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Luciano Bianciardi's *Aprire il fuoco*: on the Function of Literature in Society

An author's late works are not guaranteed to sum up the intensity and the complexity of a long writing career. Readers may encounter only a selection of themes and ideas that memory and oblivion naturally skim from a lifetime of literary activity. On some occasions, readers are rewarded by finding practical indicators of the tensions that have inspired those authors. In the case of Luciano Bianciardi (1922–71), two anecdotes from his last work, *Viaggio in Barberia* (1969), are certainly a good point of departure to study how Bianciardi measured himself against his past literary production, from the ironic upbeat pages of *Il lavoro culturale* (1957) and the success of *La vita agra* (1962) to the unsettling pages of *Aprire il fuoco* (1969), his last novel. *Viaggio in Barberia* is the journal of a twenty-day journey in North Africa Bianciardi and four companions took in September 1968. One night, Bianciardi writes, thieves emptied the car in which they were traveling. The thieves took everything but one item: his typewriter. Bianciardi mulls over the criminal act: “La faccenda è umiliante. Questo strumento di lavoro non viene preso sul serio dai ladri” (1411).¹ At the border between Libya and Algeria, a customs officer noticed a book in Bianciardi's hands. “Cos'è questo libro sull'Algeria? Dove lo avete preso? A che cosa serve?” asked the officer. Bianciardi writes: “Era una normale guida turistica, scritta con spiccata retorica, ma per fortuna avevo anche una guida della Libia altrettanto retorica e tutto finì lì. Ma in cuor mio fui contento di vedere che i libri suscitano ancora, al minimo, corruccio e sospetto, che contano” (1322).²

The overarching tone of *Viaggio in Barberia* has lost the tension and the passion of Bianciardi's previous works in favor of an amused but sour irony that borders on self-complacency. Yet these two episodes, even if placed at the end of his artistic journey, testify to Bianciardi's continuous speculation on the significance of his writing, and defines the vexed issue upon which he has been reflecting since the beginning of his activity: both the uselessness and the usefulness of his work as a writer. Bianciardi's considerations are rooted in the debate for the need of a new culture to be born out of the experience of World War II, which Vittorini spearheaded in his periodical, *Il Politecnico*. In his work, Vittorini passionately championed a culture capable of assuming a new role in society apt to prevent humankind to avoid more horrors:

Potremo mai avere una cultura che sappia proteggere l'uomo dalle sofferenze invece di limitarsi a consolarlo? Una cultura che le impedisca, che le scongiuri, che aiuti a eliminare lo sfruttamento e la schiavitù, e a vincere il bisogno, questa è la cultura in cui occorre che si trasformi tutta la vecchia cultura. [...] Occuparsi del pane e del lavoro è ancora occuparsi dell'«anima». Mentre non volere occuparsi che dell'«anima» lasciando a «Cesare» di occuparsi come gli fa comodo del pane e del lavoro, è limitarsi ad avere una funzione intellettuale e dar modo a «Cesare» (o a Donegani, a Pirelli, a Valletta) di avere una funzione di dominio sull'«anima» dell'uomo.³

Vittorini's thoughts deeply touched the young Bianciardi, who started writing because, as he stated, he considered it a moral obligation to help the marginalized individuals; an obligation, above all, to the peasants and miners of his native Maremma (in southern Tuscany). He felt a deep empathy for his fellow Maremmanni, cut off from any hope of material and educational growth raised by new economic initiatives, such as the expansion of the chemical colossus Montecatini, notorious for the exploitation of its workers⁴. In 1952 Bianciardi writes:

Io sono con loro, i badilanti e i minatori della mia terra, e ne sono orgoglioso; se in qualche modo la mia poca cultura può giovare al loro lavoro, alla loro esistenza, stimerò buona questa cultura, perché mi permette di restituire, almeno in parte, lavoro che è stato speso anche per me: non m'importa più quando mi dicono che questa è cultura "engagée."⁵

In 1954 an accident in the mine of Ribolla, near his hometown, caused the death of forty-three miners. Investigations revealed the owners' utter disregard for the most elementary safety precautions. The director of the mine was punished, but not the company that owned the mine, Montecatini Ltd. Bianciardi and Carlo Cassola, wrote an account of this tragedy: *I minatori della Maremma*, but that episode reverberated in his life and his writing forever. In a recent interview, Cassola, by that time a resident of Grosseto, remembered the mood of those years:

Ci dicevamo che il mondo era tutto da rifare: vent'anni di fascismo, la guerra, una restaurazione in piena regola, ora toccava a noi metterci le mani a raddrizzare il mondo. Da dove si doveva cominciare? Nessun dubbio: bisognava lavorare proprio lì, in provincia. C'era tutto da fare, cambiare la letteratura, cambiare la politica, cambiare la gente. Chi lo sa, se non ci si fosse messa di mezzo la miniera di Ribolla con i suoi morti, forse Luciano non sarebbe mai andato via. Non lo so. È un dubbio e i dubbi importanti non si riesce mai a risolverli.⁶

Bianciardi's criticism of the post-war Italian society grew out of the contradictory developments that marked the discussion on the role of intellectuals during the economic boom and an ensuing period of newly-found prosperity in the 1950s and 1960s. Mirroring the shifting stances of the cultural debate in a country where the theme of the economic and cultural independence of the intellectuals from the industry was widely discussed, Bianciardi's position on the value of literature changed. As an intellectual, he was forced to confront attacks on his public and private life that sapped his energy and eroded his confidence in his work. As a result, the abrasive but ultimately constructive tone of his first fictional works turned into a different perception of literature in his last novel *Aprire il fuoco* – a perception which, despite its bellicose title, bids farewell to open social commitment. As I will prove in the following pages, at the end of a complicated intellectual journey, where Bianciardi compares his position with Franco Fortini's reflections on literature, Bianciardi reflects on a literature that advocates a direct effect on

societies. He is far from embracing the literature of consolation that Vittorini had criticized in his *Politecnico*. In fact, Bianciardi upholds his conviction on the need to write as proof of trust in the readers' capabilities to make sense of the writers' efforts.

Why does Bianciardi feel constrained by the poles of usefulness and uselessness? Born in Grosseto in 1922, he was librarian, teacher, writer, translator, journalist, and editor for the publisher Feltrinelli. Between 1955 and 1963 he translated from English into Italian more than eighty books ranging from typing manuals to the classical Italian translations of Henry Miller's *Tropics*, and books by, among others, Stephen Crane, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, and John Steinbeck.⁷ In 1954 he left his small provincial town to move to Milan, the great city, the metropolis where, in his ironic words, everything happens.

After eight years of "vita agra"—hard life—in Milan, fired by the publisher Feltrinelli and with a precarious income from his freelance activity as translator, in 1962 Bianciardi finally published his third novel: *La vita agra* (translated in English as "It's a Hard Life"). Written in the first person, it is the caustic and sometimes hilarious account of his experiences in the great city. Bianciardi mercilessly displays the moral desert he encountered: the shallowness of personal relations; the disintegration of elementary forms of social life; the fixation with money, or the lack of it. The novel was a great success.

La vita agra tells the story of a young man who arrives in Milan from Grosseto to work as an editor for a magazine devoted to film and show business, but this is only the cover for his real mission: to avenge the miners who died at Ribolla. To do so, he has to go where the company that owned the mine has its headquarters, Milan. The plan is clear: he will fill up the "torracchione" – a derogatory term to describe the towering

Montecatini building in downtown Milan, symbol of the company's power – armed with the correct mixture of methane and air to cause a devastating explosion. The protagonist does not blow up the building: the daily routine imprisons him in the system of mere survival in an unwelcoming Italian metropolis. The novel does not contain technical elements that would serve as a manual for the improvised terrorist; nonetheless it contained enough elements to arouse the curiosity of the Italian police.

The curiosity was ignited by a libel suit against Bianciardi initiated by a former friend named in the novel as the mastermind behind the planned attack. The friend claimed that his employer, Montecatini, fired him for this reason. The investigators' interest in Bianciardi's real intentions increased because of the autobiographical references throughout the text: as did the protagonist of *La vita agra*, Bianciardi worked for a periodical focused on cinema, *Cinema nuovo*; he was also a free-lance translator with family in Grosseto.⁸ The reference in *La vita agra* to Bianciardi's friend, and the latter's reaction, were considered sufficient for the public prosecutor to initiate a trial. Bianciardi's letters to family members and friends shed a clear light, if not on the intricacies of the trial, then on its outcome and on the effect it had on him, which was profound. In letters to a friend he writes:

Oggi sono giù di morale. Tacconi Otelli mi ha querelato per diffamazione: cioè per avere scritto che la Montecatini lo licenziò in seguito a un suo comizio di accusa contro i metodi della società. Io mi chiedo che mondo è questo. Ora ti lascio, perché sono dagli avvocati. Sarebbe meglio piantarla di scrivere"; "[C]redi pure che è un avvilito comparire davanti ai giudici, e sentirsi chiedere se è vero che volevo far saltare il palazzo della Montecatini per ordine di quel poveraccio... Capisci che mondo confuso?"; "[S]ono io che devo scusarmi. Toccava a me di scrivere, ma di raccontarti che squallida pena fu il processo non avevo voglia. Anch'io stento ancora a crederlo. E ti assicuro che vorrei capire [...] Non scrivo nulla [...] non ho nè intenzione nè voglia di scrivere."⁹

E. L. Doctorow writes that fiction writers are much more respected and feared in non-democratic countries, (where they can be imprisoned because their voices are heard and because they threaten the existence of the regime), whereas democracies tout them and quickly cast them aside.¹⁰ Why then was Bianciardi tried in an Italian court, if lying in the course of narration had long been presumed? Isn't fiction – as opposed to non-fiction – the realm where language is free, and free to transform readers? While it is obvious that Bianciardi's idea about blasting the Montecatini headquarters was a fictitious scenario inserted into a successful novel, we can infer that the status of fiction is relevant if a prosecutor takes such an interest in the intentions of a writer, and that the notion of intention is still an issue that transcends the limits of the literary world. The word "intention" is often associated with the juridical world: in Bianciardi's case the judiciary authority decided to intervene to ascertain the protagonist's plans.¹¹

In 1965, after a lengthy trial, Bianciardi was exonerated. More surprising than the verdict of innocence is that while the trial had expanded into an investigation of Bianciardi's real intentions, the preparation and release of a film inspired by the novel were taking place. The film, *La vita agra*, shot between October and November 1963, was released in April 1964. In spite of the fact that it emphasized the bomb-attack theme, it caught the censors' attention only for its erotic scenes (perhaps because of the comedic overtones the director decided to emphasize).¹²

Not only does the movie – released one year before the end of the trial – escape the scrupulous attention of investigators, but so too does *Aprire il fuoco*, Bianciardi's last novel. Published seven years after *La vita agra*, *Aprire il fuoco* is a work more disturbing than the former for its numerous exhortations and references to violence and armed

resistance that had been only announced in his first successful novel.¹³ Guerrilla techniques were the subject of *Aprire il fuoco*. Set in 1959 Italy (but in a scenario where Lombardia was still under the control of the Habsburg Empire) *Aprire il fuoco* uses figurative, subversive language to exhort Milanese to fight for their land, to resist the imperial invaders by resorting to urban warfare. In this novel Bianciardi describes in detail how to prepare time bombs (1034) and molotovs (1034, 1046); how to set up effective road barricades (1067-68; 1134-35); how to fight in streets and alleys (1043); why to rob a bank (1110);¹⁴ and he reflects on the organization and effectiveness of acts of sabotage (1109-10).

The timeline of events deserves attention: the political arena in which *Aprire il fuoco* debuted – to limit the scenario to Italy – was more unstable than it had been in the years 1962–65 (the years of the trial): in 1967 the news of a 1964 planned coup was divulged and the news was still reverberating¹⁵; in April 1968 and in July 1969 the publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Bianciardi's old employer, authored amid much commotion, two pamphlets in which he expressed his fears for an imminent coup and theorized on how to prepare a counterattack.¹⁶ In May 1968 the student protests erupted. In late 1969 student protests – supported by unions and political parties – became a political struggle against the government and the work-conditions in what is still recalled as the “autunno caldo” (hot autumn). Finally, in December 1969, the first postwar Italian *strage* (terrorist attack) took place at Piazza Fontana, Milan. Yet, Bianciardi's potentially most dangerous novel, published in more dire times, did not receive the stern attention from judicial authorities that *La vita agra* did.

References to facts, people, and places in *Aprire il fuoco* are often obscure and difficult to grasp for a reader encountering Bianciardi's works for the first time. In an Italy schizophrenically and chronologically torn between the protests of the 1960s and the 1848 wars of independence, many well-known names from the past and the present are entwined on the same pages of the novel as co-protagonists of the imagined 1959 revolt of Milan: protagonists of the "real" 1848 Milanese revolt against the Austrian occupiers, such as Carlo Cattaneo, Carlo Alberto, and Marshall Radetzky interact with famous contemporary Milanese friends of Bianciardi, such as the artists Giorgio Gaber, Enzo Jannacci, Emilio Tadini, the journalist Giorgio Bocca, and the politician Carlo Ripa di Meana. Everything in the novel came across either as a joke or as some unintelligible pastiche because of the apparent irresponsibility of Bianciardi's narrative, which did not attract the attention of the judicial authorities. Why? I argue that Bianciardi, in writing *Aprire il fuoco*, was tempted by a lesson taught by his friend Franco Fortini as set forth in his 1962 essay "Astuti come colombe" (Cunning as Doves), where he reflected on the need for an obscure writing style: "Mi chiedo se non si debba cercare di preservare le residue capacità rivoluzionarie del linguaggio in una nuova estraniamento [...]. Le poetiche dell'occulto e dell'ermetico potrebbero essere paradossalmente, e fra scoppi di risa, riabilite."17

Published in *Il menabò* the same year as *La vita agra*, "Astuti come colombe" is indeed a provocative essay on Fortini's idea of true revolutionary literature.¹⁸ In his articulate discourse, Fortini illustrates his view of a society that is the product of the capitalist mode of production to the point of identifying itself with production. Furthermore, he writes, its structure provides for the presence of critics, but their

criticism is part of their assimilation process, because while critics generate illusions of liberty and of protest as a means to bring about social change, the same critics are called to partake in the distribution of wealth. Writers can be controlled because they are on the cultural producers' payroll ("gestori della cultura industriale").¹⁹ Thus it is useless for writers, if not damaging to their cause, to fight for change with their traditional tools and to serve the cause of the underprivileged because the system, which – as Adorno theorized – foresees such an activity, facilitates the outcry in order to control it as a relief valve. Fortini advocates a different solution: he wants to deprive the controllers of cultural production and of consumption of literature of any means to understand the writers' intentions. To do so, Fortini states that he chooses to write in an obscure style, so to "[c]onfondere le piste, le identità. Avvelenare i pozzi," with the certainty that in the future the need for a new society, a need augmented by the desperation of the outcasts, will trigger the revolution of the majority.²⁰ Accordingly, he would like his writings to be incomprehensible to the producers and controllers of the cultural industry, but comprehensible to those who understand the perils of the status quo and who are willing to wait for the appropriate weapons to wage the struggle for a different society.²¹

In his call for a different, obscure writing that favors a seemingly playful mood ("il puro gioco, lo sberleffo, l'arcadia"²²), Fortini was aware that he was risking annihilating communication. Is there a need to write if the writing must not be accessible? Was Fortini, a thinker against the neo-avant-garde, running the risk of inviting writers to write in the style of the neo-avant-garde? He did not want his literature to be unintelligible, but he did want it to be mystifying and baffling. He perceived his call for a different writing style as a risk worth taking, and ultimately that represented his trust

in the capabilities of human beings. The tension of his discourse shows an artist whose poetry embodies a sanctuary from daily despair, but it does not forswear its duty to stimulate the conscience with a quasi-religious impulse (in fact the title of the essay is reminiscent of Matthew 10:16: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves”²³) – a hope for a revolution that Fortini himself knew it was improbable. Fortini’s willingness to sidetrack the controllers of the cultural industry leaves us to think about the need to write and to achieve what for Fortini (as well as for Bianciardi) was, at that time, the objective: to help the oppressed. Today the most valuable contribution to the critical discourse of “Astuti come colombe”, lies not in statements that refer to Italy’s past situation, but in Fortini’s provocative reflections on the properties of literature and its ethical consequences on writers and readers alike. Ultimately “Astuti come colombe” becomes a challenge to test the effectiveness of a literature *engagé* as outspoken denunciation of social injustice.²⁴

Bianciardi’s *Aprire il fuoco* puts Fortini’s ideas to the test. The novel has numerous references to facts and ideas meant to baffle and at once amuse its readers. For example: the attack against I. G. Farben, the infamous and defunct chemical cartel with ties to the Nazi regime, which in fact is a reference to the old enemy Montecatini, also a chemical firm²⁵; the reference to the publisher Garzanti that becomes Garzanti-Verlag; the bibliographical allusion to an imaginary and difficult to find scholarly paper entitled “The Milanese Uprising of the Late Fifties,” only source of information on the Milanese days, and available – as stated by the narrator – only in English. The narrator’s post-uprising reflections on the organization of the resistance against the victorious imperial troops contribute to the reader’s confusion. In long cumbersome sentences, and through

indirect speech, where the narrator responds to questions by an imaginary interlocutor or a family member, he entertains contrasting opinions concerning the need for a military central command or scattered, not-coordinated military activity to wage the struggle.²⁶ To exacerbate the confusion, the dialogue is interspersed with references to contemporary events and names: Prague (January 1968); Saigon; Pope John XXIII; with the final surprise of the appearance of Pope Pius IX, a controversial figure in the process of the political unification of Italy between the 1840s and the 1860s.

Is Bianciardi's novel the example of the baffling and mystification to which Fortini alluded? Bianciardi was certainly "cunning" in avoiding the legal problems he had to face with *La vita agra*. The presence in *Aprire il fuoco* of Fortini's idea on the need to escape the control of the cultural producers is, in my opinion, strengthened in the fifth chapter of the novel, where the protagonist recalls illustrious examples of literary works: among them he lists those of Francesco Lattes (Fortini was born Lattes, later adopted his mother's last name).²⁷ The protagonist declaims from one of Fortini's poems: "Agro inverno crepiti il tuo fuoco, incenerisci inverno i boschi, i tetti recidi e brucia inverno. Pianga chi piange, chi ha male abbia piú male, chi odia odii piú forte, chi tradisce trionfi; questo è l'ultimo testo, è il decreto del nostro inverno" (991). Bianciardi quotes the first six lines of "Agro inverno" (Sharp Winter), a poem from Fortini's *Poesia e errore*, published for the first time in 1959, and again in 1969, respectively the same years of the chronological setting and publication of *Aprire il fuoco*.²⁸ *Agro*, in its feminine form *agra*, is a word that gained great currency mainly because of Bianciardi's use in the title of his most successful novel. However, the same adjective had often surfaced in Fortini's *Poesia e errore*.²⁹ It is therefore further proof of Bianciardi's attention to Fortini for the

adjective to reappear in *Aprire il fuoco*, hidden inside his prose but as an indication that Bianciardi is moving closer to the disillusioned tone of his friend.

Fortini's "Agro inverno" appears in the middle of a section entitled "Il poeta servo" (The Poet as Servant), a series of eight poems in which Fortini claims his right, as an artist independent of all institutions, to betray the powers that be while pretending to serve them. However, at the same time he laments the failure of his generation's dreams. Following a similar model, in the last chapter of Bianciardi's *Aprire il fuoco* the protagonist manages to escape the political control that the Austrian authority that now controls Milan wants to exercise on him. But in the epilogue, signed by "L'Autore", he laments too the failure of the Milanese revolution. He writes that in truth in 1959 in Milan there was not an armed insurrection: "I giornali dell'epoca me ne danno conferma. Ciò vuol dire che i fatti raccontanti in questo libro sono un'invenzione. Purtroppo sì." (1113), so as to echo the poems' pessimistic tone.

Behind the smokescreen of the playful language and the finely contrived "confusion," Bianciardi was able to put into practice Fortini's suggestions to elude the controllers. Yet, in doing so – that is, in using puns, in setting up chronological short-circuits between two centuries, by inserting political allusions, erudite quotations, and autobiographical references – he eluded everybody, not only the managers and controllers of cultural production Fortini feared, but also the ordinary readers who did not appreciate his sophisticated novel. It is possible that the intellectual and physical exhaustion of his last years made Bianciardi miss the chance to engage more readers in a reflection on the contradictions of the Italian society that he was experiencing.³⁰ It is hard to know, however, whether Bianciardi at that late point in his writing career wanted to amuse his

readers, or wanted rather to mystify the cultural producers, as Fortini had suggested in his essay. If we accept the first hypothesis – possible because of the funny and bizarre episodes of the novel – we then accept that Bianciardi denied the effectiveness of his rhetorical strategy – first nourished by irony and then by desperation – that supported the social commitment he always propounded. It ensues that *Aprire il fuoco* could be a *divertissement* that undermines the role of a literature *engagé* as effective denunciation of social injustice. In fact, *Aprire il fuoco* was treated by some critics as an innocent provocation; he was often asked: “Lei è veramente arrabbiato o si diverte a far finta?”³¹

If we accept the second hypothesis, one has to recognize that *Aprire il fuoco*, which foretells a future dramatically fraught with violence, leaves readers puzzled and the author without any of the legal consequences provoked by *La vita agra*. The style he adopted is therefore as ineffective a denunciation of social injustice and promoter of social justice as the literature criticized in Fortini’s “Astuti come colombe.”

I argue that it is possible to read *Aprire il fuoco* in a different light, which re-evaluates what is now often considered a last yet worn-out attempt at writing. With *Aprire il fuoco* Bianciardi subjected “Astuti come colombe” to a litmus test that failed: Fortini’s initial goal to baffle the political and economical elites, while establishing communication with a few individuals ready to embrace the revolution is doomed to failure. But once the failure of that goal has been accepted, then Bianciardi’s last novel becomes a lesson in humility because he realizes that he, and all of the other writers like him, cannot aim at anything other than telling their own story, as Bianciardi skilfully does in *Aprire il fuoco*. Novelists cannot claim to be the mouthpiece for anybody but themselves. What matters is themselves; any palingenetic plan for a new society, if there

is one, must remain consciously or unconsciously hidden. It is the readers who will make sense of their writings in one way or another. At the moment of reading, the texts belong to readers, who will use them in unexpected ways. Nothing is certain, as Fortini writes, except the need to express ideas through the printed page to demonstrate trust in the readers' critical ability in order to show that literature matters in ways neither authors nor readers can always predict.³² Therefore *Aprire il fuoco* opens a window on the world of dreams from which we readers can also benefit. Bianciardi seemed to sustain this possibility since he eventually decided to have bittersweet fun in his *Aprire il fuoco* when he described the types of violence that some readers saw in his novel as a prelude to the widespread violence that entrapped Italy in the following decades. But Bianciardi did not know the future. His novel was his dream. The elements of reality are inextricably present in Bianciardi's fiction in order to create "false documents" that readers can interpret. These "false documents" are, in Doctorow's words, the novelist's dreams, in the sense that for him novelists have the right to "emulat[e] the false documents that we universally call our dreams. For dreams [...] are never real, they are never factual; nevertheless they control us, purge us, mediate our baser natures, and prophesy our fate."³³

Despite the different receptions of the two novels – *La vita agra* was successful; *Aprire il fuoco* passed almost unnoticed – Bianciardi ultimately shared with Fortini not only the lucid awareness of the impossibility of seeing the affirmation of his ideals, but also the conviction of the need to write as a lifeboat for himself and for the rest of his fellow human beings. This is why, from the never-ending controversy involving the usefulness and uselessness of his activity as a writer, in one of his last articles Bianciardi

does not feel any contradiction (and there isn't one) with regard to his complicated *Aprire il fuoco*, in rephrasing his old statement that advocates for a literature that openly pays homage to the workers of his Maremma.³⁴

Bianciardi was stimulated by Fortini's "Astuti come colombe" to complete *Aprire il fuoco*, but his novel, ultimately, is not an endeavour to prove the correctness of the essay. In fact *Aprire il fuoco* encapsulates in a work of fiction the reflections on writing as Fortini had theorized them in the course of his writings from 1962 to 1969 (the latter being the year of the preface to his collection of essays where he lucidly rectified his grim proposition on the role of literature) to attain the same result: whereas we might see at first an attempt to escape the attention of the cultural producers (as defined by Fortini) Bianciardi's novel finally expresses – with its irony and its bitter ending – criticism of the call for an obscure writing because such an undertaking reveals itself as a sterile operation. If with *Aprire il fuoco* Bianciardi shows he can resume writing after the shock of the 1965 trial, its effects are still lingering.³⁵ In his last novel, Bianciardi confines his reflections on delineating the sterility of that writing, and decides not to seize the opportunity to provide readers with his solution to Fortini's dilemma on how to reach readers without compromising himself. An action that, because of the decision not to pursue other ways of communicating, is paradoxically proof of the impossibility for him to let go of the social commitment that marked his vocation as writer, and maybe a show of remorse for what it could have been in his life.

¹ L. Bianciardi, *Viaggio in Barberia* (Roma: L'Editrice dell'Automobile, 1969). Now in L. Bianciardi, *L'antimeridiano*, ed. Luciana Bianciardi, Massimo Coppola, and Alberto Piccinini (Milano: Isbn Edizioni, ExCogita Editore, 2005), pp. 1309-1432. Unless otherwise noted, references to Bianciardi's works are to this edition.

² For Bianciardi's cynical consideration of the role of books cf. Bianciardi's letter to Mario Terrosi, September 1, 1963: "Il calzolaio Maccari, citato col suo nome a sua richiesta, mi ha fatto causa, e voleva – figurati – dieci milioni di danni. Questo è un sintomo sia della farabuttaggine degli uomini, sia del boom letterario. Prima i danni si chiedevano per tutti i motivi, fuorchè per i libri. Ora anche i libri sono entrati nel giro degli affari e dei ricatti. Segno buono...", M. Terrosi, *Bianciardi com'era. (Lettere di Luciano Bianciardi ad un amico grossetano)* (Grosseto: Il paese reale, 1974), p. 59.

³ Cf. E. Vittorini, *Il Politecnico*, 1 (September 29, 1945). Guido Donegani was the C.E.O. of Montecatini s.p.a. in the first decade of the 20th century.

⁴ Such an attention was probably fuelled by the numerous *Politecnico* articles in which the Montecatini business practices had been heavily scrutinized. Apart from Vittorini's inclusion of Donegani among the *cesari* of Italian capitalism (note 3), articles on Montecatini, all authored by P. Succi, appeared in *Il Politecnico* between January and February 1946. See, for example: "La Montecatini e l'Italia" (January 5, 1946), "La Montecatini impresaria del fascismo" (January 12, 1946), "Di chi sarà la Montecatini, dell'Italia o del Vaticano?" (January 12, 1946), "Storia operaia della Montecatini" (January 12, 1946), "L'Italia ha bisogno della Montecatini. Diamola all'Italia" (January 19, 1946), "Morte e resurrezione di un paese italiano" (February 9, 1946). Montecatini workers sketch their lives in the article "Esistenza ad Aulla tra le montagne e il mare" (February 9, 1946) in a way that anticipates the spirit of "Biografie di minatori," the brief biographical entries that constitute the last chapter of Bianciardi and Cassola's *Minatori della Maremma* (Bari: Laterza, 1956, now in *L'Antimeridiano*, cit. pp. 7-192).

⁵ L. Bianciardi, "Nascita di uomini democratici," *Belfagor*, 4 (1952). See also "Lettera da Milano": "Nel mio caso hanno ragione i badilanti, e hanno ragione i minatori, hanno torto i latifondisti, e ha torto la Montecatini. [...] Sui libri si troverà, semmai, la conferma di quel che si è visto e di quel che si è deciso, e si stabilirà, da allora in avanti, di servirsi dei libri per aiutare chi ha ragione ad averla nei fatti, oltre che nei diritti." *Chiese escatollo e nessuno raddoppiò*, ed. Luciana Bianciardi (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 1995), p. 81.

⁶ Cf. P. Corrias, *Vita agra di un anarchico* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 1993), p. 43-44.

⁷ Cf. M. C. Angelini, *Bianciardi* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1980), pp. 7-8. Other relevant authors translated by Bianciardi are Tennessee Williams, Henry Swados, Jack London, Gore Vidal, John Barth, Richard Brautigan, Irvin Shaw, and Thomas Berger. For the complete listing of the translated authors cf. Gaetano Prampolini, "Bianciardi traduttore di narrativa americana: *Alla catena* di Harvey Swados e *Il re della pioggia* di Saul Bellow," in *Carte su carte di ribaltatura: Luciano Bianciardi traduttore*, ed. Luciana Bianciardi (Firenze: Giunti, 2000), pp. 60-84.

⁸ Cf. especially chapters VIII and XI. To support the autobiographical references it is worth mentioning what Bianciardi wrote in a letter to his friend Terrosi on October 18, 1962: "Guarda che nel libro sono pochissime le cose non vere. Non è vero per esempio la storia di me che faccio una buca per la strada e il comune mi paga la giornata. Non è vero che la questura mi tenne dentro tutta la notte: mi rilasciarono immediatamente. Nient'altro, credo. Tutto il resto è vero, la mia vita a Milano è stata così, anche il mio stato d'animo era quello" in M. Terrosi, *Bianciardi com'era*, op. cit., p. 39.

⁹ L. Bianciardi a M. Terrosi, in M. Terrosi, *Bianciardi com'era*, op. cit., respectively May 5, 1963, p. 56; January 22, 1965, pp. 60-61; June 29, 1965, pp. 62-63.

¹⁰ E. L. Doctorow, "False Documents," *American Review* 26 (November 1977): 215-32; republished in E. L. Doctorow, *Essays & Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1983), pp. 16-27.

¹¹ See entry on "Intention" by A. Patterson, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹² *La vita agra*, director Carlo Lizzani, Rome: Film Napoleon, 1964. The 2006 first DVD release contains four censored scenes in a separate section. Compared to the novel, the film strikes a lighter tone so that, in the trailers, for example, the attack is depicted as a hyperbolic, comedic act.

¹³ L. Bianciardi, *La vita agra*, p. 612. The protagonist wrote: "Mi spiegò come succede uno scontro armato per strada [...] Oggi non si fa più la barricata perché è un bersaglio troppo esposto e con le armi moderne te lo spazzano via in un momento. Basta un cannoncino da quarantasette a buttare giù ogni cosa..." The interlocutor goes on briefly with her case study, describing how to block a street and prepare a movable defense-wall.

¹⁴ Bianciardi repeatedly pays attention to the role of banks. At the peak of the 1968 student protests he writes: "Ho visto poi che le scuole sono la prima cosa, nel nostro paese, che si requisisce senza pensarci

troppo: per le elezioni, ad esempio, ancora oggi, le scuole restano tranquillamente chiuse una settimana intera. Ecco perché io dubito della efficacia politica delle occupazioni studentesche. Se i nostri ragazzi occupassero le banche, il gesto avrebbe ben altra efficacia.” “Nostalgia dell’isolato,” *ABC*, July 1968, now in *Chiese escatolte e nessuno raddoppiò*, op. cit., pp. 200-203. See also note 27.

¹⁵ In 1967 the weekly magazine *L’Espresso* published an investigative report on the existence of “Piano Solo,” code name for a military coup that, in 1964, attempted to undermine the democratic life of the country. Three years after the coup’s failure, a report on the matter was presented and discussed in the Italian Parliament. Its members censured the actions of the responsible of “Piano Solo” and deemed it an impracticable scheme, without meting out punishments. In 1991 the Italian political leadership defined “Piano Solo” as “a criminal plan, criminal in its purposes as well as in its incipient organization, a plan that [...] should have come under the strictures of both the civilian and military penal code.” Cf. F. Ferraresi, *Democracy Besieged: The Radical Right in Italy after the War* (New Jersey: Princeton U. P., 1996), p. 82 et passim.

¹⁶ G. Feltrinelli, *Persiste la minaccia di un colpo di stato in Italia!* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1968); *ibid. Estate 1969: la minaccia incombente di una svolta radicale e autoritaria a destra, di un colpo di Stato all’italiana* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1969). Cf. also C. Feltrinelli, *Senior service* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1999).

¹⁷ F. Fortini, “Astuti come colombe”, in *Verifica dei poteri*, 2nd edition (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1969), p. 51. Franco Fortini (1917–1994), Marxist literary critic and poet, is known to the English-speaking audience mainly for his poetry, which spans almost sixty years of literary activity from 1937 to 1994. Consonant with his production of verse, Fortini’s sophisticated critical thinking is reflected in numerous, often provocative, essays: *Dieci inverni* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1957), *Verifica dei poteri* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1965), *L’ospite ingrato* (Bari: De Donato, 1966), *Saggi italiani* (Milano: Garzanti, 1974), *I poeti del Novecento* (Bari: Laterza, 1977), *Questioni di frontiera: scritti di politica e di letteratura 1965-1977* (Torino: Einaudi, 1977), *I cani del Sinai* (Torino: Einaudi, 1979), *Insistenze: cinquanta scritti 1976-1984* (Milano: Garzanti, 1985), *Nuovi saggi italiani* (Milano: Garzanti, 1987), *Extrema ratio: nota per un buon uso delle rovine* (Milano: Garzanti, 1990).

¹⁸ F. Fortini, “Astuti come colombe,” *Il menabò* 5 (1962): 29-45. Quotations from “Astuti come colombe” are from *Verifica dei poteri*, 2nd edition, cit.

¹⁹ F. Fortini, *ivi*, p. 52.

²⁰ F. Fortini, *ivi*, p. 51.

²¹ F. Fortini, *ivi*, p. 52-53: “... in quello che scrivo, o che altri scriverà, ci potrà essere, come la lima fine d’acciaio nascosta nella pagnotta dell’ergastolano, una parte metallica. Che possa appropriarsene solo chi l’abbia chiesta e per questa meritata. Contrabbandata sotto specie in che tutti, anche i nemici, possono comunicare; ma solo a lui e a quelli come lui destinata”.

²² F. Fortini, *ivi*, p. 50.

²³ Not only the title but also the paragraph within Fortini’s essay that recalls the title is fraught with references to the Bible: “Farsi candidi come volpi e astuti come colombe. Confondere le piste, le identità. Avvelenare i pozzi,” “Astuti come colombe,” *Verifica dei poteri* (Milan: Il Saggiatore: 1974), p. 85. Fortini inserted foxes in lieu of serpents, and attributed unconventional qualities to the doves, traditionally a symbol of innocence: the doves are endowed with cunning, but unlike in Matthew 10:16, where serpents are wise (“be ye therefore wise as serpents” mirrors Fortini’s “cunning as doves”), Fortini goes back to Genesis 3:1 where serpents were defined as “most cunning of all the animals.” Fortini seems to have decided, consistently with the goal of his essay, to confound his traces by misplacing biblical references throughout his text. See also foxes, Mt 8:20; tracks, Job 6:18; confounding, 1Cor 1:27; poisoning, Jer 8:14; 9:14; wells, Jer 14:3. Cf. *Vulgate*, Mt 10: 16: “Ecce ego mitto vos sicut oves in medio luporum. Estote ergo prudentes sicut serpentes, et simplices sicut columbae.” Gen 3: 1: “Et serpens erat callidior cunctis animantibus agri, quae fecerat Dominus Deus.”

²⁴ Fortini discussed again the need for writing in the preface to the second edition of his collected essays, *Verifica dei poteri* (1969) that contains “Astuti come colombe”. In that occasion he responded to his critics and, looking back to his writings, he noted how his reflections, especially those in “Astuti come colombe,” deserve to be re-examined. Fortini made amends for not having defended with sufficient vigor what he terms the irreplaceable function of the poetic and literary discourses against unintelligibility or aphasia. He felt that he wrongly encouraged others to follow a path that could lead to yet another avant-garde cultural position from which he had always consciously distanced himself. But central for understanding *Aprire il fuoco*, is Bianciardi’s decision to probe in his novel Fortini’s call for a different writing style he advocated

in his “Astuti come colombe”, and not Fortini’s lucid – but belated for Bianciardi – rectification, published in his 1969 collection of essays. Cf. F. Fortini, *Verifica dei poteri*, op. cit., pp. 9-21.

²⁵ A reference to Montecatini as an Italian I. G. Farben appears early in Bianciardi’s writings. “Guido Donegani aveva in mente un principio assai semplice e chiaro: in Italia non esisteva un’industria chimica; l’Italia, per i prodotti chimici, dipendeva direttamente dalla Germania. [...] non sarebbe stato un cattivo affare fondare in Italia un’industria chimica autonoma. Anzi, chi fosse arrivato per primo, avrebbe potuto forse creare le basi per una vera e propria ‘I.G. Farben’ italiana.” in L. Bianciardi, C. Cassola, *I minatori della Maremma*, op. cit. p. 18.

²⁶ “... se tu mi ricominci a comandare e a orientare, che rivoluzione è? Bisogna lasciare tutto nel disordine, perché la gente incaricata del comando e dell’orientamento, ricordatelo, è sempre quella, sempre quella [...] Ognuno diventi un Socrate [...] «Buona notte, dottore.» Non c’è verso, fino a che non è finito il telegiornale della notte, il bimbo a coricarsi non ci va. «Buona notte, capellone.» «Un bacino, dottore.» «Sì, caro, eccoti il bacino. Ed eccotene un altro per la mamma. Buona notte.» [...] Dove s’era rimasti? Sì, figlio di una levatrice. Non creo nulla, ma aiuto gli altri a produrre. È questo il solo mezzo di rischiarare, in parte, la mente del popolo, di educarlo, e non già tenendolo a forza nelle scuole, o stampando libri che esso non legge. Bellissimi discorsi, ma anche lui, come andò a finire lo sapete tutti, con la sua plebe rischiarata. Lo presero a forconate, lo presero. Bisognava occupare le banche, non le campagne, non gli atenei. [...] E non fidarsi mai di Pio IX. Papa è e papa rimane.” *Aprire il fuoco*, op. cit., pp. 1109-10.

²⁷ Fortini did not make his debut in Bianciardi’s writings with *Aprire il fuoco*: already in *L’integrazione* (1960) and in the ballad “Pro Bocca di Magra” (1961), Fortini is amicably teased, and so is the idea of the relationship between culture and production – conspicuous in Fortini’s writings – inflected by Bianciardi’s usual ironic tone with the oversimplified no-nonsense explanation of such a relationship proffered by one of the characters in *L’integrazione*, op. cit., p. 550: “Poi uno dei livornesi, il più matto, si mette a fare il verso a personalità importanti della cultura italiana [...] a Franco Fortini quando canta accompagnandosi con la chitarra [...] È proprio un tipo spassoso, questo livornese, e piace anche alla Marisa. Ridiamo tutti.” In a 1968 article, Bianciardi paid tribute to Fortini’s high intellectual profile, cf. “Il nonnino dei lupi mannari,” *ABC*, June 1968, now in *Chiese escatolite e nessuno raddoppiò*, op. cit., pp. 198-99.

²⁸ F. Fortini, “Agro inverno. 1951”: “Agro inverno crepiti il tuo fuoco / incenerisci inverno i boschi i tetti / recidi e brucia inverno. / Pianga chi piange chi ha male abbia più male / chi odia odii più forte chi tradisce trionfi: / questo è l’ultimo testo è il decreto del nostro inverno. / Non abbiamo saputo che cosa fare per noi / della verde vita e dei fiori amorosi. / Per questo la scure è alla radice dei cuori / e come stecchi che si divincolano saremo arsi.” (“Sharp Winter”: “Sharp winter you spit your fire / you burn to ashes winter the woods the roofs / you slash and burn winter. / Whoever weeps let him weep whoever suffers may he suffer more / whoever hates let him hate his fill whoever betrays let him triumph: / this is the last text the decree of our winter. / We do not know what to do / with the green life and the loving flowers. / That is why the axe is at the root of our hearts / and like disentangling twigs we shall be burned.” in F. Fortini, *Summer is not all. Selected Poems in Italian and English*, op. cit., p. 33). Bianciardi immediately reveals his source: “Mi vennero recitati molto bene, anche perché erano versi di un amico, e i tre fratelli mi applaudirono contenti. [...] «Di quale poeta si tratta?» chiese Emilio. «Del Francesco Lattes» risposi io.” *Aprire il fuoco*, op. cit., p. 991.

²⁹ Cf. F. Fortini, *Poesia e errore*: “Una sera di settembre”: “... / e sulle città non c’era che il vino agro / dei canti e tutto era possibile”; “I destini generali”: “Avere negli occhi pomeriggi interi / soli agri, irrazionali realtà!”; “A Delio Tessa”: “le vernici a spruzzo, / le agre acacie, la pozza / di sangue secco sulla calce...”.

³⁰ His novel, Bianciardi admits, incorporates partial rewritings of the first chapters of Giovanni Visconti Venosta’s *Ricordi di gioventù* [Memories of My Youth], 1904.

³¹ Interview, *Avvenire* (April 22, 1969); now in G. C. Ferretti, *La morte irridente* (Lecce: Manni, 2000), p. 98.

³² In one of his poems, he writes “Nulla è sicuro, ma scrivi.” F. Fortini, “Traducendo Brecht” *Una volta per sempre* (Milano: Mondadori, 1963).

³³ E. L. Doctorow, “False Documents,” op. cit., p. 27.

³⁴ L. Bianciardi, “Vita in Maremma” (1969): “Ricordo anche quanta gente è morta e ha sofferto per fare della Maremma un posto abitabile: dormivano nelle capanne, mangiavano acqua cotta e panzanella, lavoravano con l’acqua fino ai ginocchi, tormentati dalle mignatte e dalle zanzare, pigliavano la malaria e se ne andavano all’altro mondo prima di raggiungere l’età del militare. Sì, bisognerebbe fargli un monumento, a questi oscuri bonificatori della Maremma.” pp. 1840-41.

³⁵ Cf. L. Bianciardi's letter to M. Terrosi: "Non scrivo nulla [...] non ho nè intenzione nè voglia di scrivere." In Mario Terrosi, *Bianciardi com'era*, op. cit., pp. 62-63.