

“Che l’antico valore nelli italici cor non è ancor morto”: Carla Benedetti’s Challenge

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In the appendix to Carla Benedetti’s *Il tradimento dei critici* (2002), an essay by Alfredo Salsano (2002) describes the fortunes of Benedetti’s 1998 book, *Pasolini contro Calvino: per una letteratura impura*, in the Italian press. Entitled “Una partita senza pallone,” this essay explains the many hostile reactions *Pasolini contro Calvino* provoked in Italy in terms of the “betrayal” and insularity of contemporary Italian cultural criticism, which Benedetti has described and denounced in multiple publications since 1998: *L’ombra lunga dell’autore* (1999), *Il tradimento dei critici* (2002), *Disumane lettere: indagini sulla cultura della nostra epoca* (2011a), and numerous articles online and in the Italian press. As far as *Pasolini contro Calvino* is concerned, Salsano argues that its critics missed the “pallone” – that is, the book – by ignoring, simplifying and/or misunderstanding its contents (2002, 219). The many Italian critics who reviewed and commented on the book “lo catalogarono...come ‘saggio provocatorio,’ ‘libro polemico,’ ‘scandalo programmato,’ ‘pamphlet’” (221); and they reduced its argument to a “banalissima contrapposizione tra un Pasolini tutto vita e passione e un Calvino tutto geometria e costruzione” (219). Most critics failed to grasp, Salsano claims, “il nodo del saggio della Benedetti” (219): “l’ultima produzione di Pasolini e di Calvino mettendo in luce le loro diverse idee di letteratura nel quadro della crisi della modernità” (221).

The aim of this essay is to frame Benedetti’s success, the scandal it has provoked, and her “betrayal” by fellow critics in the context of a perceived crisis over post-modernism and the roles Italian literary culture will play, if any, in national and global futures. In the conviction that “futures past” (Koselleck [1979] 2004) – past conceptions of, and prospects for, the future of Italian literature – are at stake here, I propose to compare Benedetti’s provocative call for an “impure” literature in *Pasolini contro Calvino* and Francesco De Sanctis’s foundational *Storia della letteratura italiana* ([1871] 2009).

The comparison is partly inspired by Alberto Asor Rosa’s review (1998) of *Pasolini contro Calvino* in *La Repubblica*, which puts Benedetti’s pairing of authors in the context of Italian literary history by pointing to a relationship between Benedetti’s portrait of Calvino and the depoliticized portrait of Ariosto familiar in Italy since De Sanctis. Describing why he believes Benedetti’s discussion of Calvino, “secondo cui Calvino sarebbe scrittore tutto di esteriorità e di gioco letterario,” is unfounded, Asor Rosa writes:

Se uno non riesce a capire il nesso profondamente creativo che corre tra questi diversi aspetti della sua personalità [Calvino], senza per questo arrivare a sputare su Fortini o su Pasolini, – ha tutte le condizioni per pensare che Ludovico Ariosto sia un letterato ‘autoreferenziale.’ (1998)

I follow this cue to suggest how the similarities between Benedetti's authorial pairing of Pasolini and Calvino and De Sanctis's pairing of Ariosto and Machiavelli remind us that, despite Benedetti's solitary persona, and her calls for, and claims to radical innovation, the arguments she advances are in many ways at home in the Italian tradition and indeed have an illustrious predecessor in it.

Like De Sanctis, Benedetti is interested in putting *fondamenti* in the service of *ordini nuovi*, in elaborating versions of, and erecting models from, the past that will serve in the construction of a positive future. In other words, she (still) attributes to literature – “nella sua funzione forte” (1998, 55), with its capacity to perpetually “aprire punti di vista non ancora catalogati” – a foundational role in remaking the future according to present desires, exigencies and responsibilities (200). Her conception of criticism implies that we are never wholly attached to our foundations, that it is both legitimate and useful to (re)make literary history in the service of the future. I argue that this makes Benedetti, in part, a De Sanctian and also a “Machiavellian” critic, though in a rather different way than either she or, for that matter, De Sanctis, would understand such a term. With these points of reference in mind, the attacks on Benedetti's personal authority and competence to which she frequently refers and indeed is often subject in Italy can be seen as much more than a clash of egos and critical positions. These literary *imbrogli* can also be understood, on one hand, as essential rhetorical elements of the scandalous authorial persona and sense of *rottura* that Benedetti's work seeks to construct, and, on the other hand, as potentially fecund moments of encounter with different visions of the past and future of Italian literary culture.

Contemporaries at the Antipodes

Many of Benedetti's detractors refuse to take her work seriously (Salsano 2002, 217). “Argomenti del genere andrebbero banditi da ogni discussione seria sulla letteratura, e non vale nemmeno la pena di confutarli,” claimed Paola Capriolo in her review of *Pasolini contro Calvino* for the *Corriere della sera* (1998a). But Benedetti's contraposition is, in many ways, already familiar to serious discussions of literature in Italy. Still recognized by many Italians as “il nostro più grande critico, il nostro critico ‘canonico’” (Berardinelli 2007, 47), Francesco De Sanctis deployed Neo-Hegelian oppositions between authors to highlight key epochal continuities and ruptures in his *Storia della letteratura italiana* ([1871] 2009). “Se dunque vogliamo studiar bene questo secolo,” opens his analysis of the Cinquecento, “dobbiamo cercarne i segreti ne' due grandi, che ne sono la sintesi, Ludovico Ariosto e Niccolò Machiavelli” (519).

Benedetti's late moderns and De Sanctis's exemplary early moderns occupy parallel positions with respect to the institution of literature as they find and react to it, to their cultures at large, and to one another. Each pair describes two contemporary authors faced with a common set of crises, to which they propose antithetical exit-routes. Calvino and Ariosto prolong the *status quo*, even while bringing it to a culminating stage in its development. Pasolini and Machiavelli enact a decisive break, leap, or paradigm-shift, which does not herald a new epoch immediately but signals its possibility and offers strategies, and hope, to future innovators. While the first adapt, the second forge

uncomfortable positions of opposition to their cultures of crisis. Contemporaries, their paths diverge; they are at the antipodes from one another.

Benedetti describes the crises of late-modernity in detail. They include the author's sense of being imprisoned by his or her readers and critics: "Una pietrificazione che assomiglia molto all'essere fotografati dallo stile, all'essere pietrificati in una 'voce d'autore'" (1998, 86). This is caused by a culture of "autorialismo" that both eulogizes and celebrates the death of the author, hypocritically, in its theoretical practice (1999, 24-25). Late-modernity's theoretical claims about the author's death correspond for Benedetti, moreover, to its implicit and explicit claims about the death of art itself. Late modern art is in an "epigonal" or "posthumous" condition, deprived of its capacity not only to be itself (re)new(ed), but also to transform existing realities and thereby engender new ones (30, 49). It has become an object of consumption and the prisoner of a marginal domain – aesthetics – increasingly controlled by the culture industry (1998, 22).

For Benedetti, Pasolini's and Calvino's reactions to these crises are initially parallel but ultimately divergent. Calvino attempts to escape from authorial petrification by continually varying and multiplying the "segni dell'autore" traced in his writing: "Dunque inautenticità, ironia, citazione o menzione" (Benedetti 1998, 96). He responds to the closed and weak understanding of art in his culture with two kinds of literary games: "il giocare al romanzo così come si gioca a scacchi," as in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (where, in the mode of irony, narrative structures and other mechanisms of writing are at play); and "il gioco del descriversi il mondo," as in *Palomar* (where the author "gioca a fare lo scienziato naturalista che osserva il mondo fisico per farne una descrizione il più possibile esatta" [124-125]). In both cases, Benedetti argues, Calvino writes according to an "ideologia del costantivo" in which the author's task is to describe the world rather than act upon it, and to focus on the formal qualities of his or her descriptions (127). Calvino responds to the crisis of late-modern art, in other words, by adapting to it from within, reformulating art's positive values to correspond with its increasingly marginalized status.

Pasolini, on the other hand, represents an alternative and true "esito del postmoderno" according to Benedetti (1998, 54). He reconfigures the relationship between author and work so that "l'opera [diventa] come una *performance* in cui è coinvolta la persona dell'autore come essere in carne e ossa che parla e agisce nel 'mondo reale' – o persino come corpo, vulnerabile, e mortale" (139). He posits an ideology of literature as action that is concerned with its effects, rather than its form (143). Instead of accepting a weak and ever-shrinking sphere of aesthetics, he steps outside of that sphere and renounces its protections and privileges. Continuing to produce, he nevertheless forces a dilation of the very category of aesthetics: "La poesia dilaterà i suoi tessuti fino ad accogliere un corpo estraneo, fino a contenere in sé tutto l'*impuro* che sia possibile, dai 'brutti versi' alla 'parola diretta,' fino alle finalità pratiche della scrittura" (150).

Like this late-modern pair, De Sanctis's early moderns inherit a political and cultural context in which the functions and boundaries of art as traditionally defined are in crisis. His portrait of the Renaissance is dominated by the institution of the court, with its "corruzione" and "grandezza," which have combined to produce a culture of profound indifference and decadence ([1871] 2009, 486). Throughout the Quattrocento, De Sanctis explains, art develops formally and technically but forfeits its ability to generate thought

and values, “coscienza” and “sentimento,” as it had quintessentially in Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (517). By the Cinquecento, he argues, artists and patrons are caught in a closed and self-referential culture in which art is reduced to its purely formal aspects: “Il suo vero contenuto è negativo, cioè a dire è il ridere del suo contenuto, considerarlo come un giuoco d’immaginazione, un esercizio dello spirito” (517).

Ariosto and Machiavelli respond in opposing ways to this cultural context in De Sanctis’s narrative. Ariosto evades the pressures of courtly artistic production by dissolving himself completely in his style, achieving “un perfetto obbligo dell’anima nella sua creatura” ([1871] 2009, 489). His strategy echoes Calvino’s strategies of authorial evasion (“moltiplicarsi per nascondersi”) as described by Benedetti (1998, 102). De Sanctis’s Machiavelli, meanwhile, places himself in a new and direct relation to his writing and to society: “Qui l’uomo è tutto, e non ci è lo scrittore, o ci è solo in quanto uomo. Il Machiavelli sembra quasi ignori che ci sia un’arte dello scrivere, ammessa generalmente e divenuta moda o convenzione” ([1871] 2009, 607). Machiavelli’s authorial persona closely resembles Pasolini’s, as Benedetti describes it, with his innovative form of direct and authentic authorial performance (“l’autore in carne e ossa”) and his sober refusal to comply with aesthetic conventions (Benedetti 1998, 139).

Ariosto and Machiavelli’s relations to and within the literary institutions they inherit also parallel those of Benedetti’s pair. Ariosto brings all of the contradictions of early modern art that had developed since Boccaccio to their synthesis and perfection (De Sanctis [1871] 2009, 545), much as Calvino synthesizes and perfects Italian literary post-modernism (Benedetti 1998, 9-11). These authors are immediately canonized, the critics tell us, because they contribute to the definition and construction of the canon itself. “L’arte italiana in questa semplicità e chiarezza ariostesca tocca la sua perfezione, ed è per queste due qualità che l’Ariosto è il principe degli artisti italiani, dico artisti e non poeti,” De Sanctis writes ([1871] 2009, 545). “Calvino era già un ‘classico’ quando era ancora in vita,” explains Benedetti: “La sua prosa tersa, le sue costruzioni cristalline sono state proposte a modello, e talvolta a modello unico e insuperabile di scrittura letteraria” (1998, 9). While Ariosto and Calvino are able to transform conditions of cultural crisis into positive and enabling conditions of their art, their results, according to these accounts, perform no active or critical functions.

Machiavelli and Pasolini, on the other hand, are understood by both critics to transform extant paradigms. “Il suo concetto è che il mondo è quale lo facciamo noi,” De Sanctis writes of Machiavelli, “e che ciascuno è a sé stesso la sua provvidenza e la sua fortuna. Questo concetto dovea profondamente trasformar l’arte” ([1871] 2009, 517). Machiavelli transforms art, specifically, by challenging its function as a superficial game: “[È] rappresentazione seria della vita nella sua realtà non solo esteriore, ma interiore” (518). As an innovator, he is exposed to systematic misunderstanding by contemporaries and even by future critics. “Così n’è uscita una discussione limitata e un Machiavelli rimpiccinito. Questa critica non è che una pedanteria,” laments De Sanctis over the reception of *Il principe* (590). Benedetti describes a similar fate suffered by Pasolini: “Sono stati soprattutto i letterati e gli intellettuali d’Italia a tessergli attorno per anni una rete di definizioni velenose, tese a delegittimare la sua voce, a renderla ideologicamente sospetta, oppure a negarle addirittura lo statuto di poeta, di artista” (2007-2008, 144). Truly critical individuals are “betrayed,” Benedetti and De Sanctis tell us, in decadent cultures unable and/or unwilling to come to terms with their innovations.

Terminal Cultures and Their Remedies

De Sanctis's Renaissance and Benedetti's late-modernity are empty and sick cultures that develop and overextend the vital cultures of the medieval period and modernity, respectively. In both narratives, cultural decline is described in terms of the gradual emptying of content from form, of images of (formal) emptiness and the sick/dying body in contraposition with images of (organic, philosophical, ethical, spiritual, etc.) fullness, health and birth.

Il secolo decimosesto nella sua prima metà non è che questo medesimo movimento scrutato profondamente, rappresentato nel suo insieme, e condotto per le varie sue forme sino al suo esaurimento. È la sintesi che succede all'analisi. Qual è il lato positivo di questo movimento? È l'ideale della forma, amata e studiata come forma, indifferente il contenuto. E qual è il suo lato negativo? È appunto l'indifferenza del contenuto. (De Sanctis [1871] 2009, 487)

Ariosto's great synthesis, for De Sanctis, represents the apex of this long process of cultural stagnation and indifference to content: "In questo sorriso, in questa presenza e coscienza del reale tra le più geniali creazioni è il lato negativo dell'arte, il germe della dissoluzione e della morte" (490). Benedetti's representation of Italian late-modernity is similar:

Se l'arte tardomoderna è quella in cui incominciano a farsi sentire i malesseri della modernità, verso cui l'arte stessa si fa critica, cercando rimedi e vie d'uscita, il postmoderno allora non è che l'ultimo di questi rimedi. Ma proprio per questo esso non è una nuova epoca dell'arte saltata oltre il moderno (o fuori di esso). Una sostanziale continuità lega il rimedio al suo male. (1999, 29)

Like Ariosto's smiling death mask, the "rimedio" proposed by postmodernism under the sign of Calvino is for Benedetti a false one: "un *adattamento* patologico" (1999, 30) in which "la morte dell'autore ostenta una faccia euforica" (204).

Machiavelli and Pasolini perform particular historical functions in these narratives, which their pairings with "classic" authors – Ariosto and Calvino – are principally meant to bring into relief. By discovering effectual cures to contemporary crises, the former pair break seemingly deterministic epochal continuities and launch history into the future. "Fra tanto fiore di civiltà e in tanta apparenza di forza e di grandezza," writes De Sanctis, "mise lo sguardo acuto Niccolò Machiavelli, e vide la malattia, dove altri vedevano la più

prospera salute” ([1871] 2009, 591). In Benedetti’s Novecento, Pasolini’s bitter medicine shows how “[i]l nuovo potrebbe essere concepito in una maniera diversa dalla logica differenziale del moderno” (1999, 215). The historical impacts of Machiavelli and Pasolini are thus imagined to extend well beyond their immediate horizons, for they reveal the ever-present possibility of “riabilitazione della vita terrena,” of “rinnovamento” and “superamento” of existing paradigms towards new and unforeseeable futures (De Sanctis [1871] 2009, 584).

Benedetti can be included in a long tradition of Italian cultural criticism shaped by De Sanctis and his many mediators, most famously Croce and Gramsci. Despite the “rinnovamento” and “superamento,” to use De Sanctis’s own words, of his legacy from multiple fronts of critical and historical practice, the questions he posed, and the answers he provided, are more current today than might be expected. In a “disorienting cultural vacuum,” writes Edmund Jacobitti in *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy* (1981): De Sanctis “hoped to fill the void with a new culture, a new mission which would link again the realms of thought and action and set Italy on a new course” (47). Benedetti’s mission to renew culture in the face of today’s disorienting challenges evidently finds an ally in De Sanctis’s elaboration of the cyclical processes of history, which leave room for free and creative human responses to contingency, particularly in the realm of culture. Even De Sanctis’s Neo-Hegelian oppositions have proved appealing to Benedetti, who shares his belief that in order for a new culture to be created, its “limits” must be found and “attacked”:

Limits, De Sanctis saw, provided not only the boundaries within which human thought and action were confined, but also the obstacles against which man could struggle, obstacles that gave direction to his action and charted the distance he traveled.... The thesis, in short, was disoriented without its antithesis. (Jacobitti 1981, 54)

Because of their perceived need for “limits,” both Benedetti and De Sanctis are involved in distinguishing “what is living” and “what is dead” in history, understood not only as a distinction between what has contributed to shaping the present and what has not, but also, even primarily, as a distinction between what from history can be used towards shaping a desirable future and what cannot.¹ Thus while many reviewers of *Pasolini contro Calvino* insisted that “il ‘bipolarismo’ era una prospettiva sterile,” Benedetti maintains:

Ma il mio libro non era una ricostruzione storico-critica di un periodo della letteratura italiana. Era una riflessione su due diverse idee di letteratura, in opposizione l’una all’altra. E che si scontravano non solo

¹ David D. Robert’s “What is Living and What is Dead? Ginzburg’s Microhistory, Croce’s Historicism and the Search for a Postmodern Historiography” frames Croce’s 1906 essay *Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto della filosofia di Hegel* in the context of contemporary historiographical debates (2007, 221-236).

allora, vivi gli autori, ma anche nel presente, nel momento in cui scrivevo.
(Maccherini 2007, 63)

Whether or not her “‘bipolarismo’ avesse colpito il bersaglio” (63), as Benedetti claims, it certainly hit a tender nerve in Italian culture, and generated excitement, by recasting a familiar mode of historicism as a response to postmodern challenges and as a fresh way to relate to history today.

The Courtier and the Truth-Teller

The figures of the courtier and the truth-teller representing one of the key oppositions structuring Benedetti’s analysis performed a similar function for De Sanctis. In Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano*, he locates the exemplary cultural code of the epoch ([1871] 2009, 539). His portraits of Ariosto and Machiavelli strategically ignore the complexities of Ariosto’s relationship with his Ferrarese patrons, and of Machiavelli’s relationship with the Medici, so that the former appears as a court poet and the latter as a very different kind of state functionary in his history:

Nel ’98, proprio l’anno che il Machiavelli era eletto segretario del comune fiorentino, Ludovico scrivea in prosa le sue due prime commedie. L’uno attendeva alle gravi facende dello Stato, e ne’ suoi viaggi in Italia e in Europa attingeva quella scienza dell’uomo e quella pratica del mondo che dovea fare di lui la coscienza e il pensiero del secolo; l’altro faceva il letterato in corte, e scrivea sonetti, canzoni, elegie, capitoli, commedie, tutto nel mondo della sua immaginazione. (522-23)

The idea of the court and its functionaries informs Benedetti’s analysis despite the fact that its literal manifestation in Early Modern culture is no longer her concern. “Gli intellettuali italiani sono sempre stati cortigiani,” Benedetti quotes from Pasolini’s last interview:

I santi, gli eremiti, ma anche gli intellettuali, i pochi che hanno fatto la storia sono quelli che hanno detto di no, mica i cortigiani e gli assistenti dei cardinali. È il rifiuto, per funzionare deve essere grande, non piccolo.
(Pasolini quoted in Benedetti 2007-2008, 147)

As Pasolini’s remark anticipates, the courtly tendencies of Italian culture are associated with the first term in a series of oppositions in Benedetti’s analysis, as indeed in De Sanctis’s too: rhetoric and truth; opportunism and criticism; irony and gravity;

comedy and tragedy; theatricality and direct discourse; poetry and prose; prolonged adolescence and the turn to maturity; form and content, and so on. The many valences of these oppositions must be skipped over in this paper, but it is clear that both critics denounce “courtly” culture “in cui nessuno sembra aspettarsi più nulla dell’arte” (Benedetti 1998, 200), while they vindicate a “nuova letteratura” in opposition to it (De Sanctis [1871] 2009, 868).

Benedetti readily admits that the notion of Italian courtliness has a long history:

Si potrebbe anche dire...che nell’euforica spettacolarità, nella tendenza al travestimento, nella passione per le maschere e per le superfici, che caratterizzano gran parte della nostra narrativa degli anni ottanta, sono riconoscibili le tracce sparse di un’identità culturale italiana, forse quella stessa già denunciata e sofferta da Leopardi: l’attitudine al teatro e alla messinscena, la tendenza alla spettacolarizzazione dei conflitti. (1998, 58)

Taking up Pasolini’s denunciation of the Italian *cortigiano*, as we saw, Benedetti’s analysis links De Sanctis’s reading of the Renaissance court with Gramsci’s analysis of Renaissance humanism as an origin of the “cosmopolitan” elite that inhibited organic national-popular movements in Italy (Gramsci 1985, 234).²

In Benedetti’s version of this history, the figure of the truth-teller stands in opposition to the closed parameters of Italy’s diffused cultural court. Arguing that literary postmodernisms outside of Italy have been more successful than their Italian counterparts in engaging with globalization, urbanization, and other catastrophes of the modern era, she looks outside of the Italian philosophical tradition – to Foucault’s discussion of *parrhesia* – to introduce this figure (Benedetti 2002, 116). Foucault’s writing on the figure of the truth-teller and “the roots of what we could call the ‘critical’ tradition in the West” (Foucault 2001, 9) offers Benedetti a basis for imagining a restricted canon of cultural critics, transcending historical and national boundaries, in which she includes Edward Said and Salman Rushdie alongside Leopardi, Gobetti, Gramsci, Gadda, Pasolini, Roberto Saviano and Antonio Moresco, among others (Benedetti 1998, 187; 2002, 116; 2008).

Benedetti’s “anti-canon” invites us to question the extent to which the figure of the truth-teller can be said to represent a “via d’uscita” from mainstream currents of past or present Italian culture, as she implies it does (1998, 187). Key aspects of this figure appear in De Sanctis’s description of Machiavelli and the restricted canon of individuals he champions. “Dee cercare sé stessa,” the *Storia*’s final chapter exhorts, “con vista chiara, sgombra da ogni velo e da ogni involucre, guardando alla cosa effettuale, con lo spirito di Galileo, di Machiavelli” ([1871] 2009, 980). Among other Italian ‘moderns,’ Galileo, Machiavelli, and Savonarola emerge from the *Storia* as truth-tellers. These figures fulfill even Foucault’s definition of the *parrhesiastes*, which Benedetti has in mind, with its central requirement of courage in the face of personal danger and risk (Foucault 2001, 16).

² Forgacs discusses Gramsci’s “materialist recasting” of De Sanctis’s and other Risorgimento interpretations of the Italian Renaissance (1999, 215).

Of course, Benedetti is not alone today in using oppositions like the courtier/truth-teller to assess contemporary Italian culture and the positioning of intellectuals within it. In “Intellettuali liquidi o in liquidazione?” (2009), Remo Ceserani repeats a version of this opposition when he submits his analysis of four Italian contemporaries to Zygmunt Bauman’s (1987) distinction between legislators and interpreters:

Si può ritrovare una delle ragioni di fondo della crisi degli intellettuali italiani? Quando non si è più legislatori e chiamati a dimostrare la propria appartenenza (confermandola con l’impegno) a una delle grandi ideologie, oppure a quel grande intellettuale che era il partito di Gramsci...resta solo il ruolo dell’interprete, non più attivo ma solamente ricettivo, non più legislatore ma condannato al confronto e al conflitto delle interpretazioni. E a volte resta solo la possibilità del ripiegamento su se stessi, dell’autobiografia intellettuale – di solito dettata della musa düreriana della malinconia. (2009, 39)

Even when Ceserani’s individual examples, such as Marcello Pera, seem to “liquify” Bauman’s polarized categories, Ceserani continues to deploy them: “[S]otto la maschera dell’intellettuale impegnato nelle battaglie per la civiltà...compare, purtroppo, un’altra maschera di intellettuale italiano: il cortegiano cinquecentesco mosso dall’ambizione” (43).³

De Sanctis reminds us that the perceived division of Italian literary culture between opportunistic courtiers and dauntless speakers of truth, being proposed today in a critical and provocative fashion by Benedetti and others, is part of a foundational narrative of this culture. Meanwhile, the ongoing research on Ariosto and Machiavelli, which increasingly reveals the notion of a polarized ideological gap between them to be unfounded, reminds us of the contingent nature of such divisions.⁴

Cavalcanti’s Leap: Boundaries between Literature and Criticism

The literary “courtiers” in Benedetti’s and De Sanctis’s narratives also offer us tools with which to interrogate these critics’ premises and to better understand their strategies. The labyrinth, the game, the *tradimento dei critici*, and the “leap” outside entrapments are indispensable paradigms for our two critics that have been submitted to careful scrutiny, and deployed in turn, by the “courtly” authors they disparage.

³ Giorgio Baratta similarly describes polarized positions open to Italian intellectuals, and a negative assessment of the majority, today: “In quanto ‘persone capaci di rappresentare,’ vale a dire, ‘incarnare, articolare un messaggio, un punto di vista, un atteggiamento, una filosofia o una convinzione di fronte a un pubblico e per un pubblico,’ gli intellettuali si presentano sempre più, per usare le parole di Gramsci, quasi ‘funzionari’ o ‘commessi’ del gruppo dominante” (2009, 123).

⁴ Albert Ascoli reviews evolving perceptions of and research into the relationship between Ariosto and Machiavelli (1999, 140-141).

Benedetti challenges her readers to escape late-modernity's labyrinthine deceptions, and in her work proposes escape routes:

L'apprendimento tardomoderno, come potremo verificare man mano, produce doppi legami. E da un doppio legame non si esce finché non se ne fanno saltare le premesse. Se si tenta una via d'uscita ci si ritrova prima o poi allo stesso punto, con la strada sempre chiusa, e più scoraggiati di prima – come in un labirinto, che del resto è l'immagine guida della tarda modernità. La tardamodernità è una lunga serie di tentativi per uscire da un labirinto da essa stessa costruito, e da cui, per definizione, non si esce (non, per lo meno, camminandovi dentro). (1999, 30)

She explains the challenges faced by Pasolini and other truth-tellers with the aid of this image: “Perché il labirinto imprigiona sì, ma anche, stilizzando, protegge” (2002, 140). Her dialogue with other critics, in this case the author Antonio Moresco, is also mediated by this image:

Una voce come questa di Moresco poteva dunque comparire solo a condizione che quel labirinto venisse direttamente attaccato, denunciato come una trappola, soffiato via come un'illusione culturale: “Non c'è nessun labirinto – si legge nelle *Note contro Calvino*. È molto peggio, non c'è niente! E quindi c'è tutto!” Solo in una lingua ricostruita dal nulla come dopo una catastrofe nucleare si poteva riaprire la possibilità di un'interrogazione tragica sul mondo. (142)

De Sanctis, not dissimilarly, compares Ariosto's conception of literature to an enchanted castle: “Quel mondo è il tuo *rêve*, o per dirla con linguaggio tolto a quel mondo, è il suo castello incantato, il tuo sogno dorato. L'impressione non è così profonda che oltrepassi l'immaginazione e colpisca il tuo essere in ciò che di più serio ha il pensiero o il sentimento” ([1871] 2009, 549). Like Benedetti, who was writing after authors like Borges, Eco and Calvino had made the labyrinth into an internationally recognized symbol of post-modernism, De Sanctis is conscious about reactivating in his criticism the fantastical language of the literature he is analyzing – here, Ariosto's epic romance – in order to encourage his readers to transcend such language and the apparently debilitating cultural modes and practices it represents.

Literary engagements with the idea of the labyrinth have much to tell us about these critics' deployment of it. Penelope Reed Doob's study of this idea in classical and medieval culture shows how, from its origins, the idea of the labyrinth *in malo*, functioning as a sign of inextricability, was described “as if from a privileged perspective” by authors claiming to have knowingly escaped its perils (1990, 72). In other words, Benedetti and De Sanctis must also be seen within, and not simply outside of, a long history of labyrinthine writing when they offer readers a “via d'uscita” from

contemporary illusions (Benedetti 1998, 187), “Ariadne’s thread to unwary maze-walkers” (Doob 1990, 72).

In the *Orlando furioso*, as already in the Cretan labyrinth myth (ibid., 11-13), escape from one labyrinth is never unproblematic, but on the contrary always creates another. Like Daedalus, the Ariostan narrator who creates Alcina’s enchanted island and Atlante’s labyrinthine palace and then orchestrates his heroes’ escape self-consciously represents his own likely entrapment in the grand labyrinth of the poem:

Dirò d’Orlando in un medesimo tratto
cosa non detta in prosa mai, né in rima:
che per amor venne in furore e matto,
d’uom che sì saggio era stimato prima;
se da colei che tal quasi m’ha fatto,
che ‘l poco ingegno ad or ad or mi lima,
me ne sarà però tanto concesso,
che mi basti a finir quanto ho promesso. ([1532] 1992, I.2)

Ariosto reminds us that labyrinths baffle above all those who think they know the way out, for the binary logic or “double perspective” that opposes entrapment and escape, inside and outside, closed and comprehensive vision, traitor and hero, and so on is itself the logic of the labyrinth (Doob 1990, 1).

In particular, the “courtly” literatures De Sanctis and Benedetti disparage question the polarized opposition between play and seriousness these critics insist upon. De Sanctis first associates “giuoco” with Boccaccio, who inaugurates the “vuoto della coscienza ed il difetto di senso morale” that, in the *Storia*, climaxes in early modern culture and finds its antithesis in the sober spirit of Machiavelli ([1871] 2009, 395). Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, however, framed as a storytellers’ retreat away from the horrors of the plague to a ludic site where those horrors can be reflected upon and, in part, contained, subverts and complicates De Sanctis’s opposition (Mazzotta 1986, ch.1). Benedetti’s disparaging descriptions of Calvino’s “scrittura come gioco,” in its opposition to Pasolini’s courageous criticism, is similarly called into question in Calvino’s work (Benedetti 1998, 116). In *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* ([1979] 1994), for example, the comical character Arkadian Porphyrich poses a serious question about whether even the most vehement of cultural critics are not only unknowingly playing the games of power but also are essential to their functioning:

Diciamolo francamente: ogni regime, anche il più autoritario, sopravvive in una situazione d’equilibrio instabile, per cui ha bisogno di giustificare continuamente l’esistenza del proprio apparato repressivo, dunque di qualcosa da reprimere. La volontà di scrivere cose che diano fastidio all’autorità costituita e uno degli elementi necessari a mantenere questo equilibrio. Perciò, in base a un trattato segreto con i paesi di regime sociale avverso al nostro, abbiamo creato un’organizzazione comune, a cui

lei ha intelligentemente accettato di collaborare, per esportare i libri proibiti qui e importare i libri proibiti là. (277)

Calvino probes the meaning of Foucault's statement that: "*Parrhesia* is thus always a 'game' between the one who speaks the truth and the interlocutor – a game which not only its direct participants but also the 'silent majority' must agree to 'play'" (2001, 17).

As literary works question their critics' paradigms, they can also deploy the same paradigms in their own defense. In the final canto of *Orlando furioso*, the scene representing the reception of Cassandra's veil as a beautiful but vacuous decorative object contemplates the phenomenon of the *tradimento dei critici* from the perspective of a work of art whose historical, ethical and philosophical contents, and whose potential for critical efficacy, are overlooked:

Le donne e i cavallier mirano fisi,
senza trarne costrutto, le figure;
perché non hanno appresso che gli avvisi
che tutte quelle sien cose future.
Prendon piacere a riguardare i visi
belli e ben fatti, e legger le scritture.⁵ ([1532] 1992, XLVI.98)

In Calvino's *Lezioni americane* (1993), the paradigmatic "leap" out of labyrinthine entrapments, used in Benedetti to figure escape from Calvino's vision of literature, is used instead to embody what he values in writing and reading and to represent his relations with critics who would attempt to pin down his work with a univocal meaning. Calvino's lecture on "Leggerezza" recounts Boccaccio's story of Guido Cavalcanti, who is cornered by a rowdy *brigata* while meditating among marble sepulchers in Florence. At the novella's climax, Cavalcanti makes a literal and metaphysical leap, beyond both the menacing bodies and the dead-end logic of his fellow Florentines, who thought they had him trapped.

A' quali Guido, da lor veggendosi chiuso, prestamente disse: 'Signori, voi mi potete dire a casa vostra ciò che vi piace'; e posta la mano sopra una di quelle arche, che grandi erano, sì come colui che leggerissimo era, prese un salto e fusi gittato dall'altra parte, e sviluppatosi da loro se n'andò. (Boccaccio quoted in Calvino 1993, 15)

In identifying himself with the poet-philosopher Cavalcanti – alone, harassed and suspected by the *brigata* – Calvino suggests that critics such as Benedetti may be exaggerating the smoothness of his insertion into Italian culture.

⁵ See Ascoli 1987 (127, 380-381) for the *Orlando furioso*'s dialogue with its readers and critics through the image of Cassandra's veil and other figures of the poem.

Se volessi scegliere un simbolo augurale per l'affacciarsi al nuovo millennio, sceglierei questo: l'agile salto improvviso del poeta-filosofo che si solleva sulla pesantezza del mondo, dimostrando che la sua gravità contiene il segreto della leggerezza, mentre quella che molti credono essere la vitalità dei tempi, rumorosa, aggressiva, scalpitante e rombante, appartiene al regno della morte, come un cimitero, d'automobili arrugginite. (1993, 16)

Whatever the judgments of Benedetti's and Calvino's readers, Cavalcanti's simultaneously solitary and sympathetic character, and his agile reversal from victim to victor at the novella's end, reminds us of how slippery the categories of lightness and gravity, outsider and insider, critic and classic, are, and how authors and works of literature can move between them as their meanings are continuously redefined by each other.

The literatures De Sanctis and Benedetti read as inert artifacts of the most decadent, "courtly" tendencies of Italian culture resist being definitively read as such. They can and do find readers who aim to resuscitate their nuances and contradictions, to trace literature's anticipations of and responses to its critics, defenses and interrogations of its various modes. But these do not represent the aims of either De Sanctis or of Benedetti.

"Machiavellian" Literary History

Sulla grande scacchiera della letteratura gli autori (isolati o in gruppo) segnano delle "posizioni": incarnano delle scelte formali e di contenuto che hanno delle "motivazioni," e che sono dotate di un valore differenziale entro la storia delle forme e l'avvicinarsi delle poetiche.

--Benedetti (1999, 88)

Where does Benedetti "position" her own work? Neither within a purely literary sphere, as the above quotation suggests, nor outside of it from the perspective of an objective or descriptive criticism. Instead, she self-consciously occupies an impure space along with the authors she celebrates, who give priority to "la *forza agente* della parola letteraria, più che la *veridicità* di ciò che viene raccontato" (2008). In this space, literature and criticism are ideally indistinguishable: "La visione è dunque un momento di indistinzione tra letteratura e critica, che non è confusione tra due forme d'espressione o generi, ma rivendicazione della pulsione vitale del pensiero" (2002, 23). And truth is conceived as a construction: "[È] sempre possibile produrre delle rotture *dicendo la verità* o meglio costruendola con l'atto di dirla" (122).

De Sanctis also fuses his critical voice with those of the select authors he champions:

[L'Italia d]ee cercare se stessa, con vista chiara, sgombra da ogni velo e da ogni involucro, guardando alla cosa effettuale, con lo spirito di Galileo, di Machiavelli. In questa ricerca degli elementi reali della sua esistenza, lo spirito italiano rifarà la sua coltura, ristaurerà il suo mondo morale, rinfrescherà le sue impressioni, troverà nella sua intimità nuove fonti d'ispirazione.... Una letteratura simile suppone una seria preparazione di studi originali e diretti in tutt'i rami dello scibile, guidati da una critica libera da preconcetti e paziente esploratrice, e suppone pure una vita nazionale, pubblica e privata, lungamente sviluppata.... Questa è la propedeutica alla letteratura nazionale moderna, della quale compariscono presso di noi piccoli indizi con vaste ombre. ([1871] 2009, 980-81)

Like Benedetti's, his notion of a total criticism is mobilized towards present and future goals. To quote Gianfranco Contini: "Il De Sanctis è un critico militante volto al problema della poesia contemporanea e inteso a risolvere tutto il corso letterario in termini d'attualità" (1959, 33). De Sanctis's notion of truth, Contini believed, was also constructive, or performative, rather than constative: "La base teorica di questa conciliazione è un nuovo concetto della verità, rappresentata non come un assoluto immobile *a priori*, ma come un divenire ideale, cioè a dire secondo le leggi dell'intelligenza e dello spirito. Onde nasceva l'identità dell'ideale e del reale" (35).

Here again we see affinities that have often gone unrecognized or unappreciated. De Sanctis is usually thought of as a unique and unrepeatable figure in Italian history, who created a literary history for the birth of the Italian nation (Berardinelli 2007, 47), while Benedetti's call for an impure literature has brought her up against the charge of betraying the institution of literature and undermining its specifically Italian traditions (Capriolo 1998b). In other words, De Sanctis and Benedetti have been understood as performing opposing operations in relation to the Italian literary canon. Moreover, Benedetti employs a rhetoric of radical innovation with respect to the past. As Mario Maccherini writes in their 2007 interview, "Benedetti ritiene perciò necessario dimenticare gli schemi interpretativi ereditati da un'esperienza culturale illustre ma ormai chiusa" (11). She avoids the traditional vocabulary of Italian *impegno*, with which De Sanctis is associated, in constructing the portrait of the "scrittore combattente" to which she is faithful: "Mentre lo 'scrittore impegnato' apre le sue finzioni a contenuti socialmente o politicamente caldi, lo scrittore combattente invece va al fronte, sul fronte della parola, avanzando nelle sue zone di intensità" (47).

The similarities between De Sanctis and Benedetti, however, indicate the (re)foundational role Benedetti aims to play in Italian culture and her allegiance to values and categories familiar to the Italian humanistic tradition, particularly the figure of the *intellettuale impegnato*. In *Il grande silenzio: intervista sugli intellettuali* (2009), Asor Rosa discusses the importance of the Risorgimento, and of De Sanctis in particular, in shaping this figure for generations of Italians to come:

[Q]uando gli intellettuali risultano fortemente impegnati nella costruzione di qualche cosa che in precedenza non c'era, cioè l'Italia come nazione...si forma una tipologia intellettuale che segnerà i decenni successivi, caratterizzata da un nesso indissolubile tra politica e cultura. (35)

Un personaggio esemplare di questo doppio impegno può essere individuato in Francesco De Sanctis, che si pone esplicitamente il compito di costruire un tessuto ideologico, politico e culturale nazionale.... All' 'uomo italiano' della decadenza si contrappone l' 'uomo italiano' del Risorgimento, pronto a schierarsi e a combattere. (36)

Benedetti, as we have seen, in her juxtaposition of Calvino and Pasolini, the cynical majority and radical minority of critics, likewise sees herself involved in the “struggle to create a new culture,” as Gramsci said of De Sanctis; and her “analyses of content, criticism of the ‘structure’ of works...are connected to this struggle” (Gramsci 2000, 394).

Asor Rosa has repeatedly argued that the legacy of this intellectual type effectively comes to an end in the late Novecento, at which point “[c]ambia completamente lo scenario nel quale questa figura è maturata” (2009, 10). He considers intellectuals who continue to operate under traditional models of *impegno* today to be cultural dinosaurs, destined both to extinction and to be ineffectual agents of positive change in new historical conditions: “Per chi avrà la pazienza di ascoltarlo, potrà fungere da coltivatore di memoria, tramite tra passato e futuro, testimone di un'epoca che non c'è più” (168). His emphasis on historical ruptures over continuities evidently differs from, for example, Paul Ginsborg's in *Salviamo l'Italia* (2010), which calls for the reactivation of virtues and historical figures from the Risorgimento in contemporary Italy. We have seen that Benedetti, unlike either Asor Rosa or Ginsborg, proposes models of cultural criticism from the past (i.e. Pasolini) whose *difference* she nevertheless emphasizes with respect to the Italian tradition both past and present; she leaves it up to her readers to recognize, or not, that both her models and her modes of deploying them are deeply embedded in tradition.

The shifting figure of Machiavelli may help us to grasp the paradox between innovation and history – and the Italian tradition of writing about innovation – in which Benedetti, like De Sanctis before her, is invested. Machiavelli's critical legacy offers proof that his thought and strategies can be effectively deployed in widely distant contexts– “Machiavellian moments” in Pocock's classic formulation – where there is a perceived “confrontation of ‘virtue’ with ‘fortune’ and ‘corruption’” (1975, vii). In both De Sanctis's and Benedetti's battles for cultural renewal against cultural decadence, with its notion of art for art's sake, history is characterized by the overbearing force of a *fortuna* that can only be faced by individuals of an equally extraordinary *virtù*. *Il principe's* catalogue of *uomini eccellentissimi*; Machiavelli in the *Storia della letteratura italiana*; Pasolini in *Pasolini contro Calvino*: These are heroic protagonists constructed to incite readers to action by providing precedents upon which the authors of these texts

draw to project their ideal readers into traditions of active intervention into history. Machiavelli in De Sanctis “è un punto di partenza nella storia, destinato a svilupparsi” ([1871] 2009, 644). “Dire che Pasolini è stato l’ultimo significa costruire attorno alla sua opera una sorta di cordone sanitaria,” Benedetti emphasizes: “Al contrario è stato il primo di una nuova figura di intellettuale, che ha inaugurato una nuova forma di ‘impegno” (1998, 147).

These critics’ optimism that their models from the past will find receptive readers able to interpret and reactivate them in the present resonates with the optimism of *Il principe*’s final chapter and its salvific exhortation to action. Like Machiavelli’s instrumental citation of Petrarch’s “Italia mia,” Benedetti’s and De Sanctis’s literary histories are intended to serve the “verità effettuale della cosa,” to shape futures that will “verify” their tactically framed narratives of, and carefully selected examples from, history (Machiavelli [1532] 1998, chap. XXVI, see also chap. XV). In other words, Benedetti and De Sanctis tell their readers, as Machiavelli did, that Italy can be saved “se vi recheate innanzi le azioni e vita de’ sopra nominati; e benché quelli uomini sieno rari e maravigliosi, nondimeno furno uomini, ed ebbe ciascuno di loro minore occasione che la presente” (chap. XXVI). In each case, the exhortation from exemplarity emphasizes – more or less tacitly – historical continuities over ruptures, for hermenutic and rhetorical bridges across time must be built in order for figures from the more or less distant past to become useful and available models in the present, as Timothy Hampton explains (1990, 3). In Benedetti, there is thus a profound supposition of, and indeed faith in, historical continuity underlying her apparently revolutionary desire to break away from the traps and trappings of the past. It is because, in other words, “[u]n’eredità di Calvino esiste” for Benedetti (Maccherini 2007, 63) that “heroic ‘selves” and their heredities, “through the conjunction of a heroic narrative and a heroic body” can also be constituted in her writing (Hampton 1990, 300).

We know from Machiavelli, however, that the rhetoric of exhortation can be as disconcerting, and as desperate as it is optimistic. “In Machiavelli’s model of history,” Hampton writes, “the similitude linking exemplar and imitator is rendered at the very least useless and at the most a dangerous illusion” (71). Machiavelli both uses the exemplar – “a kind of textual node or point of juncture, where a given author’s interpretation of the past overlaps with the desire to form and fashion readers” (3) – and reveals its inadequacy for shaping a present whose unprecedented and contingent structures forestall the possibility of resurrecting the past (76). “In a world where no signs of ancient virtue can be read, one must write” (77) – with the consequence that “the rhetoric of exemplarity becomes just that, pure rhetoric” (75). In Benedetti’s work, the model of cultural criticism for which Pasolini is meant to stand is indeed vague – open to new reformulations because empty of specific contents:

Naturalmente non intendo fare di *Petrolio* o di *Trasumanar e organizzar* una ricetta per la letteratura. Come la critica non può avere un canone, così la ‘letteratura impura’ non è una poetica, non definisce nessuna linea, né dà la formula di niente. Essa ci dice solo che c’è sempre una mossa giusta per riaprire il gioco, quando questo si chiude, bloccato dalle

ideologie, da punti di vista che si fissano. Ma non si può dire una volta per tutte quale sia la mossa giusta per riaprirlo. (1998, 200)

The Early Modern crisis in exemplarity Machiavelli experienced, and which Hampton describes as fully conscious of its relevance for contemporary critical practice even in 1990, is helpful for understanding Benedetti's frustration with the Italian critics she characterizes as "florilegio funebre" (2011a, 93). Asor Rosa synthetically expressed the perspective Benedetti labels with this epithet in his review of *Pasolini contro Calvino*:

Le sofferenze della letteratura oggi, sofferenze, vorrei spiegarmi bene, anche positive oltre che passive, coincidono con la sconfitta di quei tre [Calvino, Pasolini, Fortini] e cioè con l'impossibilità di continuare a fare come loro anche quando uno avrebbe voglia di fare come loro. Questa è la vera linea di confine tra il nostro passato e il nostro presente, e di qui vengono le uniche domande a cui varrebbe la pena di rispondere: cosa ci è successo e dove stiamo andando. (1998)

Benedetti rejects the notion that there is a "linea di confine" between Italy's past and present, which would render the practice of exemplarity ineffective, and uses this practice to mold her readers and provoke them to action.

It is not only the particular practice of exemplarity, and the use-value of the past for shaping the present, but also the very power of the written word to effect change today – the word "fondata essenzialmente su spirito critico, spiccata individualità, riconoscibilità pubblica," as Asor Rosa describes it (2009, 120) – that is in question in these disagreements. For Benedetti, who declares herself ever faithful to this power, the expression of skepticism in the written word itself debilitates it: "[Q]uel ritornello, ricantato un'infinità di volte in mille variazioni...certo non ha favorito l'attenzione verso ciò che di nuovo e importante si stava elaborando in Italia" (Maccherini 2007, 94). The copiousness, and repetitiveness, of Benedetti's body of writing can in part be explained by her opposition to what she perceives as an onslaught of skepticism in the power that innovative and critical writing can wield today. From Asor Rosa's perspective, meanwhile, "paladini della cultura umanistica" are both inefficacious in the present and involved in undermining, by denying the fundamental alterity of the past with respect to the present, even the limited powers of its various languages to speak to us from across gulfs of time:

Mi chiedo se queste forme di resistenza – pur nella loro elevatissima qualità intellettuale – non siano però né in grado di contrastare i pericoli della nuova civiltà massmediatica né capaci di coglierne la ricchezza, pur nella diversità rispetto all'esperienza passata. (2009, 114)

Critical “Betrayals”

In Benedetti’s work one often comes across the word *tradimento*. When asked about her 2002 book title *Il tradimento dei critici* – a reference to Julian Benda’s *La trahison des clercs* (1927) – Benedetti responded:

Ma io credo che sia addirittura un po’ eufemistico. Quello che è successo è ben più di un tradimento. Chi tradisce conserva in qualche modo il senso di ciò che ha abbandonato.... E ora la maggioranza di coloro che parlano, che lavorano nelle case editrici, che svolgono il ruolo di opinionisti nei fatti della cultura, sono funzionari della megamacchina. (2007, 60)

Because of its deliberately hyperbolic force, the word can be confusing. At times, “[i]l tradimento” in Benedetti “è da intendere come la paralisi della critica provocata dalle sue stesse ideologie, dominate dalla forma mentis della chiusura” (11). It refers to the critics and critical practices Benedetti disparages. At other times, Benedetti refers to herself as having been “betrayed” – that is, attacked unjustly – by such critics. For example, she describes Salsano’s essay at the end of *Il tradimento dei critici*, reviewing the hostile critical reception of *Pasolini contro Calvino* in the Italian press, as “quasi un altro capitolo perfettamente in tema con l’argomento del libro” (62).

This double front of betrayal in Benedetti’s work – the image of her own betrayal by treacherous critics – is an important element of her authorial persona. In her 2007 interview with Mario Maccherini, she is introduced as a “studiosa irregolare,” “spesso attaccata dall’*establishment*,” “nell’Italia sonnecchiante e menefreghista...un Giovanna D’Arco dei nostri tempi” (Maccherini 2007, 114).⁶ Both Benedetti and her supporters frequently describe and caricature attacks from “i suoi ‘colleghi,’” as does Maccherini below:

Sembra insomma di assistere, leggendo le recensioni suddette, a una di quelle commedie in cui il folle, o ritenuto tale, viene isolato e deriso con paroline vacue per poi essere allontanato dal gruppo. E la cui parola, considerate incerta, viene depotenziata e abbassata a un *scchhhhhhh!* col ditino teso sulla boccuccia. (8)

The portrait this paints of Benedetti is that of the ideal cultural critic – scandalous, serious and solitary – she champions. Many attacks on her work thus come to “prove” what she proposes all along: firstly, that “[o]gni sua scelta va a colpire i centri nervosi di tensioni

⁶ The “maschilismo” to which Benedetti has been subject needs to be taken seriously in the context of a full discussion of her authorial persona and its “betrayal” (Benedetti 2011b ; 2007b, 62), however the issue is outside the confines of this paper.

tenute troppo a lungo nascoste nella società culturale e accademica italiana”; and secondly, that, as in Pasolini, “[l]’*impegno* in Benedetti è quello di dire *frontalmente* le cose, oggi assolutamente inusuale” (8). Indeed, Benedetti’s double logic of betrayal strengthens her alliance with Pasolini as she describes him, vigorously positioned “contro la letteratura,” on the one hand, and “betrayed” by a culture that attempted “prima di espellerlo, e poi di imbozzarlo,” on the other (58-59).

The notion of *tradimento* is associated with Benedetti’s belief in the value of “antagonismi” in culture. It combats relativistic positions that threaten to convert the present into a “presente-prigione [in cui] diventiamo tutti dei ‘noi,’ e l’epoca diviene la ‘nostra,’ senza residui, senza antagonismi al suo interno” (2011a, 71). *Disumane lettere*, her most recent book, in addition to recalling the series of oppositions familiar in her writing since *Pasolini contro Calvino* (i.e. courtier/truth-teller), is organized explicitly around oppositions: “mondo a sfondo chiuso/mondo a sfondo aperto, apocalisse/emergenza, necessità storica/contingenza, morte/nascita, collettivo/singolare, quantità/qualità, orizzontale/verticale” (2011a, 20). “Il primo termine di ogni coppia sta a indicare la forza amputante, il secondo quella rigenerante,” Benedetti explains (20).

Like the notion of *letteratura impura*, that of *disumane lettere* calls for “nuove strutture di pensiero” with old ones (2011a, 7). Its challenge to the humanities to accept greater degrees of cognitive complexity – to enlarge the horizon of knowledge in which the human is framed by including astronomy, biology, genetics and other “nuove possibilità che la scienza oggi ci aprirebbe per muoverci in una direzione diversa” (58) – remains attached to a binary logic that extends to individuals the freedom to choose between its terms and, in forcing them to do so, generates the possibility of their “betrayal.” In other words, Benedetti’s discourse of *tradimento* is a corollary of her way of affirming the transformative power of individual action and “il ruolo cruciale che vengono ad avere l’invenzione e la scrittura in questa situazione inedita della storia dell’uomo” (6). In not only describing but also perpetuating a cynical image of Benedetti’s field of activity as a treacherous “court” of conflicting individual authorities, however, this discourse may also pose a challenge to her goal of a strong and influential role for the humanities in national and global futures.

The notion of *tradimento* obfuscates the complexities of Benedetti’s work and its relations with other voices, past and present, in Italian culture. “Tutti in coro,” Benedetti describes her critics, “perché come sai le idee cetriolo si diffondono in un momento, soprattutto quando servono per deviare il discorso dal merito” (2007, 63). In revisiting only Asor Rosa’s dialogue with Benedetti, we have seen that there is more to his position than an attempt to discredit the merits of her discourse – different ideas, not “idee cetriolo” – despite the fact that polemical language with such intent is not alien to his work either. The discourse of betrayal also obfuscates the fact that, on one hand, objections to Benedetti’s work are made for different reasons and from different positions and, on the other, that she shares with many of her interlocutors a common heritage, formation and at least some common goals.

In series of articles in *L’Unità* (2006a and b), one of the critics Benedetti has accused of *tradimento*, Giulio Ferroni, celebrated new critical editions of Machiavelli’s writings by making a case for the political deployment of literary history and criticism:

E, a parte le forzature storiche e interpretative, non mi pare che oggi possa servirci un Machiavelli propositivo e pedagogico, maestro di virtù religiosa: abbiamo piuttosto ancora bisogno del Machiavelli che critica spietatamente le più varie illusioni ideologiche (anche quelle del tradizionale ‘umanesimo cristiano’), che nota ossessivamente l’azione dell’illusione e dell’errore nella vita politica.⁷ (2006a)

His case rests on the conviction that the only way to legitimately recover and use “questo Machiavelli” is through a kind of research in which “l’edizione del testo costituisca il tramite essenziale, l’orizzonte di riferimento della sua storia, e la sua storia il veicolo necessario della sua interpretazione” (2006b). “[P]er toccare la complessità contraddittoria del suo pensiero, per sottrarlo a schemi ideologici precostituiti, è necessaria un’ottica integralmente storica e linguistico-letteraria” (2006a).

Ferroni’s defense of a literary criticism rooted in philological and historical labor, Benedetti might argue, attempts to preclude not only other kinds of criticism but also other kinds of political values. In any case, Ferroni’s approach differs from Benedetti’s, whose “Machiavellian” performances show little concern with his critical editions. Asor Rosa, meanwhile, has advocated neither Ferroni’s historico-philological nor Benedetti’s performative modes of “Machiavellian” heroism. At the end of *Il grande silenzio*, returning to *Il principe* in the belief that “[o]gni ragionamento, anche il più critico, ha bisogno di finire con la formulazione di una speranza” (2009, 168), Asor Rosa emphasizes the “realistic” message that “[l]a ‘virtù’ spesso non basta, ci vuole anche la ‘fortuna’”:

Quando alle giovani generazioni, quando ai nostri giovani davvero “puzzerà questo barbaro dominio,” un nuovo corso della storia italiana, anche della nostra storia intellettuale, potrà cominciare. Nel frattempo bisogna lavorare pazientemente, e anche oscuramente, senza timori né requie, per questo nuovo inizio. (ibid.)

At once discordant and *in coro*, Benedetti and her interlocutors are showing us multiple ways that the resources of the past can be mobilized to meet the challenges of the future.

⁷ The polemic between Benedetti and Ferroni appears openly in *L’ombra lunga dell’autore* (Benedetti 1999, 42) and *Dopo la fine: una letteratura possibile* (Ferroni 2010, xi).

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