



RECOMBINATION

+

**COLLECTIVE
CHARACTER**

**Poems by
a Bifo Essay about
and an Interview with**

NANNI BALESTRINI

No Tears for the Roses (1969)

In the end, big business and its science won't be the prizes for the one who wins the class struggle. They are the field on which the battle itself is fought. And for as long as the enemy occupies this ground, we mustn't hesitate to fire our guns at it, without any tears for the roses.

Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*

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EVERYTHING

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Introduction [to *Blackout*] (2016)

by franco bifo berardi

Blackout is when the electricity fails, the lights of the city suddenly shut down, and darkness spreads all over, as in New York city in the year 1977 (the year of the premonition, but also the year two ages collide).

Blackout is a poem about light and darkness. The contrast between eternal light and the sudden darkening of the landscape strikes the reader from the poem's outset.

In the late seventies Nanni Balestrini conceived the idea of a musical poem in collaboration with Demetrio Stratos, the singer of Area, whose exceptional voice was part of the Italian rebel movement's sound. Then Demetrio died, while Balestrini, the poet, was forced to exile in France. It was year 1979, when the Italian State banned, arrested, and persecuted a group of intellectuals, workers and activists known as *Potere Operaio* (Worker's Power). The poet was one of them.

In fact on the 7th of April, 1979, dozens of activists, workers, and writers were arrested under the false accusation of being the leaders of the Red Brigades: the militant organization responsible for the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, President of Democrazia Cristiana, the nation's governing party. Those activists, workers, and writers were actually guilty of a different crime: the crime of supporting the progressive movement of *autonomia operaia*. That day was a watershed in the history of Italian society. In this country, "1968" had lasted for ten years. This is the historical peculiarity of Italy: the long-lasting wave of social struggle had countered capitalist aggression until 1977, and beyond. After nine years of continuous social conflict and cultural mobilization, the year 1977 was marked by a widespread insurrection of a sort: more dadaist than bolshevik, more poetic than violent.

In Bologna, Rome, Milan, and many other cities in that year, thousands and thousands of students, artists, unemployed young people, and precarious workers staged a sort of ironic rebellion which ranged from carnivalesque parades, to acts of semiotic sabotage, to skirmishes with police, to peaceful and not so peaceful occupations of entire quarters of cities.

After the '77 insurrection of creativity, the Stalinists of the Red Brigades converged with the apparatus of the State in the attempt to annihilate the

movement, and to enlist as many militants as possible in the project of military assault against the so called “heart of the State.” The convergence of State apparatus and red terrorism resulted in the isolation and in the final defeat of the movement. Blackout.

If we want to understand the peculiarity of this enduring wave of social movements in Italy, reading the poems and the novels of Nanni Balestrini can be useful — even if Balestrini has never been a storyteller, or a chronicler of neorealist descent.

Instead, Nanni Balestrini is simultaneously the most radically formalist poet of the Italian scene and the most explicitly engaged in a political sense. He follows a methodology of composition that may be named *recombination*, as he is always recombining fragments taken from the ongoing public discourse (newspapers, leaflets, advertising, street voices, politician’s speeches, scientific texts, and so on). But simultaneously he is *remixing* those fragments in a rhythmic wave that reverberates with passions and expectations and rage.

The peculiarity of the Italian movement of what would be called *autonomia* may be found in the concept of refusal of labor: workers’ struggles were viewed from the point of view of their ability to destroy political control, but also and mainly from the point of view of their ability to advance knowledge and the technological replacement of human labor time in the process of production. The reduction of labor time has always been the main goal of the Italian autonomist workerist movement.

The words “*operai e studenti uniti nella lotta*” (workers and students united in the struggle) were not simply a rhetorical call for solidarity, but the expression of the consciousness that the workers were fighting against exploitation and students bore the force of science and technology: tools for the emancipation of time from the slavery of waged work.

In this social and political framework, literature was conceived as middle ground between labor and refusal of labor. Literature may be viewed as labor, according to the structuralist vision purported by the French formalists of *Tel Quel*, but literature may also be viewed as an attempt to emancipate the rhythm of language from the work of signification. Poetic language is suspended between these two attractors.

This double dimension is the defining feature of Balestrini’s poetics: formalism of the machine, and dynamism of the movement. Cold recombination of linguistic fragments, and hot emotionality of the rhythm. Although the event is

hot, this poetical treatment transforms it into a verbal crystal, and the combination of verbal crystals gives way to the energy of a sort of a-pathetic emotion.

Since the sixties, Italian culture had been traversed by the cold fire of a certain kind of *sperimentalismo* that was named Neoavanguardia, in order to distinguish that movement from the historical avant-garde that in the first decade of the century burnt with a passionate fire, aggressive and destructive. Italian *sperimentalismo* was inspired by Husserl's phenomenology and the French *nouveau roman*; it was influenced as well by Frankfurt School critical theory, and by the colors of Maoism spreading everywhere in those years.

Umberto Eco, Edoardo Sanguinetti, Alberto Arbasino, and many others were involved in Neoavanguardia, whose style was based on the elegant game of quotations, winking and hinting. Then, from its cold fire emerged the angelical and diabolical face of Nanni Balestrini, cool head and warm heart. Or, contrarily, cool heart and hot head, who knows.

Anyway, Balestrini managed to keep a cold experimental style while dealing with very hot subjects and verbal objects. Angelic cool of the recombinant style, and diabolical hotness of the events, of the characters, of the gestures. Violence is often onstage in his writings. The well-intentioned violence of the autonomous of Fiat workers in *Vogliamo tutto* (*We Want Everything*); the livid violence of the precarious, marginalized, and unemployed in *La violenza illustrata*; and the mad violence without historical or social explanation in *I furiosi* and *Sandokan*. In those novels violence is recounted without sentimentality and without identification. No condemnation, no celebration, a purely rhythmic interpretation of good and evil, of the progressive and of the aggressive forces that explode in the streets, in the factories, in the campuses, and in daily life.

According to a widespread common place, the seventies are recorded as the decade of violence. Yes, since 1975 many people have been killed on both fronts of the battle, when a bill passed by the Parliament allowed policemen to shoot and kill if they felt in danger. All through the years 1969-76, activists and students were killed by fascists and cops. At a certain point they decided to react, to build molotov cocktails and take up the gun. As a consequence, cops and fascists and some politicians and corporate persons were attacked, some killed.

It must be said that in those years violence was highly ritualized and charged with symbolic meaning. Nevertheless, in the following decades,

and particularly in the recent years of this new century, violence is far more pervasive than it was in the seventies. It is less emphasized, less advertised, less ritualized, but it percolates in the daily behaviour, in labor relations, in the rising tide of femicide and child abuse, and in the wave of political hatred that never becomes open protest, never deploys as a movement, but flows through the folds of public discourse.

Balestrini was literary witness in the theatre of social conflict, but simultaneously he was an actor on the stage. Nevertheless he has managed to be ironic and distant, while being involved body and soul. This is why his literary gaze is both complicit and detached. His poetics have nothing to do with the psychological introspection, or dramatic expressiveness. His work consists in combining words and freezing actions into dance. The narration strips events of their passional content, pure gesturing devoid of content. But the dance turns into breathing and breathing turns into rhythm, and emotion comes back from the side of language.

Balestrini is not uttering words that come out from his soul (does Balestrini have a soul?). Words are but verbal objects proceeding from the outside world. Voices are broken, fragmented, assembled in sequences whose rhythm is sometimes gentle, aristocratic, and ironic; sometimes furious, violent, and crazy. The act of the poet does not consist in finding words, but in combining their sound, their meaning and their emotional effect.

Since the sixties Balestrini started writing poetry for computer, and his declared intention was already in those years to make poetry as an art of recombination, not an art of expression. The computing poet combines verbal detritus and musical waste grabbed at the flowing surface of the immense river of social communication. He assembles decontextualised fragments that gain their meaning and their energy from the explosive force of the combination (contact, mixture, collage, cut-up).

Following this poetic methodology Balestrini has traversed five decades of the Italian history, transforming events and thoughts into a sort of *opera aperta* (work that stays always open to new interpretations). He has shaped furies and utopias, euphorias and tragedies that have marked the history of the country.

Blackout is the work in which the relation between the history of the country and the history of the movement is more directly integrated with the life of the poet himself, the work in which his personal sentiments seep more visibly through words and silences.

Selections from *Blackout* (2001)

instigation (*andante*)

1. Blackout

A LOSS OF MEMORY OR AN EVENT OF FACT

9.

the dream of recovery was a dream of false consciousness

the Arena is enough to stop the nightmare

others smoke marijuana and laugh like crazed people

the Fiat bosses have never seen the workers laugh and it is an outrage to our Lady

feminists sneer every time a male gives orders

it is the world of use-value that conflicts with the factory and production

above all the manager feels their contempt on his skin

Fiat fears their hatred of the factory

there are gays that make faces they write Long Live Renato Zero on the walls

by 1979 even hope is exhausted the factory is no longer the place where the fight for power is waged

study travel play become an artist or go to India

they are not thinking about the day they will leave Fiat

10.

the television commentator says these young people come from another planet

it is the world of use-value that conflicts with the factory and production

and are convinced there is no possible tool that can modify their private life

they are not thinking about the day they will leave Fiat

off to work but as soon as the siren sounds they flee like hares and if they can they go on sick leave

in the city disrupted by immigrants dehumanized in the ghettos where the quality of life is tragic

the salary is insufficient and the comparison between the rise in prices and our needs proves this

the Fiat bosses have never seen the workers laugh and it is an outrage to our Lady

no longer attached to your job as during the times of the economic miracle

by 1979 even hope is exhausted the factory is no longer the place where the fight for power is waged

instigation (andante)

2. Blackout

THE EXTINGUISHING OF ALL STAGE LIGHTS TO END A
PLAY OR SCENE

21.

namely the problem of power as the fundamental problem

the relationship has become a relationship of power

disintegration confusion chaos and general unrest there's no end in sight and
it's doubtful anyone would deny this

it is the level to which he said the internal contradictions of the bourgeoisie
have fallen

but the fact remains the movement is obstinate and not just capable
of renewing itself

it is a new concept emerging it is the concept of direct counterpower

to continually renew the conceptual forms in which it expresses the struggle

they have turned all the struggles in this direction

and I believe that the entire series of factors that we are beginning to
understand now as conclusive confirms the struggle of the worker

in the first place the definitive collapse of the state's ability to mediate power
by law

22.

once the problem is exposed we must resolve it by any means

it is the level to which he said the internal contradictions of the bourgeoisie have fallen

from the point of view of capital there is a continuous mobilization of force

in the first place the definitive collapse of the state's ability to mediate power by law

in which large demographic and geographic spaces require continuous restructuring

any historical analysis that we bring forward on the large reality of the proletarian world proves this

that is to say the marginal elements that we are able to find again in the crisis have completely fallen

the relationship has become a relationship of power

where the crisis continuously acts as a factor in the restructuring of class

they have turned all the struggles in this direction

reentry will occur on a strip of land between 50 degrees North and 50 degrees South

the reentry of the 85-ton cylinder is now expected by

persecution (*minuet*)

3. Blackout

SUPPRESSION CENSORSHIP CONCEALMENT ETC.

25.

I write to you opposite the balcony from whence I contemplate the eternal light whose radiant fire slowly fades on the distant horizon

I often imagine the world turned upside down and the sky the sun the ocean the entire earth aflame in the void

I assume a thousand arguments I overlook a thousand ideas I reject then go back to choose again finally I write tear up cancel and often lose the morning and evening

perhaps I think too much but it seems impossible to me that our homeland is so ravaged in our time

if I had sold the faith denied the truth busied my wits instead do you believe I would have lived a more honorable and peaceful life

you persecute your persecutors with the truth

but when I pass before the venerable poor who grow weak as their veins are sucked by the omnipotent opulence

and when I see so many men ill imprisoned hungry and all the suppliant ones under the terrible scourge of certain laws

no I cannot reconcile myself I shout for revenge

I know my name is on the wanted list

Doctor Pietro Calogero our substitute magistrate for the republic approves the actions of the penal procedure no.710 / 79 a

with regard to articles 252 253 254 of the penal code we order the arrest of

26.

not laws but arbitrary courts not accusers not defenders on the contrary spies
of thought new and inventive crimes committed by those who are not punished
and punishment endured without appeal

I know my name is on the wanted list

meanwhile this occasion has unmasked all the petty tyrants who swore to me
that they would eviscerate our friendship

you persecute your persecutors with the truth

after all I live as calmly as one can but to be honest I gnaw at my thoughts
please send me a book

I often imagine the world turned upside down and the sky the sun the ocean
the entire earth aflame in the void

accused of a crime under articles pp. 110 112 # 1 270 of the criminal code
concerning a dispute with each other and with other people being in number
not less than five

carried out in homes and adjacent closed rooms in the middle of the night
organized and directed a group called Workers' Power and other similar groups
variously referred to as

with regard to articles 252 253 254 of the penal code we order the arrest of

but connected to each other and related to all the so-called autonomous
workers' organizations to direct the violent overthrow of the systems that
constitute the state

repression (*rondo*)

4. Blackout

A MOMENTARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS OR VISION

41.

I close my eyes and start to sing

threads are entangled and transformed into spots whose dance moves ever more slowly

I sang my repertoire then I started the monologues

with my eyes closed I walked back and forth in the cell four steps forward four steps back

I invented dialogues for two characters that spoke different languages like at the cinema when the film ends

there are those who make love who smoke there are those who merely exist

but perhaps something already broke inside each of them

the perception of being in this knot over the Italian situation for years it remains unresolved the problem intact

split up minute after minute in front of the cables that no longer transmitted the occasional sounds to the vacant air and to life

now in the stadium there are sixty thousand people a mixture of lights gestures sounds

with so much anger

42.

I improvised two characters

with my eyes closed I walked back and forth in the cell four steps forward four steps back

someone gets up from the sea of young men on the lawn

with so much anger

hundreds imitate him they do not know what has happened

everyone looks at you and at everyone else

you don't hear anything the music is absorbed by the rough cloth or perhaps by both the rough cloth and the mass of people I don't know

split up minute after minute in front the cables no longer transmitted the occasional sounds to the vacant air and to life

they only want to keep count see how many there are we are one hundred thousand

as I stood up I felt a gust of wind and heard music that seemed to issue directly from the center of the sky

an experience that once again reveals itself as dislocated diminished postponed

but perhaps something already broke inside each of them

'I Am Interested in Collective Characters': An Interview With Nanni Balestrini (2016)

Rachel Kushner

I've been an admirer of Nanni Balestrini for many years, ever since I first read *The Unseen*, a funny, strange, and devastating novel about Italy's Movement of 1977. His 1971 novel, *We Want Everything*, has just been translated into English. In September, I finally met Balestrini—or, rather, he met me: He'd taken a taxi all the way to Fiumicino Airport, on the outskirts of Rome, to await my arrival. We made our way into the city and had lunch. Balestrini is 81 but looks about 60, and he's more of a refined dandy and perfect gentleman than any anarcho-communist I've ever met. When I excitedly launched into a series of questions about his life in the movement, he said, "This is lunch, not a biographical study," and worried about what kind of wine to order. Everything in its place.

RK: I wanted to ask how you built the voice that appears in *We Want Everything*. I know *The Unseen*, for instance, is largely Sergio Bianchi's story.

NB: *We Want Everything* is the story of a real person, Alfonso; he told me everything that's in the book. He is a collective character, in the sense that in those years, thousands of people like him experienced the same things and had the same ideas and the same behaviors. It's for this reason that he has no name in the book. I am interested in collective characters like the protagonist in *The Unseen*. I think that unlike what happens in the bourgeois novel—which is based on the individual and his personal struggle within a society—the collective character struggles politically, together with others like him, in order to transform society. Thus his own story becomes an epic story.

RK: With Alfonso, you seem to have hit the jackpot in terms of these thousands that you talk about who migrated from the South, went to Fiat, worked, revolted... he's incredibly funny and insightful. Can you recount a bit about how you met him?

NB: You're trying to get me to give Alfonso his individuality back, to break him out of his collective figure. I really can't respond to questions like that.

RK: I'm assuming you were attending meetings, protesting outside the factory gates, talking to workers, inquiring about their conditions and lives?

NB: As is the case with a lot of the comrades who participated in the 1970s movement, the great workers' struggles were at the center of our activism. That is how I knew about the Fiat struggle that's talked about in the book—I followed it at close quarters; I lived it together with the protagonists. It was something that I saw and experienced.

RK: Today, particularly in the United States, there is a growing interest in the women's movement that was starting to take form just after the "Hot Autumn" of 1969, and in particular much talk about Lotta Femminista and Maria Dalla Costa's *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Looking back from this vantage point, would you have anticipated that the ideas emerging from Italian feminism would be such a lasting achievement from that era? Perhaps because the factory is essentially gone, but the family remains, for better or worse.

NB: The factory has not disappeared; it has just lost its centrality to society by way of automation. For feminism, as for communism, the stages through which the bases of great social transformations are realized cannot be moved through rapidly. That's always a vain hope. It takes long periods—generations, if not centuries. But it is important that there is a tendency that way which is maintained despite the halts, reverses, and backward steps.

RK: You were a fugitive, then an exile. Now you again live in Italy. *Autonomia*, an era that you documented so critically, has seen a resurgence of interest among leftists. Do you tend to think much of the past?

NB: I consider myself lucky to have been through an extraordinary and happy period. It would be senseless to search that period for something that could be applied politically in a radically different situation like the one we're living in 40 years later. Everything is different; everything has changed. That period bequeaths us only an imperative: that we need to change the world, and that this is possible, necessary, and urgent—even if we don't immediately manage to realize it as we'd like.

Nanni Balestrini was born in Milan in 1935. Known both as an experimental writer of prose and verse and as a cultural and political activist, he played a leading role in avant-garde writing and publishing in the sixties. His involvement with the extra-parliamentary left in the seventies resulted in terrorism charges (of which he was subsequently acquitted) and a long period of self-imposed exile from Italy.

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LOTTA CONTINUA
Per il potere di resistenza contro il
Partito di governo, della Resistenza

