

Pontiggia's discreet experimentalism

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Abstract

This essay aims to summarise certain key elements of the literary experience of Giuseppe Pontiggia (1934-2003), an author inclined to renew his artistic solutions by experimenting with techniques and genres while addressing a wide and varied readership. In order to highlight the thematic thread running through the different moments of his narrative production, the essay will cover the following: the author's early apprenticeship within the periodical «Il verri», certain structural aspects arising from the analysis of his writing, including the chess model, the elliptic functionality of typographic blank, already present in his debut writing, a tendency towards a «medallion structure», discernible in his three investigative novels and preparatory to *Vite di uomini non illustri*, the evolution of his literary language towards a mature and accomplished «simple style», as well as the ethical stance which characterises his work.

Key words

Fragmentation, simple style, classicism, ethicality.

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There are certain inevitable starting points from which to discuss experimentalism and the features of experimental works. In fact, as already observed by Umberto Eco, «if experimenting means fostering innovation in relation to tradition, every work of art we praise as significant has been experimental in its own way» (Eco 96).¹ However, focusing on the highly subversive experimentalism in the Italian tradition between the 1950s and 1960s, one must note how Giuseppe Pontiggia's education and apprenticeship took place within a cultural hotbed that he consciously and rapidly left so as to establish his own autonomous position. The writer moved on conceptually from the manifold positions of the group gathered around the journal «Il verri» led by Luciano Anceschi, a veritable melting pot of ideas which would set down the foundations of Eco's and the future neo-avant-gardists' first theoretical works. Pontiggia collaborated on the «verri» from its establishment in 1956 until 1961, and his gradual detachment from the journal points to the beginning of his unique route towards a more communicative literary experimentalism. The writer rejected the most radical stances that had circulated, also thanks to Anceschi's mediation, some years before the Gruppo 63, and that were relaunched at the first conference of the neo-avant-garde in Palermo in 1963. While he agreed with his fellow writers on the need for formal renewal in literature and particularly in language, he quickly distanced himself from the most intransigent positions emerging from the theoretical debate.

Pontiggia challenged that «poetics of language devaluation» which had already been promoted by the Novissimi and that Angelo Guglielmi (*La poetica*, 121) saw exalted in Arbasino

¹ All translation is mine. I have left the original Italian only for Pontiggia's words.

starting from Gadda's leading model, two writers diametrically opposed to Pontiggia in stylistic terms for various reasons. Whereas their expressionist style was described in terms of «boiling» and «electrification of the linguistic matter» (Guglielmi, *L'officina* 109-111), for Pontiggia it is perhaps more appropriate to talk of a polishing process. Pontiggia's desire for change with regard to post-war literature, moreover, found its roots in diverse models and did not concur with, for example, Renato Barilli's «total, radical, compelling dissatisfaction» (*Cahier*, 127), although it did result from a similar desire to avoid the much-despised «common sense» in literature. This was often indicated as a deciding element in the linguistic and narrative structures of most neorealist novels, or in the Cassola-like «well-crafted» sentimental-psychological model, or even in Moravia's «conventional» novels. Starting from premises which were at least partly held in common and which had developed thanks to the opening up to phenomenology advocated by the «verri»,² Pontiggia worked on a conception of literature that did not hark back either to linguistic *pastiche* or to suggestions from Informal art on which so much attention was focused during those years. Rather, he looked back to the models of communicativeness that were by no means warmly welcomed at the time, drawing ideas from Dickens and Renard to Collodi, beyond the fundamental Flaubert, Kafka and Joyce (although more the Joyce of *Dubliners* than that of *Ulysses*). Moreover, in the period in which, with great perspicacity and sarcasm, Arbasino was advising Italian intellectuals to make a trip to Chiasso,³ the author was studying the then largely ignored Svevo and exploring Eastern thought⁴ while going back in time in search of beauty in the language of the Classics,⁵ translating Lucan, and later Ausonius, encountering Sallust, Plutarch and Caesar, Ovid and Aristophanes, and investigating Freud and Jung, Croce and Heidegger with intellectual verve.

Pontiggia's anti-naturalism, as well as his breaking away from those who were on the point of forming the Gruppo 63, stemmed from this discrepancy. Pontiggia decisively rejected the «normalisation» of language Barilli spoke of at the third conference of the neo-avant-garde in 1965, since he aimed at retrieving the linguistic roots that continue to mould contemporary Italian, and this marked a point of divergence that the author would maintain coherently from his initial literary production until his death at the height of his intellectual activity. The themes of language devaluation and degradation were converted, in Pontiggia's case, into a very lucid (and early) attention to technique,⁶ perceived by him, in opposition to Crocean notions still circulating in society at that time, as an «active field of theoretical and

² See the *Discorso generale* at the start of the first issue: «Literature lives only through full participation in the widest system formed by unstable relations in which, accordingly, the meanings of an epoch unfold; furthermore, it is precisely these particular meanings that it helps form through its own means». (Anceschi 25-26).

³ I allude to Arbasino's irony about Italian intellectuals, who would better advised to cross the nearest border with Switzerland and buy, «together with a Toblerone and some Muratti with filters, Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Leavis's *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*», etc. The famous article was published in «Il Giorno» on 22nd January 1963.

⁴ Pontiggia would declare a «significant interest in Taoism» and in Eastern philosophy later, stating that it also acted upon his work as a writer (see Dedola 18).

⁵ The author would maintain later: «Per me lo stile è felicità [...] è piacere del linguaggio» [To me style is bliss [...] it is the pleasure of language] (Pontiggia, *I classici* 21-22); and also: «Per me la letteratura è critica radicale al linguaggio assieme ad altre cose» [To me literature is a radical critique of language, as well as other things] (Dedola 46).

⁶ Particularly thanks to the Italian translations of three books: Joseph Warren Beach's *The Twentieth-Century Novel. Studies in Technique* (1932), René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949), and Edward M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927).

expressive opportunities» (see Marcheschi, *Destino* 153). The ideological arguments of those years were thus usefully readdressed in terms of communication and narrative strategies. Pontiggia's stance would yield its best fruits later on, and yet he had already found a synthesis of those discussions on «practical» and «pure» reasons on which so many neo-avant-garde theorists insisted at the Palermo convention in 1963.⁷ Therefore, beyond the common agreement about the need to intervene on language, seen as the «soggetto malato che bisognava mettere in discussione» [the sick subject that needed to be called into question] (see Dedola 46), Pontiggia pursued other paths in his personal expressive quest, since, in light of the sensibility that he had been gaining through his study of the Greek and Latin classics, he was unable to accept for the novel either the application of an «arbitrary» language, which Guglielmi, for example, considered as more effective «the further it moves away from its merely communicative function» (Balestrini 34), and the radical refusal of *langue* or the lowering of language to a «writing degree zero», to mention only some solutions that were being discussed at that time.

Aside from the well-known family tragedies (two serious bereavements in his youth: his mildly Fascist father was murdered by two partisans in 1943; his sister committed suicide in 1955), Pontiggia as well as his fellow writers came to maturity in a climate in which «ready-made ideological prescriptions» (Balestrini 35) were being challenged.⁸ However, the debate on literary forms and the (albeit only theoretical) refusal of ideology by some (such as Guglielmi) was perceived by the writer as unresolved. Thus, he distanced himself from other normative positions of the avant-garde, such as that of promoting an a-temporal literature that «does not contain messages, nor produces meaning of general validity» but that should attempt at the same time to recover the «real in its intactness» by linguistic means (see Barilli and Guglielmi 242); by the same token, he also rejected Sanguineti's idea of making «the literary operation as such» coincide with «the expression of an ideology in the form of language» (see Barilli e Guglielmi 245). Pontiggia in those years was rather closer to the position of the early Antonio Porta, who did not deny the possibility of attaining knowledge through literature, and brought back the much debated possibility of heteronomy in art within a framework that always aimed at truth, attainable through the shattering of the point of view on external objects (see Lorenzini, *Giuseppe* 25). Therefore, whereas for Guglielmi «the notion of a novel as an instrument for knowledge is untenable» (Balestrini 137), for Pontiggia the cognitive potential of literature cannot be eliminated.

Despite contributing to the shedding of the old Italian critical and artistic context, the highly subversive experimentalism of the neo-avant-garde demonstrated theoretical fragilities. As Eco had insinuated, capturing postmodernism in its embryonic state («The *autre* is largely becoming *même*», Balestrini 73),⁹ and as Giancarlo Alfano, «in retrospect», observes

⁷ See passages such as: «What happened in this postwar period? What happened was that issues relating to pure reason, that is issues relating to knowledge – psychological, gnoseological, epistemological, anthropological issues – had been regularly set aside in favour of ethical and political ones» (Barilli and Guglielmi 251).

⁸ Additionally, consider Ancheschi's words in 1958: «We have a certain suspicion of ideological discourses with regard to literature: when they do not hide an ace up their sleeve, they run the risk of being intolerant of those testimonies that do not confirm them, of the particular and incomparable destinies. And the number of times that ideologies have blinded man in the face of truth!» (35). And again: «We had better say that each work is historically and culturally conditioned, bearing in mind that we have no right to condemn the way in which a writer reacts to such a conditioning in the freedom of his choices» (42).

⁹ Eco ironically pointed out that what is acclaimed as new, as «*autre*», immediately becomes liable to being re-exploited, re-shaped, and therefore recognised, as «*même*», as metaliterary writing or even mannerism.

today (Cortellessa 345), the debate seemed to lean towards overcoming experimentalism itself (which had not been hitherto clear), if not directly declaring its impracticality. Thus, the avant-garde pursued new forms through a preliminary normalisation of forms and language, substantially failing in its own intentions in practice and later failing the test posed by postmodernism, which would demonstrate the impossibility of combining radical subversion and action leading to change in society according to the ideological framework hitherto debated, since it would assimilate those experimental traits through camouflage, quotations and irony. On the contrary, Pontiggia went through both phases of avant-garde and postmodernism focusing on his own singular experimentation and, with adamant consistency, promoted an idea of literature as strong, profound, temporally and spatially open, internally rigorous, thereby delivering a cultural production endowed with authentic cognitive value.

It is for these reasons that the literary practice of those who, like Pontiggia, continually aspire to the *invention* of stylistic and narrative solutions, without giving in to the lures of the market or to ideological conditioning, must be considered as a way to forward experimental practice, especially in a historical period that has seen book production grow massively, with evident distortions in the editorial system. For, in Pontiggia's work, invention is associated with formal research as much as with a need for communicativeness. In this sense, he recovers the etymological meaning of the Latin term *invenire* – a key term for the author – that is «to come upon by chance, to discover, to know». As Daniela Marcheschi (*Introduzione VIII*) reaffirms in no uncertain terms, «experimentalism and tradition were then, and will remain, the dialectic poles of Pontiggia's work». This essay therefore aims to contest the simplistic idea that Pontiggia's experimentalism can only be traced in the parts of his work which are most clearly subversive of traditional narrative structures, that is to say in *L'arte della fuga*. Instead, I contend that his experimentalism develops along a wider trajectory that involves his later works, including his fresh and original collections of essays where his reflection on the classics re-surfaces as of real importance for the Italian culture of today.

But how do experimentalism and classicism come together in Pontiggia's work?

1. Fragmented narrative structures

The height of experimental tension is achieved in *L'arte della fuga* (1968, 1990), a text planned after the turning point in 1961 and published some years after the divergences with his “veri” companions had already developed. By redefining the need for renewal repeatedly expressed during this period in his own way, Pontiggia proposes a radical dismantling of the traditional notion of linear reading in favour of a narrative structure that allows to read «upon opening the page at random» (Pontiggia, *Niente*). Recalling the Beckett of *Comment c'est* (see Marcheschi, *Introduzione XII*), the 1968 edition consists of brief portions of text in prose and in verse, which would be grouped into wider thematic macrosequences in the 1990 edition to improve its readability. *L'arte della fuga* seemingly alludes to «the requests for Informal art made by the neo-avant-garde» and yet, rather than representing a «tribute» (Maccari 63) to these requests, it decisively draws on different sources. Its rigorous contrapuntal structure display influences that range from Spatialism to Stockhausen's *Gruppen* and the concept of form as «formation of form» found in Klee, as observed by Marcheschi (*Introduzione XV*). The «reduction of the self», to which Alfredo Giuliani aspires for his «*novissima*» poetry, is resolved here in the agglomeration of objects and places especially in the parts written in verse, and tends towards a depersonalisation which recalls Antonio Porta's «language of events» (Lorenzini, *Il presente* 92) as well as the works of the *école du regard*. Nevertheless, it never denies, not even initially, the potential of the communicative word. *L'arte della fuga*, beyond its

disjointed structure, touches the point of greatest oddity in its dialogues (where the distance from realistic mimesis is occasionally total)¹⁰ and in the treatment of temporality, which is arbitrarily manipulated and ordered in a «web of fantastic associations»¹¹ that allows for a law of constant reversibility and a multi-perspective broadening of space. Virtual representation, a generalised process of discharge and re-fuelling of novelistic material become the dominant factors, organised in terms of a «fugue», which is the structuring principle of the book. This is achieved through a pervasive *mise en abîme* of the text, which becomes clearer in the second edition thanks to a careful grouping of the sequences into chapters, and to peritextual indications: the brief paragraphs seem to be almost chemically catalysed by the title that sets them off.

Overall, the experimental drive of the book appears to be crucial in liberating the author's imagination and dismissing false preoccupations regarding genre that had never convinced him. With this book, therefore, Pontiggia reaffirms his partial adhesion to the renewal which he had already expressed in his illuminating article of 1963, *Avanguardia e impegno oggi* («the crisis from which [the neo-avant-garde] arose does not appear, fortunately, to be resolved»; see Marcheschi, *Destino* 154). On the other hand, the book also confirms the necessity of not adhering completely to theories which are impervious to the models of the past and are engrossed in championing the antinovel.¹² It is enough to compare today the explosive inventiveness of *L'arte della fuga* with the grey flatness of Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano* or with Balestrini's *Tristano*, with its automatised *patchwork*.

Pontiggia would treasure the failure of the book – a failure due largely to the marked narrative disarticulation, lacking in peritextual indications, rather than to its language – and reconsider his own artistic practice during the 1970s, revisiting some thematic and formal lines already present in his debut novel and in the short stories of *La morte in banca* (1959, 1979, 1991). The short novel *La morte in banca* is clearly characterised by a narrative progression typical of a long story and culminates with a revelation of meaning that «bursts into» the narrative (Lattarulo 32) in the same way as it does in the structurally similar *Il raggio d'ombra* (1983, 1988). Thus, the epiphany of the «everyday *autre*» or «adventure *autre*» proposed by Barilli in his conference talk in 1965 (Balestrini 14) is transposed onto another dimension: a dimension of play. Pontiggia's typical textual arrangement in brief narrative or expository blocks alludes to a chessboard. Thanks to the formal crossroad represented by *L'arte della fuga*,¹³ such a technique recalls the only partial intelligibility of life events that continually need to be called into question and «repositioned». In fact, Pontiggia's characters always seem to become aware of their situation *in retrospect*, recalling Federigo Tozzi's figures in *Con gli occhi chiusi* and Italo Svevo's main characters, studied by Pontiggia in his thesis of 1959 (see Pontiggia, *La tecnica*). Even when the narrative fabric seems to follow much more traditional novelistic strategies, as in the two further novels of the investigative trilogy, *Il giocatore invisibile* (1978) and *La grande sera* (1989, 1995), this tendency emerges, thereby reinforcing the antinaturalism on the structural level too, as the narrator's comments and blunt aphorisms re-

¹⁰ «“Chi è?” domandò dietro l'uscio l'ingegnere, asciugandosi il viso. “(+ (+ -)”. “Ah, sei tu” disse l'ingegnere» (12) [“Who is it?” asked the engineer, drying his face, from behind the door. “(+ (+ -)”. “Oh, it's you” said the engineer].

¹¹ As Pontiggia maintains on the back cover of the second edition.

¹² Years later Pontiggia would write, not by chance, the parody *Gli ultimi giorni del romanzo* [The last days of novel] which contains the phrase: «Poteva guardare solo davanti a sé e in tale posizione fu trovato cadavere» [It could only look ahead and in that position its dead body was found] (Pontiggia, *L'isola* 94).

¹³ About the continuity between *L'arte della fuga* and *Il giocatore invisibile*, please see Marcheschi in particular (*Destino* 25-43).

veal, especially in *La grande sera*. The characters' psychology is given minimal space, and their inner being is, if anything, alluded to through the pitfalls, slips or shortcomings in their language, or filtered through a rendering of gestures that appears to be influenced by American behaviourist literature. The notable enhancement of the visual effectiveness in the texts seems to absorb methods of representation derived from film language. The *topos* of the quarrel, which invariably takes place between two characters, becomes emblematic of Pontiggia's narrative.

His three investigative novels, furthermore, show a gradual expansion of the descriptive digressions. These are brief, incisive and deeply sarcastic in *Il giocatore invisibile* (exceeding half a page just to describe the character of Cattaneo). In *Il raggio d'ombra* they are expanded further in an independent chapter about the obsessive book collector Perego (the author's alter ego), and in a long passage within a chapter about Doctor Berbenni. Finally, such digressions take on a key function in *La grande sera*, where they can be found in fifteen out of thirty chapters. The «ring-shaped structure» of this novel has already been highlighted (Marcheschi, *Destino* 58); building on this suggestion, it could be said that in a spherical model the plot is kept equidistant from the main narrative core represented by the fugitive and the central theme of absence, extended by metonymy into the void and ontologically into «existential death», on which Pontiggia had already focused elsewhere. If we were to cut out the narrative fabric of the novel, this would almost appear to be a sequence of juxtaposed portraits, revealing itself in the end as an unfolded origami.

Such structural tendencies contribute to determining the author's narrative strategy in the 1970s and 1980s (*Il giocatore invisibile* was started in 1971), and are enacted from an *a posteriori* perspective in *Vite di uomini non illustri* (1993), where the eighteen micro-novels show – and this is not a coincidence – a rarely-seen formal maturity and stylistic sensibility. The book is innovative since it overturns the classical approach to biography, as Segre pointed out at the time (*Straordinarie*), by opposing celebratory rhetoric with «a de-sublimated realism» (Febbraio 21) achieved through a montage of fragments of ordinary life. The author reveals his great acuteness in presenting every single event as filtered either through the characters' points of view or from a perspective connected in some way to their social environment. What counts is the effect that everyday minimal events have on the characters' life, even unbeknown to themselves, in a «horizontal complexity» (Maccari 49) of the smallest turning points. Gestures undergo a decisive amplification, unlocking humour. The characters are endowed with an «epic attribute» (Segre, *Straordinarie*) that distinguishes them, such as the mahogany cane that allows Terzaghi to become such an unmistakable figure in the «bar delle Prealpi», so much so that he is «consultato come giudice inappellabile in ogni controversia di carte e di biliardo» [consulted as the ultimate judge in every controversy arising from card games or billiards] (22-23). The dialogues, which in *Il giocatore invisibile* already recalled the essential style of a certain American literature, particularly Hemingway's allusive dryness, become even more limited and similar to verbal crossfire, thereby reproducing the hyperbolic memorability of snapshots of the past. The treatment of the characters' names is also rather revealing: previously, building on Kafka's model, this treatment aimed at depersonalising them by a process of elimination; now it achieves the same outcome through the bureaucratic inversion of surname and name, as well as the outline of family ancestry (see Randaccio 76).

Finally, Pontiggia's experimentation with genres and narrative forms has been praised above all in the extremely successful *Nati due volte* (2000), where several of the formal and thematic features already highlighted re-emerge (e.g. the pseudo-autobiographical narrative as found in *La morte in banca*; the theme of rebirth introduced in the first and the last of his short stories in *Vite di uomini non illustri*). However, other valuable motives pertaining to tex-

tual construction intersect as well. On the one hand, in fact, by exploiting very common literary conventions, the author masks the autobiographical content and substitutes his and his relatives' real identities with fictional characters. On the other hand, he re-uses narrative structures reminiscent of the classic *Bildungsroman* with a double reversal of terms: it is the father, a figure of maturity, who passes through a series of stages and gains a *surplus* of understanding, while the figure of the disabled son is illuminated by him as if by refraction, so as to avoid sugary rhetoric and progression through misleading social labels. The son's connotation changes according to the internal focalisation on the father, who is the bearer of an ethical call directed at the readers. The disabled son thus takes on a dignity which is in the end free from pre-established mental superimpositions, and can escape from a false and inappropriate protective social bubble. The father, too, experiences an epiphany *in retrospect*, at the end of the novel, although this is the result of a series of approximations that have occurred over the course of a plot made up of short, incisive scenes.

As has been noted, Pontiggia essentially ends up being a writer of short stories.¹⁴ Rather than representing reality within broad fictional frameworks, the author prefers to juxtapose self-sufficient fragments that strengthen the textual meaning thanks to their structural synergy, but also invite free, non-linear reading. If one looks at his essays, what is striking, among other things, is the implicit narrativity that supports the discourse in synergy with his masterful use of blank space, not differently from his short stories. The author harks back to a tradition embodied in the 1920s in Italy by, for example, Umberto Fracchia and Dino Terra, and abroad by André Gide, Jakob Wassermann and John Dos Passos, as Marcheschi has already pointed out (*Percorsi*, 57-59). In his original recycling of forms and themes, Pontiggia's essay-writing style is also in turn extensively reflected in his novels, to the point of characterising some chapters, especially in *La grande sera* and in *Nati due volte*. However, even where essay style comes to the fore more clearly, Pontiggia's writing advances by leaps and bounds, since he conceives each paragraph as an explanatory section equipped with its own narrative force, as clearly shown in his essays from *Il giardino delle Esperidi* (1984) to *Prima persona* (2002): see, for example, the essay *L'amore di Majakovskij* at the beginning of *L'isola volante* (1996).¹⁵ Full of anecdotes, aphorisms and digressions as concise as they are illuminating, these essays open up virtual perspectives, and overturn trite *clichés* with ironic elegance. For Pontiggia «does not want to exhaust a topic, but to suggest one» (Febbraio 18). It is no coincidence that Maria Corti defined this latter collection as «an intellectual narrative».

2. The simple style

Over the years, Pontiggia's literary writing was built on his stubborn and systematic search for a highly communicative artistic language and on rigorous formal refinement. As a result of this he employed a lexical selection which was centred around common terms while re-

¹⁴ Franchini (290-291) claims that the short story is «the most appropriate length for Pontiggia» and talks of him possessing «an Id which is typical of short-story writers and a Superego like that of a novelist»; Marcheschi (*Percorsi* 49) observes that «Pontiggia's novels look almost more like novellas (in Boris Eikhenbaum's meaning) [...] in that their accumulating of their full weight towards the end is typical of the novella».

¹⁵ Raboni (*Pontiggia, i saggi*) underlines the rhythmicity of the text and talks of «a precise affinity with the stanza form». Regarding *Prima persona*, see Marcheschi's very recent contribution (*Giuseppe* 111-116), where the differences between his «*zibaldone*» and the previous examples by Vittorini, Flaiano and Pavese are also outlined. Marcheschi summarises the difference of Pontiggia's book with the expression «a self-reflexive subjectivity, which is nonetheless extroverted».

storing their etymological meanings. The result is a treatment of language that from the very first attempt in *La morte in banca* demonstrates semantic precision and an inclination towards syntactic concision: it is a profoundly non-mimetic prose.

The almost total absence of dialectal and regional variants is the first element that surfaces from a lexical analysis. Even later on, Pontiggia's literary Italian would only exceptionally include diatopically-marked lexis, which points to one of the author's fundamental models, Alessandro Manzoni. This stylistic tendency, in general, aims at achieving uniformity of writing supported by a relatively high register, but one which never, nonetheless, strays into an excessively lofty, formal level. His debut novel, which is exemplary of the stylistic choices he would perfect later, generally shows his preference for a fundamental lexical *medietas* that is open to more formalised levels of language, while typically avoiding informality. This choice is also revealed by the moderate use of augmentative and diminutive forms, superlatives and emphatic exclamations, phraseological verbs, suffixed forms, in short, all the features of spoken Italian, which, when necessary, is rather systematically rendered more formal or dignified, usually with syntactical devices designed to restore the immediacy of speech. This aphoristic narration, which will become the author's trademark, already aims at maximum effectiveness using the minimum number of words. On a lexical level, this entails a particular attention to semantic weight; on the syntactical level, the generalised preference for simple or nominal phrases and for paratactic links between clauses turns to be quite functional, to the detriment of broad and articulated subordination. While *L'arte della fuga* may be seen as eccentric for many reasons, his subsequent novels only confirm the general trends shown in the debut.

In spite of the considerable disarray of the narrative structure, *L'arte della fuga* features for the most part a simple syntax and a lexis which aims at only moderate literariness, even if the narrator's expressionism sometimes triggers a rise in the overall register, which turns out to be lyrical and elliptical. The requalification of conventional verbal materials sometimes through the literal re-use («Colpita da una pallottola vagante, vide la fine del mondo» [Having been hit by a stray bullet, she saw the end of the world], 44) is therefore rather relevant (above all in the parts in prose); and so is the search for rhythm in sentences, obtained thanks to iterations such as the marked use of «non» («non sorrida a tutti, non lodi l'avversario, non stringa mani. Non abbassi la testa, non annuisca. Non dimentichi chi ha sconfitto, non creda al gioco» [Don't smile at everyone, don't praise your rival, don't shake hands. Don't bow your head, don't nod. Don't forget whom you defeated, don't have faith in the game], 159), rhetorical constructions such as epanalepses and polyptotons («galleggiava lei nelle luci, lei tra poco in attesa, galleggiando nell'acqua della notte» [She floated in the lights, she, who would soon be waiting, floating in the water of the night], 13), alliteration («lamelle di luce» [blades of light], «schizzava a chiazze» [it spurted like stains], 63), and assonance («La pioggia [...] sull'asfalto nero nel viale rischiarato al neon della città allagata, un velo di pioggia» [The rain... on the black tarmac of the neon-lit lane in the flooded city, a veil of rain], 12). Consistently with the story's formal features and content, Pontiggia normally aims at essentiality and fragmentation, with extensive use of linear syntax and, as far as punctuation is concerned, extensive use of full stops («La vittima fu mancata in piena luce. Entrò dentro un portone spalancato. Dovette la sua vita all'imperizia» [The victim was missed in broad daylight. The figure went through a wide open doorway. She owed her life to incompetence], 47). Even in passages where the opposite tendency, towards a feverish narration of events, prevails, the writing remains between the tracks of syntactical linearity. While Pontiggia's desire to experiment is obvious here, it also appears crucial to point out the difference between *L'arte della fuga* and some works produced within the neo-avant-garde, a fact

that foretells the growing distance of the author's artistic choices from those that would be expressed over the following years by other representatives of the former Gruppo 63. For Pontiggia champions an experimentalism which moves ever more towards readability,¹⁶ and in the case of *L'arte della fuga*, the second edition in 1990 emphasises this point exactly. At any rate, the reflection following on from the unsuccessful first edition proves to be a deciding factor for the author's literary journey towards a more affable discursive tone.

A new season in fact begins in the Seventies with *Il giocatore invisibile*: the experimentation now consists in finding the right balance for a literary voice that reacts against the shortcomings of the language in current use, at the same time as addressing a readership that is not only niche, but also mixed, demanding, and needing entertainment as much as culture. The search for clarity becomes methodical. On a syntactical level the author favours a linear order, with very few marked constructions. The peculiar use of subordination, evident in the opening of some chapters and in specific passages, seems if anything to be a syntactical shift designed to introduce or reinforce when necessary a parodic suspense. In his lexical selection Pontiggia favours the use of standard Italian: in the text, therefore, archaic terms, rarefied words and regional variants are not introduced. A prime example would be the ubiquitous choice of «che cosa», in declarative or interrogative functions, instead of the more informal and diatopically marked «che» or «cosa». For what concerns the textual rhetoric, tropes capture clear images while rhetorical schemes are used sparingly and generally tend to be discreet. However, there are also instances where the figurative intention emerges more clearly, as in the case of some metaphors (the city from above is «un immenso braciere di luci e di lampi» [an enormous cauldron of lights and lightening], 161) and oxymorons («torpore benefico» [healthy torpor], 35), to mention the most obvious; but one can also observe short allegories or examples,¹⁷ which involve wider argumentative structures.

Now, the search for clarity is important not just as a useful stylistic solution for reaching a wider audience. Were it only this, it would be small matter. Rather, as the author maintains, recalling René Daumal's reflections, clear language with its «potenzialità enigmatica» [enigmatic potential] is the only way to complexity. This entails «l'impiego di un linguaggio corrente per esprimere verità remote dai luoghi comuni» [the use of a common language to express truths that are far removed from clichés] (Pontiggia, *Il giardino* 11-13). Because of his unceasing proclivity for *brevitas*, the semantic poignancy in the linguistic fabric of *Il giocatore invisibile* becomes decisive, and is taken to very high stylistic levels thanks to the precise work of etymological whittling down, which is partly made explicit. This result is achieved thanks to Pontiggia's awareness of the strains and revitalisation to which language is continually subjected, thus accommodating layers of meaning. It is also a way of stimulating readers, of awakening their dulled senses. Even when not directly displayed, etymological study comes effortlessly to the textual surface. However, Pontiggia's lexical precision is never either a dis-

¹⁶ Pontiggia, among other things, and unlike many neo-avant-gardists, would never use neologisms; on the contrary, he would always search for rigorous semantic clarity in standard Italian.

¹⁷ «Non credo all'originalità come la intendi tu» continuò il professore. «Deve essere una scoperta, ma anche una riconferma, altrimenti è mostruosa. C'è il caso di quel padre che alla figlia ammalata di cancro, nel giorno del suo compleanno, regala una bellissima bara. Ecco, questo sì che è un dono assolutamente originale, che né la figlia né alcun altro avrebbe potuto prevedere. Solo che è il dono di un pazzo» [“I do not believe in originality as you understand it”, the professor continued. “It ought to be a discovery, but also a reconfirmation, otherwise it is monstrous. There is the case of that father of a cancer patient who, on her birthday, gives her a beautiful coffin. Now, it is true that this is an absolutely original present, one that neither the daughter nor anyone else could have predicted. Only that it is the gift of a madman.”] (113). Needless to say, this passage lends itself to a clear metaliterary allusion.

play of his own intellectual elegance or mere technical rigidity: it is craftsman's awareness that «ogni parola è un mondo e non ci si può permettere distrazioni» [every word is a world and we cannot allow ourselves any distractions] (122).

In *Il giocatore invisibile* Pontiggia's linguistic experimentalism achieves its maturity precisely for the originality of its classicism «without classicisms» (Marcheschi, *La letteratura* XIX), establishing itself in the Italian literary panorama as an example of great power and accessibility.¹⁸ *Il raggio d'ombra* follows the same path towards descriptive precision and is marked by the fine tuning of a particular form of narrative aphorism, as the authorial variants of the second edition testify. This approach is repeated with the revision of *La grande sera* for the 1995 edition, to which Pontiggia makes scrupulous corrections aimed especially at limiting the aphoristic nature of the narrator's comments.¹⁹ After the many modifications, the edited text still abounds with aphorisms and figures of speech, so that the novel stands out from the two previous ones in its demand for greater concentration from the reader: the overall register is raised. One of the most clearly outlined stylistic features of the novel, already visible in *Il raggio d'ombra*, is the meticulous combination of adjectives with nouns, often by means of oxymoron, with the intention of making the text poignant and allusive, particularly when the characters' states of mind are mentioned («modestia arrogante» [arrogant modesty], 22; «attiva riluttanza» [active reluctance], «adesione assorta» [engrossed acceptance], 24; «ironia riluttante» [reluctant irony], 31; «presunzione irresponsabile» [irresponsible presumption], 33; «ozio ottuso» [obtuse idleness], 34; «affaticato disprezzo» [weary disdain], 41; «mondanità vorace» [voracious worldliness], 53; «viso patibolare» [execution's face], 89; «sguardo dimissionario» [resigning look], 128, etc.). Moreover, see the very skillful *variatio* which characterises the tone of the dialogues («tono carezzevole» [endearing tone], 6; «voce costernata» [dismayed voice], 7; «tono petulante» [querulous tone], 22), as well as the combinatory use of *tricolon*, which appears relatively frequently and becomes increasingly typical of the author, including climaxes, chiasms, antitheses, chains of nouns or single adjectives, or syntagms («dopo anni di lodi inattendibili, di menzogne impavide e di adesioni ricattatorie» [after years of unreliable praises, of undaunted lies and of extorted acceptance], 35).

In *Vite di uomini non illustri* the element that best sums up the harmonious texture of the book is the bonding of the register with the specific content in each individual biography. A story (*Italia! Italia!*), for example, features patriotic rhetoric, while another features rhetoric associated with post-1968 discourses (*Una goccia nell'oceano divino*); but the most striking case can be found in the story *La villa di Bolsena*, characterised by a lyrical register that parodically evokes D'Annunzio. Here lexicon and syntax are skilfully measured and blended to achieve a «multi-coloured» style (Marcheschi, *La letteratura* LIII). However, on the whole the author imposes his usual trademark of formal correctness onto the text, once again adjusting his own writing to the varieties of supra-regional Italian, and, wherever necessary, drawing on lexical repertoire of subcodes and slang, as already seen in *La morte in banca*.²⁰ Examples of

¹⁸ See Dionigi (99-110) for an analysis of classical echoes in Pontiggia's work.

¹⁹ Pontiggia's corrections are intended to amend some excessively moralistic passages and to shift comments and aphorisms from the narrative voice on to the characters' points of view, in order to lighten the text and to give it more credibility. See De Santis (99-119).

²⁰ «Giustamente, si è detto che il libro è ricco di segmenti di linguaggio medico, burocratico, notarile. Io li adotto sia per ottenere effetti d'atmosfera, sia per ottenere effetti comici, grotteschi: mai però per una ricostruzione ambientale fine a se stessa. Come dire, mi interessa sempre la storia che sto raccontando». [It is said, with good reason, that the book is full of segments of medical, bureaucratic and notarial language. I adopt them to create either atmospheric effects, or comic, grotesque effects; but I never use them just for

technical language are: medical vocabulary, evident in «parto podalico» [breech delivery], «nutrizione endovenosa» [intravenous nutrition], «nevrosi coatta» [obsessive compulsive disorder], «affezione nervosa» [nervous disease], «insufficienza toracica» [thoracic inadequacy], «ernia inguinale» [inguinal hernia], or in entire phrases such as «all'altezza della quinta costola dell'emitorace sinistro» [at the height of the fifth rib of the left hemitorax]; financial vocabulary: «inflazione» [inflation], «liquidazione» [liquidation], «onorario» [fee], «interesse» [interest], «mensilità» [monthly salary]; military vocabulary: «trincea» [trench], «shrapnel», «Beretta calibro 9» [Beretta 9mm], «caricatore» [magazine], «cartucce» [cartridges], «pallottole» [bullets], «otturatore» [breechblock], «grilletto» [trigger], «basco» [beret], «crepitio dei mitra» [crackling of machine guns]; terms from architecture: «torretta panoramica» [panoramic turret], «balaustra» [balustrade], «foresteria» [guest rooms], «doggione» [the Gods], «cavedio» [internal courtyard], «altana» [rooftop terrace], «ballatoio» [walkway], etc. A few regionalisms appear: for example the expression «vera?», a Northern feminine variant of «vero?» [really?] (23); or «breva» (120), the wind that blows on Lake Como; also note the definite article put in front of people's names, which is accepted by the narrating voice («la Milena», 107), specific toponyms («orrido» [gorge], 201), but above all the extreme precision of historic terms: ballet dancers are named «cocottes» (121), which means «prostitutes», in a scene set in 1910; a homosexual is referred to as an «invertito» [literally: inverted] (205) in another scene set in 1939; a recruit has his hair cut «alla umberta» [crewcut; like king Umberto I] (140), a word which was still in use in 1970. Finally, consider Pontiggia's exceptional philological rigour (as well as his creativity) in relation to a whole series of proper nouns to describe public institutions, factories, newspapers, vehicles, organisations, cigarettes, antiques, streets or churches.

However, it is really on the syntactical level that Pontiggia's writing displays innovative variety. He employs intense punctuation to break the discourse into simple phrases and paratactic sentences, triggering rhythmical changes which follow the tone of the narrating voice and the inescapable turning points of life. Anacoluthon frequently appears:

Lei diventa sempre più matronale e statuarica, nei dintorni viene chiamata la svizzera, impara a guidare l'automobile, controlla la manutenzione della villa, progetta una vasca per i pesci, scopre la floricoltura, fa erigere una serra e ogni giorno contempla le specie rare che importa perfino dal Sudamerica. Giorni d'ozio frenetico, ripete anche a sua madre che è felice, che cosa le manca?, un figlio, ma non è indispensabile, del resto l'epigrafia, conosce Carlo Bartesaghi. (91)

[She gets stouter and more statuesque, is called the Swiss in the surrounding area, learns to drive a car, manages the villa's maintenance, designs a fish pond, discovers floriculture, has a greenhouse erected and contemplates daily the rare species she imports from as far away as South-America. Days of frenetic idleness, she repeats to her mother that she is happy, what is she lacking? a child, but that's not indispensable, moreover epigraphy, she meets Carlo Bartesaghi]

Nominal syntax, used sparingly in the novels, now comes to the fore, often applied with lyricism:

L'autunno per vagliare le lettere ed entrare in famiglie tetre, dove si subiscono persecuzioni senza fine, silenzi d'odio, incesti, e dove la vita è gridare, piangere, servire, ribellarsi. Appelli mesti, dissimulati dai sorrisi delle fotografie, sullo sfondo di declivi erbosi o di porti gremiti di

the sake of reconstructing an environment. That's to say, I am always interested in the story that I am telling] (Pontiggia, *I classici stanno* 58).

alberature. Qualche contatto telefonico, tra imbarazzo e malizia, qualche rinuncia rivelata, più che occultata, da arrivederci cordiali. (51)

[Autumn to sift through her letters and get in gloomy families, where one suffers endless persecution, contemptuous silences and incest, where life is yelling and crying, serving and rebelling. Miserable pleas, hidden behind smiles in the photos, on the background of turfy slopes or mast-crowded harbours. Some rare phone calls, between embarrassment and coquetry, some renunciations revealed more than concealed, by friendly farewells]

On the other hand, the minimal room left for orally marked constructions, evidently seen by Pontiggia as foreign to his writing (he only makes limited use of them in *Nati due volte*), is still significant. In fact, as had already occurred in the past, even the characters' spoken Italian is, if anything, syntactically realigned or rendered through limited lexical deviation.

The rhetoric in *Vite di uomini non illustri* is also reduced to small refined touches. Significantly, the use of oxymoron and antithesis, which is so typical of Pontiggia's work, is mostly reduced: although they do still appear in the text, it is much less frequently than in the pages of the novels aimed more at striking contrasts: «desolazione serena» [serene desolation] (52), «ozio frenetico» [frenetic idleness] (91), «pietà sprezzante» [scornful pity] (222); «“Trattare le cameriere come principesse e le principesse come cameriere” è il segreto che svela ai suoi compagni» [“Treating waitresses like princesses and princesses like waitresses” is the secret that he reveals to friends] (216), uniting chiasm and antithesis. The few tropes used in the text seem aimed at maintaining a plain prosaic fluency. See also, beyond the more obvious cases, the minimal occurrences of metonyms: «do sfolgorio della piazza» [the glare of the *pi-azzola*] (21); metaphors: «facendo ala al passaggio» [literally: parting like wings as he passes] (21); and synesthesia: «buio caldo» [hot darkness] (213). These are all plain rhetorical choices aimed at avoiding affectation, promoting controlled colloquialism instead and contributing to defining Pontiggia's style.²¹

Nati due volte, finally, does not move away from the line of simplicity which the author followed over the last twenty years. Here, nonetheless, the rediscovered syntactical and lexical balance, typical of *Il giocatore invisibile* and of the best pages of *Il raggio d'ombra*, reaches a peak. However, the components of concision and the features of spoken Italian become slightly more pronounced in Pontiggia's linguistic strategy at this time: in several cases the syntax becomes fragmented, and structures the text by way of very short sentences, brief noun sequences and dislocations. At some points in the text we find sequences with asyndeton, anacoluthon, shifts from the first to the second person, narrative reports in the form of psychological analysis, sometimes with moments of «free direct thoughts», and that give rise to a colloquial inflection that involves the reader. However, these are few and far between in a text that aims for expressive composure.

Observed from this perspective, *La grande sera* and *Vite di uomini non illustri* appear to be situated just above and below the median line of Pontiggia's «simple style» (the novel for its high register; the biographies for their intrinsic concision, which is widely reflected in the syntax). Rather, an overall *medietas* returns in *Nati due volte*, on the strength of an artistic maturity that sets in motion a range of registers, in a style «already admirably forged» previously, but evidently «re-motivated or re-justified from within» (Raboni, *Un padre*). This style supports the circulation of the work to a wider audience: it is «a clear, cultured Italian, modern

²¹ In a recent survey promoted by 'The Guardian', Zadie Smith declared that she had thoroughly admired the biography of Umberto Buti. Despite her misleading reference to the writer's alleged «anti-Italian spirit», she extolled the «economy and humour» of Pontiggia's style.

in its opposition to poetic effusiveness and ornamentation» (Spinazzola 86).²² The editorial success, far from being the result of the approachability of the text, is rather the outcome of a blend of clarity and elegance, thought and disclosure, life and literature, in a composition that is never tempted to take the easy way out. Here, no less, to paraphrase Horace, lies the difference separating its *aurea medietas* from mediocrity, in other words, separating «simple style» from an «easy style»: the former pursues clarity of presentation, aiming at stratifying content; the latter, opaque in its stylistic sloppiness, does not venture beyond superficiality.

3. Conclusion

The first phase of Pontiggia's narrative production is therefore distinguished by a desire to avoid representative modes that belong in the first place to Neorealism and later to the neo-avant-garde. Pontiggia's ability to follow an original path could not be clearer since *La morte in banca*. In his debut novel the striving for mimetic representation as well as the return to a naturalism, which had been perceived as sterile in the mid-1950s, are entirely avoided. *L'arte della fuga*, on the other hand, still seems attracted to the climate of formal revival which was also produced by the neo-avant-garde, but the novel stands out in particular for Pontiggia's stubborn confidence in literature's ability to aim for truth – despite the fragmentation of the narrative structures – through a writing that does not duck out of the primary task of communicating. This is why, years after such climate had ended, the work preserves its vitality alongside other examples that by now are reduced to mere testimonial value, crushed as they are by the weight of the theoretical circumstances that guided, or rather perhaps constricted, them. However, on the whole *L'arte della fuga* is a book in which the author's most authentic voice still has not fully emerged. Nevertheless, by that time, it was already clear how, in Pontiggia's work, experimentalism is not a product that is constructed on a theoretical level, since for the author the «openness» and the pleasure of discovery in the craft of writing are essential. In this sense, it is perhaps useful to observe how he has always professed his own confidence in a work of art that is able to exceed its author's intentions, rearranging itself according to the receiver's perspective. We can perceive in this his relationship with classical models, with theories that were being formulated and that found a clear presentation in Eco's *Opera aperta*, as well as with the ideas of openness and recirculation embraced by Pontiggia also as a result of the Eastern philosophy in which he was interested.²³

²² See also Paccagnini (*Una rinascita*): «A lexical range [...] that Pontiggia uses more horizontally than vertically».

²³ See the author's words that illustrate his idea of «openness»: «L'atteggiamento che avevo di fronte alla scrittura, lavorando all'*Arte della fuga* era appunto di attesa mistica. Ogni giorno mi mettevo a scrivere non sapendo quale sarebbe stato lo sviluppo di un capitolo, di una pagina, e puntavo tutto su una concentrazione per così dire "orientale". [...] Oggi ho ancora una sorta di attesa nei confronti del testo; penso che il testo alla fine debba saperne più di me, lo penso come allora. Ma la strada per arrivarci penso non sia quella di un'attesa mistica, ma quella di un lavoro più indiretto. Lavorando per esempio su materiali realistici, cercando di ottenerne il massimo di complessità, di ambiguità, di stratificazione, ritengo che si possa arrivare a risultati di maggiore ricchezza espressiva». [The attitude that I had towards writing while working on *L'arte della fuga* was exactly that of mystical expectation. Every day I started to write, not knowing how a chapter, or a page, would develop, and I aimed everything towards an "eastern" concentration, as it were. [...] Today I still have a sort of expectation towards the text; I think that after all the text should know more than me, I do think so just like once. But I do not think that the route to get there is one of mystical expectation, but rather one of a more indirect task. By working, for example, on realistic materials, and by trying to get the most complexity, ambiguity and layering, I believe that one can achieve results with a greater depth of expression] (Pontiggia, *Certi* 40).

However, it is only with *Il giocatore invisibile* that Pontiggia's experimentalism stands out thanks to the treatment of genres and the focus on language, especially if compared to a literary production that would soon enter fully into its postmodernist phase. In addition to the points already highlighted, the novels of the so-called trilogy reveal a partial correspondence with a range of postmodern poetics of the 1980s. Cases in point are the varied «postmodern paranoia of conspiracy» (Donnarumma 36) that had already been introduced into the narrative texture of *Il giocatore invisibile*; or the sarcastic tone that would culminate in *La grande sera*; or, moreover, the abandonment of all-encompassing perspectives. However, a whole series of key features of postmodernism is foreign to Pontiggia: his metaliterary re-use of the classics re-affirms the genuine potential of their experiences; even if sometimes he ironically overturns the words of the classics, he does not reduce contemporary writing to literary disguise or echolalia. By the same token, when he forces genres, as in the case of his investigative novels, these maintain the fundamental openness that he had repeatedly proposed for literary writing, whereas in other cases postmodern works have aimed at becoming bestsellers and crushed literary conventions as if they were hermetically sealed devices. Pontiggia's *experiri* is an *ire ex per*,²⁴ a moving of himself out into the unknown in search of knowledge. It is not surprising that he repeatedly pointed out the value of travelling with the mind through time and space even without moving, while ironically reproaching the «gitanti della Storia» [day-trippers through History] (Pontiggia, *L'isola* 52), those who travel physically but remain stuck in their narrow-mindedness.

Through such opposition to the major postmodernist paradigms, Pontiggia more fully develops that original reinterpretation of the classics that is today seen as the highest value of his work. This is an observation that has taken a long time to reach acceptance: at the beginning of the 1990s Pontiggia was considered by many to be an unimportant author. Most anthologies (with few exceptions) still devote little space to him, giving him a passing mention, which is often simplistic, as is all too easy to verify.²⁵ However, his frank attitude as a classical moralist (Pontiggia, in his ethical stance, is also a firm critic of stupidity) and his texts' inclination towards clarity never succumb to a glossy style despite pointing to «high» literature; moreover, being the cognitive value of literary writing always at the centre, Pontiggia's style distinguishes from other literary cases during the period of political disengagement. His work is both solid and airy, serious and amusing, in some way instructive but not pedantic, and targets a wide and articulate audience, seeking to involve them politely but without paternalism, as evidenced by the general tone and by the configuration *ad exemplum* of many passages. Furthermore, it is experimental literature because it makes demands upon the reader and conveys its own kind of postmodern *impegno*.²⁶

²⁴ See Levato (15) who quotes Paolo Jedlowski's interpretation of the term.

²⁵ See, for example, Ragni e Iermano (1032), who talk of «exceptional stylistic and narrative skill» in *L'arte della fuga*, but also of «excellent coherence with the group's guiding principles» and of an actually non-existent «verbal *pastiche*». A more balanced view is found in Ferroni (257-259) who also appreciates the quality of the essays. Pontiggia is praised by Guido Guglielmi (611) as «one of our most valuable writers», and repeatedly appears in Segre-Martignoni, Segre (*La letteratura* 89), and even in Luti (175-176), while he does not appear in other important anthologies or textbooks, nor, significantly, in Luperini in 1981, who also writes about a «heavy phenomenological and neo-positivistic legacy that will weigh on the group established in Palermo in 1963» (732).

²⁶ See the critical points highlighted by Antonello and Mussgnug (1-29) in opposition to the many Italian critics' scaremongering on engagement in the postmodern era. I also find many of Pierpaolo Antonello's considerations in *Dimenticare Pasolini* to be decidedly appropriate and suitable for a never oracular (although aphorist) writer like Pontiggia, who carried out with great understatement his intellectual role as a teacher,

As shown by the lengthy draftings and the continual formal reworking of the novels even years later, Pontiggia subjects his work to particular scrutiny and is punctiliously ready to *correctio*. Significantly, moving into the 1990s, and more precisely into the two-year period of 1993-1994, *Vite di uomini non illustri* has been contrasted with bestsellers such as Susanna Tamaro's *Va' dove ti porta il cuore* (Casadei 63), which had popular but little critical success and, on the other hand, with postmodern and fairly refined books such as Paolo Maurensig's intriguing novel *La variante di Luneburg*, which mixes investigation and philosophy, chess-playing theories and the Holocaust. In comparison, Pontiggia's literary quest once again garners critical attention: opposing the temptations of a well-packaged novel, the author offers humanistic faith in the power of the word that traverses time, illuminating contemporaneity. Therefore, he distinguishes himself thanks to the recovery of a constructive dialogue with literary traditions, exalting their inheritance and bringing them back as an active corpus in the system of present-day forces.²⁷ Furthermore, as has been said by Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo among others (quoted in Casadei 27), whereas in the last few decades Italian writers have often established their own linguistic identity by starting again from ground zero, Pontiggia's linguistic awareness is part of a wide and far-reaching perspective, and emerges like a voice from outside the choir, albeit with harmonics that may appear sometimes elitist. However, it is a reactive, but never nostalgically reactionary voice, attentive to the possibilities of the present while preparing for the future. These are all elements which buck the trend in years characterised by the search for editorial marketability, by the rise of the *noir* and splatter genres, by a narrative segmentation at times rather passively deducted from the patterns of TV and serial fiction, as well as by an emphatic language and one that is ever more imitative of television speech. In Pontiggia's work the themes of common man and everyday life are confronted with great realism and with a style which is never contrived but contrasts with the aforementioned influences and genres. With *Nati due volte*, furthermore, the author stands out for his courageous treatment of the autobiographical material: the social issues expressed by the book fit into a national context that would soon witness a period of a progressive return to the self and to a new realism.

Pontiggia's *brevitas* by this stage is fully mature and does not aim for that mere «rapidity» which was such a distinctive part of the literature of the 1990s (Simonetti): although the narrative fragmentation can meet similar needs, on a linguistic level it is a matter of a dense brevity, a brevity that stimulates reflection. It is overall a foreshortened *concinnitas* leaning towards rational harmony and fragmentation into units of meaning which also benefits from the author's great stylistic awareness. Pontiggia's clarity therefore addresses the changes in the contemporary world and arises as a reaction that aims for essentiality. Thus, at the end of the century, he provides an admirable example of that non-expressionist line that had started with Manzoni and then slowly matured in Italy (see Testa 335). It is an experimentalism that does not so much propose a breach of conventions, but rather instils in the reader the awareness of how biased a viewpoint and knowledge can be, and cautions against «il culto letale della completezza» [the lethal worship of completeness] (Pontiggia, *L'isola* 24); it exposes stereotypes revealing their superficiality and conceptual weakness, and crosses through trends inserting itself in a wider circulation of ideas that go beyond national borders and influences. Ultimately, it is a way of making experimental literature that should be fostered, not

translator, editorial reader, talent scout (see the, unfortunately posthumous, discovery of Guido Morselli), pioneer of creative writing, also accepting the challenge of radio.

²⁷ See also Marcheschi's fundamental study on how Pontiggia employed suggestions from some literary traditions of the 20th century (*Giuseppe Pontiggia e le tradizioni* 3-17).

only because of its stylistic merits, but because it is a valuable example of literature which takes a moral stance and maintains an autonomous position providing a significant legacy for the future.

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