

IMPEGNO IN THE WORK OF SILVIA BALLESTRA: A SPACE OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN REALISM AND POSTMODERNISM

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Sommario

L'opera di Silvia Ballestra è emblematica della transizione dei cosiddetti scrittori 'pulp' dalla produzione giovanile dei primi anni Novanta, di taglio esplicitamente sperimentale, ironico ed auto-riflessivo, a generi e stili che si rifanno invece alla tradizione realista ed impegnata, quali il romanzo storico e familiare, il pamphlet politico e femminista, e il giornalismo, visti come strumenti più immediati e diretti da opporre alla reazione culturale di destra dell'era berlusconiana. La raccolta di racconti Gli orsi (1994), in particolare, mostra come per Ballestra il passaggio da un'estetica postmoderna ad una più realista sia frutto di una profonda riflessione poetica sulle possibilità degli intellettuali di intervenire sulla realtà in un momento di grande urgenza politica.

Te lo facevano capire, il disprezzo che
provavano per i ragazzi, lo leggevi su
certi settimanali ch'erano stati di lotta e
che ora, essendo capitolati loro per
primi, non esitavano a pubblicare
inchiestine superficiali e colorate da
tagliuzzare e comprimere in cento righe.
Sui paninari, sui postpunk, sugli yuppie,
sui rockabilly e insomma sulle "tribù".

Le tribù, capirai!

Le tribù.

Che iddio li perdoni.

Silvia Ballestra, *I giorni della Rotonda*

Introduction: Silvia Ballestra's political engagement

Silvia Ballestra (b. 1969) is one of the most prominent and prolific authors to have emerged from the so-called 'pulp' generation of the early 1990s, which included authors such as Niccolò Ammaniti, Enrico Brizzi, Rossana Campo, Aldo Nove, Isabella Santacroce, Tiziano Scarpa and Simona Vinci. The media and critical attention obtained by their first works was due in part to the support that they received collectively from the *Gruppo 63*, the avant-garde intellectuals who had dominated the critical discourse on experimental writing in the 1960s and 1970s. Following the first *Ricerca* conference in 1993, held to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the *Gruppo 63*, a series of annual meetings took place in the city of Reggio Emilia until 2004. These conferences provided an opportunity to discuss the legacy of the *neoavanguardia* and their experimental project. More interestingly for the purpose of this discussion, it became a privileged space for introducing new, innovative voices into the Italian literary landscape¹.

According to the *neoavanguardia* intellectuals who promoted these encounters and to those who contributed to the discussion on this new generation, Ballestra and her fellow writers were different expressions of a similar underlying current. Their fiction successfully represented contemporary Italian society of the 1990s – specifically its youth culture – with structural and linguistic experimentation, while remaining eminently readable, unlike many of the “libri illeggibili che rappresentano i nostri scheletri nell’armadio” produced by the *Gruppo 63*, as Renato Barilli acknowledged in an interview (Guadagni, 1996). In particular, the new model of *Bildungsroman* created by Silvia Ballestra in her first two books *Compleanno dell’iguana* (1991) and *La guerra degli Antò* (1992) was hailed as innovative not only because it described what it meant to grow up as a young, provincial

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For an overview of the texts and authors presented at *Ricerca*, see Barilli et al. (1992); Balestrini, Barilli, Burani, Caliceti (2000). For in-depth critical discussions of the 'pulp' generation, see Balestrini and Barilli (1997); Sinibaldi (1997); Barilli (2000); Lucamante (2001); La Porta (2003); Mondello (2004; 2007).

Italian in the early 1990s, but also because it did so by incorporating the language and culture of that generation, in an ironic and self-reflexive style that embodied the more exciting developments of late postmodern fiction in Italy. Ballestra and her fellow ‘pulp’ writers² were praised for their ability to describe relevant aspects of contemporary society: the omnipresence of the mass media; the obsession with brands and celebrity culture; the full transformation of culture itself into a market product. All this, expressed through a *pastiche* of popular genres and experimental narrative structures, gave voice to the sense of alienation experienced by a generation disillusioned by the impossibility of effecting any political change after the failure of the radical Leftist movements of the 1970s and the degeneration of part of those movements into terrorism. This had, in turn, been followed by the alleged apathy and ‘riflusso’ of the hedonistic 1980s, with their conservative political backlash and the retreat to the private sphere, at least in the eyes of the more engaged intellectuals.

Several critics have convincingly revised this simplistic categorisation that pitted the politically engaged but anti-narrative 1970s against the allegedly apolitical 1980s. For example, Jennifer Burns (2001) has written a lucid argument in favour of the several ‘fault lines of *impegno*’ that run through the post-war Italian literary landscape well into the years of the supposed political disengagement and ‘pensiero debole’. More recently, and following Burns’s line of reasoning, a series of essays collected and edited by Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (Antonello & Mussgnug, 2009), has further developed and added important theoretical insight into the idea that postmodernism and *impegno* are not necessarily irreconcilable, drawing several examples from contemporary Italian thought,

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The term ‘pulp’ was used and misused in the media that covered the emergence of this literary wave as a nod to the films of Quentin Tarantino, whose ludic, postmodern style appeared to be echoed in the fiction of the new Italian writers, but also as a reference to the world of popular culture and consumerism inhabited by many of their characters. For a brief overview of this and other terms used in the critical discussion of this group of writers, see Bernardi (1997).

narrative and cinema. This volume, together with one edited by Eugenio Bolongaro, Mark Epstein and Rita Gagliano the same year, contributes to the very current and lively debate on the apparent return to the real on the part of Italian writers and intellectuals, a debate that has certainly been spurred by the sense of emergency of the Italian and international political situation in the 2000s, from the consequences of the 2001 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York to the sense of permanent crisis experienced in Italy during these Berlusconi-led years. The contributors to issue 57 of *Allegoria*, the literary journal directed by Romano Luperini, asked already in 2008 whether Italian fiction and cinema were undergoing a “ritorno alla realtà” and to realism, with Raffaele Donnarumma replying emphatically in the affirmative in his essay on “Nuovi realismi and persistenze postmoderne: narratori italiani di oggi (Donnarumma, 2008). In the overall discussion, however, only a few of the authors who emerged in the 1990s with *Ricerca* have been taken into consideration³, and of none of them are women.

This indifference to the political engagement of the ‘pulp’ generation and of women in particular is at odds with the fact that many of the critics who praised the new writers of the 1990s identified these authors’ strengths and novelty precisely in their ability to talk about Italian youth in ways that were recognisable by that generation, all the while engaging in experimental uses of language and narrative strategies. Not everyone agreed that the ‘pulp’ writers were doing more than simply adapting to the Italian context what some considered the fundamentally empty literary games of the epigones of Anglo-American postmodernism⁴. Nevertheless, both the critics who hailed the arrival of the new authors of the 1990s as a breath of fresh air and those who perceived their efforts as derivative and politically bland, acknowledged the significant presence of women’s voices among the

³ Donnarumma (2008) mentions recent works by Ammaniti, Nove and Scarpa.

⁴ On the different voices and positions of the critical debate about the ‘pulp’ writers, see Bernardi, (1999).

'pulp' generation as one of its distinguishing features. Elsewhere, I have discussed the works of Silvia Ballestra, Rossana Campo and Isabella Santacroce to show how writing from a woman's point of view was, for these writers, the result of a complex negotiation between multiple literary models, both male and female, ultimately leading them to reclaim the legacy of women's writing, albeit from very distinct traditions (Bernardi, 2007). In this article, I want to focus on Silvia Ballestra to argue that her alignment with diverse literary models at different stages of her career reflects the evolution of her political commitment. Her *impegno* – this historically pregnant term that means both commitment to and engagement with the social reality in which we live and is considered a traditional compelling responsibility of Italian intellectuals – becomes increasingly more explicit as her work evolves over the years. She moves from the apparently detached, ironic postmodern stance of her early writings, that led Burns to claim that Ballestra “makes irony an instrument of engagement” (2001:139), to the adoption of realist writing modes that followed her encounter with the older writer Joyce Lussu. Then, in light of her subsequent awareness of the marginalisation of women in the Italian cultural landscape, she embraces a more open feminist stance both in her fiction and in her activist writings.

It is my contention that Ballestra's evolution as *intellettuale impegnata*, one who constantly confronts and questions the Italian past and present in her fiction and raises her voice to criticise the policies promoted by Berlusconi's successive governments, goes hand in hand with her increasing focus on women's issues and women's literature. She sees this link between her engagement and her concern with women's issues as imperative and central in the context of the misogynistic public discourse of the Berlusconi-led politics that have dominated the country since the founding of his Forza Italia party in 1994. Equally central for Ballestra is the question of how to channel this engagement into her work: how, in other words, to express a female political perspective in both her narrative and non-fictional writing. But Ballestra's arrival at this strong intellectual position where commitment to literature, to women's issues and to politics *tout*

court come together is a gradual process, one that is traceable in the evolution of her poetics.

The political limits of experimentalism: *Gli orsi* (1994)

As mentioned before, Ballestra's early fiction was praised for its innovative, experimental language, with its hybridisation of spoken and written forms, youth jargons, mass media idioms, dialects and national language. Critics pointed to her use of postmodern narrative techniques, such as the interplay between different genres, the presence of meta-fictional characters and of intertextual references. The adventures of the four protagonists of "La via per Berlino" (1991, the novella included in her first volume *Compleanno dell'iguana*) and of the novel *La guerra degli Antò* (1992) are focalised through the male protagonists behind whom the third-person narrator is constantly concealed. In the final chapters of *La guerra degli Antò*, however, a new character irrupts into the narrative: because of her name, Ballestrera, and the mention of her activity as experimental writer in Bologna, we are encouraged to see in her the author's attempt to claim direct control over her material and finally speak in a woman's voice. At the same time, Ballestra also embarks on a critique of the very postmodernist narrative strategies she employs, questioning their ability to engage in a significant way with the political urgency of her times whilst employing them.

The work which most successfully reveals this extraordinary double strategy of homage to and distancing from her early literary models is *Gli orsi* (1994). All the seven short stories that form the book question Ballestra's role as a writer, including the possibility of her political commitment, in contemporary Italian culture. Throughout these stories, we come across numerous references to Italy in the early and mid-1990s, including the period of Berlusconi's rise to power. This is by no means the first time that Ballestra addresses such contemporary issues in her fiction. As Burns has argued convincingly, *La guerra degli Antò* is one of the few works of Italian fiction to have dealt with the experience of the first Gulf War, focussing on the way it

was constantly filtered by the media, and television in particular (2001:140-146). The true novelty of *Gli orsi*, however, lies in combining attention to the political and social reality of contemporary Italy with a quest for the narrative tools that are best able to convey the *impegno* the author feels is so urgently needed. Moreover, the book formulates a sophisticated – and affectionate – critique of the very postmodern narrative strategies that had brought Ballestra and other authors of the ‘pulp’ generation such critical acclaim in the early 1990s, precisely at the time she tests the extent to which this kind of writing can accommodate a female narrative voice.

“Gli orsi” (63-93), the short story that opens the collection based on the author’s experience at the first *Ricerca* conference, describes the complex relationship between the ‘pulp’ generation and the *neoavanguardia*. The other six stories continue to explore the collection’s main theme: the weight of the literary tradition on contemporary narrative and the role of the writer in this context. “Cozze marroni, non fatelo!”, “Cari ci siete o no?”, “Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)”, “Intervistare Bret Ellis” (F.P.) and “1974” are in the first instance postmodern elaborations of established genres and styles. “Cozze marroni” uses the standard plot and narrative structure of science fiction, while “Cari, ci siete o no?” employs the language of cyberpunk in an ironic way; “Lettere” is inspired by horror and fantasy themes; “Intervistare Bret Ellis” comments on the influence of 1980s American minimalism on Italian literature and “1974” is a variation on motifs of childhood memory. Thus, Ballestra adopts genres which belong to the popular culture of her generation (science fiction, cyberpunk, horror and fantasy, minimalism and childhood autobiography), in order to examine their political effectiveness. In the closing short story of the collection, “La fidanzata di Hendrix da piccolo”, she eventually suggests that a ‘return’ to realism may be the most effective strategy to say something significant about contemporary Italian society. As we shall see, a strategic move towards realism will in fact characterise Ballestra’s narrative production after *Gli orsi*. Before discussing the strategic uses of specific realistic genres and languages, however, it is important to

consider in detail how and why she formulates her critique of a certain idea of postmodern experimental writing, by pushing its meta-narrative concerns to the limits and thus showing its political limitations.

In “Cozze marroni, non fatelo!” the supporters of the Italian Right are depicted as aliens from another planet. The middle class Northern Italians and Romans who, each summer, invade the Marche coast are variously referred to as “mostri”, “alieni”, “zombie inimmaginabili”, “cozze millenarie”, “cozze dell’ultraspazio” and their behaviour is compared to that of the invaders in Hollywood science fiction movies from the 1950s: “Ricordate le tecniche di occupazione messe in atto dagli invasori dell’ultraspazio ne *Il dominio dei mondi*? Più o meno per i bagnini di Cupramarina era andata così: psicologie terrestri rivoltate come guanti, annullamento di tutte le facoltà dell’autodeterminazione” (33). The language of science fiction is used as an ironic metaphor to describe Italian mores in the Second Republic, already in thrall to the new political elite. The plot develops through a constant comparison between the dangers of an alien attack and a social takeover by the emerging political class. The family home is about to be invaded by the body snatchers on the occasion of a dinner party organised by the protagonist’s mother. Following the conventions of the genre, the time which precedes the invasion is filled with ominous signs, including the narrator’s fear that the infiltration of alien ideas might have already affected the potential rebels: “Hanno preso anche te, non è vero, mamma? Sei una di loro, ormai, non è così? Ti ricordi, quando, la settimana scorsa, volevi permanentarti i capelli? Dicevi ‘Come starei secondo voi con i capelli permanentati?’” (38).

In keeping with the science fiction canon, the narrator, Laura, is at first the only one aware of the danger looming behind the presence of these tourists, and finds only a reluctant ally in her sister Maddalena to carry out an act of resistance and subversion. Significantly dressed up in “roba degli anni settanta”, Laura and Maddalena try to enact their revenge against the “cozze” who have contaminated their beaches, by forcing one of them into a pool of “letame”. At first, their attack

appears to be successful: the young son of one of the party guests does not recognise Laura in her 1970s clothes and mistakes her for the “Satana dei Pomodori.” Dragged into the tub of “letame”, the boy succumbs to Laura’s revenge. Suddenly, however, the SF language and metaphor become a reality. The designated victim starts to show unexpected strength and resistance, while the party guests intone an ominous litany and, one by one, capture all of Laura’s family members. Having eagerly made use of the alien metaphor to warn her relatives (and readers) against the social and political danger represented by the new Italians, it is now Laura who has most difficulties in coming to terms with the revelation that “cozze marroni” are real body snatchers. As her intended victim explains to her, the narrator is the true impostor: not only for pretending to be the inexistent “Satana dei Pomodori”, but also for not believing that the SF metaphor could hide a much more literal and darker reality.

The last section of the story shows the family in exile on planet Altair IV. Two years have gone by since the unexpected climax to the party. The conditions on the planet are apocalyptic and the family group its only human presence. They are enduring the punishment reserved for them by the aliens and some plan of resistance is already forming in the narrator’s mind: with some luck and the help of the Altair IV twisters, she hopes they will return to Earth eventually:

Ho una speranza di riuscire a schiodare via di qui prima del prossimo compleanno dell’Iguana, quando a Civitanova Marche, in un rifugio anticozze chiamato “Oceanic”, la popolazione giovanile locale celebra la nascita di Iggy Pop, l’immarcescibile. (57)

The mention of Iggy Pop’s birthday is a reference to Ballestra’s first book, *Compleanno dell’iguana*, where the Iguana appears both as a popular icon for his generation and a symbol of youthful anarchy and vulnerability. In “Cozze marroni”, however, the mention of Iggy Pop’s birthday acquires a strong political connotation, an inspiration to resist.

In “Cari, ci siete o no?” elements of cyberpunk narrative appear in an unlikely context: the story of a grandmother’s birthday. Here the presence of cyberpunk has the function of frustrating the reader’s desire for completion of the apparently realist narrative centred on the character of the grandmother. But it is with “Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)” that political commitment and related issues of narrative genres and language are dramatised in a way that fully illustrates the problems that arise when we ask ourselves how fiction writing can influence the world. This is the longest and most complex story of the collection, modelled on horror and adventure fiction that goes as far back as Edgar Allan Poe and H.T. Lovecraft by way of such contemporary authors as Clive Barker, Stephen King and Anne Rice, all mentioned directly or alluded to in the text. It is divided into six parts, each covering a classic narrative function of horror fiction: the first part introduces the first-person narrator, Polonio, as she meets for the first time her new, mysterious friend and alter-ego, Silvana Libertini. The second part focuses on Polonio’s unsatisfactory life as a writer and her craving for something exciting to jolt her out of the stasis, while the third section narrates the event which changes the narrator’s life: her reading of Silvana’s fiction, which interrupts the realist narrative and introduces horror and fantasy elements. Polonio’s reaction to Silvana’s text occupies the fourth part of the narrative, whereas the fifth shows the uncanny results of Silvana’s fiction, with their alienating effects on Polonio’s life. Finally, the sixth section narrates Polonio as she attempts to relate to the real world again, only to find out that the Italian political reality is more horrific than her friend’s narrative: Berlusconi has won the 1994 general elections and Silvana’s tale turns out to be a prophecy of real events: “‘verrà un Pelàto,’ diceva la cinquantunesima Profezia. ‘Un Pelàto in diretta sulle pelose ali della notte nera’” (113).

Silvana Libertini’s prophetic skills are announced at the beginning, when, while attending the football match which opens “Lettere”, she correctly predicts that the player Giunco will miss the penalty he is about to shoot. The football match itself is an explanation and prefiguration of the political aspects of Silvana’s predictions. The

game between the young members of the Pds and the “creativi” Rotunderos degenerates into a fight, echoing the internal weakness and divisions of the Italian Left following the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party in 1991. The narrator underlines how the Rotunderos themselves are not a credible alternative to the old institutional Left: “Noi altri creativi eravamo una quindicina, disuniti da ripicche, gelosie, invidie scellerate” (76). Polonio’s encounter with Silvana precipitates her crisis as a writer. Polonio tries to explain the Rotunderos’ football ethics to Silvana, by comparing the team to a steam engine and then to a huge blind bull that runs loose around the football pitch. Silvana is perplexed by this comparison and asks if the image of the blind bull should be intended literally or metaphorically. Polonio replies:

“Beh, alla lettera [...] è chiaro.” Trovavo insopportabile aggiungere spiegazioni a un’immagine tanto netta.

In quel periodo della mia vita mi sentivo come un pittore d’altri tempi, un paesaggista naturalista, uno che con due tre pennellate, zac zac, ti tirava fuori migliaia di verità profondissime sul reale. (79-80)

Silvana’s doubts are an implicit critique of Polonio’s poetics, questioning as they do the latter’s assumption that the link between literal and metaphorical is self-evident. But even before she starts reading Silvana’s text, Polonio is experiencing a condition of depression and authorial anxiety, doubting her own narrative talent and comparing herself negatively to Leopardi:

Io con gli amici scambiavo giornaletti splatter tutti popolati da 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*, la *Titanomachia* e *La Torta* [...] mentre la sottoscritta – nata anche lei nelle Marche e questo avrà voluto pur dire qualcosa, no? – ebbene, facevo finta di suonare la

chitarra, per fare bella figura con il disc-jockey
Percey [...] Io ero schiacciata da quell'abisso incolmabile.
(84-85, Ballestra's italics)

Her limits relate not only to literary ambition and competence, but are also cultural: "io della storia del mondo non ricordavo nulla," bemoans the narrator, her cultural baggage reduced to confused "toponomastiche" of youth culture, the representatives of which are almost indistinguishable entities: "Johnny Lydon, Johnny Bono, Johnny Bowie" (84).

Silvana's narrative reaches Polonio by fax at a moment of great self-doubt as a writer. Before the reader is given a glimpse of Silvana's text, the narrator offers her critical perspective on it. First of all, she states that the "trama" is the aspect of Silvana's story which attracts her most; secondly, that this plot contains a message: "Un messaggio, desidero anticiparlo con nettezza, questo, in cui nessun essere umano – né umano né vivente – usciva vivo da lì" (89). Moreover, the narrator makes a favourable comparison between Silvana's text and Leopardi's *La Torta*, stressing the innovative quality of her friend's fiction. Finally, Silvana's writing rings true to Polonio, who finds in it a reflection of her own narrative concerns, such as, for example, her interest in first-person narrators.

Set in Paraguay in 1939, Silvana's story within the story follows the structure of the horror genre, with a first-person narrator fighting against an evil creature that can mutate and assume various identities, until he finally loses his human form and all his body parts and is reduced to just his dying eyes. Silvana's intention to write a political metaphor that transcends its setting is expressed directly in her text, when, in Asunción in 1939, one of the characters is seen reading an old issue of the magazine *Masters of Rock* containing a 1970s photograph of the British band Jethro Tull. The protagonist and her enemy also mention the punk band The Sex Pistols, while the narrator refers to Clive Barker, Cornell Woolrich and Eric Rohmer. Then, during the final confrontation between the protagonist and the mutant creature, the historical metaphor is forgotten and direct mention is

made of “il centro-destra”, “Miglio”, “la massoneria incappucciata”, “i ladri della prima repubblica” and the prophecy of Berlusconi’s victory.

Polonio becomes obsessed with Silvana’s text: she wants to write a film adaptation of it, a musical comedy, and to launch a commercial franchise. She is so focused on the infinite possibilities of the text that she becomes entirely oblivious to the external world. Together with her friend Giunco, she undergoes a process of physical transformation that recalls that of the mutant character of Silvana’s fiction. When, at last, Silvana sends her the new pages, the language has become so difficult to decode that the narrator compares it to “materiali sperimentali alla Sanguineti” (112). The new text carries a promising title, *Tutti i numeri della peste nera*, which makes Polonio hope for something in the same style as Silvana’s previous horror story, *Noi incontaminati, alziamoci!* The text, however, is soon revealed to be made up of numbers, rather than words: “Non erano materiali di narrativa e neanche cose aforistiche o mitologiche,” Polonio explains to Giunco, “Qui è tutta matematica pura” (113). Finally, the narrator realises that, during her isolation and separation from the world, the Italian general elections have taken place and the numeric tables sent by Silvana are not an example of avant-garde writing as she had first believed, but the results of the general election won on 20 March 1994 by the Centre-Right alliance led by Berlusconi. Having wasted all her energies on Silvana’s fiction, Polonio reacts with horror to the news, but is unable to gather enough strength to even imagine an act of rebellion, thus reinforcing the suggestion that, while able to produce a sophisticated and engrossing political metaphor, Silvana’s ‘pulp’ narrative may also reinforce the lack of connection between a certain kind of experimental writing (and reading) and the reality of which it speaks.

In the next short story of the collection, “Intervistare Bret Ellis” (F.P.), Ballestra continues to spell out her weariness with an idea of fiction that is more concerned with its own form and language than with contents. The title of the story refers to Bret Easton Ellis, author of influential novels about the lifestyle and obsessions of the educated,

wealthy and morally vacuous American youth of the 1980s, such as *Less Than Zero* (1985), *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) and *American Psycho* (1991). The literary reference is, however, incidental, a misleading clue used by the narrator in order to comment ironically on the postmodern fascination with narrative fragmentation, irresolution and interpretative openness, precisely the traits the *neoavanguardia* critics had identified and praised in Ballestra's first books. The promised interview with the American writer never materialises in the story, which immediately digresses into a long description of the ostentatious apartment where the narrator is invited to meet him and of the games played by the other guests:

una diavola malata di nervi aveva buttato là a gran voce l'idea del gioco delle iniziali. Non so se lo conoscete. Bisognava dividersi in due squadre, sostanzialmente. Poi, individuate due iniziali, per esempio le iniziali F.P., ci si dava battaglia su chi trovava piú nomi e cognomi universalmente noti di gente che a quel punto poteva chiamarsi. (120-121)

The list of names starting with F.P. occupies almost a third of the story's length. Not only is this list guided merely by initials, but the names which appear in it have arbitrary initials, belonging to unknown people, institutions, places and shops. The game therefore becomes a meaningless play of words. When the narrator is finally expelled from the game and from the house, the story ends abruptly without resolution and without any suggestion as to whether Bret Easton Ellis will eventually attend the party. The story parodies many strategies of postmodern narrative, such as the use of digressions, arbitrary cultural links and deliberate manipulation of readers' expectations, and shows them to be futile exercises in style.

After this critique of the cultural and literary models adopted in her 'pulp' production, in the final two stories of the book Ballestra adopts more realist modes in an attempt to move forward. "1974" is an autobiographical childhood memory and a reflection on the Italian

political context of the 1970s. It is also her first foray into the historical and personal memoir that will find its more mature expression in her most recent novel, *I giorni della Rotonda* (2009). This recent novel weaves together the memory of 1970s Leftist terrorism, the fall-out of political disenchantment and the subsequent heroin addiction of a significant part of that generation, followed by the quiet resistance to the conservative backlash by many who, like Ballestra herself, grew up in the 1980s. In “1974”, written fifteen years before *I giorni della Rotonda*, Ballestra already tells the collective story of her generation’s younger years through a tale of school failure and success that reflects the turmoil of the social and political tension of the *anni di piombo*. In doing so, she anticipates the theme of childhood that is also at the centre of the short story that closes *Gli orsi*, “La fidanzata di Hendrix da piccolo”. Here, she turns fully to realism, adopting a coherent female point of view. Meta-narrative elements are still present. The reader follows the first-person narrator as she undertakes a train journey and as she interacts with people, both adults and children, she meets along the way. This becomes an opportunity for her to reflect in earnest on her role as a writer, and to move away from an exclusive and self-reflexive focus on form, represented by her obsession with beginnings and endings of stories that never go anywhere. Instead she comes to concentrate on content, the narrative middle, as symbolised by her increasing engagement with her fellow passengers.

In praise of a “letteratura servizievole”: Joyce Lussu, realism and impegno

In the stories collected in *Gli orsi*, in “Cozze marroni” and “Lettere” in particular, Ballestra highlights the limits of a narrative approach that lets formal concerns and ironic posturing take precedence over literature’s ability to speak directly of the reality it inhabits. But Ballestra’s move from the postmodern narrative models that inspired her early, critically-acclaimed fiction, to a type of writing located within the tradition of realism – albeit one resolutely anchored to the

centrality of language and form and aware of the potential for experimentation also within the parameters of realism – happens gradually and runs parallel with her new-found interest in women’s literary tradition.

Gli orsi is, as we have seen, a reflection on the nature and limitations of a literature conceived exclusively in terms of opposition to (and ironic deconstruction of) realist literary practices. In the final short story, “La fidanzata di Hendrix”, Ballestra suggests that a less self-referential and more engaged blueprint for contemporary fiction might be found in narratives that belong to the autobiographical and realist traditions. Indeed, Burns argues that Ballestra associates the character of Nonna F. from “Cari, ci siete o no?” with the act of storytelling, a “matriarchal source” that allows the narrator to re-elaborate existing literary conventions (2001:152). This interpretation is confirmed later with the publication of *Tutto su mia nonna* (2005), a family saga told by a female narrator who traces the origin of her narrative passion back to the storytelling skills of her own mother and grandmother, as I will discuss shortly.

The turning point in this transition is the publication of *Joyce L. Una vita contro* (1996). This is Ballestra’s biography/interview of Joyce Lussu (1912-1998), an older writer who, thanks to her participation in the anti-fascist Resistance, her life-long political commitment and her feminist ideals has sufficient authority to displace the male literary models Ballestra followed in her early production. In her biography of Lussu, Ballestra repeatedly emphasises her admiration for the older writer’s view that literature should be both accessible and engaged. She quotes Lussu’s words directly:

Io mi sono posta il problema dell’interlocutore. Con chi vuoi parlare? Mi sono detta [...] Un raccontare e un argomentare capaci di rinunciare alle parole difficili o a un linguaggio formalizzato, ossia a ciò che per certa gente costituisce invece un gran gusto, allorchè gli sembra che escogitare una parola difficile conferisca importanza al discorso. (54)

Lussu's words echo Ballestra's own questioning of avant-garde and postmodern models and show that her move towards more realistic genres and style was a very deliberate one. Ballestra's works after Lussu's biography, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* (1998), *Nina* (2001) and *Il compagno di mezzanotte* (2003), are a trilogy of novels featuring the same protagonist, Nina. The themes of romantic love in the first book and motherhood in the second link *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.* and *Nina* to the tradition of women's writing, but it would be a mistake to read them as a retreat to the private. Rather, Ballestra's focus on romantic love and motherhood is grounded in her desire to give voice to women's experiences that have rarely found expression in Italian narrative⁵. *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* (1998) is a sentimental novel about the protagonist's memory of her first love. Ballestra openly adopts a narrative genre normally associated with women's writing and reading practices, that of romance. The male love interest is introduced as a "giovane gentiluomo" (17), his presence projects an "aura [...] fiabesca, resa esotica dal poetico viaggiare" (38), expressions that mimic, but only with minimal irony, the vocabulary of romance fiction.

The first encounter between the two protagonists is framed in terms of an exceptional event, love at first sight: "le luci strobo del locale sciabolavano sui suoi diciassette anni, e tutto intorno, il sabato notte, brillando delle piccole felicità che ci sono disponibili in vita, brillava" (40). But when the adult N.N. meets a group of children survivors of the Chernobyl disaster who have come to spend the summer in Grottaville, the narrator links the protagonist's youthful openness to

⁵ Significantly, Ballestra explained how she found the authority she needed to write about the female experience of pregnancy and motherhood by re-reading Pier Vittorio Tondelli's novel about male military service, *Pao Pao* (1992): "Perché in fondo ho pensato: il militare lo fanno tutti. Però nessuno ha scritto sul servizio militare. E ho pensato: va be', quasi tutte le donne, molte donne partoriscono, o almeno è un'esperienza molto comune, però nessuno ha mai scritto, quindi come Tondelli l'ho potuta scrivere." (Caredda 2005:91).

romantic love to her current ability to feel compassion for the children and to her new stance on committed writing:

Con ogni evidenza, la signorina N.N. aveva in mente – le sue letture di allora, in certo modo ve la costringevano – aveva in mente, dicevo, un’idea di letteratura non troppo incendiaria, e neanche tanto rivoluzionaria. La sua era un’idea di letteratura, per così dire, servizievole. (91)

Following Lussu’s example, Ballestra has learnt that, in order to be “servizievole”, literature needs at times to be expressed in accessible language and forms. While “non troppo incendiaria, e neanche tanto rivoluzionaria”, Ballestra’s literature is not any less engaged, because “servizievole” means of service to others, helpful, therefore eminently committed and political. This is in line with her comments on Lussu’s memoir of the Resistance, which Ballestra praised for “la sua completa assenza di retorica”, the “tono quotidiano”, “la profonda umiltà dei personaggi”, that is to say for its deliberate focus on the human aspects of the narrative and the rejection of any temptation to mythicise history, the war and also the anti-fascist Resistance. This is the example of anti-ideological engagement that, as we shall see shortly, Ballestra will follow in her own historical novel on World War II, *La seconda Dora* (2006). Most important of all, hers is an idea of literature where experimental preoccupations have become secondary to the ability to communicate, especially in the urgency of a difficult political moment, even if this means using forms traditionally disregarded by Italian critics such as, in the case of Nina’s trilogy, romance.

In *Nina* the language is also lyrical and we find constant echoes of romance. When Nina and her new lover Bruno meet for the first time, she sees how their “destini uscivano dal corpo e s’inveravano” (19). More openly than in *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.*, the landscape and the environment of *Nina* are used to emphasise the character’s emotions. When the pregnant Nina witnesses the arrival of spring in Milan, the new life in the city becomes a reflection of the life in her

womb. The narrator mentions the “canto delle allodole” and the “battito delle foglie”, and direct references are made to the Romantic poetry of Leopardi. Soon after the detailed narrative of the birth of her son, the focus moves however from the mother/child dyad to subjects that share a similar experience first and then, gradually, to the rest of the world. Nina establishes a connection between herself and other women who have just given birth in the same hospital. These women find a common language which is historically inscribed in their similar experiences as mothers, “come fra donne che in un mondo antico discutano dentro la casa calma” (122). The hospital itself is just a step away from the disturbing reality of the outside world, such as the war in Yugoslavia (the novel is set in June 1999). The protagonist watches the news of the NATO bombings in Serbia and her horror is especially heightened when she hears the mayor of a small Serbian town asking for humanitarian aid:

“Qui abbiamo bisogno di molte cose, ma soprattutto di Pampers! Come dite voi? Pampers è giusto, si capisce?”
Parlava nel suo strano italiano concitato, il buon sindaco del villaggio serbo [...] Chiedeva pannolini. Taglia new born, ma anche midi. (213)

It is not by chance that the maternity clinic chosen by Nina for her ante-natal classes is in rooms that only a few years before had housed a great publishing house (69). Rooms which have seen intellectual life thrive are now filled with women and men who want to learn how to bring children into the world, yet another reminder of how literature is and should be inextricably linked to real life and a comment on the politics that regulate this relationship.

If in *Il compagno di mezzanotte* (2002) – the book that concludes Nina’s trilogy – Ballestra represents again her struggle to assert a female voice by staging a complex sharing of the narrator’s role by three characters, in *Tutto su mia nonna* (2005) the first-person narrator never relinquishes her hard-won female identity. In this novel, the innovative language the *neoavanguardia* critics had praised in

Ballestra's early works is re-envisioned as a legacy from maternal oral narratives passed down from generation to generation. Nonna Fernanda's story begins as a series of family tales, recollected after the death of the matriarch. This story of a grandmother starts as a traditionally linear narrative, but her tale becomes immediately interconnected with that of three generations of women. Chronology is soon abandoned in favour of a fragmented narrative, featuring the dialogues between Fernanda and her female descendants, the narrator's references to her own work as a writer, the appearance of characters from Ballestra's previous novels and random childhood memories, as well as thoughts on the current political situation in Italy and international events. The fragmented style, the meta-narrative comments, the intertextual references, the variety of registers, the use of the Marche dialect, all remind us of the experimentalism of Ballestra's early works, but this is now framed within the memory of family life, women's experiences and, most importantly, women's language and storytelling: avant-garde writing steeped in realism and in the traditionally female genre of the family memoir.

Parallel to her rediscovery of her family's female voices, Ballestra continues to follow Lussu's teachings about a politically engaged literature. Dedicated to Joyce Lussu and to Ballestra's own childhood schoolteacher, *La seconda Dora* is a historical novel set between the rise of fascism and the present. The protagonist, Dora Levi, is a young Jewish woman forced to convert to Catholicism in order to survive the anti-Jewish persecution in Italy. At the end of the war, she finds a new sense of identity by becoming a dedicated school teacher. While the events of fascism and the war years mark her profoundly, her determination to live a full life, have a family and follow her path as an educator transforms that experience into a quiet moral growth. Narrated in the third person, the novel is told in a simple, realist style that Angelo Guglielmi described as "una sorta di resistenza linguistica contro la volgarità viriloide e l'aggressività roboante che ha marcato lo scorrere di tanta parte del secolo scorso" (Guglielmi 2006). Guglielmi's assessment underlines a key element of a novel that takes on a widely narrated historical period, that of the perspective of an

Italian woman who lives at the margins of history: as a woman and as a Jew, but also a convert to Catholicism; as the daughter of a Jewish father who loses everything as a consequence of the racial laws, but who continues to sympathise with fascist ideology; and, finally, as a survivor of a war where she loses her beloved father during an accident caused by the American liberators. In a symbolic negotiation of her many border identities, the converted and devout Catholic Dora will continue throughout her life to remember her father with a Jewish prayer:

Aveva il culto, Dora, della sua memoria, e in casa teneva un ritratto del suo genitore, e accanto a quel ritratto sistemava sempre dei fiori freschi insieme a una stella di Davide incisa su legno. Disponeva i fiori accanto alla stella e qualche volta pregava. Non proprio una preghiera, ma una frase che il prete aveva detto in chiesa, negli ultimi anni. Era una frase che ripeteva dentro di sé: ‘Shemà Israel, Shemà Israel’. “Ascolta. Ascolta, Israele’.
(114)

The language and narrative structure of elegantly calibrated simplicity and readability could not be more different from the explicit experimentalism of *Tutto su mia nonna*. Nevertheless, they reflect the previous novel’s interest in portraying an ordinary woman’s life within a clearly identifiable political and historical framework. It seems that by choosing women’s experiences and language as the common denominator and focal point of her mature writing, Ballestra has also gained the confidence to move between different styles and traditions, between avant-garde and more mainstream forms, as she has explicitly stated in a recent interview: “vorrei continuare a esplorare nuove strade e a mantenere quella cosa più ludica, più sperimentale se vogliamo, che gioca più con le strutture, coi personaggi, però fare qualcosa di diverso, confrontarmi col romanzo più ortodosso” (Caredda 2005:93). She asserts that there need be no contradiction between realism and experimental writing, but that there are questions of political opportunity and urgency for different texts

and different circumstances. In the context of a revisionist political discourse such as the one promoted in recent years by the Centre-Right Italian government and the dominant media, one that pushes towards a re-writing of the school curriculum in order to give equal historical dignity to both fascism and anti-fascism, Ballestra's story of ordinary racial persecution and everyday resistance must be expressed, she believes, in the clearest and most unambiguous terms.

Conclusion: Ballestra's militant writing

Ballestra's focus on women's experience as the cornerstone of her intellectual and political *impegno* is also at the basis of *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli* (2006), a feminist essay where Ballestra addresses the misogynistic backlash in contemporary society and in the media, and the more recent *Piove sul nostro amore* (2008), an impassioned defence of the 'legge 194', the law that legalised abortion in Italy in 1978. In this essay, Ballestra admits that at the start of her career she resisted being identified as a woman writer, a resistance she relinquished when the prejudice of Italian critics towards women's writing tradition and the conservative, misogynistic backlash of the Berlusconi years became apparent to her. In *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli* she recounts how she became aware of the marginalisation of women in the Italian literary world, including among those Leftist critics who supported her: "mi scopro a contare le donne invitate ai convegni, presenti nelle antologie, nell'Olimpo della critica, e non le trovavo" (9). She also talks about some women's own complicity in this, including women writers and intellectuals of her own generation: "neanche le scrittrici e le attrici più giovani e underground riescono a sottrarsi a questo palloso teatrino" (17). In this context, she reminds us of the forgotten classical texts of Italian feminism, such as the writings of Carla Ravaioli and Carla Lonzi. Ballestra argues that they are still relevant today and in need of being rediscovered and urgently re-read by her own and younger generations. Violence against women in all its forms – from the objectification of the female body in establishment-controlled media,

to the conservative undermining of reproduction rights; from everyday abuse and rape to the economic exploitation of immigrants as underpaid, unprotected domestic workers often forced into illegality by the punitive 2002 Bossi-Fini immigration law – all these attacks against women are the object of Ballestra's discussion in *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli*, as well as in many of the weekly columns she writes for *L'Unità*. In the newspaper founded in 1924 by Antonio Gramsci, she has been writing impassioned commentaries on a variety of current events since 2001, from women's rights to immigration to international politics, including the recent sexual-political scandals involving the Italian Prime Minister. Because of this reporting, a lawsuit has been filed by Berlusconi's legal team against Ballestra, the editor of *L'Unità* Concita De Gregorio, and other writers for the newspaper (all women!), who have all been sued for 200.000 euros each (Ballestra 2009b): a reminder, if one were needed, that intellectual engagement is still feared and therefore still relevant.

In the final pages of this feminist essay, Ballestra encourages her readers and fellow writers to become more alert to the signs of the backlash and gives a specific personal example: “Esco e vado alla Feltrinelli: c'è una parete occupata dalle novità più vendute [...] tanto per fare un giochetto mi metto a contare e su cinquanta libri solo quattro risultano scritti da donne. Forse è un periodo così, un caso. O forse no” (91). Rediscovering past women writers like Joyce Lussu; giving new literary dignity to narrative traditions associated with women, like romance, and to stories that narrate women's experiences; writing in the style of matrilinear story-telling and re-engaging with key texts of Italian feminism: nothing could be further away from the ironic and disenchanted take on Italian youth that almost twenty years ago had excited critics as the main innovative trait of the ‘pulp’ generation, but also turned out to be one of the main limitations of that experience. In Ballestra's case, we see instead a fully-fledged embracing of *impegno*, where the seriousness of intention and clarity of language are demanded by the urgency of the Italian political crisis.

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