

Voci dal Settantasette: Orality and Historical Experience in Enrico Palandri's Boccalone and Pier Vittorio Tondelli's Altri libertini

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Enrico Palandri's novel *Boccalone*, first published in 1979, and Pier Vittorio Tondelli's collection of short stories *Altri libertini*, published in 1980, have both been interpreted as significant literary and sociological portraits of an entire generation. The adventures of their main characters have been considered by many a literary critic as striking portraits of an entire generation – the generation that is considered to be more or less directly concerned by or actively involved in the *settantasette* movement and its wide range of countercultural practices and political activities.¹ In reality, as has often been stressed, the involvement of this generation in the *Movimento*, and more in general the way in which its members experience their own role in society, has less to do with some form of 'positive' political agenda than with a diffuse attitude of skepticism, disappointment, if not of straightforward refusal of traditional political and ideological action. Their presence on the political and social scene, so it seems, was more a *rivolta* than a real, strategically planned and ideologically underpinned *rivoluzione*.

Still, even if we take for granted that the generation of the *Settantasette* rejected what could be regarded as 'traditional' forms of political action, and even if we might conclude, from our retrospective viewpoint, that the *settantasette* generation was, at least unconsciously, and against all odds, already *beyond*

¹ See, both for *Altri libertini* and *Boccalone*, the comments dedicated to *Altri libertini* in the edition of Tondelli's *Opere* (Tondelli 1120-22).

politics – or beyond certain kinds of political activism – even if we take all this for granted, the fact that *Boccalone* and *Altri libertini* have been considered so easily and so widely as portraits of the *Settantasette* generation, remains something of a paradox.

In both books, countercultural and political practices and discourses of the Movimento are represented in specific forms. In *Boccalone*, the narrator relates the *alterne vicende* of his relation with Anna, from May 1977 to March 1978; the main setting of the novel is the town of Bologna, right after the events of March 1977. The narrator often alludes to his involvement – or that of his friends² – in many episodes of the *Settantasette*. He seems to have contributed to various collective publications, such as the *A/traverso* review,³ and the volume *...fatti nostri...*, a collective account on the events of March 1977 published in July of the same year.⁴ Several of his friends have been arrested, or are arrested in the course of the novel, their homes are being searched (Palandri 39, 53). He also mentions the preparations of the Bologna *Convegno* of September 1977.⁵ These and other references to concrete events and circumstances of the *Settantasette* usually remain indirect, incidental or vague.⁶ They

² See for instance the involvement of Massimo, Andrea and Marco in various “gloriose imprese rivoluzionarie” (Palandri 25, 73).

³ The main character writes a contribution on crime for *A/traverso* (Palandri 39-40).

⁴ Cfr. Palandri 53, 70. The *Convegno di settembre*, an initiative of Franco Berardi, was an attempt to coordinate the heterogeneous components of the Movimento.

⁵ Cfr. Palandri 70 (first announcement of the *Convegno* in a newspaper), 81, 86 (preparation of the *Convegno*), 87 (Enrico’s participation in the conference).

⁶ A striking example is the rally against Catalanotti and the inquiry on the *fatti di marzo* (Palandri 45-46). During a conversation with his friend

are sometimes even cryptical,⁷ or treated with indifference,⁸ and are almost never commented on or interpreted in depth. Clearly, what is at stake in Enrico's account concerns his relationship with Anna and his own feelings of distress, not the dynamics of the *Movimento* as such, nor his involvement in it. Moreover, it is hard even to define the *Settantasette* as a real 'background' to the novel. If it is a background, it certainly is a diffuse, fragmented one, dissipated within the multi-layered texture of signs, experiences, events and artefacts that constitute the world of the main character and his friends, and through which they articulate their own position within society. The references to the *Settantasette* are simply, in an almost natural way, part of their *culture*. For Enrico, the *Settantasette* experience is part of what he is and does, but he does not seem very eager to incorporate this experience into a clear-cut political agenda, on the contrary. In this respect, the fact that the narrator starts his account in *May 1977*, when he first meets Anna, without referring in explicit terms to the events of *March 1977*, can be seen as a highly significant, even provocative, discursive gesture.

One is tempted to state that the same holds true, *mutatis mutandis*, for some of the stories in *Altri libertini*. La Pia, the female narrator of *Mimi e istrioni*, recalls, from a retrospective point of view, her involvement in a series of countercultural experiences, but in the end the emphasis in her account *Pia* is not on the ideological and sociopolitical dimension of these

Claudio, the narrator alludes to "quei tre mesi terribili" (Palandri 47) without any further comments.

⁷ See the mentioning of the shooting of a member of *Lotta Continua*, Walter Rossi, by neo-fascist militants in Rome, on September 30 1977, and subsequently Enrico's flashback memories of the death of Antonio Lo Muscio, member of the NAP (*Nuclei Armati Proletari*), shot by the police in Rome on July 1 1977 (Palandri 89).

⁸ "a roma il giorno successivo c'era non so che diavolo di congresso organizzato dalla fred" (Palandri 25).

experiences,⁹ but on the way they are expected to forge the identities of the protagonists – and especially, I would add, on the extent to which they fail to do so. The narrator of another story, *Viaggio*, recalls his university years, stretching from 1974 (the summer before his enrollment as a freshman) to 1978. The story contains references to episodes of *rivolta* and violent clashes in Milan and Bologna,¹⁰ but the narrator, although some of his friends witness from very nearby some of its episodes, perceives the *Settantasette* turmoil as distant and eventually as incomprehensible.¹¹ In the short story entitled *Altri libertini*, Annacarla’s attic, the meeting place of the narrator and his friends, is stuffed with a huge amount of books, photographs, film posters, drinks and oriental scents. The almost homeric catalogue of all the items in the attic suggest a youth culture of the seventies that has more resemblances with a late capitalist warehouse than with straightforward countercultural practices. Therefore, it hardly comes as a surprise that the intellectual and

⁹ The passages in *Mimi e istrioni* dedicated to these countercultural experiences stand out because of the sharp contrasts between the informal and expressive tone of the narrator’s account and the “official discourse” of the *Movimento*. This carnivalization of the “official” slogans creates sharp parodic and grotesque effects: “Non si vuole però far soltanto spettacolo, anche prender coscienza e dibattere, per cui il Beny produce e tira in cinquanta copie la bibliografia del nostro seminario e noi volantiniamo alla Fiat Trattori e invitiamo all’autocoscienza e al gruppo di studio e alle riprese tuttequante perché i movimenti vanno integrati e non si può soltanto starsela a menare senza prender coscienza” (Tondelli 43-44).

¹⁰ Tondelli 82-83 (Dilo’s arrest in Milan), 86-87 (the occupation of the Bolognese university).

¹¹ “A Bologna ci è difficile inserirci nuovamente in quello che si era lasciato e non appena a febbraio si occupa l’università dico a Dilo ‘non me la sento, ho bisogno di stare solo con te e basta, cerca di capire amore’ e lui dice ‘ti capisco, ma vieni anche tu che è bello vedrai, stanotte si dorme là e così anche domani e c’è posto per noi, ce lo siamo conquistato, perdio non lo capisci?’ ma io proprio non capisco e finisce che resto chiuso in casa anche a marzo” (Tondelli 86).

ideological aspects of the youth culture of the seventies occupy only a marginal position in the 'catalogue'.¹²

In short, the characters in *Boccalone* and *Altri libertini*, even if they are protagonists, *combattenti*, or privileged eye-witnesses of various cultural and political experiences of the *Movimento*, never see or represent themselves in the first place as such. Precisely this is what makes texts such as *Boccalone* or *Altri libertini* so strikingly different from many so-to-speak 'official' narratives on the *Settantasette*, such as accounts by *ex-combattenti* (or to be more precise, by authors who continue to consider themselves as *combattenti*)¹³ or collective accounts of the events (such as *...fatti nostri...*, mentioned in *Boccalone*), who usually combine an (often very) detailed *cronaca* of the facts with an emphasis on the exceptional character and meaning of the events and on the intense involvement of their protagonists.

Both in *Boccalone* and *Altri libertini*, the *Movimento* is evoked in a series of (sometimes very vague) hints and isolated episodes, with hardly any contextualisation or lengthy interpretation. The *Settantasette* turmoil as such, although it sometimes touches the characters from nearby, seems of secondary importance. Apparently even irrelevant to the main focus of the narrative, whose stress is clearly on personal and private matters. From this point of view, both texts produce even what might seem a kind of 'counternarrative' on the *Movimento*, for they contain, just as the book Enrico conceives at a certain

¹² "[...] e le fotografie che riempiono tuttaquanta la parte e per la maggior parte autografate come quella di Francesco Guccini, di Peter Gabriel, di Marco Ferreri ritratto per le giornate del cinema italiano il due di settembre del settantatré, Annacarla coi capelli sciolti e le spalle nude, Ferreri con una camicia bordata di pizzo sul davanti e poi ritratti scattati qua e là a convegni e simposi e seminari e convivi, giornate rassegne e dibattiti a cui nessuno in questi anni si è sottratto" (Tondelli 113).

¹³ E.g. Paccino 1977; Marino 1978.

stage in the novel, many of the things that have been excluded from accounts such as ...*fatti nostri*...¹⁴ Yet at the same time, precisely these texts, with their specific representation (or non-representation) of the *Settantasette* movement, have been considered as evocations of the experience of an entire generation. In order to understand this paradox, it is necessary, in my view, to address issues of narrativity and historical experience, or to be more precise, to address the relationship between the narrative economy of *Boccalone* and *Altri libertini* and the ways historical experience is organized and produced in these texts.

On a general level, it is tempting to ascribe the documentary value attributed to *Boccalone* and *Altri libertini* precisely to the fact that the stories they contain hinge mainly or exclusively upon personal and sentimental matters: the choice of the topics, the selection of events and situations, the spatial and temporal articulation of the narrative (specific timeframe, organization of narrative space) are clearly dictated by the will to focus on the *subjective* experience of reality, and more specifically on *emotional* and *private* matters (a love-affair, a process of emotional maturing, and so forth). Precisely this *personal* focus could be seen as a radical application of the tendency to locate the political precisely in the realm of the personal – *il personale è il politico* – a tendency that can be considered as one of the constant threats in the Movimento. The narrators exclude explicit political agendas from their accounts and point towards the possibility of scrutinizing the presence of

¹⁴ “Avevo scritto alcune lettere a Claudio su un libro che pensavo di fare, che avrebbe parlato di tutte quelle cose che non erano riuscite a entrare in ... fatti nostri..., le storie d’amore e le avventure minori che nella vita di tanti avevano fatto andare le cose; c’erano moltissime poesie, racconti, pagine di diari che non c’entravano quasi nulla con la magistratura e che non avevamo inserito per questo motivo, pensavo di farne un altro libro collettivo, l’altra metà di... fatti nostri..., ci pensava lui?” (Palandri 73).

the political at the heart of the personal. What really matters to *la Pia* and her friends in *Mimi e istrioni* is not the ideological underpinning of their countercultural experiences, but the very fact of actually *going through* these experiences, of exploring life by living it¹⁵ – even if, as Sylvia states in her letter to *la Pia* written at the end of the story, eventually the price of this personalization of the political might be too high, and the free and authentic exploration of subjectivity a mere illusion.¹⁶ In *Boccalone*, the intertwining of the personal and the political plays an important role in Enrico’s narrative, not only at the level of the story events, but also on the level of the narrative act itself. The second part of this essay will be devoted to Enrico’s exploration of the personal/political and to the specific forms of narrativity and historical experience it enhances.

The narrator of *Boccalone* hints at the entanglement of the personal and the political through a political interpretation of a dynamics of *desire*, as well as by locating mechanisms of *power* and *paranoia* at the heart of the personal. On various occasions, Enrico explicitly states the possibility or the necessity of conceiving desire as a pivotal element in a politically relevant dynamics of experience and behavior that may, can, or should be used to counter mechanisms of social control and repression.¹⁷ Enrico’s narrative contains expressions such as

¹⁵ “Sylvia ha la forza di urlare sulla porta che a noi non frega un cazzo dell’ideologia, ma solo delle persone tout-court e che le alleanze si stringono sui vissuti e mica sulle chiacchiere” (Tondelli 45).

¹⁶ “Dice che abbiamo pagato troppo caro il prezzo per la ricerca di una nostra autenticità, che tutto quanto abbiamo fatto era giusto e lecito e sacrosanto perché lo si è voluto e questo basta a giustificare ogni azione, ma i tempi son duri e la realtà del quotidiano anche e ci si ritrova sempre a far i conti con qualche superego malamente digerito; che è stata tutta un’illusione, che non siamo mai state tanto libere come ora che conosciamo il peso effettivo dei condizionamenti” (Tondelli 46).

¹⁷ See for instance the article he writes for the review *A/traverso* (Palandri 39).

“soggetti desideranti”; he sees his fellow travellers as “un popolo di incontentabili, rissosi, sfrenati esseri desideranti” (57). More than once, he insists on the interweaving of this kind of politics of desire and specific uses of language. It is not difficult to perceive in these ideas echoes of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipe*, notwithstanding the fact Enrico claims he could not make much out of the book.

ero molto allegro, nello stato di traboccamento amoroso in cui mette la primavera.

Non è possibile calmarsi, o trattenersi, e il sesso, l’enorme energia del sesso che è capace di non farvi addormentare mai, sfugge alle norme che ci si danno (norme invernali) per affrontare le miserie e le paure della solitudine; tutte le coppie, le troppie, le orge organizzate diventano in primavera poliziotti, e permettono di fingere una concretezza del desiderio là dove invece esiste solo uno schema astratto che divide le parole e le cose in zone per poter affrontare separatamente sesso, intelligenza, amore, cacca, bambino, eccetera: anima e corpo, sinteticamente, o anche “divide et impera! (11-12)

Credo che nella vita non esistano limiti, che si possa fare dire pensare e soprattutto desiderare qualsiasi cosa; che i sogni e il sonnambulismo siano il sentiero che porta fuori dallo schema paranoico dei valori giusti e di quelli sbagliati. (61)

In Enrico’s views, the political dimension of desire reverses, in a kind of mirror image, the all-embracing ramification of power structures, governing all aspects of everyday personal life. Apart from the police as such, Enrico’s criticism targets the body control exerted by the doctors’ clinic (the foucauldian term is more than appropriate), the mind control exerted by traditional political and ideological movements, and so forth. But the most striking elements are the allusions to family, family relations,

love relations (*coppia* or *troppia*) as the bedrock of social stability. Since those relations transform desire and emotions in institutions, guaranteeing not just physical reproduction as such but most of all reproduction of social structures, Enrico's ideal *soggetto desiderante* ought to be constantly vigilant in order not to let the dynamics of desire deteriorate into a socially controlled or controllable web of relations. At this point, the main character's relations of affection, love, passion, sex, threaten to remain trapped in a web of conflicting discourses on the personal and the political, with on the one hand a discourse on the subversive potentials of desire and on the other hand a discourse critical of social control of the personal. Therefore, Enrico's increasing *paranoia* concerns only to a limited extent fear of the authorities. Instead, it has more to do with his own judgments on what is right and wrong in the realm of the personal and the emotional, judgments that cannot but affect the very heart of his *autocoscienza* and of his relationships with others (with Anna, but also with his friends). Enrico's paranoid fear of social regulation of sexual and emotional relations appears to be the reason why breaking up with Anna and their last kiss are welcomed with an almost euphoric sense of relief and liberation, interpreted in straightforward political terms:

Baci, baci... è bellissimo, sento che parla della libertà e delle cose che ho perduto in questo inverno di merda, sento che ha colpito al cuore lo stato, che sono ucciso da queste parole in tutto il lurido maritume che mi sono costruito, che la famiglia ha ricevuto un colpo mortale, che sono solo, e assieme a lei.(113)

Desire and paranoia are not merely facts or circumstances present *within* Enrico's narrative, they also constitute the condition of the narrative act as such, and determine the concrete narrative praxis. In order to illustrate this aspect of the novel, it is important to emphasize that *Boccalone* contains two

stories: the first story is the most visible, since it has to do with the actual ‘topic’ of the text: the relationship with Anna (stretching from May 1977 to January 1978). This story is interwoven with a second story: that of the writing process itself, a story extending over a period of two months (January-March 1978; see Palandri 7, 137). Throughout the novel, the writing process is constantly foregrounded: the narrator explains the various phases of writing and rewriting, formulates judgments on the aim of his writing, comments on the results, and so forth.

Both stories are linked by a number of recurrent remarks and images directly relevant both to the first *and* the second story, as well as to the overall narrative economy of the text. The most important are the references to the mouth (*la bocca*) and to the head (*la testa*), as well as to the connection between both.

The mouth is prominently present throughout the novel, especially in the first half. *Boccalone*, the title of the novel and Enrico’s nickname, immediately draws attention to the centrality of main character’s *bocca*, which becomes a kind of *pars pro toto*. The nickname characterizes the *bocca* in terms of *excess*. Enrico’s mouth, in fact, as he often states, is too large, not just in a physical sense, but especially in a metaphorical sense: his mouth is so large that it leaks words. He often talks without pause, under the spell of a kind of *incontinenza verbale*. He is unable to control or to filter what comes out of his mouth, since it is directly attached to his brains and expresses instantly what passes through his head:

Sono un chiacchierone, mi è difficile non parlare delle cose che ho in testa; la bocca è attaccata direttamente al cervello e amplifica i pensieri, anzi è tutt’uno col cervello.

[...] La bocca è larga, e perde in continuazione. (23)¹⁸

¹⁸ See also Palandri 32-33, 80.

Yet on many occasions Enrico is unable to find the right words, especially in conversations (Palandri 13), and prefers to shut up, if he is able to do so.

As the *bocca* clearly has to do with *excess*, it comes as no surprise that, in the second chapter of the book, the sensation of a freefloating energy that transcends all categories and distinctions is characterized as a *traboccamento*:

il traboccamento è invece quando le zone in cui vi eravate riconosciuti si svuotano completamente, le categorie svaniscono come l'etere, in cui vi accorgerete parlando di poter affermare le cose e il loro contrario ed anche altro che non c'entra affatto, che tutta ha ugualmente senso, il che vale a dire più o meno che non ne ha nessuno. (11)

In this case, too, it can hardly be a coincidence that Enrico is unwilling or unable to describe this status of *traboccamento* in language, since it simply exceeds the possibilities of the *bocca*:

Ma... tanto non c'è nulla da fare, quando si trabocca si trabocca, non ha molto senso spiegare il significato, bla bla bla la vita contro l'ideologia, bla bla bla l'individuale contro il collettivo, bla bla e bla; descrivo solo qualche sintomo. (12)

Interestingly, towards the end of the novel, the same term *traboccamento* is used to characterize spatial movement (*spostamento*). In this way a similar meaning of producing *excess*, of exceeding limits, boundaries, categories, may be assigned also to the frequent spatial movements of the characters: their travels abroad (Anna and Enrico's trip to Spain, Gigi's trip to Asia, and so forth), as well as their restless moving back and forth between Bologna and various cities of northern and central Italy; in particular the recurrent metaphor of the "popolo alto di camminatori" clearly functions as an image of

spatial *excess*, produced by characters restlessly moving around, exploring spaces and crossing borders.

As is already evident in the description of the *stato di traboccamento amoroso*, the mouth is also linked to passion and desire (whose crucial role in the economy of Enrico's narrative has already been pointed out). When Anna and Enrico first kiss, Enrico is fascinated by Anna's *bella bocca grande* (33); in the encounter of these two *bocche grandi*, Enrico seems to be able to overcome his inhibitions, and the need to search for the right words seems to disappear: "i suoi baci [...] conoscono presto tutti gli angoli della mia bocca, non ho più segreti in bocca" (37). Yet, as their relationship grows steadier and becomes socially visible, the link between *bocca* and *testa* slowly dissolves. Enrico is often struck with aphasia; he seems to be unable to manifest and thereby contain his thoughts, and his head goes its own way ("la testa parte per gli affari suoi", 111). The *traboccamento* – the dynamics of desire playfully engulfing and destabilizing social categories – turns into its opposite: the *bocca* is mute, and the *testa*, sealed off from the mouth, is affected by paranoia, which could also be characterized as a kind of *traboccamento interiore*, an uncontrollable proliferation of thoughts and emotions.

The unsteady relationship between *bocca* and *testa* enhance a tension between *traboccamento* and *paranoia* that does not only jeopardize Enrico's love-story with Anna, but also determines his narrative discourse: the instability of Enrico's *bocca* is confirmed and increased in the process of writing and rewriting the story of his relationship with Anna. Although the structure and organization of the narrative seems conveniently arranged (Enrico's narrative respects the chronological order of events and focuses right from the start on what seems to be his main topic – his relationship with Anna), it gradually becomes clear that the narrative voice is profoundly unstable and unreliable, since it is under the spell of at times drastical changes in the way words and thought connect.

On the one hand, Enrico deliberately conceives the writing process as a *traboccamento*: a process of acting out and writing down without restraints as many things as possible (“scrivere tutto senza vergogna”, p. 43; “svuotare il sacco”, p. 49) – all this in obedience to his agenda of free-floating desire. But this basic option for a narrative act invested by a dynamics of *traboccamento* also means that his position as a narrator is bound to shift constantly between the various interpretations and impressions of past and present. Enrico is obliged to confess that he is unable to define his own position and identity:

ora che non ho un letto, che ogni pasto è un problema, che ogni spostamento mi sconvolge, sento le trasformazioni correre sotto la pelle; non sono più lo stesso di una volta, cambio continuamente faccia, non so più chi sono. (50)

As a consequence, Enrico the narrator, speaking in the *hic et nunc*, accuses himself of constantly changing opinion on matters, of being incapable to choose sides.

In queste pagine cambio continuamente idea, parlo male del fidanzamento, e poi ci casco come un cretino, allora non so più da che parte sto. comunque le idee sono cambiate allora, quando un pensiero in testa non c'è più e dopo un certo numero di pagine si scopre che ce n'è un altro, è perché i pensieri nella testa cambiano; così racconta che succede la fase cinque, poi vai a sapere com'è! (19)¹⁹

The result is a narrative that reproduces the confusion in the *testa*,²⁰ a narrative that tries to put order in the chaos, but more

¹⁹ See also Palandri 26, 78 (“a me pare che abbiano ragione tutti”).

²⁰ “Forse non si capisce bene, io cerco di spiegarmi chiaramente, ma è la testa che è fatta così, non riesco a metterla in ordine” (Palandri 95).

often than not simply adds another level of chaos to what seems to be a tale *senza capo né coda*.²¹

As Enrico's *bocca* is really crucial to his experience of subjectivity, his nickname – *boccalone* – is more than justified. Throughout the novel, the mouth becomes the battlefield of contrasting and conflicting ways of exploring and constituting subjectivity – with the *traboccamiento* and the *paranoia* as two guiding categories. The *bocca* is at the heart of an experience of subjectivity as constantly shifting, producing in one way or another some kind of excess (too much too soon or too little too late). And the *bocca* also determines the relationship between narrative economy and historical experience. In fact, Enrico's narrative can be characterized as fundamentally *oral* – even if he actually writes it down –, not just in the sense that many of its linguistic and stylistic features are usually associated with spoken language, but in the sense that the overall *modus comunicandi* of Enrico's narrative is profoundly *oral*: the words he utters enhance a particularly close relationship with a concrete individual *voice*, presenting his narrative act as a cultural practice inextricably tied to a specific experience of time and space: the *traboccamiento* as historical experience cannot represent and thematize itself in a distant, panoramic, stable narrative; it can only act itself out in the performative dynamics of orality.

²¹ “Voglio mettere molte cose vecchie, qua e là, cose che ho scritto e dimenticato di aver scritto, ci sono tutti i passaggi fino ad adesso; per me il “romanzo” è una cosa sola: cercare di ricostruire la trama, o le trame delle cose che scrivo, almeno per quel che riguarda questi ultimi mesi, perché oggi mi sembra tutta spezzata la storia, senza né capo né coda” (Palandri 40-41).

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