

## Piero Bigongiari's search for strength along the Arno valley<sup>1</sup>

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At the heart of the work of the Italian poet Piero Bigongiari (1914-1997) is an abiding connection with the natural phases of existence and the character of his native region. The writings from the first phase of his life, which include poems, diary entries, prose pieces and letters, have a particular concern for the lands along the broad valley of the river Arno, which, whether it flows through them or not, is the thread which links a cluster of highly individual cities: Florence, Pistoia, Pisa, Lucca and Livorno and countless other smaller towns and villages in the surrounding lands, among which Bigongiari believed were some of "the sweetest cities of the earth."<sup>2</sup> This region was the setting for the human realities of Bigongiari's rise into maturity. Bigongiari was born near Pisa, spent his youth in Pistoia and was a student in Florence. He knew all of the cities of the Arno valley and the tragic circumstances of the war dragged him back through several of them. His undying impulse to define his existence according to the character of his surroundings ensured that the different phases of his wartime experiences would be forever associated with a particular place and atmosphere. At the same time he also confronted the danger of that oneness of mood becoming ruptured and fragmented, so that a disparity between desire and reality was also in conflict with a potential disparity between truth and the evolving meaning of the poetic word. In Livorno he was stuck in a relief-teaching job which he loathed, in Pistoia he was conscripted into the army and he was trapped in Florence during the siege which liberated it from the occupying Nazis but also destroyed much of it in the process. This beautiful and affectionate city, his new home, fell to pieces around him and

his habits contracted into a desolate routine. Writing remained his lifeline. Before the war ended he had begun writing poems which he would eventually collect under the title *Rogo*, which denotes a consuming fire, as at the stake or on a funeral pyre. The preoccupations and recurring motifs of this collection not only recorded but also motivated his gradual escape from monotony and fear: the accumulating poems record his impressions of the slow recovery of life and the transformation of misery into acceptance. *Rogo* was the test of Bigongiari's maturity as a writer and it came to express a general mood of endurance: the poet, his city and its setting would persist in living in their own way, according to the impulses of a life undetermined by external pressures. It was through writing as much as through public activities that Bigongiari resumed a contented life in a peaceful place. If the structure of this article follows a chronological pattern, beginning with some of the fundamental principles of writing Bigongiari derived for himself as a student and following them through periods of crisis in which their theory and practice were sorely tested, it is in order to reflect the natural progression Bigongiari himself believed was at work and which, as a consequence, is necessary to understand the existential motives of the poetry. It is also intended to provide a form of introduction to the work of a poet who is barely known outside Italy, but whose work is greatly appreciated in the regions in question and who is remembered there as a significant figure of conscience from a time of considerable suffering and danger.

Bigongiari and his contemporaries – Mario Luzi, Carlo Betocchi, Alfonso Gatto, Giorgio Caproni, Alessandro Parronchi and others – were part of the major Italian poetic tradition of the Twentieth Century, *ermetismo* (Hermeticism),<sup>3</sup> of which they are said to be the *terza generazione* (third generation). The unifying characteristic of this otherwise quite diverse school of poetry is its atmosphere of mystery and evocation and a tendency to search for the heart of living truths, beyond politics or ideology. The

major forerunners of Bigongiari's generation, Giuseppe Ungaretti and particularly Eugenio Montale, enjoy a wider international appreciation, not only in the field of Italian Studies. The *terza generazione*, on the other hand, being more recent and distinctly localised by their attachment to Florence, are not as widely discussed, although in Florence itself there are ongoing efforts to bring these poets to a larger public. Anna Dolfi's authoritative *Terza generazione: Ermetismo e oltre (Third generation: Hermeticism and beyond)*, Rome: Bulzoni, 1997) approaches the major figures of the movement at emblematic moments of their careers, while Silvio Ramat's *Ermetismo* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1969) provides an intricate theoretical history of the movement across several decades. Between these large-scale analyses of the movement there has only been one monograph dedicated specifically to Bigongiari, *Invito alla lettura di Piero Bigongiari (Guide to reading Piero Bigongiari)* once again by Silvio Ramat (Milan: Mursia, 1979), but given its date of publication it does not account for the whole of the poet's career. In all these cases the commentary, analysis and interpretation of the poetry is indisputably significant but frequently it concentrates on the abstractions and theoretical complexities of the poetry (Anna Dolfi's *Terza generazione* contains some important exceptions in this regard) and so is somewhat removed from the needs of an uninitiated audience. To turn to critical pieces that concentrate more specifically on particular instances in Bigongiari's work is one solution and Maria Carla Papini's essays in this area in the collections *Il linguaggio del moto: Storia esemplare di una generazione (The language of motion: Exemplary history of a generation)*, Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1981) and *Il sorriso della Gioconda: La scrittura tra immaginario e reale (The smile of the Mona Lisa: Writing between imaginary and real)*, Rome: Bulzoni, 1989) represent advances in this respect, with their analysis of the philosophical origins of Bigongiari's art of poetic elaboration, a topic of central importance here. Even so, for a public without any knowledge of Bigongiari at all, and to build a more specific picture of Bigongiari's sense of place in and around

Florence, it is essential to communicate something of the human circumstances in which his poetry came to be written, without on the other hand losing sight of the theoretical and poetic matters in question. The ideal source of this double illustration is primary documentary material such as letters, articles and personal notes, which, thanks to a sustained programme of publication through the 1990s and the earlier part of this decade, have been made available to scholars. The efforts of Carlo Pirozzi in this area (*Piero Bigongiari, Piazza Cavalleggeri 2, Firenze*, Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2002 and *Incontrando B. lungo il nastro di Möebius: Dialoghi con Piero Bigongiari* [*Meeting B. in the Circle of Möebius: Dialogues with Piero Bigongiari*], Rome: Bulzoni, 2007) are exemplars of literary biography and historiography without descending into historicism. The most significant effort in this regard is that of Paolo Fabrizio Iacuzzi, whose systematic publication of Bigongiari's unpublished or forgotten student poems, letters, articles and private notes has made possible a re-evaluation of the poet's early work, since these newly revealed writings represent many ideas of literature that Bigongiari was not previously known to have harboured. The approach of this article belongs to this philological mode of inquiry, drawing significantly on the materials published by Iacuzzi (details in notes) in order to trace something of Bigongiari's actual written approach to matters relating to his sense of place. Although an awareness of this is evident in most accumulated criticism, a study such as this does not feature specifically, since most of the references to Bigongiari's writings on familiar places are incidental to literary theory. At the same time another critic to have concentrated his opinions of Bigongiari into essays rather than monographs, Ruggero Jacobbi, insists that alongside the "strongly recognisable landscapes"<sup>4</sup> of his work, another major note to be made about Bigongiari is that *Rogo* stands as the true beginning of his mature career and that all avenues of his intellectual continuity should be explored to confirm this. Whether or not this is qualitatively the case, such comments create a

need for some consideration of *Rogo*, its origins and its development under the sign of those “recognisable landscapes,” and with an historiographical rather than totally theoretical methodology. Primary materials such as those cited here illustrate with more immediacy what Bigongiari himself called “the diary that is at the basis of every work [of literature],”<sup>5</sup> the occasional impulses and the modulations of thought and feeling that give rise to artistic forms.

That “diary” is also the motive behind the chronological approach of this article. As shall be seen, the technical conceit of *Rogo* is based on a sequence of motifs which evolve over time according to gradual changes in the mood of surrounding circumstances, the resolution of which depends on foregoing ideas. This sequence has its origins in the writings of Bigongiari’s youth, which with their exploration of the gap between ambition and provincial reality gave rise to his particular technique of accumulating motivic development, and which gave him the confidence to recover quickly from his first brushes with war; it continues with his settlement in Florence and the calmer and more orderly influence his life there introduced into his work; the crisis in its continuity comes with the descent of war on Florence and Bigongiari’s attempts to salvage and re-evaluate his approach to his shattered world; through *Rogo* the integrity of the sequence is restored and brought to a resolution. Thoughts of familiar places and life within them are continually present and an immersion within them is the key to each of Bigongiari’s steps forward in gaining literary confidence.

Although his formative years were calm, Bigongiari was nonetheless aware of a conflict in his approach to writing: “My poetry was born out of a perceived disparity... in the relations between man and things, and in fact placed itself as a sign of that disparity...”<sup>6</sup> The expression of this “disparity,” however, did not come about in jarring or violent ways. Its earliest form was saturating boredom. He thought of his home town of Pistoia and its surroundings as “my places, my time,”<sup>7</sup> but as a personal

anchor this did little to give his imagination direction. He did take the train to Florence every day to attend university but the novelty of these escapes had worn off by 1934, when he wrote to a friend that he spent his university days “wandering, killing time, until in the evening I find myself tired and not really feeling like anything.”<sup>8</sup> All he could do was return to “the enchanting boredom of Pistoia”<sup>9</sup> from which any real escape was impossible.<sup>10</sup> The suspension of intellectual possibility brought on by the dullness of provincial life widened the gap between Bigongiari’s ambitions and his capacity to realise them. “[There is] something in me that walks, walks, and something that remains behind,”<sup>11</sup> he lamented. Paradoxically this imbalance gave rise to the existential stance of his first writings, which express “the sign of a desire divided from will and which leads nowhere.”<sup>12</sup> “[T]he rivers run without reason, without knowing it, / the trees grow without leaves,”<sup>13</sup> is a central image of one poem, “Gli uomini stanchi” [“The tired men,” 1934], and such cheerlessness echoes in another, “Campagna” [“Countryside”]:

The evening comes,  
the light is lit in the dim rooms,  
and the sadness of sameness weeps  
in our tired, different bodies.<sup>14</sup>

These lines are in stark contrast – disparity, in fact – with the earlier part of the poem, which revels in the sweetness and beauty of the harvest; where some of his other poems conclude as they begin, with the persona being absorbed into the seasonal rhythm, “Campagna” points more tellingly to Bigongiari’s frustration with the city of his youth and its stifling of his hopes. “Man is not entirely his own master,”<sup>15</sup> he grumbled, not wholly philosophically.

The more significant kind of detachment present in the poetry, however, is a linguistic one. There is a slight disparity between the meanings of words and definite realities. It is not a case of disconnection but one of abstraction: the content and movements of Bigongiari’s imagery are attached to thoughts

much in the same way as musical figures connect with impressions in the mind of a listener. Indeed, in a letter to Bigongiari in 1942 his friend the writer Leone Traverso asked him why he did not devote himself to music altogether, finding a musician's touch not in the song-like beauty of the poems (though this is sometimes superb), but in words which "whether by accident or luck have in themselves a driving energy which illuminates or discovers, but does not invent..."<sup>16</sup> The musical analogy is fundamental to Bigongiari's approach to writing poetry, particularly in the case of *Rogo*. The art of that collection is an art of elaboration, in which particular words, phrases, images or even whole situations are taken up and repeated across many poems and in various forms, acquiring new colour, a different emotional focus and even perhaps an entirely new meaning. Many poets of the "third generation" tended to dwell on certain words in order to explore their evocative possibilities. In the poetry of Alessandro Parronchi, for instance, the critic Luigi Baldacci observes "a tapestry of *natural* words"<sup>17</sup> which coalesce to create an "effect of indeterminateness."<sup>18</sup> Bigongiari's poetic texture is similar in spirit – his images are often "indeterminate" in that they express ideas that can be understood but not necessarily analysed – but it is more refined in practice. While the poetry of Parronchi rests on "liquid, musical, thematic Petrarchesque words"<sup>19</sup> and meanings that are suspended within each individual poem, Bigongiari's imagery evolves. Each poem of *Rogo* builds on an image or an idea that has gone before and so drives the poetic consciousness in different directions. The web of these references is so dense that dozens of different images can be combined in a single poem, all recolouring previous ideas. In discussing *Rogo* it is possible to use the language of musical scores: alongside poetic conceits, there are also motifs and passages of "theme and variations." The purpose of such a conception of poetry, as Bigongiari replied to Traverso, was to test "that silence beneath the danger of music, which is the 'danger' of the world, the useless space of blood and chimeras,"<sup>20</sup> which, he believed, music alone

would not necessarily touch. As a force that could illuminate existential uncertainty, poetry was a more useful vehicle for exploring the abstraction and, eventually, the tension Bigongiari perceived in human activities and reality. As such, it was also a most powerful vehicle for understanding and resolving the crisis unfolding in his own mind. In the developing “musical” web of motifs, then, there is a particularly intimate link between the poetic word and the creative mind struggling to regain contact with a fractured reality.

It is important to note that the gradual evolution and elaboration of images in *Rogo* did not come about entirely by design. While Bigongiari may have revised the entire collection prior to publishing it, the poems themselves were written one by one, many of them in times of crisis. The idea of directing them towards a resolution does not seem to have occurred to Bigongiari until the early 1950s, when the poems began to draw concurrent themes together into a synthesis which is almost miraculous. Between 1944 and 1952, however, Bigongiari frequently suffered insecurity and was unsure of where his poetry might take him. What is more, while he appreciated the need for coherence and order in intellectual activity, his attitude to thought was organic. Bigongiari was always a literary polymath, publishing almost as many books of criticism as collections of poetry and maintaining a flow of prose pieces in the background. Contemporary with *Rogo* are two collections of essays and at least sixteen prose pieces, many of which had an outing in the literary journals of the time. Despite difficult circumstances, alongside the sixty-five poems of *Rogo* this is a prodigious body of work, as elaborate in scale and form as the works themselves are in detail and sense. For Bigongiari these two kinds of elaboration – writing on wider thoughts and writing intricately – were intimately connected. As his contemporary and friend the respected critic Carlo Bo put it, “Where the writer stops the critic is born, in a perfect change of life.”<sup>21</sup> In his diary, the other continuous document of the *Rogo* years, Bigongiari was even more

thorough, writing on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January, 1944, “Thinking is continual preparation for thinking, the act of thinking does not end... and the same path cannot be followed twice...”<sup>22</sup>

Even as Bigongiari achieved that realisation, however, what it signified came under terrible strain. To follow any path at all Bigongiari needed stability, but in the early 1940s this vanished from his life. When the Fascists mobilised Italy for war the restrictions on his inventiveness became tighter than ever. The conscription of able-bodied men from the populace compelled him to abandon further study and take up a vacant teaching position at a *liceo* (secondary school) in Livorno, a major port on the Tuscan coast. The place was no great distance from the hinterland where he had been raised, but its bleakness and squalor so horrified him that he felt as though he was back in the kind of limbo he thought he had left behind in his youth. “Once I believed the sun made an arc across the earth,” he wrote to his lifelong friend Mario Ciattini, “but now I see that it loiters and fades in only the one place, precisely in front of my window.”<sup>23</sup> In this dull state the lack of stimulating company made him solitary and introspective. “This water and this salt take the place of an absent person,” he lamented in the same letter, “At least their language is not adulterated by any habits like those of these inhabitants.”<sup>24</sup> As bad as Livorno was for him, Bigongiari was still attuned to some of the gentler and more natural parts of its character, but there was no time for him to explore these further. In January, 1941, his dreams of escape became nightmares when instead of seeing out the term of his contract he was conscripted and ordered to join a regiment in Pistoia. It was a cruel twist to be returning to the home of his imagination only to be caught in a blizzard of military obscenity. For the first time Bigongiari suspected that his once calm life might be over.

In this air of confusion it might have been easy for Bigongiari to believe that in some of the writing of the previous decade he had foretold part of his own misfortune. In subsequent letters to Mario Ciattini, who remained a

confidant, Bigongiari characterised his pain not in reference to the possibility of combat or death, but to the new aggression bristling in the very fabric of this once peaceful place, which disturbed him so much that even the structure of his sentences was affected:

Strange, unexpected returns. [...] ... and all that has been, my heart beats harder to find so many signs once again, I slightly distant and yet desperately close. [...] I with hobnailed boots, and mute, these places resound within me and believe me I find in them a great fear, a dry-eyed desperation.<sup>25</sup>

To make matters worse, the insults and strains of life as a conscript ate into time Bigongiari would once have filled with contemplation and writing. Even when he was not on duty the harshness of this undesired way of living possessed his thoughts. So distracted was he that even in writing a letter to Ciattini his attention veered off course at ominous intrusions from nature:

You understand, I can only just read something, but work is impossible for me. [...] What rains, what moons. And how bored I am, it is an infinite boredom.

[...] You can see how tired and listless I am. But I wanted to write to you all the same. My sleep is insane. I always come in at eleven at night, but tonight I think I will go to sleep even before that. Thunder over Pistoia. Write to me soon, what you want, what you are doing. Thunder over Pistoia again, like a hammer. Different thunder from Florence's, more echoing, perhaps because of the "enormous" shell of the mountains.<sup>26</sup>

This letter in particular confirmed Bigongiari's new gravity. Where once the "shell of the mountains" at Pistoia had seemed so open and full of contemplative potential, it had become an inflexible and incomprehensible enclosure. Bigongiari was not the only Italian to feel alienated, but at least he was lucky enough to feel it in his own home. For years the Fascists had been sentencing dissidents to *confino*, periods of enforced residence in the more remote regions of Italy or even on offshore islands. The idea was to bring dissenters to their knees by dropping them into supposedly backward or

even barbarous societies, without actually removing them from Italy.<sup>27</sup> Their letters home expressed various kinds of pain: some of the condemned grumbled about the lack of “civilised” company<sup>28</sup> but others were alive to the human suffering they were confronting. For many it was their first taste of poverty and miserable hypocrisy: however the Fascists trumpeted their crusade to nationalise Italy, they still considered parts of it unholy enough to use as dumps for those they exiled,<sup>29</sup> and they knew the distress they could cause by plucking citizens from their familiar surroundings.<sup>30</sup> It was fateful, then, that at the end of March Bigongiari was contacted by one Vittorio Bodini, an acquaintance from university days who was serving an actual term of *confino* but who sensed that back home the feeling of dislocation might have been shared. “Illustrious Bigonciari [sic],” Bodoni wrote, “we know one another and yet we do not know one another. We were together occasionally at San Marco:<sup>31</sup> ... now for you as well, in your *Pistoiese* sadness, just as it does for us exiles, this name can take the place of reciprocal acquaintance.”<sup>32</sup> In clutching at San Marco as a substitute for true human acknowledgement Bodini unwittingly mirrored Bigongiari’s attempts to cling to the company of the sea at Livorno; both were frail attachments with only the remotest human element, typifying the desperate feeling of weakness that was enveloping Bigongiari ever more thickly. In June, mercifully, he was released from service, but thoughts of displacement lingered with him. A lone poem from August, “Il cielo rosa” (“The pink sky”), with its disjointed references to elements of landscape (including the sea) and fragments of a consciousness, is a muffled cry in the wilderness:

The pink sky is leaving the sea  
just as behind your gaze which reveals  
a mysterious altar

of tears drunk down. [...]  
...the drowsy hour  
is about to sound within the darkness.

This is the vainest hour.

To resemble your not-seeing  
And there a flash of lightning, contests you in secret.<sup>33</sup>

It was a further elaboration of the desperate terms of his letters to Ciattini and confirmed this sense of profound disturbance. Despite his discharge and his marriage to Donatella Carena in November, the year 1941 was a sobering one for Bigongiari: he had tasted disaster for the first time and had realised just how dangerous Italy was becoming for him. The war had broken through the protecting ranks of mountains and reached him personally.

The spell of freedom Bigongiari enjoyed in 1942 brought him some success, if only in a gathering darkness. His first major collection of poetry, *La figlia di Babilonia* (*The daughter of Babylon*), published that year, drew favourable comments from many established poets, including Salvatore Quasimodo, who despite remarking on the odd “extraneous gesture”<sup>34</sup> saw the collection as the sign of greater things to come. It was at this point, too, that Leone Traverso made his musical observations. When Bigongiari reflected on the meaning of this collection much later, however, the idea of his emergence as a mature writer was not uppermost in his mind. Rather, he believed that what had driven him was a desire to respond to the philosophy espoused by Eugenio Montale in his first poetry collection, *Ossi di seppia* (*Cuttlefish bones*), released in 1925, when he directed poetry towards “that which we are *not*, that which we do *not* desire.”<sup>35</sup> In *La figlia di Babilonia* Bigongiari took a more sanguine path, which he found led once again through the landscape and soothed some of its pain. Whatever else was at work in the troubling force that seemed to be driving wartime events,

...it was the bewildered land which was emerging from the cataclysms of negative thought, the unmoving and anxious earth which on the other hand awaited – fatally, with the war which delved into its every arranged and ancient human, social and geological recess – the seal of the condemnation of history... a land which was also youthfully vital and which rebelled and reacted against condemnation: that land in

which, with the few historical means at my disposal, I sought to realise that which we are, that which we do desire.<sup>36</sup>

Bigongiari desired Florence. It defined his intellect as much as Pistoia did his imagination, and after the torments of provincial teaching and conscription, Bigongiari finally was able to live there, turning down a prestigious teaching post in Bologna for an even more prominent one at the *liceo* attached to the *Accademia di Belle Arti*. Serendipity prevailed again when he took a house in Piazza Cavallegeri, on the very bank of the Arno, where he would live for the rest of his life.<sup>37</sup> It seems as though with this one move Bigongiari felt he had come home, for he dedicated successive poems of *La figlia di Babilonia* (the poems of which are undated and form a narrative arch) to the city and the river, combining evocative and faithful description with penetrating speculations on the character of the city. In observing and writing about even the most mundane of Florentine activities – which in these two poems consist of the nightly conversations and strolls of local girls – Bigongiari construed once again a definite undercurrent, as he had done in the 1930s in imagining his “existential river.” In Florence, however, this undercurrent took on a grander form. This is not to say that he transfigured it into depictions of the glorious Arno flowing past his front windows. The elaboration was less literal: its human potential increased, so that Bigongiari came to see in the habits of Florentines a sense of ceremony which gave meaning and direction to existence. In “A Firenze” (“In Florence,” or perhaps “To Florence”), Bigongiari’s attention reflects off the surface of things and upwards to the hilltops above:

With the humming of your sleeps, where they silence  
the magnolias and the courtyards,  
you surrender to the space where the wind keeps  
your flowers restless: there passed  
with children’s knees  
the women with identical eyes. And what do they do  
at the mouths of the meandering streets?  
With the waxen light of their hands they indicate  
the genistas on the hills, rose-coloured moon,

and the bell-towers look back, back.<sup>38</sup>

There is a new sense of oneness about the scene, with one element very much resembling another: “the waxen light of [the women’s] hands” evokes moonlight, but the moon itself, “rose-coloured,” is closer in feeling to the “genistas.” The “bell-towers look[ing] back, back” onomatopoeically dress the scene in the hint of their well-known sound and confirm the atmosphere of nostalgia. A similar situation is echoed in the next poem, “L’Arno” (“The Arno”), only the direction of the thought is reversed, with the charge of life flowing down from the hills into the city and each line moving the poet’s attention closer to the Florentine girls. The conclusion is also less restful. By gently switching the relationships of various elements in “A Firenze” and interspersing them with freshly dynamic ones (the wind drives with more force), Bigongiari elaborates the situation to a new point of emotional subtlety. Having revealed the ceremonial character of the Florentine night, he speculates on the reactions of the figures within it and reveals significant ambiguity:

[...]  
and the wind burns the courtyards, it disturbs a high  
moon on the hill and below a mad glance  
in puerile eyes.  
You are missing a memory, O my closed  
girls at the fountains  
hearing the drynesses filled and, in vain traces,  
your lives: on your knees, strange,  
you look at the world and perhaps you smile.<sup>39</sup>

In the space of these two poems, Bigongiari penetrates the Florentine character more deeply than previously, not yet finding its philosophical bedrock but still taking the important step of confronting its emotional mysteries.

The ideas of emptiness and futility which hover beneath the surface of these poems are more highly specified forms of the angst present in some of the work of his youth. The vague sense of loss and frustration has evolved

into more complex forms of *ennui* and even desperation (notice that the “girls at the fountains” contemplate their lives as though “on [their] knees...”). He owed this maturing seriousness to the influence of Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), one of Italy’s great Romantic poets, who was the subject of Bigongiari’s thesis and of whose work he remained a respected critic and disciple. Leopardi’s life was brief and intensely tragic (Bigongiari said of him that “he knew neither how to live nor how to die”)<sup>40</sup> and his work recorded a plunge from high idealism into pessimism. His works of the 1820s construe suffering as the universal trait of human experience and death as its only release.<sup>41</sup> In between, Bigongiari noted, Leopardi saw nothing but tedium and habit:

One of the laws of Leopardian poetic recourse is this inurement which carries the mind away from laziness while the heart inadvertently leans upon poetry, this nudge at the shoulders of will urging it to confront its own nature. [...] In Leopardi’s thought, cultivated by sensist philosophy, inurement assumes an absolute importance, to the point of becoming a theory; but in the saturating monotony of his existence he undoubtedly drew from inurement one of the major lines of his inclination: the poetry of a long fatigue.<sup>42</sup>

The “fatigue” of poetry was a subject to which Bigongiari devoted a great deal of energy in 1942 and 1943, but he saw a living quality in Leopardi’s work rather than a form of perpetual decline. It was for Bigongiari the supreme example of “a coincidence of the human with the poetic, so that it seems that a destiny is realised the more it gains consciousness of itself,”<sup>43</sup> leading to an existential fusion that “*moved* the poetic result.”<sup>44</sup> Despite the apparently absolute tragedy of Leopardi’s work Bigongiari was sure that this was nothing more than the result of the poet’s total immersion in his expression of himself. If Leopardi’s works were generally melancholy, then that was no more than a reflection of his sincerity: he wrote nothing that did not express the truth of his existence.

It was not long after his recognition of Leopardi that Bigongiari's situation became much more complicated. His faithful critic Silvio Ramat called 1943 Bigongiari's "year of poetic silence,"<sup>45</sup> but while it is true that there are no published poems by Bigongiari from that year, he certainly was not idle. He continued writing critical pieces and even embarked on an ambitious project to adapt Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* for the cinema,<sup>46</sup> but these encouraging creative prospects were plunged into "silence" when Italy's war took a turn for the worse, with the Allied invasion of Sicily in July. The film project was abandoned completely and a projected volume of criticism, *Studi* ("Studies"), was put on hold indefinitely. "Now everything has to start all over again,"<sup>47</sup> Bigongiari wrote to Mario Ciattini, unwittingly foreshadowing the far-reaching force of destruction that would soon reach him. When Italy officially surrendered in September, 1943, the Allies had not yet reached Rome. The Germans blockaded the cities they still held and the Allies, pushing their way northwards, had to break each one by siege. It was just such a situation that trapped Bigongiari in Florence, not long after he had been conscripted for the second time. Unlike Alfonso Gatto, who joined the resistance,<sup>48</sup> or Mario Luzi, who went into hiding,<sup>49</sup> when the army dissolved as a combat force and Bigongiari abandoned his barracks, he stayed in Florence, where his instinct for self-preservation was mixed intensely with a desire to contribute in some way to the effort of liberation (an ambition fulfilled through collaboration with the clandestine broadcaster Radio Firenze Libera),<sup>50</sup> and also with the dread of impending doom. Bigongiari was making a perilous gamble, trading the danger of being named as a traitor for the danger of being caught in crossfire, which was less specific but which could be just as deadly. In any case, Bigongiari was sure that he could not escape from what was coming to Florence; like the rest of innocent Italy he had been dragged into this situation against his will and all he could realistically do was wait. "[With] time the will is the first thing to collapse and involuntary intentions,

the stratum of the soul are left utterly alone...” he wrote in his diary in January, 1944, “while the voluntary complex solidifies into rhetoric, before nature.”<sup>51</sup> He was grim but not resigned. This idea of “involuntary intentions... [which are] utterly alone” expresses the fundamental desires and motivations of existence, a reduction of life to the bare necessities, a state of suspension rather than inertia. The significance of this entry was huge, for in it Bigongiari found the philosophical terms to sustain himself through these oppressive times. Whatever the constraints on his free will and security, he had recognised the will to survive as elemental.

As important as this insight was it did not make Bigongiari any happier. In the early part of 1944 he had nothing to do in his seemingly doomed city except breathe the “...ineffaceable odour of death which lives like a citizen in the Florentine streets...”<sup>52</sup> He could not work. His diary filled with notes on his eclectic reading as he searched for anchors for his thoughts. “[T]he light touch of silence,” lamented one entry, “is enough to send everything back into nothingness.”<sup>53</sup> The date of that bitter remark was the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, 1944. Little did Bigongiari know that things would change the very next day. After all his long reflections of the previous months, the diary entry for the 15<sup>th</sup> of April consists of one curt sentence: “I have been to *The Magic Flute*; I could only listen to the first act.”<sup>54</sup> At first glance there is nothing remarkable about this comment. It seems to express a vague sense of being unable to concentrate, but little more. Other events of the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, 1944, however, make it possible to infer why Bigongiari felt so distracted. That afternoon Giovanni Gentile, the Fascist philosophical mastermind, who had recently moved to Florence, was shot.<sup>55</sup> It was a sickening blow to the regime’s self-confidence. Loyal Fascists were shocked and Resistance leaders delighted. Bigongiari was racked with ambivalence. He had a deep mistrust of Fascism and favoured the liberal Benedetto Croce over Gentile, but he was a peaceable intellectual who hated the idea of killing (to add insult to injury, as the assassin fired he shouted that he was not killing the man, only

the ideas).<sup>56</sup> Mixed feelings or not, this explosive event seems to have been the breaking point that Bigongiari had been yearning for. That abrupt little diary entry, written in the evening after he walked out of the opera, was a turning point for his poetry. Alongside a condemnation of killing, the idea of disconnection from a musical performance gave him the language to express suspension and weariness in creative rather than analytical terms. On this day Bigongiari wrote the only poem to have survived these difficult middle years of the war.

“A labbra serrate” (roughly translated as “Through clenched teeth” or “Tight-lipped”), as he called it, is a meditation on bitterness and futility and as the title suggests it creates an atmosphere of frustration and tension. Yet it is somewhat miraculous, since it pulls together so many of Bigongiari’s accumulated preoccupations and fuses them to create a coherent mood. One of his finest poetic qualities had always been the invention of metaphors which not only revealed unseen resemblances between elements but also resulted in new visions of reality.<sup>57</sup> The richness of his youth and the experiences he shared with his friends kept this tendency alive: in a varied reality he found plenty of unexpected connections. Quite apart from physical dangers, what tortured Bigongiari during the war was monotony. Rations of reality were in short supply and his imagination was starving. The miracle of “A labbra serrate” was his realisation that even this barren situation had its undercurrents. In the opening stanza, the ideas of dread, obsessive thought and stalemate are all different faces of the same mood:

A shadow still, a shadow that does not disappear  
like a discussion full of propositions,  
and this sky without victory for anyone...<sup>58</sup>

At last, also Bigongiari found the terms to express the artifice and futility of denying the tragedies unfolding around him. He returned to contemplating elements of places, finding in corners of the urban landscape

the home of hypocrisy and in the open natural landscape the familiar currents of vital force, all now tempered with the bitterness of the moment:

the slaughter like walls of clay behind which we hide,  
with a red handkerchief we wipe up blood so as not to see it,  
with a white one tears so as not to cry.

[...]  
...the seasons save themselves from the cannon but not from the eyes of  
men,  
who perhaps only exist on earth through an excess of lies

like the wind in a barometric distortion.<sup>59</sup>

And in the final lines Bigongiari derived a metaphor of unravelling and loss of integrity which draws on deeper meanings of that mysterious diary entry:

And we invent the idea of going to bed, to invent something,

and while we feel that life truly does divide from death,  
there is no doubt of that, we are tired all the same,  
as when tired of music we listen only to instruments.<sup>60</sup>

An initial reading does not reveal how charged with potential the words of “A labbra serrate” are (Bigongiari emphasises the idea of tiredness) but the fact is that the ideas of the “sky without victory,” “the slaughter like walls of clay” the “barometric distortion” and others not connected to the landscape are all recapitulated and varied in later poems of *Rogo*. The concluding image of dislocated music, however, is unique, so that “A labbra serrate” stands further apart from the rest of the collection than subsequent poems.

The reason for this was that Bigongiari’s situation quickly became much worse and he could not concentrate on poetry for almost another year. In August the Allies reached Florence. For many days Bigongiari hid while the city around him was reduced to chaos. His diary entry for the 9<sup>th</sup> of August is like a nightmare, in which pain and horror are magnified beyond

comprehension because they are shared between mind and city without distinction:

Today is the twelfth day I have been shut in here, in the centre of Florence, unable to get out. It is the tenth day of the agony of this city. Overhead the bullets and grenades whistle. The cannon answer each other from opposing hills, on either side of the Arno. I live only on voices: they say that the bridges have all been destroyed, except the Ponte Vecchio. The city is scoured by women who are seeking water, water continually. The nights are pierced by this absurd hissing that is looking for somewhere to go...<sup>61</sup>

In describing this cataclysm Bigongiari discovered a new kind of “disparity.” In this and other related entries he finds himself on the edge of oblivion, but it stops just short of him: chaotic reality churns around him but he does not make contact with it. His city and its landscape suffer, they feel human pain and appear as empty of hope as he is, all of which he understands but which he cannot express: “I cannot speak my pain for this city that has become a no-man’s land.”<sup>62</sup> And growing out of these two “themes” are “variations”: the rumours and voices flying around the unmoving centre of Bigongiari’s mind, the distant booming of artillery fire echoing across the Arno, the desperate wandering women calling for water. All these elements would inspire essential motifs in *Rogo*, but in late 1944, with the siege barely over and a wife and baby son to take care of, writing poetry was still impossible. “In this my crisis at the limit,” runs a diary entry in October, “and I would say the crisis of my life, I work on broken or distant thoughts...”<sup>63</sup> His chief problem, then, was continuity. How could he sustain his thoughts so as to write more than the idealistic philosophical pieces that were filling the pages of his diary and some of which he read on the radio?

This yearning for a purpose in a vacuum, this lurching through all kinds of doubts and disturbances in a home which was suddenly no longer its familiar self, seem in fact to have answered through their own nature the

very questions they raised. Perhaps in early 1945 Bigongiari realised that although he was unsure of what to do with his new poems, and that even though in this climate of scavenging and privation the world might end with a whimper, he would find a point to them one day, and expressing himself honestly mattered more than a search for conclusive answers. At last he put his ideas of an art of elaboration fully into practice. “Nevi e lacrime” (“Snows and tears”) and “Particolari” (“Particulars”), the next poems of *Rogo*, do not build on any of the images of “A labbra serrate” (that would come later) but they are similar to one another. “Particolari” draws on “Nevi e lacrime” and begins the long process of variation which flows through the whole collection. Connecting these two poems are extended metaphors of late-night guard duties and the feelings of barrenness that flood through lives lived by routine. In “Nevi e lacrime,” Bigongiari also at last recovered his idea of an “existential river,” which, he implies, has become a raging torrent of pain, but which also seems the only deliverance:

Screws can melt,  
lights break doors, chinks  
like ever vaster rivers carry us away,  
but why walk abroad to keep ourselves  
in this smell of spent fire,  
to falsify the heart as an horizon  
at our desolate turn to watch?<sup>64</sup>

In “Particolari” the case is similar: there is another question at the centre of the poem, expressed in familiar terms. Bigongiari reinforces his doubts about the need to expose oneself in this atmosphere of death, but adds a new element of detachment and indifference to the situation, sealing it with an aphorismic comment on the emptiness of the soul:

why disobey the orders not to stay hidden,  
why hide oneself walking indifferently?  
And I no longer know who I am, but only what I do,  
and I also know this: I will not ask pardon  
for what I do, for the deep passage of abandonment.<sup>65</sup>

As forlorn as these lines are they do at least confirm Bigongiari's idea of his situation: abandonment and barrenness are the only constants in this "no-man's land" and around them all else is unstable; while emotions lurch, emptiness beats on. Hence perhaps the heaving imbalances expressed earlier in "Particolari" ("...those who cannot drink / a little more without drunkenness")<sup>66</sup> and in a poem from July, 1945, "Improvviso in Piazza San Piero" ("Impromptu in Piazza San Piero"):

Nights and tears too long not to suffer,  
a little space is instantly too much space,  
the heart can find rejoicing in not dying,  
and light in the piazzas and in the cafés.<sup>67</sup>

And so it goes on, this melancholy search for peace and confidence, a tributary of Bigongiari's "existential river," flowing through the already thick web of motifs, internal references and variations, and around the sporadic moments of enlightenment, all of which combined to prevent imagination and identity from melting into oblivion. "[L]osing oneself," Bigongiari wrote later in July in a poem called "Per ritrovarci" ("To find ourselves once more"), "is much more difficult than not losing oneself..."<sup>68</sup> And as miserable as many of these early poems of *Rogo* are, Bigongiari was finding himself again. As time went on and Bigongiari resumed his activities as a critic and editor, the poems gradually turned away from the horrors of wartime and looked out again at the familiar places, which were still there, and blended the painful memories of disaster and conflict with the gentler sensations of the landscape. The result was a poetic consciousness that had indeed matured. Indeed, that model of desolation, the "passage of abandonment" (see "Particolari"), would itself give rise to a motif, for the idea of a sound echoing and booming down a channel would later recall the sound of the artillery roaring down the sides of the Arno valley.

The Arno itself eventually flows into the Ligurian Sea, a northern patch of the Mediterranean. As though following a parallel course the "existential river" of *Rogo* also tends towards the idea of a sea, in a not always quotable

but certainly perceptible shift towards resolution. As with many themes of *Rogo*, the apparent deliberateness of this development is largely an illusion. Its first glimmerings appear in some poems of 1945 and 1946 but are means to different emotional ends. In “Nevi e lacrime” the sea is a symbol of chaos in a compact world: “...the sea crashes in our illuminated glasses.”<sup>69</sup> In “Per ritrovarci” the sea appears as one of the many forms of destructive power which threaten to engulf the persona (the most powerful of these is the consuming fire from which the collection takes its name):

Perhaps as the tides will rise this nausea  
hides a little of the world, a little of love,  
but perhaps there is no shore to measure us  
and the wave of death will rise without breaking.<sup>70</sup>

The idea of a surging sea returns at the end of the poem, only its violence takes on a shade of hopefulness, since it is allied with the desires of the unknown “you” to whom many of the poems are addressed and who seems immune to the disasters unfolding in their reality:

...you, outside yourself, you now search for your sea  
which in rising breaks the banks and braces of the heart.<sup>71</sup>

It is only later, between 1950 and 1952, that the potential of the sea to be calm as well as furious is fully realised and it becomes the setting for the collection’s closing stages. It is true, though, that the sea did have a calming effect on other writing Bigongiari produced in the *Rogo* period, for he often returns to the idea in the prose pieces. In the two pieces which make up “Viaggio nelle Marche” (“Journey in Le Marche”)<sup>72</sup> of 1947, an account of a pilgrimage into the lands of Leopardi, Bigongiari plays on the words of his hero’s greatest poem, “L’Infinito” (“The infinite”), by stating that the infinite sea in which Leopardi felt himself immersed was “not in a thought but in a human dimension,”<sup>73</sup> which could be felt in the mountainous coastal landscape. Closer to home, in a short story set on the island of Palmaria at the junction of Tuscany and Liguria, Bigongiari envisioned a sea which

could disarm the memories of wartime, and even reveal some sweetness in them:

Far off he saw what he had at first taken for a little island: the upturned hull of a cruiser, rusted, supported on each side by enormous pontoons, overflowed by gulls. [...]

They had to watch where to put their feet: remains of barbed wire lay here and there on the side of the path.... Renata thought she knew everything about Andrea, but in truth she knew nothing other than that region in which possibilities could be realised that were unknown even to him. [...] But how sweet it is to speak while pretending that ours is a sufficient, even comprehensive discourse; to move the lips believing we are moving the universe; to offer an object, to move aside a rusted strand of barbed wire as though we were shifting a lever of the universe, offering an object without which a happy equilibrium would be disturbed.<sup>74</sup>

A “happy equilibrium” is never entirely attained in *Rogo*, but the image of the sea, meeting terrestrial images of mountainsides, does bring the collection to a resolved end. The possibility of enjoying the “disparity” between acquaintances, as raised in the story set on Palmaria, was new and encouraging, but the optimistic movements of the sea took some time to filter into the poetry. In a poem from October, 1950 called “Lungarno,”<sup>75</sup> Bigongiari claimed, “Through these lands it is useless to go again / through mirrors of dead water...”<sup>76</sup> a dark image he would elaborate further in January, 1951, when he did join his river to the sea, but felt lost in doing so:

...the river runs dead,  
they are searching for you but the gaff  
returns nothing but darkness, dead time,  
time which the port does not swallow, and I  
the pilot here await, in vain, the sign.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the bleakness of its sea imagery, this poem, “Demonica,” plays an essential role in the development of terrestrial imagery, for it fuses the two fundamental motifs of the whole of *Rogo*: the consuming fire and an idea of the seasons which has been strikingly coloured to suggest that spring is the season of reactivated death. In their new composite form, they suggest an altogether more accepting idea of death, no longer a moment of

destruction but a gradual process of ageing and decay: “the flame which removes / in spring...”<sup>78</sup> It is under the sign of this new acceptance of mortality that the rest of *Rogo* unfolds. A calm sea is in its own turn fused with the land, no longer through an overflowing of the shores, but in a moment of stillness in “Sguardo cupo” (“Dark gaze”), written in November, 1951: “the tide / of the fields in the perfume of the mists...”<sup>79</sup> No longer is Bigongiari concerned specifically with the fields and tides which surround him; his home landscape comes to stand for a general resolution of the elements and a return to the contentment of bygone days.

In the final two poems of *Rogo*, Bigongiari appears to leave behind the Tuscan landscape altogether. In “Ibis redibis,”<sup>80</sup> (see note for an explanation of this Latin phrase) and “Un lume velenoso” (“A poisonous light”) his gaze shifts southwards to Campania, a wilder and more brooding place, home of Vesuvius and the ghosts of Pompeii, with their inherent connotations of destruction and mortality. In the added dimension of accumulated time, however, Bigongiari finds not fear but confirmation – although the place is empty of humanity, the movement of existence, the same force on whose edge swallows fly, has persisted here:

There through tendrils and sounds  
as through thorns here and the arduous desolate  
sea which still hollows the caverns  
of Cuma vainly concave, and the spent  
volcanoes, the wind sighs soft and empty  
between the overturned pitchers and the deaf cliffs.<sup>81</sup>

In “Un lume velenoso” even the last hint of disturbing motion is gone, and in this mythical landscape, far from the homely Arno valley, Bigongiari confirms what has anchored him there in his beloved Florence, with an unexpected presence recalling the words of “A Firenze:”

There, flying about calmly is the Florentine  
bat, there falls to earth a sound,  
liberal and lacerated, of bells.  
And I do not know if it is the sky that I tread  
or if I indicate, indicating the moon, a spent

subject, a game...<sup>82</sup>

The ellipsis at the end of the stanza is Bigongiari's and it increases the mystery of his already enigmatic words: his heart is in Florence, but what is his mind to do? As though in answer, the poem concentrates afresh on the Campanian coast and the truths to be found in its landscape:

On the sea of Amalfi  
the flowers descend to their colour  
like thoughts, a bare tree  
is a polyp of sun on the slope.<sup>83</sup>

Although it is not the absolute end of the poem it is the last gaze outwards at places, and the matching of "flowers descend[ing] to their colour" with "a bare tree" encapsulates Bigongiari's entire sensibility, fundamentally unchanged since his youth. After all his trials, one thing which did not leave him was his connection to the landscape in single moments and in transformation. That such assurance should be found in Campania rather than Tuscany is not an abandonment of familiar tropes, but a reflection of their regained strength: a renewed confidence in the Tuscan homeland allows the poetry to look out at the wider world and perceive its redeeming qualities.

There are many other strands of thought in *Rogo* which trace the maturation of Bigongiari's poetic mind, but none with as much bearing on his literary character as the approach to the "strongly recognisable landscapes" Ruggero Jacobbi believed should be taken into account, but which have until now only been taken for granted. In speaking for the Arno valley Bigongiari achieved for himself what he saw in Leopardi, "a continuous... elaboration of probable meanings, which is... a faculty of language in its natural state..."<sup>84</sup> It was, ultimately, the "natural state" that Bigongiari was seeking throughout the fraught years of war and disaster, a return which came about precisely because the "disparity between man and things" did not yet run to the rhythms of existence driven by the evolving landscape around him. It is plain that after the catastrophe of the war and

monotony of its aftermath, Bigongiari's link with the intellectual purity of his youth was utterly severed. Even so, the crucible of the siege yielded such unexpectedly fertile possibilities for poetry that eventually a new poetic landscape became established on the ashes of the old, and familiar waters ran through it. Over another fifty years of poetry Bigongiari would need to look no further back.

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<sup>1</sup> The original language of all the sources cited in this article is Italian. Unless otherwise stated all the English translations presented here are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Piero Bigongiari, "Pescia-Lucca," in Piero Bigongiari, *Poesie*, ed. Silvio Ramat (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1982), p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> The name derives from *Hermes trismegistus*, the messenger god of antiquity, who flits from place to place and can never be pinned down and who acts as an intermediary between mortals and the mysterious governing forces of the universe. There is also a connection with the so-called "Hermetic" alchemists of the early modern period. In any case the name denotes thoughts and endeavours that cannot be classified or defined absolutely. The meanings expressed in Hermetic poetry certainly drive mood and comprehension in certain directions, so that the poems make sense as forms of words, but the truth which they suggest is so vast that no one phrase or image can encapsulate it entirely. Piero Bigongiari is rare among the Hermetic poets in that he does tie his poetry down to actual experience, although this has the effect of producing great tension between the levels of reality he explores.

<sup>4</sup> Ruggero Jacobbi, *L'avventura del Novecento*, Anna Dolfi ed. (Milan: Garzanti, 1984), 505.

<sup>5</sup> Piero Bigongiari, "Disubbedienza al 'tema'," in *Il critico come scrittore: Prose e aforismi (1933-1942)*, Paolo Fabrizio Iacuzzi, ed. (Porretta Terme: I Quaderni del Battello Ebbro, 1994), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Bigongiari, "Autoritratto poetico," *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, ed. Paolo Fabrizio Iacuzzi (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994), 387.

<sup>7</sup> Piero Bigongiari, letter to Mario Ciattini, 13 November 1933, in Piero Bigongiari, *Giovinezza a Pistoia: Autoritratto del poeta attraverso le lettere a Mario Ciattini 1933-1971*, Paolo Fabrizio Iacuzzi, ed. (Pistoia/Forlì: Comune di Pistoia/Nuova Comagnia Editrice, 1994), 62.

<sup>8</sup> Piero Bigongiari, letter to Danilo Bartoletti, 13 February 1934, in Paolo Fabrizio Iacuzzi, ed. *Piero Bigongiari: Voci in un labirinto* (Florence: Edizioni Pagliai Polistampa, 2000), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Bigongiari, letter to Danilo Bartoletti, 13 February 1934, in Paolo Fabrizio Iacuzzi ed. *Piero Bigongiari: Voci in un labirinto*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Paolo Fabrizio Iacuzzi, "L'elaborazione lirica del «primo» Bigongiari: L'origine tra antifigura e antimateria," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Bigongiari, letter to Mario Ciattini, 17 March 1934, in *Giovinezza a Pistoia*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> Paolo Fabrizio Iacuzzi, "Introduzione," in Piero Bigongiari, *Il sole della sera: Racconti e frammenti 1932-1935* (Florence: Passigli Editore, 1994), 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Bigongiari, "Gli uomini stanchi," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Bigongiari, "Campagna," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Bigongiari, letter to Mario Ciattini, 17 March 1934, in *Giovinezza a Pistoia*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> Leone Traverso, letter to Piero Bigongiari, 27 October 1941, in *Piero Bigongiari: Voci in un labirinto*, 89.

<sup>17</sup> Luigi Baldacci, "Presentazione" in Alessandro Parronchi, *Per strade di bosco e città: Poesie dal 1937 al 1955* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa Firenze, 1994), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Baldacci, in *Per strade di bosco e città*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Baldacci, in *Per strade di bosco e città*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Bigongiari, letter to Leone Traverso, 16 March 1943, in Iacuzzi, *Piero Bigongiari: Voci in un labirinto*, 89.

<sup>21</sup> Carlo Bo, "Letteratura come vita," in *Letteratura come vita*, Sergio Pautasso, ed. (Milan: Rizzoli, 1994), 15.

<sup>22</sup> Piero Bigongiari, diary entry, 17 January 1944, in Piero Bigongiari, *Un pensiero che seguita a pensare: Giornale, 1933-1997* (Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2001), 52.

<sup>23</sup> Piero Bigongiari, letter to Mario Ciattini, 28 December 1940, in *Giovinezza a Pistoia* 149.

<sup>24</sup> Bigongiari, letter to Mario Ciattini, 28 December 1940, in *Giovinezza a Pistoia*, 150.

<sup>25</sup> Bigongiari, letter to Mario Ciattini, 18 February 1941, in *Giovinezza a Pistoia*, 153.

<sup>26</sup> Bigongiari, letter to Mario Ciattini, 18 February 1941, in *Giovinezza a Pistoia*, 154-155. The use of inverted commas to emphasise the word "enormous" in this passage is Bigongiari's.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life under the dictatorship 1915-1945* (St. Ives: Penguin, 2006), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Bosworth, 255.

<sup>29</sup> Bosworth, 336.

<sup>30</sup> Bosworth, 255.

<sup>31</sup> Piazza San Marco (not to be confused with the piazza of the same name in Venice) is the site of a significant monastery, the main seat of the University of Florence and many cafés renowned for their literary patrons. It was and remains the regular haunt of students and scholars and so understandably Bodoni recalls it affectionately.

<sup>32</sup> Vittorio Bodini, letter to Piero Bigongiari, 28<sup>th</sup> of March (approximately), 1941, in Bigongiari, *Giovinezza a Pistoia*, 155.

<sup>33</sup> Bigongiari, "Il cielo rosa," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 74.

- <sup>34</sup> Salvatore Quasimodo, letter to Piero Bigongiari, 22 October 1942, in Iacuzzi, *Piero Bigongiari: Voci in un labirinto*, 91.
- <sup>35</sup> Eugenio Montale, *Ossi di seppia 1920-1927* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2003), 39.
- <sup>36</sup> Bigongiari, "Alcune riflessioni su *La figlia di Babilonia* e oltre," in Iacuzzi, *Piero Bigongiari: Voci in un labirinto*, p.87.
- <sup>37</sup> Martino Baldi, "Cronologia della vita e delle opere di Bigongiari," *Piero Bigongiari: Voci in un labirinto*, 242.
- <sup>38</sup> Bigongiari, "A Firenze," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 88-89.
- <sup>39</sup> Bigongiari, "L'Arno," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 89.
- <sup>40</sup> Piero Bigongiari, "Viaggio nelle Marche," in *Visibile invisibile* (Florence: Sansoni, 1985), 13.
- <sup>41</sup> Giuliano Procacci, *History of the Italian People*, trans. Anthony Paul (London: Pelican, 1978), 282-283.
- <sup>42</sup> Piero Bigongiari, *L'elaborazione della lirica leopardiana* (Florence: Marzocco, 1948), 15.
- <sup>43</sup> Bigongiari, *L'elaborazione della lirica leopardiana*, 11.
- <sup>44</sup> Bigongiari, *L'elaborazione della lirica leopardiana*, 10.
- <sup>45</sup> Silvio Ramat, *Invito alla lettura di Piero Bigongiari* (Milan: Mursia, 1979), 64.
- <sup>46</sup> Details of this unusual project can be found in letters from the film director Alberto Lattuada sent to Bigongiari in 1943 and reproduced in Paolo Fabrizio Iacuzzi [Ed.], *Piero Bigongiari: Voci in un labirinto*, 145.
- <sup>47</sup> Bigongiari, letter to Mario Ciattini, 22 July 1943, in *Giovinanza a Pistoia*, 165.
- <sup>48</sup> Luigi Baldacci, "La vita e le opere" in Alfonso Gatto, *Poesie (1929-1969) scelte dall'autore* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1972), 14.
- <sup>49</sup> Lisa Rizzoli and Giorgio C. Morelli, *Mario Luzi: La poesia, il teatro, la prosa, la saggistica, le traduzioni* (Milan: Mursia, 1992), 7.
- <sup>50</sup> Baldi, "Cronologia della vita e delle opere di Bigongiari," in *Piero Bigongiari: Voci in un labirinto*, 242.
- <sup>51</sup> Bigongiari, diary entry, 3 January 1944, in *Un pensiero che seguita a pensare*, 49.
- <sup>52</sup> Bigongiari, letter to Oreste Macri, 11 January 1944, in *Piero Bigongiari: Voci in un labirinto*, 79.
- <sup>53</sup> Bigongiari, diary entry, 14 April 1944, in *Un pensiero che seguita a pensare*, 64.
- <sup>54</sup> Bigongiari, diary entry, 15 April 1944, in *Un pensiero che seguita a pensare*, 65.
- <sup>55</sup> Gabriele Turi, *Giovanni Gentile: Una biografia* (Florence: Giunti, 1995), 522.
- <sup>56</sup> Sergio Romano, *Giovanni Gentile: La filosofia al potere* (Milan: Bompiani, 1984), 299.
- <sup>57</sup> Viktor Berber, *Metaphor and image in the poetry of the terza generazione*, Doctoral thesis submitted to the Department of French and Italian, Indiana University, May 2004, 43.
- <sup>58</sup> Bigongiari, "A labbra serrate," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 129.
- <sup>59</sup> Bigongiari, "A labbra serrate," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 129.
- <sup>60</sup> Bigongiari, "A labbra serrate," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 129-130.
- <sup>61</sup> Bigongiari, diary entry, 9 August 1944, in *Un pensiero che seguita a pensare*, 68.
- <sup>62</sup> Bigongiari, diary entry, 9 August 1944, in *Un pensiero che seguita a pensare*, 69.
- <sup>63</sup> Bigongiari, diary entry, 26 October 1944, in *Un pensiero che seguita a pensare*, 70.
- <sup>64</sup> Bigongiari, "Nevi e lacrime," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 130.
- <sup>65</sup> Bigongiari, "Particolari," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 131.
- <sup>66</sup> Bigongiari, "Particolari," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 131.
- <sup>67</sup> Bigongiari, "Improvviso in Piazza San Piero," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 133
- <sup>68</sup> Bigongiari, "Per ritrovarci," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 133.
- <sup>69</sup> Bigongiari, "Nevi e lacrime," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 130.
- <sup>70</sup> Bigongiari, "Per ritrovarci," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 133.
- <sup>71</sup> Bigongiari, "Per ritrovarci," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 133.
- <sup>72</sup> Le Marche is a mountainous region on Italy's upper eastern coastal flank.
- <sup>73</sup> Bigongiari, "Viaggio nelle Marche," in *Visibile invisibile*, 14.
- <sup>74</sup> Bigongiari, "La Palmaria bruciata," in *Visibile invisibile*, 33-34.
- <sup>75</sup> A "lungarno" is a particular class of Florentine street which runs alongside the river.
- <sup>76</sup> Bigongiari, "Lungarno," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 166.
- <sup>77</sup> Bigongiari, "Demonica," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 168-169.
- <sup>78</sup> Bigongiari, "Demonica," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 169.
- <sup>79</sup> Bigongiari, "Sguardo cupo," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 171.
- <sup>80</sup> This Latin phrase is part of the traditional response of oracles to warriors consulting them on the eve of their missions. The full phrase is, "Ibis redibis non morieris in bello." As with all oracular proclamations this phrase is supremely ambiguous, thanks to the placement of the word "non." If read in conjunction with the word "morieris" the phrase means, "Thou shalt go, thou shalt return, thou shalt not die in war," whereas if read in conjunction with "redibis" the meaning changes significantly to, "Thou shalt go, thou shalt not return, thou shalt die in war." Placed as it is between these two unpunctuated words the message would have been most puzzling to the warriors who received it. The fact that Bigongiari has left out the rest of the phrase compounds the mystery – though we go and return, do we live or not?
- <sup>81</sup> Bigongiari, "Ibis redibis," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 172.

<sup>82</sup> Bigongiari, "Un lume velenoso," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 172-173.

<sup>83</sup> Bigongiari, "Un lume velenoso," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963*, 173.

<sup>84</sup> Bigongiari, *L'elaborazione della lirica leopardiana*, 9.