lungo la strada* conveys the perpetual motion around this fixed point, and the importance of narrative ('canto') in this existence.

describes best the real status of these people, denoting both their sense of ex-clusion, and the seeming permanence of this condition, in that the verbal adjective, derived from the Latin present participle, renders the sense of an action still in process. This is also the closest term to 'migrante', which is the cultural identity of many of the North African characters at least. They are socio-economic migrants, who perpetuate a nomadic subsistence, constantly shifting habitat in search of a means to live. The modern difference is that this continuous displacement takes place in an alien continent, and in an alien economic reality. For this reason, they are not just 'migranti' but 'emigranti'.

The author stresses the intimate sense of displacement suffered by the immigrants through the self-exploration of Ahmad, an educated and socially conscious young immigrant who is the predominant 'io narrante'. He comments, 'In questo paese aveva la sensazione di non capire nulla' (p. 18). This is less a response to an alien language and culture than to a self-alienating psychological and philosophical disruption, whereby he feels his mental processes are inadequate to the challenge of understanding his situation:

> Ogni giorno aveva l'impressione che la logica non fosse in accordo con il suo obiettivo. Non conosceva quale fosse il vero mezzo per passare dall'altra sponda. A volte fuggiva le domande che lo straziavano con alcune risate tristi. Oppure scriveva poesia. (p. 19)

The 'altra sponda' as a symbol of escape and freedom, like the desert, is one which appears several times in this novel. Geographically, it is the other shore of the Mediterranean, and so is connected with the desert, as an image of the security and

familiarity of his own country. It is interesting, and characteristic, that on one page (p. 21), Melliti uses the image twice, to refer to opposite shores of the Mediterranean. At the top of the page, the 'altra sponda' is home, but this leads into a recapitulation of his thoughts and ambitions whilst he was there, and in voicing these, he reverses his perspective, making Italy the 'other side': 'Pensavo di viaggiare verso il paradiso terrestre, verso l'altra sponda del Mediterraneo' (p. 21). In this way, Melliti exploits the metaphorical potential of the circular, enclosed sea as the division between north and south, and all they seem to signify. The Mediterranean is the midriff where the continental body is split into Europe and Africa, and the positives and negatives of this division can be balanced. They are balanced, however, by deconstructing the opposition and demonstrating that the characteristics attributed to each side amount to no more than a projection of the desires felt on the other side, so that north and south can be switched, and the 'altra sponda' is more significant for its perceived alterity than for its physical existence as *terra firma*.

The narrative voices of the novel express a sort of nomadism, as they shift unprogrammatically from character to character, and from third to first person, occasionally addressing the reader as 'tu', or a collective 'voi'. If there is a central voice, it is that of Ahmad, but his voice dilates and contracts: from individual character, he periodically becomes spokesperson, chorus, narrator, author, even at times a much larger entity, speaking universally.[29] The narrator and Ahmad sometimes merge, where free indirect speech is used, but in other passages Ahmad's thoughts are

[29] Ahmad is in some ways an ideal Gramscian intellectual, 'voicing' individually the intellectual force of a community of more or less programmatic thinkers, of which he is an organic part. This is perhaps a naïve notion of the intellectual's role, which rejects the institutionalized role enforced by 'western' culture. The 'developing' community of the Pantanella is a utopia where such an intellectual can exist.

framed with speech marks, or simply narrated in the third person.

This dilation happens almost imperceptibly in the text. The best example is in chapter four, when the reader enters Ahmad's thoughts as he explores his memory of life in his home country. I quote the ensuing passage:

> Doveva fuggire...!
> Ma dove?
> Qui, in questo posto desolato, in queste notti estive che puzzano del **vostro** sudore, dove sent**ite** la mancanza di donne e di bambini non f**ate** altro che gettare boccate rabbiose di fumo [...]
> Ma and**ate** avanti! [...]
> Costru**ite** i vostri sogni di emigranti e part**ite** per un viaggio senza fine...
> (p. 55; emphasis added)

This demonstrates how the narrative voice seamlessly passes from the single character, Ahmad, to something larger and more general, whether it be the voice of the author, of the community, of the 'patria', of a god. After fourteen lines, this Voice is silenced, and the neutral narrator, unannounced, takes over, using the third person ('In quelle serate estive si riunivano per cercare di risolvere...'(p. 55)). This leads into a description of the community's political initiatives, and, interestingly, the second person plural is again used. This time, however, it is represented in speech marks, and the addresser and addressees are clearly identified. This is a worldly, political echo of the other-worldly, mystical voice of the preceding page.

The haphazard structure of the Pantanella building is, in a sense, the structure of the novel, delineating its narrative space. The structure is underpinned by the babelic chatter of its multi-national community, but its cracks are the reflective silences which dominate the narrative, and which impose upon it a discontinuous and disorienting

narrative line, propelled by an affective 'logic'. Silence, particularly at night-time, seems to be a container of stories, and the expression and exchange of these stories is a process which confirms and creates community. Melliti describes Ahmad and three friends gathering together one night as a meeting of nations: 'L'amicizia dominava quel tavolo: quattro persone, quattro mondi diversi...Ognuno portava con sé la storia del suo paese' (p. 43). The relationship between the silence they share and the stories they exchange is expressed as something beyond their control, as the following describes: 'All'improvviso Shirkhan iniziò a parlare, senza che nessuno sapesse il perché. Si mise a raccontare della guerra' (p. 43). There is almost a mystical sense that a divine Voice or Word is expressing itself through the vehicle of a human spokesperson, and in response, the story becomes the 'property' of the collective, with each listener adopting and nurturing the story in his own mind, even after the teller has fallen silent. This notion is embedded in oral culture, whereby the narrator-performer is the immediate source of a story whose 'origin' or 'authorship' is indefinable and immaterial.

Ritualistic narrative also dominates the end of the novel, when the Pantanella building burns down in a climax which implies simultaneously the fitting destruction of the site of a hellish experience and the regenerative cancellation of an old order to make way for the new. Melliti gives this event cosmic significance: the entire universe screams 'B A S T A!' as the conflagration takes hold; a choir of voices sings ('Erano molti, moltissimi' (p. 171)); and he recites a litany of names witnessing the burning. The apocalyptic vision culminates in a description of Ahmad throwing himself off a bridge, and the last lines of the narrative are: 'Prima di gettarsi Ahmad gridò o forse

cantò, aveva scritto un messaggio, ma non sapeva se lo aveva scritto per se stesso o per un amico che non era ancora arrivato' (p. 192). The suicidal leap seems to be a pre-condition of the transmission of meaning, liberating the text from the author's 'authority'. Ahmad's 'suicide' seems a programmed sacrifice, rather than a sudden act of desperation. What does all this mean?

The bewilderment we feel is expressed earlier in the novel by Ahmad's Italian girlfriend, Mary. She asks him to tell her about his girlfriend at home, and in response he tells her what sounds like a fable. She wants the facts, but he mythologizes the past, giving a hypothetical story of what might have happened to Suheyr. Melliti again allows the narrative to slip tantalizingly from the openly hypothetical ('Immaginati Suheyr in una cella...' (p. 142)) to the factual ('Mandarono questo rapporto in tribunale...'(p. 143)). A cultural chiasmus between Mary and Ahmad - represented in their assumptions about story-telling - is opened up. Ahmad is trying to demonstrate the validity of the possible, whereas for Mary, validity rests on the condition of empirical verifiability.

A similar breach perhaps explains Melliti's seemingly bizarre techniques. The variety of levels of narrative voices used, and the formulaic quality of the narrative, suggest a defined tradition. For obvious reasons, connected with literacy and mass-production of books, the oral tradition in North Africa is much less distant than it is in Europe.[30] Dropping assumptions about The Novel, as a European device for telling of

[30] Professional story-tellers (male) still practised in public places in Tunisia until the late 1960s. In an effort to 'modernize' the country, the government discouraged oral culture after independence in 1956, but a resurgence of oral culture began in the 1970s, under the influence of Pan-Arabism, and story-tellers have returned to the streets during festivals in the 1990s. For details, see Hejaiej (pp. 10-11).

the experiences of individuals, and instead seeing and hearing *Pantanella* as a conversation, a drama, a performance - in other words, a collective story told, not written - allows us to accommodate the potentially alienating use of dialogue and voices.[31] This investigation of the act of story-telling uses references and techniques which have, I think, no precedent in contemporary Italian writing.

Mohsen Melliti, *I bambini delle rose*[32]

Melliti's most recent work carries no introduction or endorsements, and was written in Italian. It is a much simpler story than *Pantanella*, focussing clearly on two main characters, who are children. The language of both works is direct and colloquial: were the reader unaware that one text is a translation and the other written in the author's second or third language, I doubt he would identify this difference on reading them. Whether this indicates that the author is now 'at home' with Italian is a question I shall return to at the end of this chapter.

The novel's first sentence is 'Fuori piove' (p. 9), bringing the reader immediately into an interior, perceived as a haven compared to the hostile world outside. As the narrative proceeds, other familiar themes of Melliti's previous novel are introduced: it is night-time, and this dark, enclosed space is a locus of story-telling. Though the brief

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[31] Alec Hargreaves, *Voices From The North African Immigrant Community in France: Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction* (Oxford & New York: Berg, 1991), p. 109. Hargreaves describes a similar use of multiple narrative voices in 'Beur' fiction, i.e. novels published since 1981 by the French-born and educated children of North African immigrants. He relates the use of one 'choral' voice to Bakhtinian theory: 'The most multi-voiced of Beur narratives do not necessarily have multiple narrators. They tend in fact to have a single homodiegetic narrator. Yet his or her discourse carries within itself the orchestrated heteroglossia which is characteristic of dialogism'. There are other similarities between Beur writing and writing by immigrants in Italy: preoccupation with the question of identity, fractured narrative chronology, open-ended conclusions implying further movement, reference to a folkloric past.

[32] Mohsen Melliti, *I bambini delle rose* (Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 1995).

(one page) frame story is told in the third person, and describes a man and his female partner, the narrator uses the technique of expressing the man through his thoughts, as a sort of inner narrator, and the woman through dialogue. In so doing, he makes the frame of the novel the man's consciousness, and from this brief introduction, the reader identifies him as an Ahmad-type character: an educated, thoughtful and ambitious young man (he cannot sleep because he is mentally wrestling with Heidegger). The woman asks him to tell her a story, and this leads into the body of the novel, or the story within the story.

The main story is divided into chapters according to the days of one week, Monday to Sunday. This gives the narrative a more rigid time frame than *Pantanella* has, but this novel retains the earlier work's propensity to move between realism and fantasy. In this case, the narrative centres on two children, and therefore the flights into fantasy are specifically child-like: stories (especially fables), games, and fantastical interpretation of reality. Given the attention paid to imagination and creativity amongst adults in *Pantanella*, I think Melliti is attempting here to investigate the origins of story-telling and story-making in human consciousness. The movement from the frame story to the story of two children enacts a movement from adulthood back to childhood, focussing in on the period in human development when 'stories' are connected most intricately and spontaneously with lived experience.

The two child protagonists are immigrants living on the edges of society and the edges of the law. Nico, the boy, is an eleven year-old Romany of Serbian origin, and Ly, the younger girl, is Chinese. Stories for them are a measure of security, and of

belonging. They are told to them by their mothers, in the interior of their own homes, however insecure and squallid these homes may be (a caravan in an encampment on the edges of Rome, and a cramped room in an apartment block).[33] Night-time is no longer the safe repository of stories: the children have to be independent and sell their roses in the city at night. Nico's mother draws attention to the reversal implicit in this situation, warning him that stories 'portano male se vengono raccontate di giorno' (p. 12).[34] The fable she recounts, of 'il lupo e la picciona', a story of a predatory and deceitful male destroying the young of a gullible female, prefigures two incidents in the 'real world' during the night which follows. The 'lupo' is, in one manifestation, the despised 'zio' who organizes the band of street-traders and child prostitutes of which Nico is one, and whom Nico later finds sleeping with his mother. Later on, another 'lupo' is Enzo, a paedophile who eventually tricks Nico into supplying sexual gratification. The mother's superstition about telling stories in daylight appears to be well-founded.

Melliti takes the reader into the mind of Nico, in order to explore the significance of story-telling. Returning from work early, having been given more than a night's earnings by Enzo, he fabricates his own story about stories, seeing a story as currency: he will tell his mother where the night's money came from if she will tell him a story. It is a moral exchange, whereby a truth is disclosed in return for the disclosure of

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[33] Hejaiej explains that only male story-tellers speak in public, whilst the narrative tradition for women continues 'behind closed doors', as her title suggests (p. 11). Hejaiej is, of course, referring to Tunisian beliefs, whereas the story-tellers in Melliti's novel are Serbian and Chinese, but the author may have his own culture in mind, and in any case, the rituals of story-telling are largely cross-cultural.

[34] Hejaiej describes a similar superstition: 'There is a common belief that stories can only be told at night and a taboo prohibiting tale-telling during the day: a person who tells stories during the day will give birth to bald children' (p. 12). It is interesting that, as in Melliti's story, the adult's transgression brings affliction upon the child.

another sort of truth - the 'moral' of a fable - and entering the transaction by which the story is exchanged demands the acceptance of a certain moral contract: the receiver must merit the story. The morality of the story itself and of the exchange of it are thus co-dependent. Nico arrives home to find his mother in bed with the 'zio' he despises, and, seeing that the corruption of the outside world has invaded the place and the body of the story-teller, he abandons his faith in the integrity of stories and leaves home to sleep rough in the city.

The ingenuousness of the children is used by Melliti to create a political satire. He mocks the great Communist icons, using the vehicle of their icons. Ly sells a photograph of Chairman Mao for a good price in a student bar, and explains that Mao is a great man, because he walked a lot, indeed all over China. The next day, Nico, with the advice of a student, acquires photographs of Che Guevara, whom he credits with having walked all over the world. The photographs bring a reasonable profit. Melliti is perhaps suggesting the irrelevance of macropolitics and great political ideals to the micropolitics of finding a way to subsist on the margins of contemporary society. Mao and Che (or 'Miao' and 'Tchio', as Nico calls them) represent hope for the disadvantaged in society only in as much as their images are immediate commodities for trade.

The 'cammino' attributed to the political leaders becomes a refrain of the narrative. Walking is the children's existence: they spend nights, and later in the week, days, walking around and around the centre of Rome, trying to sell their goods or simply to keep themselves amused. On a wider scale, the children are a nomad and an

immigrant: they have travelled to where they are now and will probably move on again, in pursuit of a more prosperous livelihood. Walking, as the basis of a nomadic existence, is essentially utopic, representing a perpetual search for a better life. In this way, Mao, Che, Ly and Nico are all moving under the same impetus. This is emphasized by two sentences which follow each other on one page (p. 57). First, Ly explains the importance of Mao: 'Sì, lui cammina, cammina, cammina, e a ogni cammino c'è una persona nuova che si mette a camminare dietro di lui; così tutti i cinesi hanno camminato dietro di lui.' Meanwhile, 'Ly cammina, cammina, e Nico accanto a lei cammina, cammina'.

Another politically symbolic figure in the narrative is Garibaldi, a 'barbone' with whom Nico spends the nights when he has left home. An ex-'partigiano', Garibaldi talks sadly of the difference between the courage and integrity of the past and the selfishness of the present. When Nico mocks him he responds proudly, 'Comunista son nato e comunista muoio' (p. 32). There follows an image which could have appeared in one of the fantastical silences in *Pantanella*: 'La tromba di Garibaldi è alzata verso il cielo di piazza Farnese e le stelle corrono in mezzo alle nuvole' (p. 32). This quasi-apotheosis of Garibaldi is endorsed but tempered with brutal realism when, on Saturday night, Nico finds that Garibaldi has been attacked by a gang of youths - termed 'i fascisti' - who had previously burned an immigrant to death.

As a real, human figure, rather than an icon, and one who shares a similar experience of the difficulties of living on the streets, the political implications involving this character are more poignant than those of the Mao and Che story, and it

is interesting that Melliti uses this character to bring specifically Italian political history into the sub-text about the fall of communism which weaves through his story. By portraying vividly the destruction of a symbol of the ideals of the Risorgimento and the Resistance at the hands of right-wing 'teppisti', it might be that Melliti is making a comment on the defeat in the 1994 elections of the left-wing coalition led by the former Communists (PDS) by Berlusconi's right-wing coalition including the former Fascists (AN). There are parallels between this incident and the killing by fascist thugs of the 'resistance' activist Monteiro Rossi in Tabucchi's *Sostiene Pereira*, published the previous year and with similar oblique reference to Italian politics (see chapter three of this thesis). Melliti differs from Tabucchi, whose vision is Eurocentric, in his world-wide overview of the decline of communism, which he seems to suggest endangers the realization of an equal global community.

With these political references, Melliti perhaps intends to present politics (specifically, Marxism) as the grand narrative which helps adults to interpret their existence, whether it be on the scale of the story of twentieth-century world politics (represented by Mao and Che), the story of Italy (represented by Garibaldi), or the stories written in the newspapers (there is an ironic portrait of a drunken journalist from *Il manifesto*, another figure of collapsing communism). Both the adults' and the children's stories seek justice and equality: good and evil are easily distinguished from one another and the good who endure exploitation by the evil are eventually rewarded. Both types of stories have a utopic thrust. The end of the novel explores this, using the literary *topos* of the treasure island. Ly and Nico steal coins from the Trevi fountain at night, and bury them on the Isola Tiberina, as security for their future together,

somewhere else (their 'cammino' continues). Their burial of the coins mimics the utopic gesture of throwing coins in the Trevi fountain, and as they make their pact, they swear on Mao and Che, mimicking another adult investment of faith in a utopic ideal.

This novel has thus altered the proportions of Melliti's previous work, adjusting the focus on narrative and projecting the reference to immigration issues onto the broader screen of global politics. His child protagonists are fragmentary examples of the human impetus to explain experience by means of some narrative, and their vulnerability is that of anybody, like Garibaldi, who figures in a narrative which is not or no longer sanctioned by the majority. Melliti is perhaps suggesting more vehemently than in *Pantanella* that we listen to stories which might at first seem anachronistic or illogical. In *I bambini delle rose*, Melliti succumbs to the risks - over-simplification and cliché - involved in the innovative attempt to view a similar situation to the previous novel through children's eyes.[35] However, both his novels to date are disruptive and thought-provoking in a way which is perhaps a prerequisite of any writing which seeks to convey a message.

Conclusions

Gnisci refers in his analysis to the western history of exploration, aimed at mapping unknown spaces: Europeans felt a compulsion to classify and define the shifting expanse of the desert.[36] Approaching this literature is similarly an enterprise of

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[35] Most instances of sentimentalism and cliché in the novel involve images of the relationship between the two children. A good example is in the chapter concerning Friday, when a description of the children sitting together after a rainstorm is postcard-picturesque: 'Nico e Ly, con lo sguardo rivolto alla cupola di san Pietro e le mani incrociate, sognano e pensano' (p. 73).

[36] Gnisci, 1993, p. 20.

mapping an incalculable space: an experience we cannot share, a mentality which is, in a positive way, different, and a literary product which is at once familiar (autobiography, testimony, narrative) and perplexing (all and none of these). This sense of discomfort is exacerbated by the fact that all this happens within our own pre-defined space, that is, in Europe, in a European language, in texts published by recognized European names. It is an immigrant in our literary culture.

Gnisci makes a hyperbolic comparison between the nascent literature of Italian immigrants and the works of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch who opened up a new literary discourse in fourteenth-century Europe. Claiming that Italian literature is ethically and creatively exhausted, he calls for Italy to take the initiative of a dialogue offered with North African culture, and to use this to create a new 'Weltliteratur', drawing on its past moments of literary greatness. Though the renewal of literature is his prime concern, he sees an inevitable linkage between literature, culture and politics, calling for an ethical commitment to human regeneration which will span the whole of human activity. I quote:

> È ora che la letteratura italiana contemporanea, come la classe politica italiana, come la cultura italiana contemporanea, si dimettano e si consegnino al giudizio e alla rieducazione da parte del mondo. La nostra tradizione e la nostra civiltà vanno consegnate: è l'ultima possibilità di inventarci una dignità e di corrispondere al mondo attuale che abbiamo. Rovesciare il gioco, un gioco che è finito e che si può giocare solo al rovescio, ormai. (p. 104)

The 'revolutionary', or, at least, revisionary, potential of this type of writing is explored in a more temperate manner by Deleuze and Guattari, in their analysis of

Kafka and minority literature.[37] To summarize, they claim, 'ce que l'écrivain tout seul dit constitue déjà une action commune, et ce qu'il dit ou fait est nécessairement politique' (p. 31). The status of estrangement and marginality necessarily empowers minority writing with revolutionary potential, to the extent that the critics call on 'major' languages and literatures to make themselves 'minor' in order to find their creative energy. This faintly echoes Gnisci, and seems a dangerous subsumption of the urgency and specificity of the minority literature's cause into a more general, 'majority' project.[38] This danger is identified by Janmohamed and Lloyd (see note 19), who see an overlap between the projects of minority discourses and of postmodernism - for example, the critique of dominant structures, tolerance of difference - but this similarity leads them to identify important differences:

> Where the point of departure of post-structuralism lies within the Western tradition and tries to deconstruct its identity formations 'from within', the critical difference is that minorities, by virtue of their very social being, must begin from a position of objective non-identity that is rooted in their economic and cultural marginalization vis-à-vis the 'West'. (p. 15)

Non-identity for minorities is an index of damage and negation, rather than one of positive liberation, and their response must accordingly be action and struggle rather than an ironic distance.

To claim, like Gnisci, that writing by immigrants in Italy will be the catalyst to a comprehensive revolution in Italian culture is clearly excessive; but alongside the

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[37] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1975).

[38] Gnisci makes similarly colonialist claims on 'third-world' literatures when he maintains that English, French and Hispanic literatures have doubled their value by adopting the literary creativity of India, Africa and Latin America, and that Italy should grasp the investment opportunity on offer (1993, pp. 100-1). The distinction between an appreciative interchange and an insensitive appropriation is a fine one, but the possible implications of such partnerships are disturbing.

demands, political and imaginative, these guest-writers make on the host-reader, they offer the experience of different ways of living, reading and writing. They enact an ethical exchange through literature which seems to be what many of the other 'indigenous' writers I have discussed are trying to retrieve from across the breach between life and literature imposed by decades of critical theory, narrative experimentation, and political retrenchment. These texts demonstrate the possibilities of reinterpreting narrative techniques as powerfully as other, more critically knowing projects in recent Italian narrative (Tabucchi, Tondelli). Their implicit protest element, accommodated without intense critical or political self-consciousness, and with a cogent and conspicuous social referent, revives an ability of narrative to enforce with almost cruel simplicity a re-appraisal of social conditions on the part of the reader, which other writers I have discussed elaborate ingenious ways to provoke (Tabucchi, Duranti, Ballestra). Melliti's novels in particular, preoccupied as they are with how stories both inform experience and inform us about experience, are perhaps the most impressive 'proof' amongst all the texts I have considered that narrative is political. The energy, both ethical and creative, which this new writing represents, should not, as Gnisci says, be undervalued.

The potential of this literature is great: its problem will be maintaining its voice.[39] These writers stand on the outside of the new canon of young Italian writers who are fiercely promoted by the powerful publishing houses, with economic backing and marketing which make the personal collaboration of journalists and critics with

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[39] One novel is already out of print: Mohamed Bouchane, *Chiamatemi Alì*, ed. by C. De Girolamo & D. Miccione (Milan: Leonardo, 1990).

immigrant writers look hospitable but rather insignificant. More seriously, there is the risk of them losing their story. The texts I have discussed all tell, fundamentally, one story of life as an African immigrant in Italy, in the late 1980s. With increased provision for the social needs of immigrants, and increased integration, will the impetus to tell the story be lost? It is also worth considering whether this new instance of 'impegno' might become fragmented as has its archetype: Melliti's second novel, less directly related to immigration and more broadly political-philosophical, is an indication that the initial protest story is already being re-interpreted. Immigrant writing in Italian is an enterprise which deserves to be nurtured, and which, in the spirit of true hospitality, will benefit both guest-writer and host-reader cultures.[40] The bridge these writers have constructed between two literatures and two cultures remains, however, fragile.

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[40] The establishment of a minority community in Italy may in fact be dependent on the affirmation of its culture which such writing works to produce. Janmohamed & Lloyd write: 'For many minorities, culture is not a mere superstructure; all too often, in an ironic twist of a Sartrean phenomenology, the physical survival of minority groups depends on the recognition of its culture as viable' (p. 6).

CONCLUSION

PIECING TOGETHER THE FRAGMENTS

I am left, at the end of this study of 'impegno' in contemporary Italian narrative, with bits and pieces of commitment: anger and anxiety about resistance to the memory of cruelty from Tabucchi; snapshots of generational inertia from De Carlo; a tortured love affair with youth culture, incorporating flashes of gay textual politics, from Tondelli; televized generational and political debate from Ballestra; understated pseudo-feminist arguments from Duranti and others; muffled protest from immigrant writers. All very postmodern. But what do I mean by that?

To know exactly what postmodernism is, or to attempt to define it, would be deeply unfashionable and 'un-postmodern': it is an over-used and under-questioned term which conveniently covers anything the 'weirdness' of which worries us.[1] There are a few things which it is 'safe' to say about postmodernism, however. One is that it describes a general loss of faith; in reason and its systems of expression. Doubt is cast upon history, philosophy, ideology, science - the grand narratives of western civilization. In a sense, this thesis describes the breaking down of the grand narrative of political commitment in literature by writers who are unsure whether their work can really make a difference in society. A second thing to say is that postmodernism involves the privileging of the aesthetic over the cerebral, of desire over reason. As the

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[1] Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London & New York: Arnold, 1992), collects the most important essays on the subject, and sets it in the context of the history of ideas. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988) is a comprehensive analysis of its literary significance.

discussions of my selected authors have shown, it is a sense of community rather than a doctrine of commitment which is to be found in contemporary Italian narrative.

Scepticism and aestheticism allow for the crossing of boundaries between disciplines, between genres, and between levels of cultural hierarchy with which postmodernism is most readily associated. Pastiche, parody, games, *bricolage*, kitsch, baroque, etc., are all terms which appear in close proximity to the adjective 'postmodern' in cultural criticism. Postmodernism is the aesthetic of 'anything goes', and again, my research is illustrative. The works I have discussed combine novel with short story, fiction with chronicle, narrative with reportage, literary classics with soap opera, poetic prose with slang, concertos with pop songs, and so on. Postmodernism also sanctions the commodification of cultural products, recognizing that economic and socio-cultural conditions are intrinsic to the evaluation of a piece of art, and I think my thesis expresses this, by taking into account the commercial influences on literary success and showing, through its range of authors, how an author's position with respect to the publishing industry influences his/her canonical or non-canonical status.

The purpose of the above tour of the subject is to establish that postmodernism is the broad cultural environment in which these writers and their readers (myself included) are working. In a sense, postmodernism can be taken for granted: or rather, it is less an academic theory (postmodernism) that we may or may not adhere to, than cultural practice (postmodernity). Pre-millennial or post-modern tension is our late twentieth-century existential condition. Lino Pertile comments on the resistance in

Italian culture to the use of the term, and claims that a characteristic Italian respect for 'high' culture precludes the acceptance of postmodernism.[2] I think this illustrates well the difference I have proposed between postmodernism and postmodernity: it may be difficult to imagine the core cultural establishment arguing the theory that Leopardi is to be valued no more highly than Mike Bongiorno, but Italian culture in practice exhibits many of the features of postmodernity. All the writers I have discussed are to some degree 'postmodern'. The fact that some flaunt postmodernism (chiefly, Tondelli and Ballestra), and that Italy's 'biggest' intellectual, Umberto Eco, is a leading theorist and practitioner of postmodernism, belies Pertile's assertion that postmodernism has no place in Italian culture.[3]

Pertile is right, however, in identifying the Achilles' heel of a 'great tradition' still embedded in Italian literary culture, and this is why this thesis does more than tell a tale of postmodernism in Italian literature in the past twenty or so years. The writers I have discussed also illustrate something much more culturally specific, the crux of which is responsibility. Postmodernism cultivates a lack of seriousness - to believe is naïve - but contemporary Italian writers still demonstrate a faith broadly describable as humanistic. The analyses in the body of my thesis reveal this piecemeal, but I shall try here to draw together the pieces.

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[2] Lino Pertile, 'The Italian Novel Today: Politics, Language, Literature', in *The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barañski & Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 1-19 (p. 16).

[3] Intimations of postmodernism persist in all Eco's work since the 1960s: perhaps the best recent example is *Il secondo diario minimo* (Milan: Bompiani, 1992). On postmodernism in Italy, see Dino Cervigni (ed.), *Italy 1991: The Modern and the Postmodern. Annali d'Italianistica*, 9 (1991); and Michael Caesar, 'Italian Fiction in the Nineteen-Eighties', in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, ed. by Edmund J. Smyth (London: Batsford, 1991), pp. 74-89.

The postmodern buzz-word which I did not include in my list above is 'irony'.[4] In its most popular manifestations, irony is used as a tactic for undercutting seriousness and denying responsibility: if something is meant 'ironically' it suggests it was hardly meant at all. If irony traditionally is a revolving door which allows one to glimpse both inside and outside worlds, postmodern irony is an automatic sliding door which allows one to leap from the gloomy interior into the sunny space outside and barely look back.

Such a superficial, sparky sort of irony is employed by some of the authors I have discussed (Tondelli, Ballestra), but in their works and those of others there is also a much weightier, more cogent and even cruel irony, which exposes the 'dark side' of contemporary life and asks the reader to recognize it. Tabucchi's 'gioco del rovescio' is one version of this amongst many in his work, and it is also in evidence in Tondelli's *Camere separate*, Ballestra's *Gli orsi*, Sanvitale's *Verso Paola*, Duranti's *Ultima stesura*, and other texts. This is an irony which intends to make a point, and a very sharp point. It has its roots in the literary classics, and whilst Shakespeare, Racine, and numerous others demonstrate that it is a European tradition, I think there is something acutely Italian in this momentous and almost tragic glance at the underside of comic mundanity. As a geographical fault line marks the dangerous point where two continental plates meet, irony is the critical seam between two different perspectives. Irony thus provides a deeper, longer 'fault line', running from as far back

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[4] See Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

as Dante, through Ariosto, Leopardi, Verga, Svevo, Pirandello, to Pavese and Calvino, who forefronts the seriousness of games.

There is also a more contemporary sense of responsibility in the 'postmodern' writing I have discussed. In my introduction, I stated the aim of assessing whether any 'impegno' on the part of my selected authors was generic or attached to the specific socio-political environment of Italy in the 1980s and 1990s, and if so, whether it was indulgence in the spectacle of institutional collapse, or genuine commitment to regeneration. With minor exceptions, such as Sanvitale's *Madre e figlia* and perhaps some of Tabucchi's early short stories, I think it is legitimate to say that none of these texts would have existed in their present form, had the socio-political developments of the 1980-1995 period been different. All my chapters include one text which refers implicitly or explicitly to 'Tangentopoli' (except chapter five on Tondelli, for obvious reasons), but this is just a crude means of measuring what is a deep-rooted and essential engagement of the writer with his/her world; and this world is clearly at least a reflection, if not a representation, of Italy in the period concerned.

A check-list of the issues facing Italian society which I summarized in my introduction demonstrates that most of them have been raised somewhere in this thesis: the 'riflusso' and political stagnation (De Carlo); the legacy of Italy's past (Tabucchi, Tondelli, Sanvitale); the effects of the collapse of communism (Duranti); corruption and political improbity (De Carlo, Sanvitale, Tondelli, Ballestra); immigration (immigrant writers, Tondelli, Ballestra); nationalism and regionalism (Tabucchi, Ben Jelloun, Methnani); Europe (Tondelli, Ballestra, Tabucchi, Sanvitale);

drug abuse and teenage 'delinquency' (Tondelli, Ballestra, Methnani); gender and sexual relations (Tondelli, women writers, including Ballestra, Tabucchi). At risk of wearing out my analogy (or my reader's receptivity to it), I think it is reasonable to say that after the 1950s, 'impegno' went 'underground', but it is still there, diffused just under the surface, like an intense and still-moving magma which makes the texts I have discussed a part of the land they are written in.

The almost-exception to the specificity claims made above is immigrant writers. Chapter eight explained my reasons for considering their work indispensable to any full understanding of the relationship between literature and society in contemporary Italian narrative, but I want to reiterate in the present context that the apparent ex-centricity of these works and their authors gives them a special relevance with regard to the others I have discussed. They can almost be used as an instrument of deconstruction: these writers with a cause and without cultural, commercial or linguistic backing can be used to undermine the 'canonical' status of some of the indigenous writers and test whether their 'commitment' is cynical cashing-in on the *Zeitgeist* or a real social conscience. The novels by Methnani and Melliti in particular are genuine initiatives in communication: if anything, they teach us or remind us that literature is a two-way exchange. Testing the works of my other writers against this basic formula, I think it becomes clear, as I concluded in chapter four, that commitment is predominantly a factor of the author-reader relationship, and in this sense, all the writers I have discussed 'pass the test', except De Carlo. Tabucchi and Tondelli gain top marks in this respect, I think, but it is Methnani and Melliti themselves who draw attention to the importance of simply establishing relationships.

As I suggested in chapter eight, the immigrant writers are also important as a counterpoint in the class question, because they represent an underclass or un-class which is the nearest social equivalent to the deprived masses of industrial workers who represented the 'popolo' to whom Vittorini and others wished to give access to culture in the 1950s. They too were (e)migrants, living in poor conditions with unstable work, and resented by their 'indigenous' co-workers. The works by immigrants are a reminder that the language of marginalization and social deprivation is still current, and some - the best example being Khouma's *Io, venditore di elefanti* - are perhaps a neorealism for the 1990s, though as I said in chapter eight, this immediate representation manifests similar limitations to those encountered in the immediate post-war period. It would be a gross and irresponsible misrepresentation to say that the working class no longer exists in 'post-industrial', de-unionized economies such as Italy, and the service industries have in any case created their own class of exploited employees working in unfavourable conditions. However, the whole discourse of class has shifted, as the collapse of communism demonstrates, bringing 'scrittori' and 'popolo' more or less onto a level with each other.

Television is commonly credited as being the great cultural 'leveller', and it is a medium which has had a more dramatic impact in Italy than in most other comparable societies (Ballestra addresses the later stages of this).[5] Whether television can be credited/blamed or not, the question in the 1950s of how upper-class intellectuals

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[5] See Pertile, 1993, pp. 13-14. More detailed analysis of the television phenomenon is provided in part five of Zygmunt G. Barañski & Robert Lumley (eds), *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).

could bridge a gap between themselves and working-class readers is now the question of how middle-class writers (usually 'non-professional' writers) can create a gap between themselves and their middle-class readership sufficient to be able to make an impact. Whereas the model of 'impegno' saw the writer as spokesperson of his class, setting out to negotiate with a distinct social grouping, 'fragmented' contemporary writers do not presume to be representative, but rather attempt to convey their impressions of the shared socio-cultural panorama as seen through their own lens.

This brings me to the question of mediocrity which I raised in my introduction (and briefly in chapters four and five). Again, part of the cultural reality of postmodernity is the collapse of the high-middle-low culture hierarchy to leave a general, middle-brow, middle-class, mix. It is an economic fact that a text will not be published if those funding the publication are not convinced that it will appeal to the mass of 'average' consumers, and the majority of the texts I have studied are 'bestsellers', to some degree. But why should popularity breed contempt? The book-buying market is already to some degree a specialist one because it chooses to go into a shop and seek out a book, rather than taking advantage of the more user-friendly cultural products, such as television or computer games. If a reader chooses a certain text because she has seen the writer interviewed on television or because there was a full-page advertisement for it in a newspaper, is she really choosing it for the 'wrong' reasons? Mediocrity is, like postmodernity, a cultural given, and there is space within it to take up positions which challenge the status quo (Tondelli's *Rimini* being a good example).

Under the umbrella of 'giovani narratori' there is a heterogeneous and loosely-connected bunch of writers who show that, despite the appearance of homogenization created by such labels, Italian literary culture is alive and kicking - in the sense of being alive to socio-cultural issues and kicking back against uniformity. The big-name conglomerates of the Italian publishing industry, such as RCS and Mondadori, are not the greatest threat to literary culture, in my opinion. It it true that De Carlo's work becomes less interesting when he moves from Einaudi to Bompiani in the mid-1980s, but Tondelli managed to publish some formally and thematically radical texts with Bompiani. He is also, however, an example of a writer who worked with small publishing houses (Baskerville, Transeuropa) as well as mainstream ones, as is Tabucchi (Sellerio). In other words, writers do not seem to be boxed too restrictively by their publishers.

The more pressing problem is the one which Tondelli and Ballestra raise, of the absence of a vibrant critical community. Tani uses the 'romanzo medio' as a largely pejorative description, and I think to read mediocre as anodyne, consolatory, unchallenging is a misreading. To be intelligent and challenging is not necessarily to be abstruse and inaccessible. The sort of prejudices outlined above against the 'middle-brow' novel, and the sort of misreadings or under-readings of contemporary writers which I have outlined in the course of this research, are all remnants of a critical snobbery which hangs on to the discourse of 'high' culture in order to justify its own existence in the face of potential accusations of irrelevance. This is the negative side of the persistence of a 'great tradition' in Italian culture which I discussed above. The result is that younger, probably non-professional, critics (of the sort who make up

Tondelli's 'community'), who speak the language of young writers, and of the contemporary reading community, cannot publicly respond to and discuss contemporary writing.

The prevalence of anthologies of young writing in the past decade suggests that the fragmentary coincidences they enclose are the closest contemporary culture comes to replicating the 'schools' of the past, such as the 'Gruppo 63', in the absence of a critical community.[6] There are signs that this is changing in the late 1990s, with the emergence of a group - the 'pulp' writers - who have a stronger stylistic and thematic concordance than did the 'giovani narratori'. Niccolò Ammaniti, for example, writes regularly for *Tuttolibri*, but he is an author commenting on other authors - are there no young critics?[7]

If the sort of writing I have discussed has received patchy critical acclaim, what does that mean for the 'ambitions' with which Italian literary culture began the decade, as outlined in my introduction? In terms of its 'expansion' - that is the exportation of contemporary Italian writing augured by Calvino and Eco's success in translation, I think little 'progress' has been made. Calvino, Primo Levi and Eco are still the only household names in the English-speaking world at least (though many of Tondelli's works have been translated into German, and Tabucchi's into English, French and

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[6] Examples are the Transeuropa 'Under 25' volumes, Ferruccio Parazzoli & Antonio Franchini (eds), *Italiana: Antologia della nuova narrativa* (Milan: Mondadori, 1991) and Daniele Brolli (ed.), *Gioventù cannibale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996). See Dario Voltolini, 'Tutti in coda dietro Tondelli', *Tuttolibri*, 1044 (6.2.97), 7 (a review of *Coda*, ed. by Ballestra & Mozzi): 'non sono la scrittura di un gruppo (sono un gruppo di scritture)'.

[7] Ammaniti is author of *Fango* (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), one of the first 'pulp' novels.

Portuguese). Susanna Tamaro's *Va' dove ti porta il cuore* (1994), and Roberto Calasso's *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* (1988), in translation, have received some favourable critical attention in Britain, but it is still more 'exotic' fiction, from Latin America, India and Pakistan, which seems the more popular foreign-language contemporary writing.

The contraction of reference which the 1980s seemed to promise - writing about writing rather than anything 'outside' it - has not been the dominant tendency, as this thesis demonstrates. Some writers have followed the self-referential, hyper-literary line throughout the period (Capriolo, Del Giudice), but otherwise narrative has expanded its frame of reference, I think, touching on politics, popular culture, travel, history, journalism, psychoanalysis, etc.. One instance of contraction relates to the point I made above, about Italian as a 'world-class' contemporary literature. There is a tradition of 'exile' in the writers I have discussed, stemming from Calvino. Both he and Celati chose (choose) to live outside Italy, Tabucchi has adopted a Portuguese persona, De Carlo leans towards America, Tondelli towards northern Europe. Immigrant writers are again the counterpoint: they are exiles in Italy. Despite this, and the almost all-pervasive travel theme, I think the focus on Italy - as a geographical, historical, political and cultural entity - has sharpened during the period spanned by this thesis. The most concise 'proof' of this in my thesis is that the writer who gives the most immediate and tangible sense of what it is like to be an Italian in Italy today is Ballestra, the youngest and most recently launched. After decades of looking outwards for models, it seems that Italian is 'cool', to coin an adopted Americanism which is perhaps now a cypher for the past. 'Proof' from beyond my selection of

authors is the *Italiana* anthology, the title of which responds directly to Vittorini's collection of American writing, *Americana* (the sign of his 'exile'), which aimed to rejuvenate Italian literature by means of the importation of a comparatively new literary culture.

Does this indicate that Italy has recovered from the supposed emptiness of the 1980s and the crisis of the early 1990s and now has a thriving literary culture? It is impossible to assess from such a close position the significance of the 1980-1995 period in the whole span of twentieth-century Italian literature, but I would hazard that this period will be seen as one of superficial polish covering deep-seated uneasiness, which erupts into pre-millennial agitation in the mid-1990s. In this sense, the narrative of the period accurately conveys the *Zeitgeist*: the superficial economic success of Italy in the 1980s, masking endemic social and institutional difficulties, resulting in the 'Tangentopoli' crisis and ensuing ructions. I think it is a period in literature which will warrant repeated re-assessment, precisely because of the way the outer 'hype' of 'giovani narratori' (and later 'pulp'), and literary prizes, is undercut by an inner uncertainty, provisionality, and fragmentation of ethical and creative purpose, which will perhaps be seen as 'typically' postmodern.

I hope, along with Gnisci, that this period marks the introduction of a new line, from across the Mediterranean, into Italian literary culture. I described above a new national identity in Italian fiction, but I do not think this is nationalist by any means. The collaboration of one of the *Italiana* contributors, Mario Fortunato, with Salah Methnani, and Ballestra's accommodation of the question of immigration in her work,

demonstrate that young Italian writers are 'hospitable'. The general receptiveness of the reading public to works from Africa, Asia and Latin America - as mentioned above - is perhaps favourable to the interaction of cultures which writing by immigrants offers, although reading of the squalor of life as an immigrant in Italy perhaps does not hold the same exotic attraction as the story of the romantic poverty of a child growing up in Bombay. As I said in chapter eight, the future of writing by immigrants is in the balance, and I cannot predict that Mondadori will publish an anthology entitled *Africana* in 2005. Whether writing in Italian by African immigrants published in the 1990s comes to mark the beginning of a new branch of Italian literature (and culture), or whether hindsight sees it as a potential gesture of hospitality barely reciprocated, it remains a sharp fragment in the literary culture of this period, and perhaps the most potent literary symbol of social change which the period produced. As a reminder of the socio-political relevance of literature, its value is unquestionable.

It only remains for me to mention the 'flip-side' of my research, or the thesis it might possibly have been. As I said in my introduction, I have cast my net very wide, and it caught a number of other authors whom I subsequently threw back into the water. For almost every author included in parts II to IV of this thesis, there is a corresponding author who might have been included, but who, for various reasons, contributes less to my thesis than the author I selected. Instead of Tabucchi, I could have discussed Sebastiano Vassalli, another 'older' writer who values and explores the contemporary relevance of history and of literature.[8] Tabucchi has more to offer the

[8] See Zygmunt G. Barañski, 'Sebastiano Vassalli: Literary Lives', in Barañski & Pertile, pp. 239-57.

specific topic of my research because, despite his 'esordio' in the 1970s, he is clearly a writer of the 1980s and 1990s (whereas Vassalli has been publishing steadily from the 1960s to the present day), and because his works of the 1990s are committed in a subtle and yet urgent way which represents one of the most striking fragments of 'impegno' in the period. Instead of De Carlo, I could have chosen Daniele Del Giudice, Calvino's other, probably more genuine son.[9] For his Calvino-esque attention to cognition and limpid expression, he illustrates that line of descendance well, but it has little to do with 'impegno'. De Carlo, though artistically the less consistently impressive writer, I think, illustrates a type of direct approach to socio-political issues the flaws in which are crucial to any thorough understanding of the limits of 'impegno' in the contemporary context.

Aldo Busi might have served well as an example of 'gay' writing, and carnivalesque revelry in irreverent language and behaviour, but he offers little more. Tondelli adds to these themes a dark irony and a profound commitment to literature as a social function which makes him a much richer source for this thesis.[10] Paola Capriolo or Lara Cardella could have taken the place of Ballestra as a new generation of women writers (who bypass 'women's issues'), but, as I pointed out in chapter seven, Capriolo's interest is almost exclusively literary and meta-literary, and Cardella's work is gimmicky in a way I believe Ballestra's genuinely is not.[11]

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[9] See Anna Dolfi, 'Daniele Del Giudice: Planimetry of Sight/Vision in Three Books', in Barañski & Pertile, pp. 89-98.

[10] See Massimo Bacigalupo, 'Aldo Busi: Writer, Jester and Moral Historian', in Barañski & Pertile, pp. 35-42.

[11] On Capriolo, see Sharon Wood, 'From Feminism to Post-Modernism: Durante [*sic*], Petrignani and Capriolo', in *Italian Women's Writing 1860-1994* (London & Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone Press, 1995), pp. 254-74.

Selecting women writers for the chapter discussing them from a specifically feminist point of view involved perhaps the most difficult decisions, especially as I intended to extend the age-range to allow for the progression of 'feminist' to be revealed. Rosetta Loy, Elisabetta Rasy, Dacia Maraini, might all have had a place, but the three authors, and more particularly, the specific novels which I discuss represent the combination of techniques most effective in tracing the fragmentation of feminist commitment.[12] Lastly, regional literature - probably Sicilian (Bufalino, Consolo, Camilleri, Cardella) - might have taken the place of writing by immigrants, as a different example of a 'marginal' literature voicing the ex-centricity of a cultural community.[13] For functional reasons which I have fully explained, I think that writing by immigrants has a much more powerful impact on the question of 'commitment' in contemporary writing than regionalism, which is a 'canonical' issue in Italian literature and an established 'problem' in Italian society. The question of 'southern-ness' is raised with new and harsher accent by immigrant writers, who foreground its immediate socio-political implications rather than just its folkloric colour.

It is part of the nature of approaching a corpus of writing so patently alive and still growing that everyone who has read an Italian novel written in the last twenty years will believe it has a place in this thesis; and to some extent it has, because part

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[12] See Sharon Wood, 'Rosetta Loy: The Paradox of the Past', in Barañski & Pertile, pp. 121-38; on Rasy, Stefano Tani, *Il romanzo di ritorno* (Milan: Mursia, 1990), pp. 355-9; Sharon Wood, 'The Silencing of Women: The Political Aesthetic of Dacia Maraini', in Wood, 1995, pp. 216-31.

[13] See Maria Corti's introduction to Gesualdo Bufalino, *Opere, 1981-1988*, ed. by Maria Corti & Francesca Caputo (Milan: Bompiani, 1992), pp. VII-XXX; and Peter Hainsworth, 'Gesualdo Bufalino: Baroque to the Future', in Barañski & Pertile, pp. 20-34. On Consolo, Joseph Farrell, 'Vincenzo Consolo: Metaphors and False History', in Barañski & Pertile, pp. 59-74. On Sicilian literature, S.S. Nigro, *Scrivere la Sicilia: Vittorini ed oltre* (Siracusa: Ediprint, 1985).

of the point I have tried to make is that the variety of new writing is great. My particular focus is not range, but a specific and difficult combination of range and depth, mapping and measuring the fractures and continuities in the terrain of 'impegno'. In some cases (such as Ballestra), I am examining the fragments before the dust around them has settled, but this too is intentional. My analysis of Vittorini, Calvino, Celati and Palandri shows that, given the time to re-visit politically committed 'acts' of writing or criticism, authors, editors and critics explain and justify them almost obsessively, glossing them with layer after layer of hindsight until it is almost impossible to scratch away the rationalization to see the original impulse. This is why I think it is important to catch contemporary writers in the act of commitment, before the process of homogenization which, in some cases (such as Tabucchi), critics have already begun, glues together all the sharp and scintillating fragments.

To piece together some final bits, I draw on Calvino, the only survivor of the original debate still active in the period covered by this thesis. In an essay of 1947, he comments:

> È caratteristica della letteratura di questo dopoguerra, [...] un'andatura a passi di piombo, attenti alla precisione della propria tecnica quanto al terreno di cronaca e d'umanità che oggi si sente più che mai necessario.[14]

In 1985, referring to Boccaccio's description of Guido Cavalcanti, he gives a very different image of the writer:

> Se volessi scegliere un simbolo augurale per l'affacciarsi al nuovo millennio, sceglierei questo: l'agile salto improvviso del poeta-filosofo che si solleva sulla pesantezza del mondo, dimostrando che la sua gravità contiene il segreto della leggerezza, mentre quella che molti credono essere la vitalità dei tempi,

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[14] Italo Calvino, 'Abbiamo vinto in molti', in 'Altri discorsi di letteratura e società: Per una letteratura dell'impegno', *Saggi, 1945-1985*, ed. by Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 2 vols, I, 1469-1504 (p. 1477).

> rumorosa, aggressiva, scalpitante e rombante, appartiene al regno della morte, come un cimitero d'automobili arrugginite.[15]

It is perhaps an indication of the contiguity of the socio-literary situations at the start of the 'First Republic' and at the start of the 'Second' that the image of the writer which seems better to illustrate the writers I have discussed, and those who will write their way into the next millennium, is the first. They make isolated, tentative leaps, and rather than proceeding with steps weighed by lead, their feet perhaps tread in the mire,[16] but theirs is the chaotic and violent world which Calvino's poet-philosopher escapes in the second quotation, and they find in it the raw materials for some powerful, rough-edged, and yet attentive and carefully-crafted writing. I disagree with Pertile and others who say that the current generation know that 'the writer has no other responsibility except to literature'.[17] For the writers I have discussed, a responsibility to literature cannot be divorced from a responsibility to the society of its readers. They know and prove that to be, as Calvino originally said, 'attenti alla precisione della propria tecnica quanto al terreno di cronaca e d'umanità', is genuinely to 'take seriously the task of expression'. Chips off the old bloc?

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[15] Italo Calvino, 'Leggerezza', in *Lezioni americane; Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milan: Palomar & Mondadori, 1993), pp. 5-35 (p. 16).
[16] I refer to the title of *Fango*, by Niccolò Ammaniti.
[17] Pertile, 1993, (p. 11). See also Walter Pedullà, 'Prefazione', in Maria Pia Ammirati, *Il vizio di scrivere* (Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 1991), pp. 7-10.

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