

“NEW ITALIAN NARRATIVE: the Under 30 Generation of ‘Gli Intemperanti’.”
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Endings and beginnings always make one want to take stock. A few years into the Duemila, there is already an impulse to look back and try to assess where Italian narrative has been and where it is now. After a century of Futurism, avant-gardism, experimentalism, “impegno”, Neo-realism, and other literary phenomena, where does contemporary Italian fiction find itself at the turn of the 21st century? My focus is a narrow one: the intent is not to compile a detailed, exhaustive survey, but to briefly review the preceding narrative tradition in Italy, especially the last two decades of the Novecento, as background and prelude to what we are seeing in the early years of the Duemila. Particular attention is directed at the Intemperanti, budding writers of the under 30 generation in present-day Italy, with a look at the literary and publishing world from which the new writers have emerged. Specifically, how are the Intemperanti of the publishing house Meridiano Zero representative of the fiction of our current times. Since it is widely accepted that there is no immediately apparent homogeneity or unifying trend that defines today’s Italian novel (though this may be due to a lack of distance and perspective), it seems reasonable to attempt a definition by identifying the parameters of the literary tradition against which today’s writers may be measured. What is it about them that sets their writing apart from what came before?

What came before: an overview of the Novecento

To answer this question we must first look, albeit briefly, at the major tendencies that characterize the 20th century in Italy, both on a literary level and on a broader social plane. The early decades of the 1900s were the avant-garde years of Futurism and fragmentism. The focus was mainly on poetry; the novel of these years, influenced by British and American fiction, remained somewhat underdeveloped. Indeed, Lino Pertile, in his Introduction to *The New Italian Novel*, points out that the tradition of the novel is still relatively young in Italy, and that even in the first half of the Novecento, there were very few Italian fiction writers. Perhaps the most important direction for fiction following Verga and verismo was that of greater subjectivity and introspection as writers sought to evade the constraints imposed by the political climate. Fueled by self-observation and auto-analysis, the narrative eye insinuated itself into every interior nook and cranny. (Svevo and Pirandello, for example, forged the way for the psychoanalytic literary genre prior to the revival of realism by writers such as Vittorini.) Along with this inward focus, the novel was in some cases marked by the decomposition of the classical sentence and the destruction of form. In a “clean” break with the past, classical order was replaced by “fragmentism”.

Oversimplification is to be avoided, however, since the modern novel took on multiple forms: the “romantic” novel, the historical novel, the adventure novel, the “cyclical” novel, the erotic novel, and so on. Poised between innovation and tradition, the period (roughly 1900-1925) came to an end with the First World War and the economic stagnation that followed it. The years that ensued (1926-1945) witnessed a new world order with the rise of Communism and Fascism, along with new forms of writing. Though Fascism forced many writers underground, at the same time it provided inspiration for some (Ignazio Silone and Carlo Levi come to mind). Writing came to include anti-fascist texts, social and political narrative (Moravia’s social criticism of the corrupt upper middle class, and the works of Silone and Jovine, to name a few), surrealism (Buzzati, Landolfi), ethical realism (Soldati), and with the advent of the Second World War, diaries from the front, memoirs and autobiographical works inspired by recent history: by the war itself and by the deportations and the Resistance (Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo*, 1958; Carlo Levi’s *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, 1951; Mario Rigoni Stern’s *Il sergente nella neve*, 1953; and other personal memories of the war period written by Vittorini, Calvino, Fenoglio, Bassani and Pavese). In short, literature became participant and witness to the transformation of society in those years.

Historically the second half of the Twentieth Century was a time of enormous change in Italian society, and postwar Italian culture experienced a profound renewal and new vitality. Developments in Italian fiction following the end of the Second World War must be viewed in the context of contemporary transformations in Italian society, of changes in the use of the Italian language which accompanied them, along with intellectual movements of the time. The period from the second postwar era to the early Sixties (1946-1962) was marked by the end of political censorship, by Reconstruction (1946-1956), and later by the economic “boom”, consumerism and the transformation of a previously agrarian country into an industrial nation. The dramatic process of industrialization during the Fifties and Sixties changed not only the economy, but also the landscape and urban culture, enabling the emancipation of women and the emergence of a large, urbanized working class that generally came from a rural background. Italy became a consumerist, technological society, and the literary scene witnessed the passing of a generation of writers who had been dominant since World War II. Moreover, the years of the Cold War that later saw the fall of Communism marked the end of a myth and the beginning of the search for new values and ideals. These social and political changes naturally affected what writers wrote about and how they wrote about it. The traditional order was overturned; ideologies, the “system”, were in crisis. The shock waves of this transformation and turmoil could not help but be felt in literature (and in art in general).

Still, there was a certain continuity in literary culture; the period from 1945-1975 was characterized by “impegno” (commitment) and up until 1980 literature appeared to absorb modern trends into pre-existing practices despite a significant expansion of the novel’s range in regard to themes, as well as in regard to language, structure and narrative technique. The late Forties and early Fifties were characterized by a Neo-realism that prompted writers to focus on their surroundings and led to “meridionalismo” (writing that concerned the Italian South) and regionalism. Objectivist in nature, Neo-realism related to films of the period (Visconti and Rossellini) and also looked back to verismo (Verga). Though loosely defined as a literary movement, a recognizable set of characteristics might include an engagement with history, a need to retell the “true” story of a censored past in an attempt to comprehend and serve as testimony to it (evident in the obsession with stories of the Resistance), and a regional focus recognizing the diversity that underlay the Fascist image of Italian unity. Rooted in “impegno” and a communist ideology, it was writing that sought to bring about social change at a time when faith in the progress of History was still possible.

The innovators of Italian literary Neo-realism were Cesare Pavese (*Tra donne sole*, 1949; *Il diavolo sulle colline*, 1949; *La luna e i falò*, 1950) and Elio Vittorini (*Conversazione in Sicilia*, 1941), two writers who "discovered" contemporary American literature and subsequently developed it into an original lyricism based on the lessons of realism. Other major figures included Carlo Levi, Vasco Pratolini, Mario Soldati, and Vitaliano Brancati. The significant regional current in postwar Italian Neo-realist literature was represented among others by Francesco Jovine’s *Le Terre di Sacramento*, 1950, by Beppe Fenoglio’s *La Malora*, 1954, and *Il partigiano Johnny*, 1968, and by Leonardo Sciascia, in whose works Sicily became a metaphor. Additional narrative writers of the period included Mario Tobino and those whose writing focused on the war and its atrocities and reflected the burden of memories; and others such as Guido Piovene, Giovanni Arpino, etc., who wrote about city and province caught between tradition and new customs.

At a certain point the Neo-realist novel lost its ascendancy and non-political themes (existential, personal recollection, psychological, fantastical, sentimental) began to appear. The novel of “impegno” came under attack for both its ideological content and its literary form as the neo-avant-garde tried to replace it with the anti-romanzo. Neo-realism declined toward the beginning of the Fifties, and the late Fifties and early Sixties saw the boom years of the “economic miracle” that ushered in new prosperity and choice. Two types of fiction emerged in these years: novels of memory dealing with personal and existential themes (Giorgio Bassani’s *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, 1962, and Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *Il Gattopardo*, 1957) and a so-called “industrial” narrative that reflected a current of social realism. While writers such as Bassani and Lampedusa fell back on disengagement (“disimpegno”), slipping into the hortus conclusus of the private sphere and withdrawing in existential questioning, others reflected on the rapport between culture and

industry. The latter current produced a fiction that focused on the alienated condition of individuals in the industrial society that had come about as a result of the “economic miracle”. At times perceived as an opportunity for modernization, at other times industrialization was seen as a threat to idealized urban and rural cultures.

The new social and political milieu was viewed as a challenge by ideologically committed intellectuals; indeed at the beginning of the Sixties a debate arose concerning the affiliation between literature and industry, and the responsibilities of leftist intellectuals and writers in the face of industrialization. Issue no. 4 (1961) of *Il Menabò*, a magazine founded by Vittorini, initiated the discussion on “literature and industry”. Two novels in particular related to the debate: Paolo Volponi’s novel *Memoriale*, 1962, that attempted to represent and bear witness to man’s alienation in a neo-industrial environment and the shattering chaos of the new society, and Primo Levi’s *La chiave a stella*, 1978, a dialogue or pseudo-autobiographical novel that is also a meditation on the ethic of writing. Embodying extreme opposite positions, they represent two conflicting literary contributions to the debate over literature and industry that preoccupied Italian intellectuals between the Sixties and Seventies. Both address the question of how to represent the working class as well as how the working classes speak (and write), reflecting socio-linguistic issues that emerged in those years. Generally speaking, “industrial” novels saw the decline of the individual as hero.

By the Sixties, the literary world had joined the protest movement against the corruption of the state. The late Sixties were marked by student protests in the universities (e.g. the French May of '68) and by vocal feminist rallies. Still, the youth movement, known as the 1968-69 “revolution” or *la contestazione*, did not produce any profound literary effects in Italy except for a few works that displayed a kind of pro forma anti-conformity in language replicating student jargon, and an uninhibited portrayal of sex. In effect, poetry surpassed the novel as the primary literary genre once “Gruppo 63”, the neo-avant-gardist group that ushered in the next major period of Italian writing (1963-1978), had eclipsed Neo-realism. Established in conjunction with a conference held in Palermo in October, 1963, this group of approximately thirty intellectuals (Eduardo Sanguineti, Elio Pagliarani, Alfredo Giuliani, Antonio Porta and Nanni Balestrini were the five poets who formed its early nucleus) met periodically to theorize on experimentalism, and represented a distinct break with literary tradition. Though there was no ideological consistency among its members, two main lines of thinking emerged: the majority view called for an ahistorical, non-ideological and disengaged avant-garde, while the minority faction could be defined as neo-Marxist in its social commitment and its attempts to demonstrate art’s compromise at the hands of the capitalist system.

Basically the neo-avant-garde, experimental novels of the mid-Sixties rejected the sentimentalism, provincialism and realism of Fifties fiction in favor of a narrative that suspended judgment and was free of ideology. Still, though exhibiting a certain degree of experimentation, several novels of the Sixties connected with the Gruppo 63 also reveal a heterogeneous group of talents and personalities. To name a few: Eduardo Sanguineti’s *Capriccio italiano* (1963) with its oneiric, dream-like quality; Luigi Malerba’s *La scoperta dell’alfabeto* (1963), *Il serpente* (1965) and *Salto mortale* (1965); Luigi Meneghello’s *Libera Nos a Malo* (1963) that makes use of dialect as a form of memory, the very essence of what is being narrated; Francesco Leonetti’s *L’incompleto* (1964); Furio Colombo’s *Le donne matte* (1964); Franco Lucentini’s *Notizie degli scavi* (1964); Nanni Balestrini’s *Tristano* (1965); Giuseppe Pontiggias *L’arte della fuga* (1968); and Sebastiano Vassalli’s *Narciso* (1968). The Gruppo 63 disbanded in 1969.

Whereas the Sixties were primarily marked by an anti-linear, non-utilitarian writing that did not serve any ideology (a literature that preferred an experimental linguistic pursuit over ethical-political “impegno”), the Seventies saw a return to a more circumspect fiction that was to characterize the Eighties, along with the rise of the Italian “best-seller” (defined as one that sold over 100,000 copies) and the “romanzo medio di qualità”, novels aimed at the average “middlebrow” reader. Thanks to the efforts of the culture industry, there was now a sizeable public for Italian narrative. Indeed, it was in the Seventies that publishers began to orchestrate *casi letterari* (later a phenomenon that continued into the Eighties), turning novels that appeared to have little likelihood of success into impressive triumphs at each new literary season. Still, novelists in the

Seventies appeared to have difficulty defining a role for themselves as they revisited issues left over from the years of experimentalism and the resistance to it. The demise of the neo-avant-garde and the collapse of ideologies left the writer in a void. With no literary movements to associate with or react against, with no political certainties with which to identify, the writer lacked a clearly defined task: he could no longer be a mouthpiece to convey programmed ideologies. Gradually, with a return to “intreccio” (plot) and a sales-driven desire to please the public, literary merit and market demands appeared to join forces. This literature for consumption, or fiction for the masses, took on new forms such as the detective thriller, the romance novel and science fiction, that were sometimes referred to as “paraletteratura” (almost literature). Although Mondadori’s “Gialli” series (crime novels) go back to 1929, it was Scerbanenco’s *Venere Privata* (1966) that first led to the creation of an Italian-style noir, a combination of “hard-boiled” romantic fiction and classic detective novel.

Another current that gained momentum in the Seventies was that of women’s writing. Beginning in the Seventies the number of fictional works by women increased, reflecting women’s changing position in society following the postwar period and the development of the feminist movement in the Sixties and Seventies. While Elsa Morante was perhaps the most prominent woman writer of the Novecento, the female voices of the second half of the century (Dacia Maraini, Rosetta Loy, Maria Corti, Francesca Duranti, Oriana Fallaci, to name a few) reflect a broad range of social and theoretical issues alternating between memory and “impegno”, thereby raising the question of whether women’s writing should be considered a separate genre. Is there such a thing as a single, distinctly “female” experience? More importantly, isn’t the suggestion of such a category a form of “ghetto-ization” that devalues women’s writing? The question is a difficult one to answer. For example, Donatella De Ferra, editor of Francesca Duranti’s *La casa sul lago della luna*, has observed that, in spite of Duranti’s reservations concerning the continued relevance of Seventies’ feminism and her rejection of a compartmentalization of women writers, “Francesca Duranti’s novels lend themselves to being read in a feminist key”.

The winds of change: the Eighties and Nineties

Toward the beginning of the Eighties, what may be considered the start of the end of the century, the winds of literary change began to shift in Italy. Readers had become bored with expressionist novels, avant-gardism, neo-avant-gardism, experimentalism, “metaromanzi” and “antiromanzi”. Narrative language sought to become limpid, accessible: a language that does not call attention to itself rather than one that aims at linguistic experimentation. Moreover good sense seemed to dictate that stories be told linearly, from beginning to end. Since the reader wanted assurance that the world was legible and coherent, reason and communication were invoked to act as guides in deciphering the chaos.

In many ways the Eighties were a relatively peaceful time. Terrorism was over, the defiant revolutionaries who had wanted to change the system were gone, and the economy had improved thanks to a new mini-boom. It was a new era in which practicality and pragmatism triumphed. The new air of confidence encouraged the growth of the publishing industry, which in turn appealed to the consumer and fueled a growing demand for Italian narrative after almost two decades of neglect. To meet this demand, publishers turned to new, young writers while also aggressively promoting established, older authors and a number of women writers. Intense marketing and promotional efforts were reinforced by the media (writers made frequent appearances on TV), and numerous literary awards (Strega, Campiello, Bancarella, etc.) added to the excitement. New collections devoted to young authors changed the demographic make-up of the narrative writing pool. Mondadori’s anthology of 1991, for example, introduced 24 new authors. Its title, *Italiana: antologia dei nuovi narratori*, significantly recalled the volume *Americana*, an anthology of American writing published 50 years earlier by Vittorini. Whereas Vittorini’s anthology focused abroad rather than on the local scene, the new anthology could be seen as replacing the old myth, “*Americana*”, with a new tradition based at home: “*Italiana*”.

As always, changes in Italian society in these years had an impact on the production and consumption of literature, and book production became a sign of economic and international status. Though capitalism had won and literature no longer fought for the oppressed, the weak and the “emarginati”, no one seemed bothered by this. If anything, the new generation of writers was characterized by a disillusionment with politics, by a tendency to suppress the first-person singular voice in favor of a plurality of voices, by a minimization of the author’s individuality and de-emphasis of the subjective self, and by a renunciation of the temptation to correlate the personal with the historical. Moreover, there was a rise in immigrant literature, signifying an awareness of the diversity of Italy’s different identities within and beyond its borders, and a general blurring of the distinction between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” culture, between “cultured” and “popular” narrative (seen, for example, in the new “serious” detective fiction). After almost a century of “impegno”, political literature, avant-gardism and experimentation, dialogue and communication became important in a literature that sought to offer consolation through the “magia del racconto” (the magic of story-telling): Umberto Eco’s *Il nome della rosa* (1980) is just one example.

The Nineties continued the return to the art of narrating and the use of plot (Busi, Malerba, Tabucchi, Tamaro, Baricco, Ballestra, etc.), and saw the “giallo” evolve to include noirs, dialect or regional detective fiction, cultured mysteries (“gialli colti”) and so on, in writers such as Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini, Andrea Camilleri, Lorian Macchiavelli and Carlo Lucarelli, to name a few. This return to the art of narrating did not always signify a return to realism and referentiality. In contrast to the Neo-realism of the postwar period which saw a return to reality and verismo, postmodern literature marked the demise of referential art. Bruno Porcelli speaks of the self-referential character of postmodern literature (“l’autoreferenzialità della lettura postmoderna”). This can be seen primarily in the treatment of time and space. At a certain point, the novel began to appropriate time and manipulate it, no longer respecting the chronology of narrated facts but overturning the temporal order of events. Such temporal inversion denotes a distinction between linear time (indicating evolution and becoming) and circular time (signifying an eternal return), between physical (real, historical) time and metaphysical (virtual, atemporal) time. The same distinction can be drawn on a spatial plane, between the physical “place” and imaginary, mental spaces. In the Introduction to Calvino’s *Le città invisibili* (1972), for example, we learn that the writer filed the pages he wrote in two different folders: one for the real cities in his life (the actual “places”) and one for the imaginary ones that existed outside of time and space (the utopia). Indeed in the interior voyage, the “garden of the mind” that Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan about is the only place that is knowable. As an example of the displacement between historical actuality and narrative reality, Porcelli points to Calvino’s break with the naturalistic novel. The spatial-temporal coordinates that support the common perception of the world, and that also structure the conventional narrative plot, lose their reassuring solidity in the visionary time and virtual space of the new narrative “reality”.

One thing is certain: with the approach of the turn of the century, the forms of the novel may have changed, but the impulse to narrate remained fervent. Postmodern writers such as Stefano Benni, Michele Serra, Aldo Busi, Andrea DeCarlo, Niccolò Ammaniti, Antonio Tabucchi, Daniele Del Giudice, Alessandro Baricco, Roberto Cotroneo, Paolo Maurensig, to name a few, are all very different from one another; perhaps what they have in common is the urgency to communicate through their story-telling. Indeed the presence of Italian writers grew strong. Analyzing data on bestselling books in Italy for the year 2002, Susanna Nirenstein writing in *La Repubblica* found numerous Italian writers, including Fallaci, Mazzantini, Camilleri, Baricco toward the top, and further down, Giorgio Faletti, Valerio Manfredi, and two titles by Niccolò Ammaniti: new names, new faces, new writing, as she puts it, as though a new national fleet of narrative writers had sprang up in the last few years, capable of occupying these places on the charts. She points out that at one time, in 1991, these same positions were held by non-fiction writers: Falcone, Bocca, De Crescenzo among others. In 1992, if you wanted to find an Italian fiction work you had to look as far down as ninth place (Benni’s *La compagnia dei celestini*) and then fourteenth (Alberto Bevilacqua), entries that were preceded by many classics: Pirandello, Pasolini, Sciascia, and so on. Today, on the other hand, there are a number of new names and the classics only appear starting in fifteenth place (with Primo Levi,

and then Calvino, De Carlo, Camilleri, Baricco).

Based on such data it would appear that Italian narrative is alive and well with more producers (and consumers) than ever before. The title of the first section of Lino Pertile's Introduction to *The New Italian Novel* – "The revival of the Italian novel: an industrial fiction?" – raises the question of the role of the publishing industry in the revival of the Italian novel in the late Eighties/early Nineties. Was the "revival" a natural development, that is, the result of a new generation of writers replacing previously pre-eminent writers such as Moravia and Calvino? Or was it a matter of marketing, a phenomenon induced by a powerful publishing industry? More importantly, despite the fact that the novel enjoyed both popularity and critical acclaim, was its popularity an indication of the objective merit of the writing? Pertile's position is a generous one: "the industry pursues its commercial interests, but it does not necessarily sacrifice quality in favor of quantity" That is, though commercial success may not always be a reliable indicator of literary merit, nevertheless, the fact that narrative works are promoted through marketing does not necessarily mean that they are unworthy of serious critical consideration.

For an issue of the journal *Il Verri* entitled "Il libro di narrativa" (May 2002), several authors were asked to provide written responses to a series of questions posed to them about the contemporary novel in Italy. The issue contained their responses along with interviews of other authors focusing on the same theme. The introductory essay referred to the crisis of the Italian "romanzo" in the 1970's and the appearance of the immoderate, excessive writers known as the "cannibali" in 1996. It was suggested that the novel of the Duemila takes nothing from that of the Novecento, and that in terms of form, the novel is now defined only by a certain length. Del Giudice, for example, thinks of the novel in spatial terms, as a "zone". Notwithstanding such speculation, the critical category of postmodernism can help to conceptualize some of the new trends and strategies in contemporary Italian fiction. We have seen that in some cases it can signify atemporality and the demise of referential art, but is there a "classic" postmodern?

The problem with postmodernism as a blanket term is that it can go on and on. Just as an avant-garde needs a mainstream tradition to be "avant" of, so too postmodern narrative needs a period to be "post" or subsequent to. At first postmodernism was said to challenge traditional notions of genre and literary form, representing a strong degree of textual self-consciousness, a preoccupation with literature as an artificial construct and a desire to challenge or disorientate the reader. Presumably it did so by overturning traditional narrative conventions, thereby frustrating the reader's expectations of order and reason. The key characteristics would therefore be narrative incoherence, philosophical relativism, and irony, combined with a lack of ideological underpinning. But how long can traditional narrative conventions be overturned before the "overturning" itself becomes conventional? How far can the process of disorienting the reader be pushed before pushing the new fiction into the mainstream itself? Surely at some point it becomes no longer possible for an author to establish his narrative legitimacy by being more experimental or irreverent toward tradition than his predecessors. When nearly everything is allowed, nothing really daring, it would seem, is possible any longer. Today's postmodern author therefore finds himself in the position of a would-be counterculturalist who can't find a culture to be counter to. But as suggested at the outset, perhaps this is simply a lack of perspective: from the viewing angle of 2004, it is difficult if not impossible to identify the trends that will become dominant and inevitable from a future vantage point that will allow for greater perspective.

Earlier I mentioned that one of the authors writing in *Il Verri* suggested that the novel of the Duemila takes nothing from that of the Novecento. This would seem to relate to Pertile's idea that "what has been left behind is no longer usable". Though critics speak of contemporary Italian narrative in terms of *riflusso* (a return to the past), *vuoto* (emptiness) and *babele* (chaos), Pertile does not agree. Though granting the point that there has been a retreat into the *privato* as the only "safe" area for the novel to explore ("The contemporary novel is often accused of helplessly mirroring the decay, emptiness and chaos of Italian society with a retreat at the thematic level into *il privato*: psychological themes, introspection, autobiography, personal memories and obsessions, a contraction of all horizons to the sphere of an

individual and usually private self...”) and that this is symptomatic of a disillusionment with public life (radicalism and History), he maintains that this retreat is neither good nor bad in and of itself. It is only bad if one expects answers from literature, answers that history and politics cannot provide. If one accepts the fact that an Italian narrative tradition may not yet be in place and that consequently this cannot be a time of *riflusso* for the writer, it may therefore be viewed as a time of great opportunity. An “exciting” time, as Pertile says, because the Italian writer, no longer directed at a fixed destination point, owes his allegiance and responsibility to literature alone: “The question is not where but how the writer goes.”

Despite difficulties of definition and description, the new narrative for some marks the successful return of fiction on the Italian literary scene, after the crisis of experimentalism which the Neo-avant-garde had provoked in the Sixties. It is precisely in the use of storylines and language which have a disturbing effect on the reader and which upset commonly-held ideas of what is a suitable subject for fiction, that the youngest writers of the Nineties, the so-called *cannibali* (cannibals), are seen as drastically different from the older authors of the Eighties. Claudia Bernadi reports that the two main tendencies of the new narrative may be termed *buonista* and *cattivista*. Indeed the 1996 Reggio Emilia conference entitled “Nuove tendenze” (new trends) underscored the differences between the two generations of writers who had come after the Neo-avant-gardists of the Sixties. In an attempt to perhaps over-simplify, journalistic reports put the question in terms of innovation versus tradition, between the ‘bad’ authors of the newest generation and the ‘good’ ones of the preceding generation. The term *buona*, or *buonista*, was used to describe the kind of personal, private, non experimental narrative by older authors who had dominated the Eighties and whose style of writing, in the opinion of former members of the Gruppo 63, was uninteresting from a linguistic point of view. Bernadi cites Nanni Balestrini, one of the original members of the Group, as saying that such writers reassure the reader, without posing problems or making him uneasy (“confezionano pagine leziose e artefatte [...] rasserenano il lettore, senza inquietarlo e porgli problemi”). Elsewhere Balestrini says that these writers’ works are anesthetic drugs to evade reality and avoid coming to terms with conflict (“opere anestetiche, piccole droghe per evadere dalla realtà e non fare i conti con reali contraddizioni”). In contrast to the *buonisti*, the writings of the *cattivisti* (or *maledettisti*, *cannibali*), a fiction dominated by youth jargon, youth culture, sex, drugs and violence, appears provocative and innovative both from a linguistic and thematic point of view. The other side of the same coin is represented by the minimalist writers: faced with a reality that has lost its meaning and where actions do not make any difference, Bernadi sees a parallel between the “stile impassibile” of the minimalist writers and the “stile fiammeggiante” of the pulp fiction *cannibali*: “minimalist and pulp plots and languages produce mirror-effect results”.

The rise of the so-called ‘pulp narrative’ in the Nineties is said to have met with general critical acclaim from part of the older generation of intellectuals associated with the historic Neo-avant-garde Gruppo 63. According to Bernadi, the influential avant-garde theorists and writers from the Sixties compared the efforts of the young ‘pulp’ authors to the earlier experimental texts written by members of Gruppo 63 itself. Such a view finds a supposed link between the New Fiction of the Nineties and the earlier Neo-avant-garde in the experimental nature of these young people’s writings. But there is a basic diversity in the new approach to narrative: the *antiromanzo* is rejected by the new authors in favor of communicative aims, while the originality of the language is not based on deconstructive practices, but stems from the use of contemporary youth jargon.

Sergio Pautasso has asserted that the literary Novecento was a series of contradictions, of forward and backward leaps. Though this might appear as stagnation, by applying a revisionist scheme to the literature he feels we can arrive at “another Novecento” (“un altro Novecento”, a term used by Alberto Asor Rosa). That is, by broadening our perspective, we can perceive a Novecento that has more to do with life than with literary technique. Distinguishing between those who consider literature an end and those who view it as a means, Pautasso sees the need for a revisionist reading of the Twentieth century, one which is participant and not just technical. Though such a view has its merits, it ignores the dynamics of the publishing market. Indeed since commercial criteria began to be applied to the novel in the late Seventies, market pressure has been strong. Narrative fiction has reasserted itself as the dominant literary form and as the medium through

which new voices can make themselves heard. In a market driven by the best-seller, the search for “new” or “young” writers has become paramount. The expansion of the market has meant more books being sold and therefore greater opportunity for young writers to be published and read. This is a key point. One such group of writers is the *intemperanti* launched this year by Meridiano Zero.

The new century: the “*Intemperanti*”

In her discussion of the critical debate surrounding the new Italian narrative, Bernadi confirms that the new phenomenon that characterized the Italian literary scene of the Nineties was the rise of the “young writers”, that is, authors born in the Sixties and Seventies. She cites the fact that the works of these new writers were launched in great numbers by publishing houses which saw them as trendy and marketable, even going so far as to create special collane (imprints) to make the most of the phenomenon (for example, Feltrinelli’s *I Canguri* and Einaudi’s *Stile Libero*). Though new writers were not considered a sound commercial investment (traditionally, and in the 1970s in particular, major publishers tended to support established authors, and translations of works from other countries were offered to meet the growing demand for new fiction), smaller publishers were more willing to take a chance on unknown authors. In its enthusiastic hunt for best-sellers, the publishing industry sometimes even stimulated production by publicly appealing to young authors for manuscripts. The idea wasn’t (and isn’t) new: it recalls the *Under 25* anthologies of writing by young authors originally edited by Pier Vittorio Tondelli and Massimo Canalini for *Transeuropa* in the late Eighties: the first three volumes, *Giovani blues*, *Belli & perversi* and *Papergang*, were published within a few years of one another. The question was whether the phenomenon would continue. Paolo Serino, writing in *Kult*, put it this way: after the 1980s and the last notes of the young writers discovered and launched by Pier Vittorio Tondelli, after the 1990s characterized by the new young “cannibal generation” of “pulp” writers, the phenomenon of young Italian writers seemed to be a soap bubble destined to disappear into the homogeneity of publishing houses less and less willing to invest in beginning writers. Or was it? The article goes on to note a renewed interest in new authors, mentioning such recent imprints as *Nichel* from publisher Minimum Fax of Rome and *Indicativo presente* from Sironi Editore of Milan. One might also mention the recent collection of Italian female writers of 2004, edited by Matteo B. Bianchi and Laura Lepetit, or anthologies featuring gay themes such as *Principesse azzurre* and *Men on Men* edited by Delia Vaccarello and Daniele Scalise respectively.

It is in this context of a revived awareness of the voices of young writers that the collana “*Gli Intemperanti*” launched by the publisher Meridiano Zero of Padua earlier this year can be set. According to the book jacket text, the title is intended to identify a generational tendency, by classifying these writers, though somewhat summarily, and placing them in a framework of avant-garde experimentation (thematic, linguistic and situational) following the era of the *indifferenti*, the decade of the *cannibali*, and the more recent *disertori* of Einaudi’s anthology of the same name. But what links exist between them and past narrative tradition? Is this simply a case of a publisher orchestrating another of the many *casi letterari* that have become common since the Seventies, or is there real substance in this writing? To what degree do the *intemperanti* embody the distinctive features of contemporary writing? To what extent do their writings reflect the tendencies of the *narrativa giovanile*, the “young writers” of the Nineties? We have seen that the violent, accelerated, even horrific stories of the latter may be characterized as linguistically interesting and thematically transgressive, some with ironic or self-ironic plots and styles, sharing a common element of engagement with youth culture and jargons. Can the same be said of the new writers termed “*gli intemperanti*”?

The collana “*Gli Intemperanti*”, dedicated to young, new Italian fiction writers, was launched by Meridiano Zero in January, 2004, with the publication of a debut anthology of the same name, *Gli Intemperanti*, and *Lola Motel* by Marco Archetti, a strikingly erotic, political novel of present-day Cuba. These were later followed by *Il vero amore non ha le noccioline* by Francesca Genti (a collection of poetry) and *Noi due*, a minimalist novel by Davide Cavagnero, both of which came out in May 2004. The next volume scheduled to

appear in October is Paola Presciuttini's novel about female gender identity entitled *Non dire il mio nome*. The anthology gives us a brief taste of the authors' writing and functions as an authentic promotional showcase for the young writers who share a collective stamp: *intemperanti* or the intemperate ones, budding writers who are uneasy, restless, agitated seekers and whose "intemperance" is intended to challenge indifference.

Giulia Belloni is the editor of the debut anthology and of the new series. Asked about how typical or atypical the *intemperanti* are, Belloni suggests that the experimental nature of the *intemperanti* (their use of language, their themes, their settings) renders them somewhat unusual with respect to Italian narrative offerings of recent years. Indeed, she points out that the criterion of diversity, stated differently, was one of the objectives that shaped the selection of authors. As Belloni explained it: "I chose texts that to me were in some way experimental, writing that was in some way the avant-garde of everything I had read over a year and a half in order to bring together this anthology. Naturally I broadened the scissors that defined the cut, applying the criterion "experimental" not just to style, but to themes and settings as well." In answer to my question of how the themes were chosen (I had been wondering whether the subjects were determined a priori), Belloni's response was "absolutely not: there were no pre-packaged or pre-imposed themes as there were in other anthologies. This kind of search didn't interest me at all, because I would have found it limiting. In my opinion, working along those lines would have meant depriving my work of any value it might have as a census mechanism: a survey of the themes, ways, and tendencies of the new young generations. The census aspect, the idea of the writing being a kind of litmus test, is an ingredient that that I am certain has been part of the success of the *intemperanti*."

Belloni goes on to elaborate, distinguishing her criteria from those applied by Pier Vittorio Tondelli in his *Under 25* anthologies. When Tondelli announced his competition, he required that the entry be a book and not a magazine, that the participants be under 25 years of age, and that all participants be mentioned by name. As Belloni sees it, Tondelli underscored the "census" aspect of the work by including the names of all the participants in the *Under 25* project at the end of the text, something that was fundamental from a marketing standpoint and indicative of publishing genius. *Meridiano Zero*'s criteria required that the candidates be under 35 years of age (but only because today the term "young people" extends to those under 35 and is no longer limited to the under 25 category), that the texts reflect a thematic, linguistic or setting experimentation, and that they represent a change from any orthodox viewpoint. Belloni adds that while Tondelli had announced a contest, *Meridiano Zero* did not. Instead selections were made a posteriori applying the three above-mentioned criteria after the fact.

The stories of the 18 writers making their debut in the collection reflect the issues and concerns of our times and range freely over the most diverse areas. Certainly a result of this kind (18 stories chosen from over a thousand!) can provide a very broad panorama of the themes that are most pressing for the new generations, for example, violence against animals (3 of the 18 stories deal with this subject). Though the writers are young, these are not coming-of-age stories in the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Instead, they portray 21st century insecurities and identity crises, and astound us with the ability with which they are able to disorient us emotionally. Their quality is to provoke or unsettle us: according to Dario Olivero's review in *La Repubblica* (Jan. 22, 2004), the stories "have the (stated) purpose of surprising the reader". Belloni (cited by Maria Grazia Bocci in *Il Gazzettino*) says: "The reaction to their stories may be positive or negative, but each of them tells us something that does not leave us quite the same." Indeed many of these stories will continue to peck at your subconscious long after you've finished reading them. Like any anthology, short-story collections tend to have an uneven quality. Not all 18 stories are equally good, but all are compelling and offer startling insights on the quotidian.

Although the name *intemperanti* can mean immoderate, excessive, uncontrolled or violent, these *intemperanti* are not violent. This new generation of under-30 writers (all born between 1974 and 1978) have no connection with the earlier *cannibali*; although the young writers embody a certain degree of youthful immoderation, differences are perceptible. Unlike the rebellious, excessive effects and bloodshed

found in the cannibali, the writings of the intemperanti seem to have their origin in personal insight -- a sort of soul-searching by and for the under 30 generation. Instead of peddling blood and gore, these authors write about apprehension and uneasiness, and about the loss of identity, with a guarded, controlled, at times almost nostalgic writing. All professionals in the field of writing and publishing (though this is said to have been coincidental and discovered after the fact), the young writers were selected by Belloni from among 800 authors and 1200 texts (Belloni notes that some authors proposed 20 or so stories, others two or three, some only one).

Some critics have referred to Meridiano Zero's Intemperanti as the forerunners of a movement that has toppled the regime of the immoderate Cannibali. But there is no movement and no manifesto, unless you consider the anthology itself a kind of manifesto as does Alessandro Zaccuri writing in *Letture* (February 2004). For Zaccuri, *Gli intemperanti* is a "libro-manifesto" since it is also the name of the new series in which Meridiano Zero intends to explore the terrain of the new young Italian narrative. In interviews published in Italian newspapers, Belloni, asked about the name Intemperanti, has said that there was no intent to present it as a literary movement. Instead she says she coined the term based on the idea of "transgression" resulting mainly from a shift in viewpoint. Elsewhere she explains that she specifically thought of "intemperance" as transgression with respect to indifference. The collection of stories was intended to represent an alteration in perspective, a way to think about reality in all its "sfumature" or nuances, a desire to reintroduce writing as a subversive force.

In some ways these writers seem almost depressed; Belloni has referred to them as a chorus of voices who suffer identity crises, noting that they do not attempt to seek solutions for the sense of void that surrounds them. Bocci writing in *Il Gazzettino* describes them as intense, strong, harsh stories that reflect an unsmiling reality ("Storie forti e dure che rispecchiano una realtà senza sorriso"). The young writers do not so much want to please or satisfy the reader, as to disturb, shock and horrify him with a violence that is often unexpressed, and for this reason, more devastating. In this sense they represent a challenge to indifference, ennui and tedium, to a narrative that today as never before has a tendency to be dull, nondescript and superficial. They portray a picture of a world that is dark and melancholy, difficult, marked by a violence that insinuates itself into everyday reality, and by a return to unhappy childhoods and adolescences. Where Pertile envisioned a "lightness" in contemporary writers released from the responsibility and "struggling ponderousness of the past", a rising above the heaviness of the world, this does not appear to be the case with the intemperanti. According to Belloni, the cliché of a light-hearted, blithe, unthinking young generation faded some time ago. Instead we are seeing a progressive depletion of values and meaning. The stories communicate this. They deal with suicides, homicides, sexuality and sexual deviations, violence against animals, illness, relationships in crisis, and so on. As Belloni puts it, these stories do not smile ("In questi racconti manca il sorriso"). Instead there is a subtle violence that explodes, upsetting the fragile, hypocritical account books of everyday life.

The themes are decidedly far-ranging and the settings unusual. Sara Beltrame's "Donna alla finestra", for example, describes a would-be suicide, a woman sitting naked in front of a window, at whom passersby cast various indifferent glances. Maristella Bonomo's "Palla di lardo" describes the cruelty of children, and Paola Presciuttini, in "Ogni venerdì", writes about a clerk who once a week becomes a transvestite. In Francesca Genti's "Giochi della gioventù", a strange ritual dance is enacted in a desolate countryside where there is nothing to do, at a garbage dump where the sheet-metal of a games arcade sparkles like a star in the hot sun. The protagonist of Paola Caldera's "Come Pedro Alvaro fu libero" is a serial killer, while that of Alberto Milazzo's "Oggetti smarriti" is a cat killer, convinced that his ex-lover's cat blames him for her having left the two of them. As already noted, 3 of the 18 stories in the collection deal with animal violence. In Marta Pastorino's "Nina", a child kills his sister's dog in an attempt to resolve family problems, and a little girl strangles her cat in Marco Peano's "Se non mangio animali la colpa è delle stelle maledette".

Some of the stories seem unnecessarily cryptic or elliptical, as if suppressing certain facts to force the reader to guess at what is unsaid. Marco Archetti's "Defecazione" struck me that way, as did Davide Cavagnero's

“I giardini del Salera”, both dealing with relationships in crisis. The fragmentation of Emiliano Ereddia’s “Niente ne è rimasto di Mimì Ayuhara” made it difficult to follow the story of Drano’s sister Matilda who has a green substance oozing out of her ears. In such cases, no matter how slowly and carefully you read the story, you will think you are missing important details. That’s because you are missing important details. These particular authors seem to bypass the traditional rules that govern the order of exposition, forcing you to invent them yourself in order to fill in the narrative gaps. And even when they do provide the information you need, it never arrives when or where you expect it. In “Defecazione”, for example, it is only at the end that the reader suddenly comes upon the connection between “la madre di Stefano” and the “Alessandra, solo Alessandra, Alessandra” of the opening paragraphs: “Avevo solo un’eco, dentro, che ripeteva come un’ossessione Alessandralessandralessandra...”. And in “Niente ne è rimasto di Mimì Ayuhara” the situation coalesces in the brief exchange between Drano and Ton-tom when Matilda appears to wake up: “Si è svegliata,” dice Ton-tom. “Forse dovremo darle delle altre gocce.” “Vuoi dire... delle altre?” “No... quelle, altre...”. The result of this technique disorients the reader and forces him to pay closer attention.

Some of these stories are not about what they seem to be about, but come at their subject tangentially. Franco Dipietro’s “Tutti sui medi”, with its futuristic setting in which sponsors film automobile accidents, has an interesting twist to it. Alessandro Gelso’s minimalist “Nella casa di Jamie” manages to tell a story, whereas Angelo Formica’s equally spare “Volevo andare in viaggio”, a conversation in a barber shop, does not. Among my personal favorites, perhaps because of the humanity that comes through, were Cinzia Bomoll’s “Sbologna”, about a young woman (once a tomboy and now uncertain of her own gender) who lost her parents in the 1980 massacre at the Bologna train station, and Marta Franchi’s “Sproloqui”, a conversation between two young friends who understand each other almost without the need to speak. Beautifully rendered in a sustained narrative style that avoids elision and ambiguity are Valentina Reginelli’s “Come il mare” and Michele Vaccari’s “Jam session”. Reginelli evocatively portrays the conflicted emotions of a teenage girl, a painter, who is in love with the girl friend she is spending the summer with at the Sardinian seaside. Vaccari’s story, instead, is set in Alabama at a time when Negroes were shunned, and is narrated from the viewpoint of a child who witnesses his parents’ racism and learns to play jazz from the blacks who befriend him.

Giuseppe Leonelli writing in *La Repubblica* (Jan. 30, 2004) questions the degree of transgression or novelty in these stories. What is it about them that supports the concept of “intemperance”? The answer is provided by Belloni’s concept of transgression as a breach of indifference: what I would call a certain defiance of apathy. Indeed, the stories seem sprung from necessity, almost as a means of survival. In a literary sense, transgression seems to mean breaking the mold of the old stories and trying to tell new ones. Still, it is necessary to draw distinctions: though there are common traits among the 18 writers, they are not very marked. The problem is how to attempt an interpretation of the intemperanti that avoids generalizations and all-inclusive definitions, since classifications are not generally helpful in accounting for individual voices and tendencies expressed by a diversity of authors. Is there a commonality that consistently emerges here? Valentina Desalvo, also writing in *La Repubblica* (Feb. 8, 2004), seems to find the meeting point in a common metaphysics that perhaps lies in their consciousness: small testimonies against everyday indifference (“piccole testimonianze contro le indifferenze quotidiane”); or as Ernesto Milanese writes in a review of Marco Archetti’s *Lola Motel* in *Il Manifesto* (Feb. 5, 2004): small everyday drops of hope in the ocean of disillusionment (“piccole speranze quotidiane nell’oceano della delusione”). Maristella Bonomo, one of the authors included in the anthology, feels that the common element is curiosity. Monica Capuani writing in *La Repubblica delle donne* (Feb. 14, 2004) calls the renunciation of temperance an “astute description”; in her view, the key to what is perhaps the only common cipher of the intemperanti lies in the “condition of existential orphanhood, of extreme solitude, almost genetic and inalienable”. Brunella Schisa (Venerdi, Feb. 6, 2004) finds the common element to be despair or desperation. And Belloni, in the aforementioned interview in *Kult* (February 2004), calls the common thread a “visible communicative freshness”. In the end, perhaps the diversity of the voices counts more than any presumed overall connection (this was so for the writers of the Einaudi anthology of the mid-1990’s as well). And though there is no hint of adolescent philosophizing in these writers’ stories, no pretense at finding solutions, if there is anything that links their

narratives together, it is perhaps the fact that they write to know and understand : indeed Luigi Malerba, whose characters are almost always misfits who reject and attack a reality that they are unable to comprehend and accept, is reported to have once said “I write to know what I think”.

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