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TRANSLATED BY

Liz Heron

The Unseen

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For a brief but explosive period in the mid-seventies, the young, the unemployed and the homeless of Italy's cities came together in an unexpectedly militant movement known simply as Autonomy. Against the austerity programmes and social discipline of the ruling Christian Democrats and their would-be partners in the Communist Party, the movement developed a "politics of refusal"—expressed in school occupations and factory sabotage, mass shoplifting and violent street protest, combined with carnivalesque creativity. But the movement was soon divided, especially over the issue of armed struggle, while its opponents united behind the most repressive measures ever seen in postwar Italy.

Nanni Balestrini, himself a victim of that repression, follows in spare but vivid unpunctuated prose Autonomy's trajectory through the eyes of one working-class protagonist—from high-school rebellion, squatting and attempts to set up a free radio station, to arrest and the brutalities of imprisonment. This is a powerful and gripping novel: a rare evocation of the intensity of commitment, the passion of politics.

The Unseen Details

Date : Published January 1st 1989 by Verso (first published 1987)

ISBN : 9780860912422

Author : Nanni Balestrini

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Genre : European Literature, Italian Literature, Fiction, Cultural, Italy, Novels, Literary Fiction

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From Reader Review The Unseen for online ebook

Jacob Wren says

Nanni Balestrini writes:

but look I told him I don't know why but I sounded annoyed but you know I really can't stand any more I really mean it that we're still stuck here with this bullshit still with this bullshit about winning or losing and it seems to me that it's always really been our big misfortune that every time we've thought the thing that mattered was basically just winning or losing when instead the things we've really done have never had anything to do with winning or losing it's clear that here we've already lost everything and not just in the last five minutes but the fact is that I think and a lot like me think so too that deep down we've never had not only have we never had any notion or desire to win but not even any notion that there was anything to be won anywhere and then you know if I really think about it now to me the word winning seems exactly like dying

And then there is this review from Pierce Penniless - <http://piercepenniless.wordpress.com/> :

The Unseen is written in unpunctuated paragraphs interspersed with different voices, differing levels of narrative intervention, reading at times as a stream-of-consciousness recollection, stitched together across jumps in time. This is not literary pretension, but technique serving its object: in other words, it is the literary form taken to best embody the narrative – sensitive to the individual's relation to history and politics, rendering its questions always in terms of individual suffering, immediate relationships rather than political abstractions. Its technique is then in service of the ethical-political axis that drives its story, in the achievements and suffering of its nameless narrator; this shift of the ethical axis away from the ragged contemporary consensus on the 'responsibility' of Autonomia for the repression undertaken by the Italian state and instead toward the individual political subject (replete with intense political bonds of friendship, love and solidarity) is perhaps what most outraged its early critics.

Julian says

Highly recommended. The lack of punctuation put me off at first, but after a while I really liked how dreamy and poetic it made the book. So much at stake, so much horror, so much defeat; yet to be in that whirlwind where it seems like everything is up in the air and the whole world could change in an instant--isn't that what we all really want?

Karlo Mikhail says

A vivid, fast-paced account of the militant struggles of the youth, workers, and unemployed led by the Italian Autonomist Marxists in the 1970s.

The book gives us a slice of life of the people who were caught in the current of this powerful movement which stood up against the bourgeois state at a time when the official communist party and its politics of class collaboration could no longer serve as a channel of workers' resistance.

Nanni Balestrini's prose form of free flowing statements arranged in blocks with no punctuations strangely helps rather than impede the novel's exhilaratingly racy and forceful movement.

We read the great sacrifices and oppression endured by an entire generation of youth, which is depressing.

We get a glimpse of the exploits and weaknesses of the Autonomists' horizontalist organization, direct action, lumpen antics, uncompromising posturing, and later on a form of armed focoism.

But most importantly, we are told the story of the class struggle that raged in Italy's prisons by political prisoners--"The Unseen."

Balestrini never fails to point out the creativity, dynamism, and solidarity of people enmeshed in a collective endeavor to transform an unjust society even in the most hopeless and repressive conditions.

This is a stunning masterpiece. A must-read!

Joseph says

This novel is perfect and essential. It has already been tragic that it remained out of print for so long, but it is even more tragic that it has yet to be considered the masterpiece of world literature that it is.

Luke says

Gritty prose poem of creating autonomy and fear amid deadend factory life and uncertain prison life. Quite good as a visceral description of direct action, factionalism, and state repression in 70s Italy.

0 says

"but look I told him I don't know why but I sounded annoyed but you know I really can't stand any more I really mean it that we're still stuck here with this bullshit still with this bullshit about winning or losing and it seems to me that it's always really been our big misfortune that every time we've thought the thing that mattered was basically just winning or losing when instead the things we've really done have never had

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Ellen says

I really enjoyed this book - the absence of punctuation takes a wee bit of getting used to, but you soon find yourself swept away in the passion and fast-pace of riots, prisoner strikes, debates, work-ins, protests and political action. I like how it follows a group of young Italians with no theoretical knowledge of class struggle who are just giving it all they've got and struggling best they can. For me this book really highlighted how to be victorious we really need to be united in an organisation that can provide theoretical lessons of the past and solutions for the future, that can carry out meaningful mass actions, so that we are no longer groups of 5 individuals struggling separately, or one prison in the middle of the countryside burning sheets that no-one can see, but that together we are marching on the streets, dismantling the bourgeoisie state and building a new society which works in the interests of everyone, rather than a handful of billionaires and bankers.

zek says

At times haunting, at times amusing, always conflictual and full of life. A moving portrait of the autonomia generation at both its peaks and valleys, which conveys the beautiful spirit of that time and place before its trampling by the boots of repression and history. Don't let the lack of punctuation turn you away, after a few pages it gives the text a relentless momentum which I found really enhanced its impact. Very highly recommended.

foxfire says

This book is so beautiful and devastating. I urge all of my friends to read it, if not for its poetry than for the heavy lessons that can be gained from it.

Magdalena says

Read this book if you want a breathtaking account of certain parts of the movements emerging and declining in 1970s Italy. Do not read this book if you're about to go to jail.

Intortetor says

leggere "gli invisibili" piomba il lettore in un'epoca remota eppure vicinissima: la stagione a cavallo tra anni

'70 e anni '80, subito dopo il '77.

osserviamo la vita -raccontata non in ordine cronologico- di un ragazzo: militante di quel movimento che non aveva confini precisi e riuniva persone con le più diverse esperienze (e di cui vedremo, attraverso i suoi occhi e quelli dei suoi compagni, le ultime azioni, la decadenza e la sparizione), finito in carcere per una casualità e tra i protagonisti di una rivolta in un carcere speciale, partito parte di una massa e finito solo. la sua parabola è quella di una generazione arrivata dopo il lungo "'68" che ha segnato l'italia dal '68 al '77 e che si trova schiacciata tra il terrorismo, l'eroina e la repressione: non tutto quello che il protagonista compie mi trova favorevole (la disintegrazione della scuola, ad esempio, pur partendo da idee condivisibili si riduce ad una farsa), ma riesce a comunicare l'insoddisfazione di chi voleva una vita e un futuro diversi.

lo stile di balestrini -rapido, fatto di immagini, vicino più al parlato che alla narrativa- è perfetto per la storia e sembra davvero di trovarsi di fronte ad un reduce di quegli anni che ti racconta la sua storia.

consigliato per chi è interessato a quel periodo storico, affianco a "boccalone" di enrico palandri e ad "altri libertini" di pier vittorio tondelli.

ah, ad un certo punto mi sono imbattuto in un passaggio familiare: divenne infatti una strofa di un pezzo degli ak47, posse romana proveniente dal primo nucleo degli assalti frontali.

Ron says

It's the rare book that I won't slug my way through, and I think this is the second I've encountered this week. I can hardly say that it's bad, owing to the leftist revolutionary sentiments being expressed. The book is exactly the sort of think I love, a fictional account of historic events that rings more true than the propaganda given to us by the media.

The problem lies wholly in the style. The book is without punctuation, but for wide paragraph breaks between little scenes. It is not exactly stream-of-consciousness, but an onslaught of vague images, with a great deal of repetition and redundancy (if all the cells have been opened, we know yours have as well, dude). There is some rhythm to all of that, attempting to evoke the states of minds of the thinly drawn--I suppose it could be the point that we are all faceless and disposable to the establishment--characters, but the story is lost and the reader easily becomes fatigued by all of this and overly folksy conversational tone. We are left with only sense impressions.

In reality, very little happens that could not be told in 1/10th the number of pages, and I was left baffled after only 50 pages that I had not simply read some encyclopedic account or found a real historical piece written from a leftist perspective.

It is vastly over rated as literature and it would have gotten only one star from me but for the topic.

Makis Dionis says

?πρεπε να αγωνιστο?με με τα μ?να ?πλα που ε?χαμε στη δι?θεσ? μας. Η εξ?γερση ?ταν μ?α ξαφνικ? πυρκαγ? που ε?χε κ?ψει τα π?ντα... για τις παρ?ες των δρ?μων το βρ?δυ.. ?να γκρ?φιτι που δεν σταματ? με σχ?δια και φρ?σεις που ανακατε?ονται αλληλεπικαλ?πτονται π?νω σε ?λους τους

το?χους εν?ντια στα αφεντικ? εν?ντια στην παρ?νομη εργασ?α εν?ντια στο γκ?το στην εκκλησ?α στο δ?μαρχο στο συνδικ?το στην ηρω?νη στους φασ?στες στους μπ?τσους στους δικαστ?ς στο κρ?τος στη φυλακ? στη λιτ?τητα στην αν?α

Troy says

This is the novel I've been looking for.

the unseen is fast and furious and perfectly captures the excitement that's endemic to being part of a larger movement part of a larger group part of a scene that is bigger than you but that supports you and loves you and wants to change the world for the better

that's the way it's written with fast and punchy paragraphs that are devoid of punctuation but are filled with propulsion speeding you forward with a sense of everything-at-once and sense of fullness and violence all at the same time

The book zips between a few turbulent years. The start of the Autonomia movement at school, then to a wild cat march which he captures perfectly especially when the cops turn violent and everything is chaos and fear but still with the sense of infinite possibility, and then to a massive prison strike, and his trial, and his upbringing, and attempts to join with the labor unions, and his time learning how to survive in prison, and learning to live communally with a sense of boundlessness, and the suddenness of the feminine movement within the larger movement, and on and on, just stop reading this and pick up this book...

because it really is that good and it really does get the excitement of a new world even if the book ends on a dour note wondering if anything they did was really worth it but of course it is even if they failed this came out and this can inspire me to go out to carry on to not give up...

(BTW, this is the second novel I've read about the Italian "Years of Lead". The first was *Time On My Hands*, which concentrated on three precocious and amoral 11 years old obsessed with The Red Brigades, and next up is *The Flamethrowers* which I know little about, but I know it's roughly about the years of lead.)

tout says

This book cut deep into me, more than any other book I can remember. It's an incredible testimony to the lost generation of autonomia, lost to repression, murder, suicide, drugs, armed struggle, betrayal, and the banality of a life that goes back to normal. This loss is all the more devastating because of shining star (or galaxy) that was autonomia at its height in 77. This is easily one of the best books I've ever read and likely will read.
