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Re-narrating the Red Brigades in translation: Questions for translator ethics

Matthew Holden

*School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics
Monash University*

Abstract

*Translating the writings of former militants such as members of Italy's Red Brigades presents translators with important ethical questions. These texts are personal accounts of extraordinary experiences in political and social conflicts, framed by narratives of identity and history that seek to help both the writer and the reader make sense of these experiences. One such text is *Compagna luna* by Barbara Balzerani, a former Red Brigades militant who took part in the kidnapping and murder of the Italian politician Aldo Moro in 1978. Balzerani frames her experiences within collective narratives of 1970s Italian left-wing militancy, attempting to present a counter-narrative to what she considers are the mainstream public narratives of this period in Italian history. This strategy makes a demand on the ethical translator to examine the personal and public narratives about social and political conflict that they subscribe to themselves, to reflect on how these are articulated with their own narratives of identity, and to understand how such narratives might position them as translator of this text. The aim of this inquiry is to use social narrative to consider the translator's identity and positionality as ethical questions and acknowledge the translator as a social and political actor whose translation choices activate new socio-political narratives in the target language and culture.*

1. Introduction

The *Brigate Rosse* (BR, Red Brigades) were a militant leftist group that carried out *la lotta armata* (the armed struggle) for communism in Italy from 1972 to the mid-1980s. This period has become known in Italy as *gli anni di piombo* (the lead years), a reference to the frequent use of guns by militants, activists and agents of public order.

The Red Brigades emerged from the 1968-69 worker and student movements in Milan and Turin. Initially they were fighting against the intensification of the exploitation of labour at large industrial companies such as Pirelli and SIT Siemens and trying to organise the spontaneous violent resistance of workers into a more coherent revolutionary program. As their struggle escalated, they carried out armed attacks on politicians, police, judges, journalists and others who they considered agents of the capitalist state. In 1974 they kidnapped the magistrate Mario Sossi in

Genoa, and in 1976 a Red Brigades unit ambushed and shot dead the Genoese prosecutor Francesco Coco and his police escort.

The Red Brigades' most high-profile action was the kidnapping of the Christian Democrat leader and former prime minister Aldo Moro in 1978. During the kidnapping in Rome, five police officers were shot dead by the Red Brigades. Moro was held for 55 days, during which he was subjected to a "people's trial" and sentenced to death. When negotiations with the Italian authorities for Moro's release failed, the Red Brigades executed Moro and left his body in the back of a car in Rome.

Many former members of the Red Brigades have written or collaborated with journalists in writing accounts of their experiences. Among these are *Mara Renato e io: Storia dei fondatori delle BR* (*Mara, Renato and I: History of the founders of the Red Brigades*) by Alberto Franceschini (1988); *A viso aperto* (*With an open face*) by Renato Curcio (1993); *Mario Moretti: Brigate Rosse una Storia Italiana* (*Mario Moretti: the Red Brigades, an Italian Story*), interviews with Carla Mosca and Rossana Rossanda (1994); *Nell'Anno della Tigre: Storia di Adriana Faranda* (*In the Year of the Tigre: the Story of Adriana Faranda*) by Silvana Mazzocchi (1994); *Compagna luna* (translated as *Comrade M*) by Barbara Balzerani (1998); *il Prigioniero* (*The Prisoner*) by Anna Laura Braghetti (1998); and *La peggio gioventù* (*The Worst Youth*) by Valerio Morucci (2004). We can think of these texts as postterrorist narration (Glynn 2013). They have continuing appeal in Italy, where *gli anni di piombo* still figure in public discourse today: see, for example, *Padre nostro*, a 2020 film recounting an attempt by the Nuclei Armati Proletari on the life of director Claudio Noce's father, a deputy-commissioner of police from Rome; and one of the novels on the shortlist for the 2022 Premio Strega, *Mordi e fuggi: il romanzo delle BR* by Alessandro Bertante (2022), a fictionalised account of the founding and early years of the Red Brigades told through the eyes of a young militant.

However, to my knowledge, no Italian postterrorist narrative has been translated and published in English, although they have been translated into other European languages. General knowledge of the Red Brigades is often very limited in the English-speaking world, perhaps gleaned from films such as Marco Bellocchio's *Buongiorno, notte*/*Good Morning, Night* (2003) and John Frankenheimer's 1991 thriller *The Year of the Gun*. Texts in English on the Red Brigades such as the historian Robert C Meade's *Red Brigades: The Story of Italian Terrorism* (1989) and Alessandro Orsini's *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: the religious mindset of modern terrorists* (2011), translated from Italian, would appeal to more specialised audiences. This presents an opportunity for a translator to extend the range of texts available to English-speaking readers about *gli anni di piombo* and the phenomenon of political violence in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s. Translating one of these texts, *Compagna luna*, is small a step towards filling this gap.

In *Compagna luna*, Barbara Balzerani reflects on her experiences in the armed struggle in Italy between 1976 and 1985. She took part in the Moro kidnapping in 1978 and in the Red Brigades' deliberations over whether to kill Moro or free him

(Glynn 2013: 104). At the time of her arrest in 1985, she was considered one of the last leaders of the Red Brigades still at large. She was convicted over the Moro kidnapping and other attacks and served more than 20 years in prison. Balzerani was released from prison on parole in 2006, granted full release in 2011 and now lives in Rome.

Compagna luna contains very little detail of a militant's life in an armed group, and the moments she recounts of the Moro kidnapping are among the text's few 'action' sequences. Rather, the text is an extended reflection on her life composed in two modes. She writes of herself in the third person when recounting past events and reflects on these events in the first person in the present. The switch between these two modes of writing is marked in the text by the alternation of roman and italic type.

Mona Baker has elaborated a typology of social narrative (Baker, 2019) that I have found useful in analysing *Compagna luna* and articulating my position as the text's translator. She draws this typology from a number of sources, but the basic framework is provided by Somers (1997) and consists of four levels of narrative: ontological narratives; public, cultural, and institutional narratives; conceptual/analytic/sociological narratives; and metanarratives (Somers, 1997: 84-86).

Ontological narratives are the stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves and the place we occupy in the world. These are articulated with collective narratives – stories that social groups tell about themselves and how they relate to the world. Baker writes that collective narratives “refer vaguely to any type of narrative that has currency in a given community” (Baker, 2019: 33). She draws this category from the work of Hinchman and Hinchman (1997), and notes that in this they are referred to as “cultural macronarratives” and are “transmitted through a variety of channels, including (in modern times) television, cinema, literature, professional associations, educational establishments, and a variety of other outlets” (Baker, 2019: 29). This makes the distinction between collective narratives and public narratives somewhat unclear. Somers characterises public, cultural and institutional narratives as “those narratives attached to ... structural formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks and institutions, local or grand, macro or micro” (Somers, 1997: 85). She also makes the point that ontological narratives are articulated with public narratives, be that public the family, the church, the state or some other social formation: the key point is that ontological narratives are also “social and interpersonal” (Somers, 1997, 84).

In this paper, I will rely on Baker's formulation of collective narratives as having “currency in any given community” to refer to the shared narratives around the armed struggle elaborated by some within the activist left in Italy, and contrast these with the public narratives about this experience, which I characterise as those narratives elaborated by the state, political parties, the police, the church, the mainstream media and other similar institutions.

It is important to note that Baker does not consider narrative an optional mode of communication, but as the underlying means by which humans organise and communicate their understanding of themselves, the world and their place in it. Narratives have great power to both constitute and verify our experiences of the world.

Using the ontological/collective/public narrative typology, we can read *Compagna luna* as an extended ontological narrative that relies on a series of collective narratives about politics, political violence and the armed struggle in Italy that contest the public narratives about these phenomena. In working with these narratives, Balzerani offers an alternative interpretation of the armed struggle and of her role in it as part of the process of trying to re-narrate her “self”.

In translating *Compagna luna* into English I am also attempting to translate these collective narratives for an audience that may not be familiar with them, even if they have an interest in Italy in this period. As a translator I face practical questions about how much these narratives might need explicitation in the text or in paratexts. The framing of these explicitations leads to ethical questions about the position I occupy in relation to this text and the events it recounts. In seeking to understand my position, I will reflect on some of the narratives through which my own identity is articulated and examine how they position me as an interpreter and translator of Balzerani’s text. This brings my identity and positionality as translator into ethical focus, and shows how translation scholars can use Baker’s social narrative typology to open a space for ethical consideration of the translator’s identity and positionality.

2. Translator ethics and the question of the translator’s identity

Maria Tymoczko has described the translator’s stance (or position) as being produced by the translator’s “ideological and cultural affiliations” (Tymoczko, 2002: 183), while Baker asserts that translators cannot “escape being firmly embedded in a series of narratives that define who they are and how they act in the world,” (Baker, 2019: 26). It therefore seems important for translators to reflect on the narratives within which their identities are articulated, and how these interact with the narratives they are engaged in translating as part of an ethical translation practice.

One strand of translator ethics focusses on codes of conduct for translators working in professional settings. In this approach we think of translator ethics as guiding relationships between people – authors, translators, publishers and others who commission and produce translations – based on virtues such as trust, fidelity and loyalty (see Chesterman, 2001; 2021). Another approach has been to frame translator ethics as starting from the question, ‘Should I translate this text at this moment?’ (Pym, 2012: 103); posing this as the fundamental ethical question makes the translator responsible for the decision to translate. Pym proposes that

answering the question “Should I translate?” involves analysis of the transaction costs in a translation: what resources will be expended, what rewards will it bring? This is an ethical question about costs and benefits. Asking also “Should *I* translate *this text at this moment?*” can make this an ethical question about the translator as a person acting in a social, political and historical context.

This responsibility for the decision to translate rests heavily on a translator who initiates a translation project, as I have with *Compagna luna*. In approaching the author, in producing the translation and in exploring how the translation might be published by a small independent publishing house in Australia, I have assumed responsibilities to the author, the text and a potential audience beyond the responsibilities that a paid, commissioned translator might have. Translating this text is a cultural intervention, a political act, and part of a research project in translator ethics. The rewards for me as translator are cultural, political and intellectual rather than financial.

The ethical questions raised by translating *Compagna luna* are bound up in my relationship to the text and to the world the text exists in, and in my own understanding of myself and my relationship to the world, which can be articulated through the ontological, collective and public narratives that my own identity is articulated within. This is not to suggest a cause-and-effect relationship between identity and the work of translation. Rather, my aim is to develop an approach for translators to reflect on their own identity and how it might be articulated in their translation practice as part of being (or becoming) an ethical translator: to develop a practice of critical self-reflection as a translator (Kadiu, 2019). In developing a critical self-reflexive approach to translating *Compagna luna* – of re-narrating Barbara Balzerani for English-speaking readers – I will examine the ontological and collective narratives that inform this text and are developed in it, and my own ontological narratives and the collective narratives within which they are articulated.

3. *Compagna luna* as narration and re-narration

Compagna luna has been published in two editions – one by Feltrinelli (Balzerani, 1998) and a second by Derive Approdi (Balzerani, 2013). The first edition included minimal paratextual material – the only framing of Balzerani’s text was provided by a blurb and brief biographical note on the back cover. The second edition is prefaced with a note by the author that provides a reframing of the text. Balzerani offers a range of positive reviews by writers such as Rossana Rossanda and Domenico Starnone that seem at least in part to be Balzerani’s response to a damning review of the first edition by the prominent Italian writer Antonio Tabucchi published in *Il Corriere della Sera* (Tabucchi, 1998, July 5). She also includes her letter to the editor of *Il Corriere della Sera* rebutting the spirit in which Tabucchi made his criticisms (Balzerani 1998, July 11).

In her author's note to the second edition, Balzerani draws on a collective narrative elaborated by other writers from the Italian left that texts such as hers are worthwhile, and that the actions of members of the Red Brigades and other similar groups were not the same as 'terrorism', understood as indiscriminate attacks on civilians.

For example, Rossanda, then the editor of the left-wing newspaper *il Manifesto*, and a former activist in the Italian Communist Party (PCI), writes:

La violenza sociale non ha volto, quella individuale sì, il suo è diventato uno di questi. Ma l'altro? L'altra violenza che va come fosse ovvia, e di cui nessuno sembra dover rispondere? Le Br non sono state le prime a volerla abbattere, non saranno le ultime. Che cosa invece si doveva fare? Gli altri, gli innocenti, i bravi comunisti, che cosa hanno proposto, fatto, ottenuto? L'Italia, prima delle speranze poi delle stragi, è diventata l'Italia degli imbrogli. Non a tutto si rimedia, non tutto si cicatrizza. Nella specie di carcere allargato in cui vive, Barbara sa che non le saranno mai più abituali gli spazi e i tempi delle persone normali, che le è negato un senso da dare a un domani che non possiede. Per averli bisognava dunque arrendersi, darsi l'arrancata individuale, chiudere gli occhio, tacere? *Compagna luna* ha il grande merito di far parlare ciascuno di noi per come ha visto quegli anni. (Rossana Rossanda, quoted in Balzerani, 2013: 7)

Social violence has no face, but individual violence does, and hers (Balzerani's) has become that face. But the other violence? The violence that passes unremarked, for which no one seems to have to answer? The Red Brigades were not the first to try to fight it, and they won't be the last. What else should have been done? The others, the innocent, the good communists, what did they propose, what did they do, what did they achieve? The Italy of hope and then of massacres, has become the Italy of scandals. Not everything can be remedied, not everything heals. In the kind of enlarged prison in which she lives, Barbara knows that the spaces and times of normal people will never again be familiar to her, that she is denied a meaning to give to a tomorrow she does not possess. In order to have them, must she surrender, give herself up, close her eyes, stay silent? *Compagna luna* has the great merit of allowing each of us to speak of how we saw those years.

Rossanda frames the actions of the Red Brigades as a response to the violence of the state, and contrasts their actions with the more law-abiding elements of the left ("i bravi comunisti"), asking, rhetorically, what they have achieved. She also refers to the "stragi", a series of bombings in public places that started with a bomb detonated in the Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura in Piazza Fontana, Milan in December 1969 that killed 16 people, and was followed by bombings of rallies, trains and railway stations.

The Piazza Fontana bomb was blamed on anarchists at the time, but it is now acknowledged that it and the other bombings in this period were carried out by

neo-fascist groups, probably with the support of elements of the Italian military and security services. This became known as “stragismo”, a difficult word to translate into English, partly because it is part of a broader collective narrative within the culture of the left – “massacre-ism” is a gloss. These massacres were seen to be part of what became known as *la strategia della tensione* (the strategy of tension) to create a climate of fear and unrest that would enable the return of a more authoritarian government in Italy. When people on the left in Italy draw a distinction between the actions of the Red Brigades and terrorism, “terrorism” refers to these “stragi”:

Le Brigate rosse non possono considerarsi un gruppo di terroristi. Terrorista è infatti chi mette una bomba su un treno, terrorizzando, appunto, la gente comune. (Erri De Luca, quoted in Cuomo 2009, June 25).

The Red Brigades cannot be considered a terrorist group. A terrorist is in fact someone who puts a bomb on a train, terrorising, precisely, ordinary people.

Balzerani also makes the text’s status as an ontological narrative more explicit in her author’s note to the new edition, although she does not use the term. She writes that *Compagna luna* recounts the beginning of her return journey through the shards of a shattered mirror (Balzerani, 2013: 5), a metaphor that can be understood as referring to a re-narration of the broken self. Further, she writes that *Compagna luna* is “[i]l tentativo di riconnettere una storia collettiva attraverso le diverse stagioni di un’esistenza” [the attempt to reconnect with a collective story through the different seasons of a life] (Balzerani, 2013: 5), drawing a connection between the collective and the personal narratives that give shape to her experiences.

4. Positioning the reader / translator

In a short introductory chapter, Balzerani writes:

“Questa non è la storia delle Brigate Rosse. Non potrei essere io a farla. È solo una parte di quanto ho vissuto e di come.” (Balzerani 2013, 23, italics in original)

This is not the history of the Red Brigades. I couldn’t be the one to write it. It is only a part of my own story, of how I have lived.

The Italian word “storia” can be translated as both “story” and “history” in English. In the Italian text it encodes the tension between the private (story) and the public (history), between the ontological narrative and the collective and public narratives of the armed struggle. *Compagna luna* is not an attempt to write (public) history, but to narrate the (private) self in its own historical and social moment.

This tension between “story” and “history” is part of Balzerani’s strategy to create a position to read this text from. By translating “storia” as “history” and contrasting it with “my own story”, I am attempting to translate the contrast between these two possibilities.

The “story” is the result of Balzerani’s “most urgent questions” and most importantly, it is “*la richiesta di aiuto per scioglierli?*” [*the cry for help in untangling them*] (Balzerani 2013, 23, italics in original text). She positions the reader as someone who is willing to hear the author’s cry for help and who considers untangling these urgent questions worthwhile. Such a position could be occupied by a reader (or translator) who refuses public narratives characterising the Red Brigades’ actions as terrorism and instead is prepared to interpret them as part of a complex historical and social situation.

Balzerani lists a range of people to whom the text is not addressed, including those who “*fa della politica un esercizio di formule buone per aggirarsi nei luoghi dove è bandito ogni spirito critico?*” [*who make politics into an exercise in the right formulas for operating in those circles where every critical spirit is banished*] (Balzerani 2013, 23, italics in original).

The text is instead addressed to:

tutte le altre e gli altri. Che pure non conosco, che non mi conoscono ma che, come me, sanno del disagio di un mondo di rappresentazioni che sempre meno significano la memoria e l’esperienza di ciascuno. (Balzerani 2013, 24, italics in original)

all the other women and men. Even those I don’t know and who don’t know me, but who, like me, feel disquiet at a world of representations that less and less signify the memory and the experience of each of us.

In her text, Balzerani activates a number of collective narratives that frame the Red Brigades’ armed struggle as something other than terrorism. Her use of the expression “those who know the disquiet of a world of representations that less and less signify the memory and experience of each of us” implies that the reader she is addressing shares these collective narratives.

Among these collective narratives are the need for people on the activist left to arm themselves against ‘the strategy of tension’ that the right was pursuing through *stragismo*, and the threat of a neo-fascist coup, also referred to as *golpismo*; the *filo rosso* (red thread) that claimed a connection between the Red Brigades’ armed struggle and the resistance of Italian partisans to Nazism and Fascism in World War II; the intransigence of Italy’s ruling political elite in the face of demands by workers, students and others for the transformation of society; and the failure of the Italian Communist Party to articulate a radical or even progressive position on the left of politics, signalling the failure of parliamentary democracy as an avenue for change.

Because these narratives are likely to be understood by the readers Balzerani is addressing, they can be evoked economically through the use of key words and

phrases throughout the text. This is consistent with Baker's assertion that social narratives are not confined to single texts or sets of utterances, but are dispersed within and are recovered, reconstructed and interpreted from a variety of sources by the communities for whom they make meaning (Baker, 2019: 19).

This is the central ethical question about this text for the translator: does the translator interpret this text from the position that Balzerani sets out, or from some other position, and how will this positioning be articulated in their translation? On a practical level, the translator must find ways to re-assemble and translate these narratives from the fragments Balzerani offers in her text. This raises the ethical question of focus and framing in the strategies the translator uses to do this.

5. Barbara Balzerani's ontological narrative

In re-narrating the self that she says has been shattered by the trauma of her experiences, Balzerani is recomposing her own ontological narrative in a way that preserves her experiences as meaningful, even if the armed struggle failed and caused great harm to its victims and those who took part in it.

The re-narration of the self begins with Balzerani's depiction of herself as child, adolescent and young working-class woman growing up in a provincial Italian city in the 1950s and 1960s. She escapes from the strictures of working-class life into a world of imaginative games played out in the fields near her home. These games compensate for the harshness of a life lacking in material and emotional comfort: her mother's caresses are rare and rough because she is always exhausted, and the family's precarious financial position is a source of constant worry (Balzerani 2013, 26-28).

As she grows up and moves out of the circle of the family, she depicts herself as uncomfortable with her emerging sexuality and ill-at-ease with the behaviour expected of a young woman:

Guardava il suo corpo crescere e trasformarsi e non sapeva come nascondere quei primissimi segni di una femminilità da cui sapeva solo che avrebbe dovuto difendersi ... E dove andare a nascondersi per la vergogna del pannello intriso di sangue menstruale maldestramente collocato e lasciato cadere per terra all'ennesimo salto? ... *adesso devi stare attenta. Stattene a casa tua invece di andartene in giro come una vagabonda tutto il giorno.* (Balzerani, 2013: 30, italics in original)

She watched her body grow and change and didn't know how to hide those first early signs of a femininity that she knew she would have to protect herself from ... And where could she hide from the shame of a pad soaked with menstrual blood, clumsily fitted and let fall disastrously to the ground after yet more jumping around? ... *you have to be careful now. You should stay at home instead of wandering around like a vagabond all day.*

This is matched by a growing awareness of class and inequality:

Il giorno di Santa Barbara, patrona del paese-fabbrica, gli operai ricevevano la busta con la tredicesima dalle mani di tale donna Mimosa, mamma della dinastia dei reggenti. La regalia veniva graziosamente concessa e il rituale prevedeva anche un baciamao. Quegli uomini, non certo avezzi a tanta buona creanza, erano costretti ad un'accenno di inchino. Ah, sì. C'erano anche biscotti secchi e vermouth e borsa di studio per i figli meritevoli, futuri baciatori di mano. (Balzerani, 2013: 29)

On Saint Barbara's day, the feast day of the patron saint of the factory-town, the workers received an envelope containing their annual bonus from the hand of one donna Mimosa, matron of the ruling dynasty. The bonus was bestowed graciously and the ritual even allowed for kissing of the hand. Those men, in no way accustomed to such good manners, were obliged to offer a nod of acknowledgement. Ah yes. There were also dry biscuits and vermouth and a scholarship for the deserving sons and daughters, future kissers of the hand.

These narratives of class and gender are not particular to Italian society. They are articulated through collective and public narratives about gender and class that are active, with variations, in other industrialised and urbanised societies. Balzerani uses them to develop her own ontological narrative as someone who does not fit in, who refuses the narrow horizons of provincial life in post-war Mediterranean Europe and the subservience expected of working-class people.

In the chapter titled "Roma" (Balzerani, 2013: 33-42), Balzerani connects this ontological narrative of a young woman struggling against conformity with social expectations to broader narratives of resistance and political activism. When she leaves the family and the local community for university in Rome, she encounters the political and social upheaval of the late 1960s. Like many in her generation, Balzerani found an escape from the narrow horizons of her life in the student movement:

Mentre sembrava non riuscisse più a trovare vie d'uscita per sottrarre la sua esistenza e il suo futuro ad un'angustia di orizzonte che la prendeva per la gola, ecco arrivare gli echi stralunati di fatti da non credere.

L'Università occupata, gli scontri con la polizia, Valle Giulia, gli studenti che non scappano più.

Era il 1968. (Balzerani, 2013: 35)

And when it seemed she could find no escape from the narrow horizons that had her life and her future by the throat, here came the astounding echoes of unbelievable events. Universities occupied, clashes with police, Valle Giulia, students who didn't run away.

It was '68.

The sentence “It was ’68” activates a broadly available narrative in Western societies of the student movement and counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. But the reference to Valle Giulia activates a narrative that was also particular to the Italian left. The Battle of Valle Giulia was a clash between students and police that took place in Rome in March 1968 and is considered to mark the beginning of *il sessantotto* – the Italian ’68 (Balestrini and Moroni, 1997: 235-240). The Battle of Valle Giulia is embedded in wider collective narratives of the left in Italy, marking the moment when the student movement became radicalised and turned to violent resistance. It marks one of the points where the discussion of the use of arms became widespread.

Like the other collective narratives that Balzerani activates, it requires the reader to be familiar with these events to fully understand it. To translate this narrative requires some form of explicitation in the text or a paratext to make it available to readers who will not be familiar with it. The framing of such an explicitation – did the police attack the students or the students attack the police? Was it necessary for the police to clear the university occupation so that classes could resume or was the use of force an over-reaction? Were the students justified in their violent resistance? And did this lead to more widespread acceptance of political violence? – will depend on the translator’s positionality.

6. Collective narratives of *la lotta armata*

In translating *Compagna luna* to this point, the translator is working with Italian articulations of more widespread social narratives. If the translator chooses a minimal gloss of Valle Giulia, for example, we can still frame the text within broader collective and public narratives of the social upheavals of the 1960s in the West: the student movement, the sexual revolution, first-wave feminism. But when Balzerani recounts her entry into the Red Brigades, she articulates her ontological narrative with a series of collective narratives about the causes and meaning of the armed struggle in Italy that are particular to the militant left and not necessarily shared by readers outside this political and social context.

One example of this is provided by the chapter “Colpo di stato” (Balzerani 2013, 43-50). Balzerani writes of spending nights monitoring the RAI news and taking turns on watch in the piazzas around Rome’s “Palazzi del potere”, ready to resist any attempted fascist takeover. The chapter appears to refer to the abortive coup mounted by Prince Junio Valerio Borghese, a former commander in the wartime Fascist republic of Salò. Borghese and his small troop occupied the Ministry of the Interior in Rome for several hours on the night of December 7-8, 1970, before withdrawing (Ginsborg, 1990: 334).

Balzerani does not mention the Borghese coup. The reader is left to interpret the meaning of this passage based on the collective narrative of the right’s tendency to *golpismo*. Both Sergio Segio (of the armed group Prima Linea) and Valerio

Morucci (a former member of the Red Brigades who took part in the Moro kidnapping alongside Balzerani) refer to “stragismo” and the threat of a coup d’etat in their accounts of the armed struggle (Segio, 2006; Morucci, 2004), while the former Red Brigades leader Mario Moretti says:

Le bombe di Piazza Fontana tolgono ogni illusione su uno sviluppo lineare e pacifico delle lotte. È il primo episodio di terrorismo che sentiamo dello stato o coperto dello stato da dentro lo stato. (Moretti, 1994: 40)

The Piazza Fontana bombing destroyed any illusions about a linear and peaceful development of the struggles. It was the first instance of terrorism that we felt came from the state or was covered up by the state from within the state.

Balzerani also connects this episode to the military coup against the Popular Front government of President Salvador Allende in Chile on September 11, 1973, alluding to the imprisonment and torture of the Pinochet regime’s opponents in Santiago’s main football stadium. For Balzerani and other militants like her, the coup in Chile and the use of the stadium as a concentration camp signalled that it was time to take up arms:

Molti, e lei con loro, con gli occhi velati e l’anima tra i denti, giurarono che mai più si sarebbero fatti trovare senza fucile. (Balzerani, 2013: 49).

Many, including her, with tears in their eyes and hearts in their mouths, swore that they would never again let themselves be caught without a rifle.

“Mai più senza fucile!” [Never again without a rifle!] became a catchcry of some activists and the title of one of the first written accounts of the Red Brigades, *Mai più senza fucile! Alle origini dei NAP e delle BR (Never Again Without a Rifle! On the Origins of the Armed Proletarian Nuclei and the Red Brigades)* by Alessandro Silj (1977).

In positioning the reader as one of the “others” who share her disquiet at the mainstream representations of history, Balzerani expects the reader to share these collective narratives and so make the appropriate interpretation of her text. The translator is faced with a choice that is both practical and ethical: to either leave interpretation of this passage to the English-language reader, relying on their knowledge or curiosity to help them make sense of what Balzerani has written on her terms; or to provide textual or paratextual explication of the collective narrative of *golpismo* and the historical context, which would be a political choice to direct the English-speaking reader to a particular interpretation of Balzerani’s text.

The chapter is framed by Balzerani’s ontological narrative about her place in her family. She recalls the votive images of deceased family members that were displayed for the feast of All Souls, and of realising later that among the images

was a photo of Benito Mussolini, admired by her father for his “onesta amministrazione del paese” [honest administration of the country] (Balzerani, 2013: 44). She recalls wondering who this ugly man was, and writes that she could never have liked him, not least because of his appearance. In this way she shows that she believed the threat of a return to authoritarianism was posed not just by neo-fascist groups and rogue members of the security services but was latent in Italian society. We can read this as connecting her identity as articulated within the family to wider collective narratives of politics and history. Her identity is articulated through both personal resistance to the patriarchal family order and collective resistance to the threat of resurgent fascism.

A narrative of the *filo rosso* connecting the armed struggle of groups such as the Red Brigades to the Partisan resistance to the Nazis and Fascists in World War II is articulated by numerous former militants writing on this period (for example, Alberto Franceschini, Sergio Segio and Valerio Morucci as cited above). Balzerani activates this collective narrative in the chapter “Il Giudice Sossi” (Balzerani, 2013: 51-58). She writes:

...in carcere c'erano dei militanti di una organizzazione combattente, i primi dal dopoguerra, così come ce ne erano altri che combattevano all'esterno. (Balzerani 2013, 55).

The militants of a fighting organisation were in prison, the first since the end of the war, like there were others fighting on the outside.

Balzerani opposes these collective narratives to public narratives of post-war Italy as a peaceful, hardworking and prosperous society, narratives that ignored the tensions created by the actions of right-wing extremists such as the Piazza Fontana bombings, and that refused to recognise that the growing social unrest expressed in worker and student activism was a result of a loss of faith in Italy's parliamentary democracy as a mechanism for social change, caused by the ruling parties' cynical politics:

Com'è che invece si parla di un paese in crescita, pacifico e operoso, per niente attraversato da tensioni straordinarie, se non fosse stato per chi, nell'ombra, tramava, spalleggiato oggettivamente da un movimento estremista e suicida? Com'è che non si dice che le bombe e la violenza della reazione padronale e della politica ridotta a strumento di potere, impedivano di credere all'efficacia, all'affidabilità e persino all'innocenza delle logore mediazioni dei partiti? (Balzerani, 2013: 45).

So why do we speak of a country that was peaceful and hardworking, with a growing economy, not in the least wracked by extraordinary tensions, if only it hadn't been for those who schemed and plotted in the shadows, obviously backed by an extremist, suicidal movement?

Why don't we admit that the bombs and the violence of the ruling-class, which reduced politics to the exercise of power, stopped us believing in the effectiveness and the trustworthiness and the good intentions of the parties' threadbare interventions?

In translating *Compagna luna*, I am attempting to translate these narratives and activate them in a new social and political context, creating the possibility that they might shape new understandings of this period in Italy for English-speaking readers. But to translate these narratives for readers who are not aware of them requires paratextual explication, and the framing of this explication, as shown in examples above, will be marked by my own positionality and interpretation of these events.

7. The translator's narratives of subjectivity

As noted above, Balzerani positions the reader for whom this text is intended as one of the "others" who share her "disquiet" at the public narratives about the armed struggle. As one of these "others" in the Italian context, Balzerani expects the reader to be aware of the collective narratives that she draws on, such as the narratives of *golpismo* and the *filo rosso*.

The choice to translate *Compagna luna* could signal my willingness to position myself as one of these "others". This triggers an ethical need to interrogate why and in what ways I consider myself one of these "others", to examine how this might be articulated with my own identity as expressed in the ontological and collective narratives I subscribe to, and to understand the position I occupy in relation to this text and its narratives now, in the third decade of the 21st century. From where does my sense of being one of these "others" spring, and is it an ethical position to occupy as translator of this text? In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I was a teenager in the suburbs of a small city in Australia, the iconography of groups such as the Red Brigades was appropriated into popular youth culture as a symbol of rebellion against consumerism and the capitalist organisation of society it is part of. For example, Joe Strummer of the British rock band The Clash wore a T-shirt bearing a logo referencing the Red Brigades on stage at a concert in London during the period of Moro's kidnapping (Salewicz, 2012: 218). Such a gesture can be read as contributing to a narrative of cultural resistance to consumer capitalism that to some degree also legitimised the idea of armed rebellion. By listening to the music of The Clash, I articulated my own identity within this narrative of resistance. And although I was only dimly aware of the Red Brigades and the armed struggle in Italy, if asked I would have thought of myself as standing 'with' the Red Brigades and against capitalism, in the same way that in those years, as someone who grew up within the (Irish-influenced) Catholic

church in Australia, I thought of myself as “with” the IRA and against the British occupation of Northern Ireland.

Strummer himself later provided an example of the complex ways such social narratives work in framing our identities when he told *Melody Maker* magazine, in response to a question about the Red Brigades’ actions, “I am ambiguous. ‘Cause at once I’m impressed with what they’re doing, and at the same time I’m really frightened by what they’re doing. It’s not an easy subject.” (Salewicz, 2012: 219) Collective narratives of opposition to capitalist society can be articulated with our own ontological narratives – in my case my sense of myself as a suburban teenager who refused mainstream culture and sought alternatives in punk and other resistant cultural forms; and later as a university student who came under the influence of structuralist and post-structuralist critical theory that positioned me in opposition to the dominant (bourgeois) critical approach to literature at the Australian university where I studied as an undergraduate in the early 1980s.

The power of this narrative drawing on the Red Brigades was reinforced for me when a comic recounting the Moro kidnapping from the Red Brigades’ point of view appeared in *Semiotext(e): Italy Autonomia* (Lotringer, 1981: 301-314) alongside writing by postmodern thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Paul Virilio and texts from Italy’s *Autonomia* movement. The Red Brigades were, in a sense, validated by this juxtaposition, which included them within a broader political and cultural resistance to capitalism even as it criticised their strategy and their analyses.

The rendering of the Moro kidnapping as a comic (in stark chiaroscuro) created for me a fascination for this extraordinary event and a desire to understand it from the militants’ point of view. I wanted to understand how young people in an advanced capitalist society could pass from the sorts of cultural gestures of opposition that I and many others like me made, through more militant forms of activism (demonstrations, strikes, occupations and clashes with the police) to make the choice of arms: a choice that would be impossible in the absence of narratives that supported and validated it.

This is not to say that 40 years later I still think the way I did when I was a teenager, but that the collective narratives that articulate my experience of the society I live in form part of the layering of my identity, and that such narratives of identity have been elaborated and developed throughout my life. This is also not to take an autobiographical approach to thinking about translator ethics and the translator’s identity, but rather to use the concept of ontological, collective and public narratives to analyse and understand my positionality as translator.

8. The translator’s identity in an ethical practice of translation

The appropriation of the iconography of the Red Brigades into popular youth culture can be thought of as having romanticised their actions and aims (and if it

had not, how would it have appealed to teenagers in rebellion against suburban conformity?) This romanticisation overlooked the fatal and damaging results of the Red Brigades' actions for their victims, for the broader left in Italy, which was subjected to a campaign of repression by the Italian state in response to the armed groups, and, as Balzerani's text shows, for themselves as human beings.

We can also think of the collective narratives of resistance articulated through popular youth culture of this period as a commodification of the Red Brigades and a channelling of the energy of youthful rebellion into forms of consumerism (buying records and T-shirts, attending concerts), even as these narratives sought to challenge consumerism – a form of recuperation that was at work at the same time as the shock value of using these symbols had its effect on mainstream culture.

Despite this romanticisation, simplification and commodification, such narratives still exercise a deep-seated power in articulating identity. In developing an ethical approach to translating *Compagna luna*, I acknowledge the power of these narratives in motivating me to translate this text and in positioning me as someone who is prepared to at least entertain the collective narratives that Balzerani's text relies on.

I also acknowledge that insofar as I adopt the position of one of the "others" to whom Balzerani's text is addressed, that position is articulated through a different ontological narrative and different collective narratives from those articulated in the Italian text, and that these narratives are inadequate in fully comprehending this text. I understand my position as translator as being someone who works from a different cultural and ideological position. Starting from this acknowledgement, as an ethical translator I can frame the translation of *Compagna luna* as an act of self-reflection, and understand the work of translation as a work of engagement with other complex narratives about this experience.

Thus, translating this text starts from an attempt to understand the position from which Balzerani speaks and the position of the readers she is addressing. In reflecting on my identity and positionality, I am reflecting on how I might position myself as a reader addressed by Balzerani. An ethical practice of translation of this kind of text that takes account of the translator's identity and positionality includes this act of self-reflection, asking and attempting to answer the questions: what is my position towards this text? How is this position articulated with my own narratives of identity? And what is my stake in translating this text? Social narrative is a powerful tool in this act of self-reflection.

9. Concluding remarks

Translating *Compagna luna* can activate this text's unfamiliar ontological and collective narratives for English-speaking readers. The narratives articulated in *Compagna luna* offer a different framing of political violence and call on the reader to reflect on the meaning and the use of the term 'terrorist'. Translating this text

means offering Barbara Balzerani's narratives of the self and politics to a new audience. This is a political choice rooted in an ethical stance towards this text: as a translator I adopt a position not just of curious inquiry, but of cultural activism, sharing oppositional narratives that question dominant public narratives in the target language and culture. It is a choice rooted in my identity as articulated in my own narratives of the self and my relationship to the world. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge the translator as a person who adopts a position towards the text being translated. Framing the question of the translator's positionality in terms of social narrative is one way to bring the translator's identity and subjectivity into focus as part of the answer to the question, "Should I translate?" This recognises the translator as a social and political actor as well as a language worker, extending the space for translator ethics.

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