

The Politics of Disarray in Nanni Balestrini:

Poetics, Referent and Musical Structure

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Abstract

This article analyses Nanni Balestrini's works in the context of his political engagement throughout fifty years of his writings. Experimenting with language is a constant of the poetic of Balestrini. The article underlines the differences in this experimentation across time; for instance before and after 1968 the referent becomes more relevant. Balestrini's experimental aesthetic is conceptualized as 'the poetic of disarray', and seen in the cultural context of the so-called leaden years. Novels are used to highlight the major steps in the political and poetical development of the author. The article suggests that, for Balestrini language is the *locus* of a struggle where the traditional structures of literature are sabotaged. The article concludes that the poetic of disarray expresses the longing for a different configuration, a new harmonic arrangement. This is articulated in the acquisition of structures of composing pertaining to different domains. In

¹ Raffaele Taddeo has contributed to the analysis of poems while Raffaella Bianchi has dealt with the historical contextualization and analyzed the novels. Raffaella Bianchi has also composed the two analyses and written the article. The authors thank Mr William Liptrot for English proofreading.

particular, the article highlights the relevance of the musical structures in Balestrini's poems, which has gone unnoticed.

'Scompligate le righe di piombo'²

Nanni Balestrini's poetics seems to revolve around this sentence that assumes a plurality of meanings. In its literal meaning 'righe di piombo' (lines of leaden) refers to the typographical work; a book can be described as a sequence of lines made of lead, the metal used for printing. Therefore, to 'disarrange leaden lines' seems to point towards the aesthetic of Balestrini's experimental methods of writing. This poetic of disarray, which is investigated in this article, is more than a technical device for experimenting with words, as it is connected to the political context of the 1970s in Italy, and with the personal involvement and *impegno* of the author. This article suggests that the language for Balestrini is the *locus* of a struggle which is a constant in his poetics. However, this struggle does not resolve itself merely on an anarchical sabotage of texts. Balestrini's experimental writing changes across time; firstly the referent acquire importance, and the disarrangement expresses the search for a new harmonic

² 'Disarrange lead(en) lines'. Nanni Balestrini, *La Violenza Illustrata* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, [1976] 2011), p.36.

structure. As it is shown below, this is evident in Balestrini's latter poems which present a musical structure, which has gone unnoticed by the literary critic.

The poetic of disarray

Since his early writings, Balestrini is interested in exploring the outcomes of combinatorial games applied to poetry and literature. In 1962 he published a poem entitled *Tape Mark I*³ mixing phrases according to an algorithm calculated by a 7070 IBM computer. The phrases to be arranged were selected by the author from three sources, namely *Il Diario di Hiroshima* by Michihito Hachiya, *Il Mistero dell'Ascensore* by Paul Goodwin and the *Tao te King* by Lao Tze. The software used for this experiment was written by Alberto Nobis an IT from IBM who had access to the big 7070 IBM computer of the bank *Cassa di Risparmio delle Province Lombarde* which he installed a year before in 1960.⁴

In his presentation of the article, Balestrini justifies the usage of technological devices for making poetry in the context of harmonizing writing within the industrial society of the time. In the Sixties a great fascination on the possibilities of technologies and of this new gigantic computer machines must have inspired Balestrini.

³ Nanni Balestrini, 'Tape Mark I', in *Almanacco Letterario Bompiani* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962), p. 145.

⁴ Adriano Comai, 'Poesie Elettroniche. L'Esempio di Balestrini' (unpublished BA dissertation, Università degli Studi di Torino, 1985).

However, this modern epistemology seems still to be present in Balestrini's works. This is evident in another combination of lines mathematically arranged, the novel *Tristano*. This was published in 1966, and recently reprinted in 2007 in single copies that are all different one from the other. In his introduction to the new edition, Balestrini commented on the new possibilities of Xerox printing machines which allows to overcome 'il rigido determinismo della tipografia meccanica gutenberghiana'.⁵ The tone of his commentary suggests a positive(-istic) attitude towards the machine that is able to challenge the final version of a literary work; in particular, its quality of being definitive. In this way, according to Balestrini, the book becomes more similar to oral traditions where a story always differs a little when recounted to different audiences. Here, the book is conceptualised as authority like in post-colonial readings; also in a sonetto Balestrini express this intent of 'crashing words in order to free them from Western colonial though [...], to break the alphabetic chains and to disseminate new verbal space of very new freed words.⁶ If the author expresses a positiviste

⁵ 'the rigid determinism of Guttenberg mechanical typography'. Nanni Balestrini, *Tristano RE4866 copia unica* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2007), p. XV. Raffaella Bianchi has translated in English Balestrini's texts included in this article.

⁶ There is a consensus among scholars who see the printed book as shaping modernity (e.g. Eiseinstein, Johns Febvre, Martin). In addition, the dissemination of knowledge that the book allows is also seen as a sign of the colonial power of Europe, for instance see Simon Gikandi 'Editor's Column – Things Called Literature...What Work Does It Do?', *PMLA*, 127 (2012), 9-21. Balestrini's sonetto is available at:

approach towards technology, this is because technology is meant to overcome what is definitive in the authority of the printed word. Technology is not employed to perfection the lines of a book, but to disarray them.

This process of disarrangement is part of the methods of composing of the author. The lead lines of newspapers are put in disarray and reassembled by Balestrini with the technique of cut-up. For instance, in his early work “Cronogrammi”, Balestrini cuts out words and sentences from newspapers and turned them into collages.⁷ This technique was invented by Dadaists, then spread by the American avant-guard writer William Burroughs; and consists of cutting phrases from magazines and newspapers, and rearranging them into literary texts, which are different from the original. Balestrini has acknowledged the influence of Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* on his poetic. Because of the use of the cut-up, Balestrini has often been compared to a painter, as this was a technique implied in visual arts. However, Balestrini’s works do not resemble a painting. We argue that this combinatory games does not simply have an aesthetic function, but they are profoundly embedded in the intellectual world of the author. For instance, the combinatory game has been well connected to a classical and philosophical tradition of cultural obsession with numbers by the

<http://www.unimediamodern.com/unimediamodern/Nanni_balestrini_sonetto.html> [accessed 18th June 2012].

⁷ Nanni Balestrini, ‘Cronogrammi’, in *Come si Agisce*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963).

critic, and companion of Balestrini in the literary experiment of the *Gruppo 63*,⁸ Umberto Eco.⁹ And in the presentation of “Tape Mark I”, Balestrini mentioned the most relevant steps of his history of a combinatory art. This starts with the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé and refers to artists of avant-garde.

Remarkably, Balestrini’s intellectual interest for shuffling and playing with words of his early compositions will remain a constant of his poetic. Robert Lumley notes that even when the avant-garde experimental literature typical of the culture of the 1960s and 1970s has been mainstream in the Italian culture, Balestrini ‘continues to frustrate the reader who wants the certainties of clearly defined characters and plot development. He even deprives them of the reassuring presence of full stops and commas’.¹⁰ By crashing sentences

⁸ Many contributions analysed this van-guard movement which celebrates his fifty anniversary this year. For the scope of this article, it is relevant to note that the critics to the commercialization and exploitation of the language which is so important in Balestrini’s poetics is developed by this group which conceptualized the crises of language. For instance, see *I Novissimi. Poesie per gli anni '60*, ed. by Alfredo Giuliani (Milan: Rusconi e Paolazzi, 1961), p. 18, 24.

⁹ Umberto Eco ‘Quante ne Combina Balestrini’ in *Tristano RE4866 copia unica* by Nanni Balestrini (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2007), pp. V-XI.

¹⁰ Robert Lumely, ‘The Historian, the Poet, and the Semiologist: Perspectives on the Post 68 Decade’, *The Value of the Literature in and after the Seventies: The Case of Italy and Portugal* ed. by Jansen M. Jordão P.

Balestrini underlines meanings; words become epiphanies. Yet, there is a difference in the experimentation of Balestrini before 1968 and the Balestrini after the riots and Cultural Revolution of the 1968. This considerable difference does not lie in the usage of different techniques and methods, as the author remains interested in cutting and rearranging fragments of texts and phrases. However, after 1968 his works became more intelligible. In his collection of poems *Come si Agisce* published in 1963 by Feltrinelli, phrases are mainly suspended in verses, alternated in white spaces, to avoid any semantic contiguity. Balestrini challenges and disputes the mechanical and automatic expression of the spoken language in his practice of poetry, as well as on his earlier contributions under the pseudonym of "L. Giordano" in the literary journal *Il Verri* edited by Luciano Anceschi.¹¹ Poetry for Balestrini was still a formal operation of manipulation of the language, and the critics also highlight this aspect of his poetic.

<<http://congress70.library.uu.nl/index.html?000003/index.html>> [accessed 28 June 2012] (p.8).

¹¹ For an introduction to the rationale of this journal and its relations with phenomenology spread in Italy by the philosopher and professor at the University of Milan, Antonio Banfi, see Luciano Anceschi, "Del Verri", perche' l'abbiamo fatto e lo facciamo", in *Il Verri*, 4 (1967), 3-13. Some of the contributors to this journal, namely Barilli, Sanguinetti, Angelo Guglielmi, Giuliani, Eco and Balestrini, will found and develop the van-guard group of writers of the *Gruppo 63*.

According to Anceschi, teacher of Balestrini at the high school *Vittorio Veneto* and literary critic, there were three main poetical currents in Italy following different ideas. The first one was the poetic of style and form of the poets Giosué Carducci, Ettore Serra, Giuseppe De Robertis and of the editors of the literary journal *La Ronda*, the so-called *rondisti*. The second current was constituted by Gabriele D'Annunzio, Futurists poets and by Giuseppe Ungaretti; this was the poetic of analogy. Finally, the last current was the poetic of the object. After the experience of the Hermetic poetry, according to Anceschi, younger contemporary poets were recovering of a poetic closer to the reality of objects.¹² These poets follow the lesson of Eugenio Montale, Ezra Pound and Thomas S. Elliot. Also Nanni Balestrini is included in this current, but:

L'universo di Balestrini è un universo linguistico; ma non è più in grado di parlare e non si lascia parlare. E' un universo di segni privi di referenzialità, un enorme vuoto semantico[...].¹³

Certainly, after 1968 Balestrini appears to give more importance to the referent. Words are still arranged using the technique of the cut-up, but they are

¹² See Luciano Anceschi, *Autonomia ed Eteronomia dell'Arte. Saggio di Fenomenologia delle Poetiche* (Milan: Garzanti, 1963), p. 247.

¹³ 'Balestrini's universe is a linguistic universe; but it is no longer able to speak and it does not let itself to speak. It is a universe of signs lacking referential, an enormous semantic void [...]'. Fausto Curi, *Ordine e Disordine* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963).

combined with the intent of communicating a meaning, which is often political. This is due to Balestrini's political engagement, and to his new necessity of communicating political content to the reader. This is because, according to Balestrini, the aim of a book is to raise readers' awareness. Far from being a tool of entertainment which allows readers to escape from the reality of life through a process of emotional engagement and identification, for Balestrini the book should be a political instrument of awareness:

serve a farti vedere altro, o meglio a cambiare il tuo modo di vedere, di percepire le cose e il mondo, serve a illuminare il tuo sguardo su aspetti della realtà che ti sono sconosciuti, a scuoterti per un istante dal tuo stato abituale di robot sonnambolico.¹⁴

If the book is an instrument of awareness, then Balestrini's techniques of writing can be seen as 'estrangement effects'¹⁵ with the aim of making readers'

¹⁴ '... it serves the purpose of showing you something else, or of changing your ways of seeing, of perceiving things and the world; it serves the function of highlighting your perspective on aspects of reality that are unknown to you, of shaking you for a moment from your usual state of somnambulist robot.'

Balestrini, *La violenza illustrata*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Bertold Brecht used these effects in his plays to interrupt the action and avoid the emotional identification of the audience with the characters on the stage. A number of different effects were used in his plays; for instance an actor was addressing directly the audience, or some explanatory placards were taken on

identification impossible. The reader becomes unable to identify himself with the protagonist and empathize with him/her.¹⁶ The interruption of logical and emotional threads in Balestrini's writing seems to have the same aim of the interruptions in Brecht's theatre. These processes are put into being to avoid this mirroring of the reader/audience in the book/play and the liberation of feelings into the catharsis. The reader does not find reassurance in the book. This is because reading should not be an emotional act; rather it should be a rational act. For Balestrini reading is a tool to deepen political awareness, where politics has a wider meaning. This wider meaning can be understood only in relation to the culture and history of Italy during 1970s.

The Leaden Years: sabotaging institutional culture

The political embedded in Balestrini's writings is connected to another dimension of the imperative 'Scompigliate le righe di piombo'. Indeed, leaden is not only the material used in typography. For all Italian people the term leaden is also a word associated with the so-called leaden years. Leaden is the metal used for making bullets. And the image of leaden years describes the 1970s as years of terrorism and political violence.¹⁷ In the 1970s, Umberto Eco highlights the

stage, etc. About the technique of estrangement which was popular in the Seventies, see also Viktor Sklovskij, *Teoria della Prosa*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1976).

¹⁶ Balestrini, *La violenza...*, p. 9.

¹⁷ See Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy 1968-78* (London: Verso, 1990); *Dal '68 agli anni di piombo* (Florence: Giunti, 1998). See

political relevance of the technique of the cut-up in relation to Balestrini's political engagement: 'Era sempre stato un brigatista rosso della letteratura, che sequestrava i testi e li restituiva tagliati a pezzi'.¹⁸ This was actually a sort of joke, as Nanni Balestrini has never been a member of the leftish terrorist group of the Red Brigades. Balestrini was indeed involved in the leftish political movement of the 1970s in Italy, and wrote a history of it with Primo Moroni.¹⁹ He was closer to the group *Autonomia Operaia* and then become one of the founder members of *Potere Operaio*. These were political organizations without representation in Parliament involved in political struggle for bettering manual workers' conditions. They saw workers as a revolutionary force for a change towards a more equal society. Robert Lumley has defined Balestrini, in Gramscian terms, as an organic intellectual of the movement he was part of.²⁰

also *Speaking Out and Silencing: Culture, Society and Politics in Italy in the 1970s*, ed. by Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio (Oxford: Legenda, 2006); Anna Cento Bull, *Italian Neofascism: The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Nonreconciliation* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

¹⁸ 'He has always been a Red Brigades activist of literature who kidnaped texts and gave them back cut into pieces'. Eco Umberto, 'La violenza illustrante', *Corriere della Sera*, 7 March 1976.

¹⁹ Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *L'orda d'oro. 1968-1977 La Grande Ondata Rivoluzionaria e Creativa, Politica ed Esistenziale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988).

²⁰ Lumely, 'The Historian, the Poet, and the Semiologist', p. 6.

This is evident in Balestrini's novel *Vogliamo Tutto* (We want it all). The book is a reaction to the authority of bourgeois narrations consists of telling a cut-up story with protagonists the working class, or more specifically the *operaio massa* (mass worker). This was the less skilled worker of the Fordist production without sentimental identification with the factory, or proudness for his condition of worker - unlike most elite workers organized in the Italian Communist Party. The *operaio massa* contested the system of factory and Fordism way of productions in factory and streets demonstrations recounted in *Vogliamo Tutto*. Workers at the assembly line are depicted also in Balestrini's poetry: 'sono animali nuovi che in Fiat si portano dietro il loro passato la loro vita privata la loro insofferenza per tutte le autorità'.²¹ If *Vogliamo Tutto* could be considered the masterpiece of Balestrini's work as organic intellectual to *Potere Operaio* because of the centrality given to the character of the manual worker, it is not only by constructing working class heroes that Balestrini fights for the revolution with(in) language.

The necessity of communicating the political goals of the movement seems at the base of his poetic of disarray, which now takes into account the referent. The importance of writing for a referent become even greater and evident when associated with the failure of the riots and the experience of prison. In *Gli*

²¹ 'they are new animals who are bringing in their past their private life their intolerance for all authorities'. Nanni Balestrini, 'Blackout', in *Blackout e Altro* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2009), p. 35.

*Invisibili*²² the protagonist, a member of the movement in prison, comes into contact also with illiterate common prisoners who asked the political prisoners to write letters for them, and the importance of writing is highlighted:

io qui in carcere mi sono accorto dell'importanza di scrivere prima praticamente non avevo mai scritto delle lettere non l'avevo mai considerate un mezzo di comunicazione e adesso invece era l'unico modo insieme al colloquio settimanale se vuoi conservare dei rapporti se vuoi portarli avanti.²³

This passage highlights the importance of writing for a referent, for conveying a message which structures a relationship. The political engagement of Balestrini is clearly intertwined with the necessity of communicating, and even its technique of the cut-up seems to become a political tool. Indeed, the above-mentioned Eco's comment does not point towards an historical recounts of the political engagement of Balestrini as part of the Red Brigades. The focus is on the

²² Nanni Balestrini, *Gli Invisibili* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, [1987] 2005). The version of 1987 has been translated two years later and published in English, Nanni Balestrini, *The Unseen*, trans. by Liz. Heron (London: Verso, 1989).

²³ 'here in jail I realized the importance of writing before I never wrote letters I never considered it a mean of communication and now on the contrary it was the only way along with the weekly interview if you want to maintain some relationships'. Nanni Balestrini, *Vogliamo Tutto*, (Rome: DeriveApprodi, [1971] 2004), p.200.

process of cut-up which is explained with reference to the violence of the leaden years. Eco highlights the political relevance of de-(co)-structuring a given meaning and cutting it into pieces.

Ada Tosatti has contextualized the cut-up into the conceptualization of violence of language by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.²⁴ According to the two thinkers, violence of language is a result of the inscription of social antagonism into antagonism of discourses and of confrontation of different specific/specialized languages. Tosatti shows these confrontations of different narrating viewpoints in *La Violenza Illustrata*. This novel is central to understand the relationships of the author with the printed words. Again, we have to go back to our beginning, to our first quote which is taken from a topical episode of the struggle, the demonstration and attack of the conservative broadsheet *Il Corriere della Sera*. Here, “scompigliare” can be translated with “disrupt” or “sabotaging”, and the lines of leaden are again the lines of typography. This is a topical scene of the novel, recounted by the author with phrases cut and pasted from newspapers. The most authoritative Italian broadsheet was under attack as all the institutional culture was under attack.

²⁴ Ada Tosatti, “Avec les Yeux du Langage”: la Violence du Texte et Subversion Politique dans *La violenza illustrata* et *Blackout* de Nanni Balestrini, Proceedings of the Conference *Littérature et “temps des révolte”, Italie, 1967-1980*, 27, 28, 29 November 2009, Lyon, <<http://colloque-temps-revoltes.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article78>> [accessed 18 June 2012].

This was because institutional traditional culture resisted the new culture of the leftish Italian movement of the 1970s. The movement recounted in *La Violenza Illustrata*, is based on forms of group sharing, participatory democracy, and acts political struggle to achieve the goal of the establishment of a utopian society, where health is more equally shared. Contemporary opponents of the movement saw its political aims as an attack to the existing institutions and to private property. The movement was repressed, as Balestrini pointed out ‘... la repressione non erano soltanto i carabinieri e i poliziotti era anche l’assedio della stampa e dell’informazione’.²⁵ For Balestrini media were engaged in a campaign aimed to criminalize the leftish movement. Possibly the best example addressing the criminalization of the movement can be found in *L’Editore*. Here, the press reconstructs the character of Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.²⁶ Feltrinelli was a politically engaged owner of the publishing company that still bares his surname where Balestrini worked. His publishing company was fundamental for the development of the *Gruppo 63*. This is because Feltrinelli promoted the *Convegno di Palermo*, a relevant workshop for debating ideas, as well as published most of the works of this group of writers. In addition, Feltrinelli was an activist and

²⁵ ‘...repression were not only military policemen and policemen it was also the siege of the press and of media’. Balestrini, *Gli invisibili*, p. 217-8.

²⁶ Carlo Feltrinelli, *Feltrinelli: A Story of Riches, Revolution, and Violent Death* (San Diego: Harcourt Trade, 2002).

founder of the GAP movement.²⁷ According to *L'Editore*, after his death in a controversial sabotaging action Giangiacomo Feltrinelli was depicted as:

un play-boy della rivoluzione, un giovane patrizio viziato dagli agi e dai miliardi un bambino capriccioso incapace di dare un senso alla propria esistenza alto-borghese un alto Borghese degenerare e degenerate un boy-scout un commesso viaggiatore alla ricerca di pubblicità assetato di clamore e di avventura.²⁸

The narrator of this novel buys all the newspapers and looks at the picture of the death man in search of the truth about his death. But the truth cannot come from words, as for Balestrini, words are the *locus* of the struggle. Here, the cut-up can be seen as a reaction to this criminalization of the movement.

²⁷ Originally the GAP (Gruppi di Azione Patriotica – Groups of Patriotic Action) were partisans fighting fascism mainly operating in sabotages of cities. See Giovanni Pesce, *Senza Tregua: La Guerra dei GAP* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995). Giangiacomo Feltrinelli founded in 1970 an organization with the same name. This was one of the first armed groups in the struggle of 1970s in Italy; eventually, this group will become part of the Red Brigades.

²⁸ 'a play-boy of revolution, a young noblemen spoiled by great comfort and by billions a whimsical child incapable of giving a sense to his own high-bourgeois existence a depraved upper class member and degenerated a boy-scout a travelling salesman looking for publicity thirsty for clamor and adventure'. Nanni Balestrini, *L'Editore* (Rome: DeriveApprodi [1989] 2006), p.82.

In *L'Editore*, the construction of parallel points of narration is the structure itself of the story. This novel is not simply the reconstruction of the death of Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. The pretext of the novel is a meeting of a group of people discussing the possibilities of shooting a movie taken from the story of Feltrinelli after seventeenth years of his death. But this is interrelated and cut-up with a love story taken from another novel *Sotto il vulcano* by Malcom Lowry. Interestingly, the issues of this love highlight a contrast between feminism and macho-ist ways of approaching love and struggles. These are not the only counter punctual perspectives; the novel is full of the point of views of different political currents composing and disaggregating the movement. Among them, the death of Feltrinelli signifies also the death of a political modality based on the method of the GAP. The body of Feltrinelli is found near a big electricity cable providing electricity to the city and industries of Milan. Possibly, here, there is another meaning of the image of disarray. Feltrinelli was attempting to sabotage lines, this time not leaden lines, but electricity lines. The author saw this technique as an old system of struggle which was no longer usable by the movement.

In fact, this sabotage system was used during Resistance and operated by the GAP from which Feltrinelli found inspiration. But with his death, also this kind of struggle died. The Italian Communist Party which decided to give up its

revolutionary component had already abandoned this type of struggle;²⁹ but also the movement abandoned this struggle, for different reasons. The struggle of partisan was based mainly on the mountains; by contrast the movement saw factories as the centre of the struggle. In addition, partisans always worked organized into a military structure, and 'I partigiani non avevano mai avuto un immaginario legato a nuove forme di vita a una vita libera giovane spontanea senza gerarchie e capi'.³⁰ In other words, partisans were engaged in taking the power from fascists. But Balestrini's political aim is not concerned only with sizing power. In *Gli Invisibili* a novel recounting the experience of the prison, and printed in 1987 after ten years of the failure of the 1970s riots, the protagonist, an activist of the movement addresses his friend who joined a terrorist group: '...tu sei convinto che l'obiettivo sia la conquista del potere così com'è quindi per te adesso tutto il problema diventa solo quello di vincere o di perdere...'.³¹ In other words, disarraying the lines of society with leaned bullets does not mean to win the struggle. The real struggle is to change society, to create another structure, a better composition. And this political and cultural aim of change can also be seen in the poetic of disarray of the author. As it will be shown below, Balestrini disarranged words are re-arranged according to different structures.

²⁹ Balestrini, *L'Editore*, pp. 71-73.

³⁰ 'Partisans never had an imaginary related to new forms of life to a free young spontaneous life without hierarchies and bosses'. Balestrini, *L'Editore*, p. 73.

³¹ 'you are convinced that the objective is the size of power as it is therefore for you the whole problem consists of merely to win or to lose...'. Balestrini, *Gli Invisibili*, p.216.

In search of new forms: musical structures

Balestrini does not leave the words he cut anarchically arranged in a painting. He ruffles words and rearranges them into a new structure. The idea of experimenting and inventing new formal structures to overcome the crisis of the system of communication and in order to better mechanisms of communication is rooted in the experience of the *Gruppo 63*. For instance, Umberto Eco underlines that the real content of an artistic work is his formal structure.³² Some critics have pointed to the similarity of this new structure with epic poems.³³ Indeed, Balestrini seem to use in most of his novels this way of rearranging words into *lasse*. This is the structure used in epical poems. However, epical poems have a single hero as protagonists. By contrast Balestrini talks about a collective subject. This has made some, to talk about the invention of a new genre of collective epic. Thus, Balestrini would become a sort of bard of the collective epic of the Seventies. If this prospective is fascinating and probably encounter the approval of the author because of his political views, however, it does not account for the poetic production of Balestrini.

³² See Umberto Eco, 'Del Modo di Formare come Impegno sulla Realtà, in *Il Menabò*, 5, 198-237.

³³ Andrea Cortellessa 'Balestrini, o Del Romanzo Controstorico' Postfazione di *La Violenza Illustrata*, by Nanni Balestrini (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2001), pp. 126 - 141.

Often, Balestrini's poems reassemble a musical rhythm twirling, organising itself in a fugue to come back to the same scene with little modifications. There are a number of examples. Let's consider as paradigmatic element, the poem *Le Avventure complete della Signorina Richmond*, in particular part VI entitled: 'La signorina Richmond raccoglie informazioni sulla cerchia dei pretendenti'.³⁴ Here, the dominant theme is the position of the intellectuals and their impossibility of taking on revolutionary perspectives. The short motif *hanno paura* (they are scared) expressing the position of intellectuals is repeated every now and then, as a recurrent musical motif, which becomes the dominant motif/theme. In a similar way, other motifs are repeated at regular intervals; these are terms or phrases which become performative and relevant. Sometimes, these are two or three words; for example *producono miseria* (they produce misery/poverty), often is a single word, namely *fiore* (flower). The musical modality assumes different rhythms and dimensions according to the frequency in which phrases, morphemes and phonemes are repeated. For instance, in part VI, a morpheme *ella* (she) is repeated at every verse along with a phoneme that is repeated in every stanza. The musical effect is similar to the trill, composed sometimes by two, sometimes by three notes. One of these notes is constant (*ella*), while the other notes can vary.

³⁴ Nanni Balestrini, *Le Avventure Complete della Signorina Richmond, Seguite dal Pubblico del Labirinto* (Turin: Testo & immagine, 1999).

In addition, Balestrini's *Blackout* is structured as a symphony. The title *Blackout* refers to two different, but connected meanings. Firstly, *Blackout* was the name given to the police enquiry of Italian subversive groups in the 1970s. Secondly, the title and the poem refer to the blackout in New York in the Seventies when robbery increased. Balestrini conceptualize this robbery as a revolutionary act. This is because people were taking what they needed, and they re-appropriate of what social injustice took away from them. The poem is divided in four parts, and subtitles reproduces movements of the classical symphony, namely allegro, andante, minuet, rondò. For each movement four different meanings of Blackout are specified: 1) a loss of memory of an event or fact; 2) the extinguishing of all stage lights to end a play or scene; 3) suppression censorship concealment etc.; 4) a momentary lapse of consciousness or vision. In addition, movements are also associated with themes. Therefore, the title of the four parts of the poem are themes associated with movements, namely 1) Trasformazione (allegro); 2) Istigazione (andante); 3) Persecuzione (minuetto); 4) Inibizione (rondò).

Despite the strong formal similarity between structure of symphony and structure of *Blackout*, there is a difference. The themes of the poem are some knots of thoughts, which cannot be assimilated to musical themes. This is because the latter are often made up only of few notes; for instance the Fifth of Beethoven is essentially composed of four notes. In Balestrini's works, themes which are communicating a meaning are not many and it would have been difficult for the author to repeat them in counterpoints.

The musical dimension increases in the following works, and it is surprising that it went unnoticed by the critics. In the sonnet of the *Ipocalisse*,³⁵ apart from the number of verses, nothing is left of the structure of sonnet; nor the typical rhyme, not the type of verse, not the repetition of quatrain and tercet. In the section “*finis terrae*”, the theme-phrase repeated is *mano* (hand). Verses look like interrupted. Sometimes even words are cut. Verses are more similar to *versicoli*, the poetical way of expressing of D’Annunzio and Ungaretti. But Balestrini’s *versicoli* do not have the same sonority of D’Annunzio’s *versicoli*, nor the same expressionistic dimension of Ungaretti’s *versicoli*. This work of Balestrini reassemble more like a composition in twelve tones; even though not a rigid composition where one note can become dominant without constituting an harmonic unit. At this point of his life, Nanni Balestrini was accused of being part of an association of terrorists and was in exile. The fragmented of the verses of *Ipocalisse* account and express this difficult moment of the author’s life.

In this composition, there are not many thematic counterpoints, but often themes are recalled to our attention. Counterpoints are not on the theme, but on terms themselves, which are repeated like in music; their meanings shift and is transfigured to denote something else. For example, the incipit of the poem is the term *panorama* (landscape). In eight verses, the term *panorama* is repeated three times next to different adjectives, which slightly shift the sense: *panorama*

³⁵ Nanni Balestrini, *Ipocalisse: 49 Sonetti. Provenza 1980-1983* (Milan: Libri Scheiwiller, 1986).

*di immensa bellezza; panorama superbo; panorama grandioso.*³⁶ Then, there are two or three relevant words or verses which are repeated after tens of verses like a brief musical motif. For instance 'fino alla pianura lombarda a Milano e agli Appennini e dal lato opposto fino a Lione e alle Cevenne', in stanza number six, and then repeated with identical words at stanza number sixteen.

Eventually, we have the structure of seven chorus of *Elettra, operapoesia*. The number seven recalls many archetypal symbolic elements of Western tradition, namely the seven days of the week and the seven days of creation of the world, in Christianity seven is a key number. Seven represents a number corresponding to an accomplished story. In addition, seven are also the musical notes. And *Elettra* follows the same musical modality of the previous works. The technique of Balestrini is to repeat in a binary recurrence a word or couples of words every few verses, providing a result of intense sonority. It is a sort of fugue, rather than being a counterpoint. Therefore sounds, words, verses are repeated and chase each other, echoing sounds already heard. The poet maintains the contact with the referent. The content of *Elettra* is made up of selected and intense things, namely freedom, dream, liberation, fear, etc. It is a musical score rocking the audience, and carrying the audience away in a musical rhythm where there is time only to wait the repetition of an announced sound. Here, words incarnate in musical tension and lyrics become epiphany. Here music and poetry merge into each other in a performance where they are both functional to this epiphany of repeated meanings. In *Elettra*, the function of music theorized by Theodor

³⁶ Landscape of immense beauty; superb landscape; great landscape.

Adorno in his 'On the Social Situation of Music'³⁷ of reaching beyond the consciousness of masses, encounter the function of the literature of Balestrini of raising awareness, and creates a work longing for a new performative structure.

³⁷ Theodor Adorno, 'On the Social Situation of Music', *Essays on Music*, ed. by R. Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 394.