

Reading Revolutions: Corrado Costa's *William Blake in Beulah*, a Visionary Cartoon Essay in 1977 Italy

BY LUISA CALÈ

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1 UNDER what conditions might Blake's *Beulah* offer a script for a revolutionary present? This essay explores an episode in the visual reception of Blake as a letterpress poet from a time of civil unrest in Italy. Corrado Costa's *William Blake in Beulah: Saggio visionario su un poeta a fumetti* (*William Blake in Beulah: A Visionary Essay on a Poet in Comic Strips*, 1977) is an avant-garde experiment in visual adaptation inspired by lettrism, Dada, and neo-avant-garde critiques of typography. Their analysis of the loss of the visual elements of writing certainly applies to the textual transmission of Blake's works, which separated the poet from the artist in order to publish his poetry in typographical layouts. Abstracted from the visual form of the illuminated book, Blake's poetry offered an ideal testing ground for Costa's "visionary essay" in the sense of a creative-critical attempt to turn poetry into comic-strip captions. In fragmenting, resegmenting, repeating, and distributing Blake's words across comic-strip panels, Costa releases them from the constraints of language and genre, testing how Blake might fare as a comic-strip poet. In what follows, I will explore how Costa's comic-strip Blake subverts the

orders of language, genre, and the medium of the book. I will focus on the most experimental section of *Blake in Beulah*, in which Costa reinvents *The French Revolution* as a prophetic cue for the 1977 movement.

2 Corrado Costa (1929–91) divided his time between his day job as a lawyer and his activities as an avant-garde poet and artist. His legal practice included working for Soccorso Rosso (Red Aid), a militant left-wing organization founded in 1968 to provide legal representation to political activists and detainees. He became known for defending the Red Brigades, including the founding member Alberto Franceschini, in trials against terrorist cells in Liguria and Emilia in the 1970s.¹ His creative work developed in the milieu of Gruppo 63, an avant-garde literary movement of the 1960s involving artists, poets, and theorists associated with the literary periodical *Il Verri*. A short biography on the back of the contents page of *Blake in Beulah* indicates that Costa began composing comics only in 1977, but documents the publication of drawings in magazines, his collections of poems *Pseudobaudelaire* (Scheiwiller, 1964) and *Le nostre posizioni* (*Our Positions*, Geiger, 1972), the collection of essays *Inferno Provvisorio* (*Provisional Hell*, Feltrinelli, 1971), and the short story/essay *La sadsfazione letteraria* (*Literary Sade-sfaction*, Cooperativa Scrittori, 1976). If this publication record locates Costa in élite avant-garde intellectual circles, his commitment to the 1977 political movement is suggested by the choice to publish his visionary Blake essay with Squi/libri, a small publishing house founded in Milan in 1976 by Dario Fiori and radical political theorist and media activist Franco Berardi ("Bifo"). It was part of a project, promoted by Nanni Balestrini and Gianni Sassi, to create a federation of editorial collectives under the name "AR&A, Strumenti per la produzione editoriale" ("editorial publishing tools"). The name Squi/libri plays with the words "libri" ("books") and "squilibriati" ("unbalanced"), a term used negatively to connote activists as mentally unstable.² Squi/libri was known for championing first-person proletarian narratives, as well as writings that relate to the tension between sex and politics, such as the anonymously published *Stalin Loves* (1977), which exhibits "the drama of the exasperated separation of the personal from the political," and Paolo Bertetto's interview with Félix Guattari, *Desiderio e rivoluzione* (*Desire and Revolution*, 1977).³

1. I am grateful to Eugenio Gazzola for details on Costa's profile as a lawyer. On the interchange between his legal and poetic experience, see Gazzola, "L'uomo di legge e il poeta" and "Le altre posizioni"; for a biographical sketch, see Gazzola, "The One You Prefer of the Two."

2. See Gandus.

3. "il dramma della separazione esasperata tra politico e personale" (cover blurb); see <<https://www.culturedeldissenso.com/squilibri>>, accessed 20 July 2020.

3 Costa's comic-book Blake should be read in the context of avant-garde experiments with the possibilities of language and the artist-book phenomenon. In 1972 Costa participated in the exhibition *I Denti del drago: Le trasformazioni della pagina e del libro nell'era post-gutenberghiana* (The Dragon's Teeth: The Transformations of the Page and the Book in the Post-Gutenberg Era), which related contemporary experiments in concrete and visual poetry to a genealogy of disruptions of the page, from Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés* to Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, futurist "parole in libertà," and surrealist book objects. *Blake in Beulah* takes up their invitation to explore how "the page explodes, conquering new dimensions that seemed closed to poetry."⁴ Costa's reproduction of handwriting in *Blake in Beulah* responds to Gruppo 63's critique of typography as an oppressive agent alienating writers from the means of production and constraining the freedom of directionality and the visual possibilities of writing within the rectangular format of letterpress. The Italian word for the typographer's chase, "gabbia," also used to denote an animal's cage and a prison cell, strengthens the association of letterpress with a "prison-house of language."⁵ Renato Barilli hailed the photocopier as an attempt to bypass print by adopting new means of technical reproducibility, "a technical revolution in the material means of writing and reading" that held the promise of a return to handwriting.⁶ While Blake, as a printmaker, embraced relief etching in order to bypass the letterpress paradigm and emulate a medieval aesthetic of the illuminated manuscript, the invention of the photocopier enabled poets to bypass the mediation and constraints of the compositor's frames and carry out their own experiments with the layout of the page. The handwriting prominently featured on the title pages and back covers of Squi/libri editions invites us to imagine autographic writing and political emancipation from systems of control associated with commercial publishing and distribution. For Barilli, Costa breaks out of the prison-house of typography through the medium of biro and felt pen, which enables him to "reconcile words with images on the same page, after the brutal separation inflicted on them by the typographic 'book.'" *Blake in Beulah* starts with a handwritten

4. "La pagina dunque esplode conquistando nuove dimensioni che sembravano precluse alla poesia" (from the information sheet for the exhibition, which was curated by Daniela Palazzoli at the Centro d'arte contemporanea e primitiva, Milan, 1972).

5. Barilli, "Iper-segmenti" 9; I take the term "prison-house of language" from Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

6. "rivoluzione tecnica nei mezzi materiali di scrittura e di lettura" (Barilli, "Iper-segmenti" 18).

7. "riconciliazione delle parole e delle immagini su uno stesso foglio, dopo la brutale separazione inflitta loro dal 'libro' tipografico" (Barilli, "Poesura e pittria" 9).

contents page, followed by a one-page handwritten manifesto, then a handwritten dedication, inscribed above the first comic panel, which locates the original in the hands of "Giovanna" and a copy with "Luigi," suggesting a restricted economy of circulation.

4 The book represents a stage in the reception of Blake that is shaped by the abstraction of the poetry from its medium and the divorce of texts from images. Encountering Blake's poems as typographical texts rather than in facsimiles reproducing his illuminated printing offered Costa a visionary prompt to invent a new visual idiom around the words. Apart from appropriating and integrating the design of the druidic stone on plate 70 of *Jerusalem*, Costa's visual language is completely different from Blake's. His adaptation relies on the selections and translations of Blake's texts published by the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti in his *Visioni di William Blake* (1965). On the contents page Costa promises excerpts from "Il sorriso del viaggiatore mentale" ("The Smile of the Mental Traveller" [*sic*]), "La rivoluzione francese" (*The French Revolution*), "Un canto di libertà" ("A Song of Liberty"), and "Jerusalem," but this order is reversed in the actual sequencing of the texts. Costa's Blake begins "in Beulah" with short excerpts tagged *Jerusalem* 69.14-15, 69.23-31, and 70.19-20, then proceeds with five pages devoted to "A Song of Liberty," twenty-four to *The French Revolution*, twelve to plates 69-70 of *Jerusalem*, and finally twenty-nine reproducing the text of "The Mental Traveller" from the Pickering Manuscript. His decision to start at the end, from the Beulah of *Jerusalem*, and finish with what he considered the core of Blake's imaginary world, "The Mental Traveller," can be explained in terms of 1970s semiotics and genetic criticism, which sought to identify the "deep structures" that reverberate across the poet's oeuvre.

5 Costa discusses his reverse reading and writing method in the poetic manifesto that prefaces the comic book: "This critical essay on William Blake proceeds in the opposite direction to the reading method that it seems to propose."⁸ While the reader's eye moves from left to right, the poet moves from right to left: "The direction of reading is in this direction →. The direction of writing (the road of the poet) is in this direction ←.- While the reader *departs*, W. B. *arrives*. The reader knows nothing yet, W. B. knows everything. As the story proceeds, W. B. *seems* to return backwards."⁹ The different directions of writing and reading might also allude to the engraver's practice of mirror writ-

8. "Questo saggio critico su William Blake procede in senso contrario al metodo di lettura che sembrerebbe proporre" (*Blake in Beulah*, manifesto; the work is unpaginated).

9. "Il senso di lettura è in questa direzione →. Il senso di scrittura (la strada del poeta) è in questo senso ←.- Mentre il lettore parte, W. B.

ing on copperplates, but the Italian formulation suggests an infraction of the highway code: going in the “wrong” direction on a “one-way” street is an example of situationist *dé-tournement*—it means refusing to follow prescribed forms of circulation. The double meaning of the Italian word “senso,” as both “direction” and “sense,” or “meaning,” supports the revolutionary artist’s perception of linear prose as the expression of a wider ideological framing. Taking opposite directions in the same lane is a way of rejecting the imposition of a one-way street, going against the received sense, multiplying directions of interpretation. Costa’s multidirectional reading is part of his attack on the linear structure of prose: “Imagination that tells its own story needs no narrative.”¹⁰ The aim of his creative-critical intervention is to release Blake’s sexual and political revolution. “*Poetic experience*,” Costa claims, “is the destruction of narrative, of political practice, of the French revolution, of all we have imagined.”¹¹ His liberation is achieved through the medium of the visionary comic book.

- 6 In addition to criticizing linear narrative, Costa’s “revolution in poetic language” takes up Blake’s claim that “poetry fetters the human race.’ The imagination shackles us, ankles and wrists, to the image the more it purports to free us.”¹² Blake’s critique of the “modern bondage of Rhyming” (*Jerusalem* 3, E 145) suits Costa’s neo-avant-garde challenge to the limitations of poetry. If Ungaretti valued translating Blake as a laboratory that freed the poet from the constraints of the hendecasyllable and other traditional Italian verse structures,¹³ Costa uses the structure of comics to fragment, space out, and redistribute the words of the poet on the page. Applying techniques advocated by the Gruppo 63 avant-garde, such as the cut-up method pioneered by Dada and theorized by William Burroughs,¹⁴ he decomposes sentence and verse units into their minimal components.

arriva. Il lettore non sa ancora niente, W. B. sa tutto. Man mano che il racconto procede, W. B. *sembra* tornare indietro.”

10. “L’immaginazione che si racconta non ha bisogno del racconto.”

11. “L’ESPERIENZA poetica è la distruzione del racconto, della pratica politica, della rivoluzione francese, di tutto ciò che ci siamo immaginati.”

12. “La poesia ha legato con catene la specie umana. L’immaginazione ci lega caviglie e polsi all’immagine in più che vuole liberarci” (*Blake in Beulah*, manifesto, quoting from plate 3 of *Jerusalem*); see also Julia Kristeva’s analysis in *La révolution du langage poétique* (1974) of poetry’s capacity to subvert the transcendental subject predicated on logic, syntax, and the symbolic order.

13. See Calé; I discuss Ungaretti’s thoughts about translating Blake on pp. 135-36, and his *Visioni di William Blake* on p. 143.

14. Barilli mentions Mallarmé and “various experiments that aimed to break away from conventional typographical alignments or to disjoin the body of words in their elementary components” (“sperimentazioni varie volte a uscire fuori dagli allineamenti tipografici consueti, o a sciogliere il corpo delle parole in componimenti elementari”) in “Iper-segmenti” p. 9; Burroughs on p. 13.

He then resegments and rearranges them as isolated word clusters redeployed as comic-strip captions, and repeats them in different lettering styles and sizes over a number of pages. In so doing, he activates a poetics of difference in repetition, spacing, and dissemination, which shows the avant-garde’s links to French deconstruction.¹⁵ In repeating and redistributing clusters of words across the page, Costa produces a new work, challenges the reader’s expectations, and subverts the typographic elements and partitions of the book.

- 7 The first portion of the comic book explores the sexual possibilities of Beulah. Costa’s reading of *Jerusalem* focuses on the utopian possibilities of the “free loves” that Blake contains within the dystopian image of a composite collective body presented as a “ravens eating Cancer,” a multiform “Polypus,” an “enormous Form at variance with Itself” (69.2-3, 6, E 223). Costa’s selective act of quotation uncouples “the free loves of Jerusalem” from their being drawn “into infernal bondage” (69.9). The opening words of the comic book—“in Beulah”—act as a *mise-en-scène* and a motto: inscribed on the first page, they locate the action and signal the comic strip’s potential for sexual utopia. After this page introduces word-less sexual scenes, a female figure extends across the following double-page spread, forming an arch that frames the world of Beulah as a female space around a male figure reclining on the bottom central panels across the pages, their bodies fragmented by the superimposition of the comic grid. The following page starts under the heading “Jerusalem,” with an epigraph from Isaiah in which a woman is addressed in the second person and her names—Hephzibah and Beulah—are substituted with their meanings: “Sarai chiamata: ‘il mio piacere è dentro di lei’ e la tua terra sarà chiamata ‘maritata’” (“You will be called ‘my pleasure is inside her’ and your land will be called ‘married’”).¹⁶ In the first two comic panels under the heading “Jerusalem,” the words “in Beulah” return, this time preceded by a negation; the phrase is cut up and redistributed across the panels by the limits of the frames, with “non come in” (“not like in”) at the top of the first panel and “Beulah!?!” completing the scene in the second (“not like Beulah,” 69.14). In other words, the comic-strip gutter takes on the function of an enjambment. The interruption makes us see the negation, but also the visual dispensation offered by the comic-book panel, which frees women’s pleasure from the negative conditions imposed by the or-

15. Discussing the 1965 gathering of Gruppo 63 in Palermo, Barilli indicates that their experiments preceded Derrida’s and Deleuze’s publications on difference, spacing, and dissemination, which defined the field in the late 1960s and 1970s; see “Iper-segmenti” 10.

16. “You will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married” (Isaiah 62.4).

der of discourse. Costa's art of spacing releases a free-love utopia from the control of Blake's syntax.

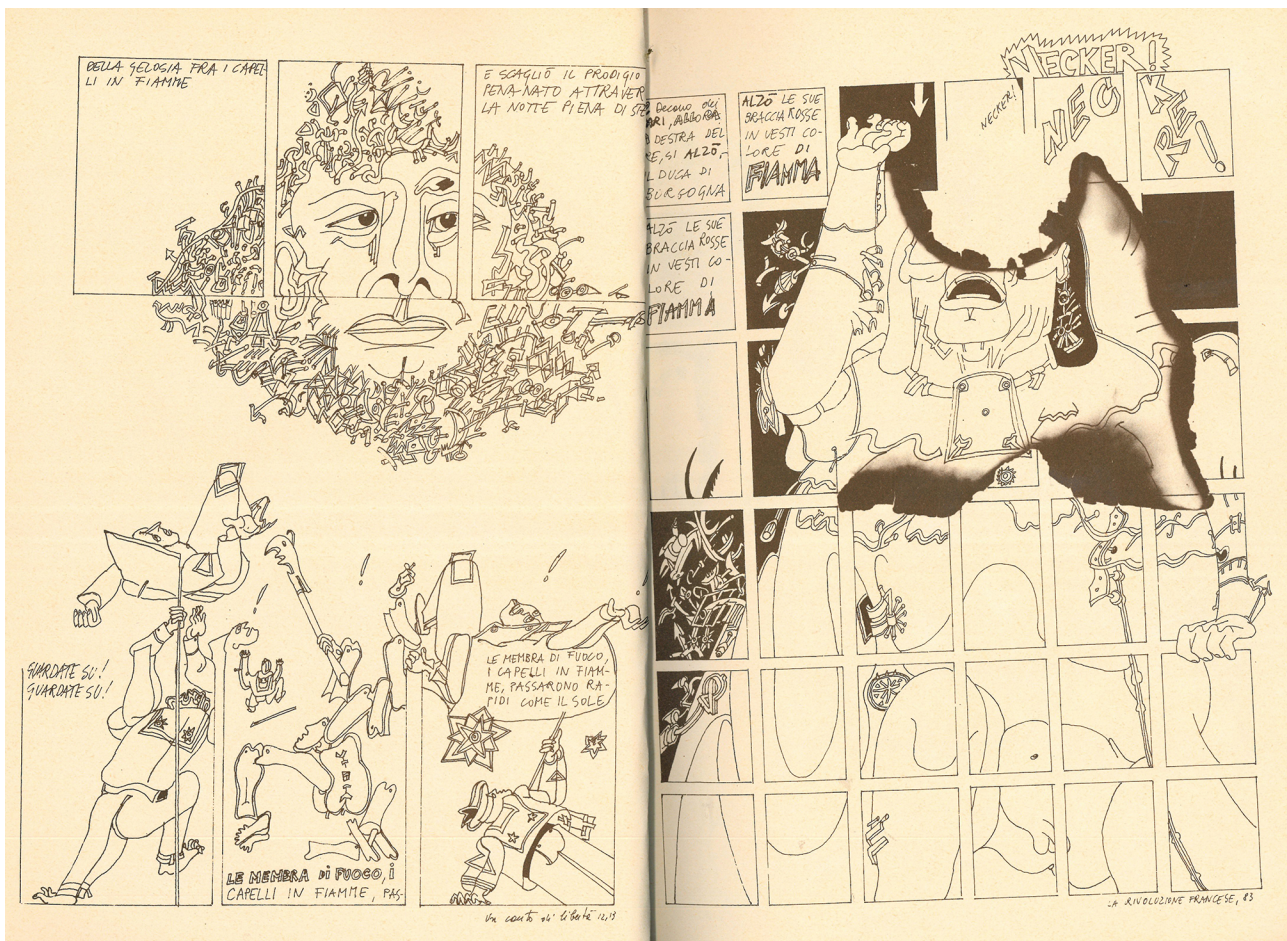
- 8 Costa's framing of the sexual revolution in Beulah inflects the only visual element from Blake's illuminated works to be referenced in the book. The first sex scene under the "Jerusalem" heading shows a multibreasted female figure being pleased by a man lying below her, with the comic-panel gutter splitting the grouping just past her genital area. The third panel shows the same scene in a panoramic view, placing the lovers under the druidic stones depicted by Blake on plate 70 of *Jerusalem*, undoubtedly sourced from one among a handful of plates reproduced in Ungaretti's 1965 edition. Above the scene Costa inscribes, twice, the continuation of the Beulah excerpt from *Jerusalem* 69.14-15, "dove ogni femmina gode dove ogni femmina gode" ("Where every Female delights [to give her maiden to her husband]"), though the Italian verb is intransitive: the pleasure his woman feels is all her own. While in Blake's text pleasure means pleasing the husband, Costa excludes mention of the husband from the erotic scene of his comic strip. The text proceeds to the woman's creation of space while the man "gives a Time & Revolution to her Space" (69.23-31). This scene of bliss is followed by six pages in which male figures in different attire exclaim "aha." Some of them wear formal suits, presumably representing figures of the establishment, the forces of reaction and repression. These figures are tagged *Jerusalem* 70.19 and 70.20, but without quotations, though they possibly visualize "Brooding Abstract Philosophy" bent on "destroy[ing] Imagination" (70.19, E 224). This section is followed by an excerpt from "A Song of Liberty," labeled nos. 11-13, featuring the flaming agency of "the hand of jealousy." The comic book then seamlessly turns to an excerpt from *The French Revolution*.
- 9 Costa's engagement with *The French Revolution* is the most experimental part of the comic book, an avant-garde intervention on the limits of the medium. The comic grid, the material properties of the page, and the book as a cultural form represent the symbolic order to be tested and subverted in his revolution of poetic language. *The French Revolution. A Poem, in Seven Books* (1791) was planned as a typographic work to be published by the radical publisher Joseph Johnson, but probably withdrawn after the proofs of the first book were printed. The action covers the months leading up to, but not including, the fall of the Bastille. Costa's script selects narrative segments and fragments marked by emotional climax and impending action, breaks them up, and rearranges and repeats them in his comic grids. His *French Revolution* starts with the Duke of Burgundy: "Il Decano dei pari, allora a destra del re, si alzò. Il Duca di Burgogna | Alzò le sue braccia rosse in vesti colore di Fiamma" ("The ancientest Peer, Duke of Burgundy, rose from

the Monarch's right hand" and "stretch'd his red limbs, / Cloth'd in flames of crimson," *French Revolution* 83, 85-86, E 289-90) (illus. 1, right).¹⁷ A comic grid is superimposed over half of his body, but his upper torso seems to peep through a burn in the page. The top part of the composition is repeated on the verso, while the bottom half of the verso shows an incendiary revolutionary act by a naked, bearded figure brandishing a torch lit to burn the upper portion (illus. 2, left). While this scene self-reflexively represents the physical properties of the recto and verso, the portion of the paper surface that has been burned fails to conform to the expectation that upon turning the page we should see the back of the duke. Instead, his face pierces through both recto and verso, repeating an action that represents a physical impossibility. Costa's handling of the duke suggests the alarm and agitation of the old order frantically calling out to "Necker," the king's finance minister. The duke's defiance of the physics of the page indicates his status as a metaphysical entity, but his place on the page is being burned out of existence by revolutionary action.

- 10 To represent the revolutionaries, Costa updates a classical heroic idiom. While the revolutionary torchbearer is transposed into the graphic conventions of comic outlines, a more radical contemporary appropriation is involved in updating poses associated with helmeted warriors from classical warfare to the everyday clothing and symbols of the workers' movement. For this new segment (illus. 2, right) he fragments one of Blake's sentences, separating subject from verb, isolating the all-capital heading, "I MIETITORI CON LA FALCE" ("the mowers with the sickle"), from the action detailed in smaller capital letters in the following panel in the row beneath: "ABBATTERANNO DALLE MONTAGNE ATLANTICHE TUTTA QUESTA GRANDE MESSE DI STELLE DI SEIMILA ANNI? Tutta questa grande messe di stelle di seimila anni?" ("Shall ... these mowers / From the Atlantic mountains, mow down all this great starry harvest of six thousand years?" *French Revolution* 89-90, E 290). The grid is superimposed over the bodies of two mowers, who occupy two and four panels respectively. One brandishes the sickle as if about to mow the stars in the sky; the other, presented in profile, seems to translate a pose of attack taken from depictions of warriors on classical vases or bas-reliefs. The heroic encoding of the mowers with the sickles alludes to the workers' movement.¹⁸ The two rows of

17. The forward slash marks line breaks in Blake quotations; in quotations from Costa, the vertical slash represents breaks effected by comic-panel gutters when a sentence is split by distributing the words between different comic panels.

18. A symbol of the workers' movement, the hammer and sickle was harnessed as a Soviet logo in 1918, and then adopted by socialist and communist parties across the world. The version adopted by the PCI (Italian Communist Party) was designed by the artist Renato Guttuso



1. All illustrations are from Corrado Costa, *William Blake in Beulah: Saggio visionario su un poeta a fumetti* (Milan: Squi/libri, 1977). The photos are by permission of the Archivio Corrado Costa, Biblioteca Panizzi, Comune di Reggio Emilia. See the sequence in book format.

panels beneath them show an establishment figure looking up to the sky.

- From the classical idiom of the mowers, Costa switches to a Western movie trope to shift from workers to leaders in what seems to be an intervention in contemporary politics. The rest of the narrative segment from Blake's text is moved

in 1953, under party leader Palmiro Togliatti. In the early 1970s, the designer Enzo Mari (1932–2020) developed a graphic-design project on the symbol's permutations in art and print culture, which formed the basis of an exhibition entitled *Hammer and Sickle: Three of the Ways an Artist Can Contribute to the Class Struggle* (Falce e martello: tre dei modi con cui un artista può contribuire alla lotta di classe) at the Galleria Milano in 1973. Andy Warhol's *Hammer and Sickle* series was inspired by seeing electoral posters on a trip to Italy during the administrative elections of 1975; the symbol was an omnipresent feature in the general election of 1976.

to the top row of panels in the following spread (illus. 3) and repeated four times as a sort of refrain or chorus, in which Blake's words are turned from the third to the second person: "Necker! Bovaro di Ginevra, curverai la tua falce, sui campi fertili della Francia?" ("And shall Necker, the hind of Geneva, stretch out his crook'd sickle o'er fertile France," *French Revolution* 91). The name Necker occupies the following row of panels across the spread, and beneath it four rows are taken up by his figure. The spread shows two identical pages left and right, in which Necker features as a cowboy who has come to the rescue; his body is fragmented by the superimposition of eighteen frames, and the composition doubled as in a mirror image. Blake's words are repeated four times, in panels left and right of Necker's head: "Come nube nera esitò Necker! & il suo volto era pieno | di nuvole" ("Like a dark cloud Necker paus'd ... / ... and his visage was cover'd with clouds," *French Revo-*

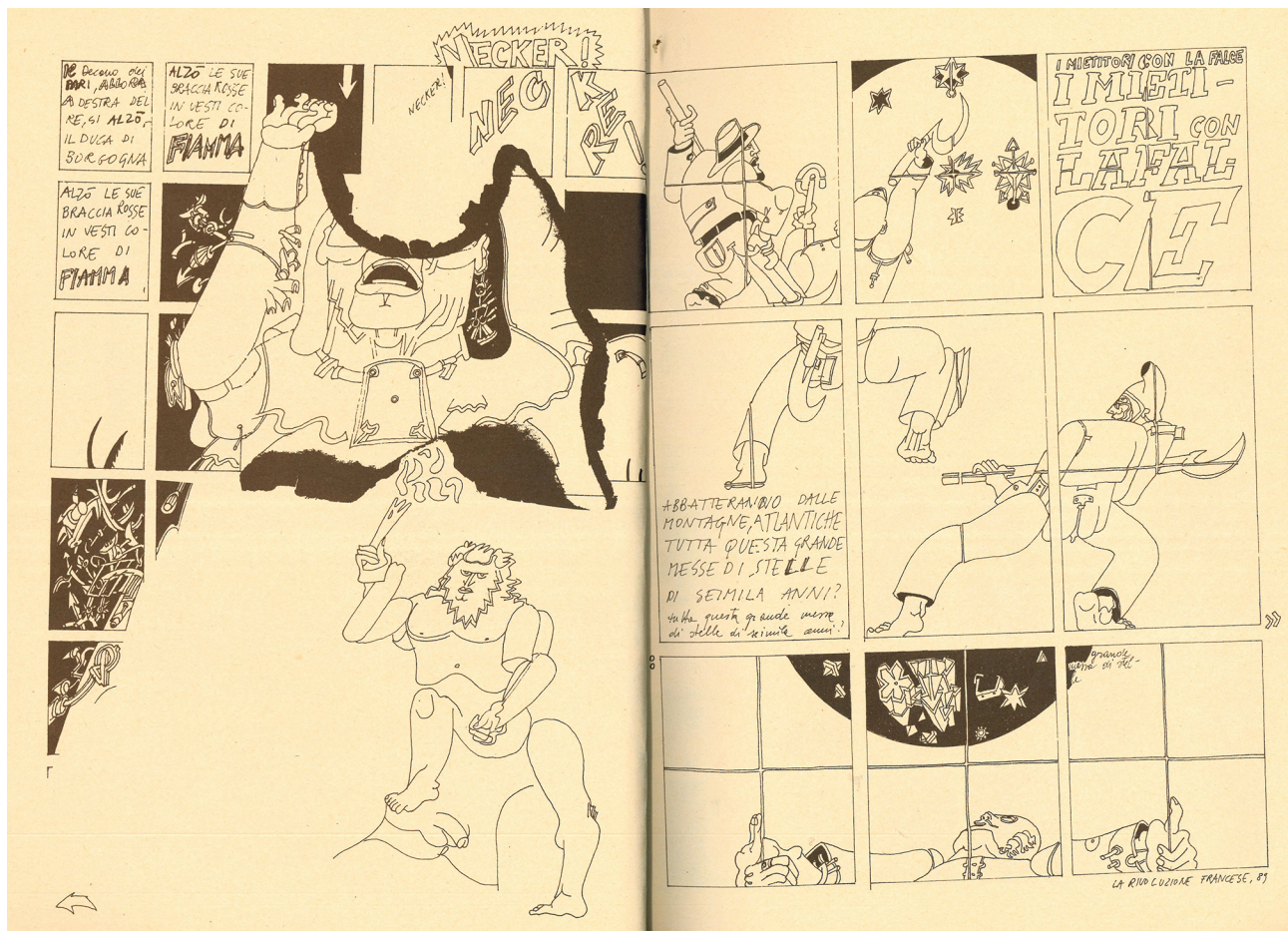


Illustration 2

lution 117, 120, E 291). Costa reads the words through a filmic analogy, translating Necker's hesitation into a typical cliff-hanger scene in a Western, where the cowboy shows up at the saloon and pauses before the shooting starts. His choice to cast the mild reformer Necker in the unlikely heroic role of a *pistolero* might be read as a coded denunciation of the Italian Communist Party, which at the time was attempting a mediation between incompatible political forces by supporting the government of the right in what has been termed "compromesso storico."¹⁹ From the stand-

19. "Compromesso storico" ("historical compromise," 1973–79) defines a period of Italian history in which the Communist Party sought to negotiate a shared political strategy with the Christian Democrats, who were in government. It was inspired by Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular coalition government in Chile; after the Chilean military coup of 11 September 1973, it was theorized as a "democratic alternative" to reactionary violence by the Italian Communist Party leader, Enrico Berlinguer, in a three-part essay entitled "Riflessioni sull'Italia dopo i fatti del Cile" ("Reflections on Italy after the Events in Chile"), pub-

point of the radical, extraparliamentary wings of the left that Costa sided with, this meant betraying the revolutionary cause, while also failing to be seen as a force fit for government. The failure of this political strategy is effectively conveyed through a parodic, mock-epic allusion to a commercial American genre. The scene of stalling in the saloon is amplified by the repetition of Blake's words, which offers a visual analogue of the pause and enhances the emotional impact. This experiment in repetition tests the possibilities of the spread as a compositional unit, subverting the sequence from left to right. The duplication of the composition disrupts the expectation that a book's pages should follow one another and thus support the linear development of the plot.

lished in *Rinascita* nos. 38 (28 Sept.), 39 (5 Oct.), and 40 (12 Oct. 1973). Plans for such a strategic alliance between communist and Catholic forces were shelved, however, after the kidnapping and execution of former Christian Democrat prime minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades in 1978.

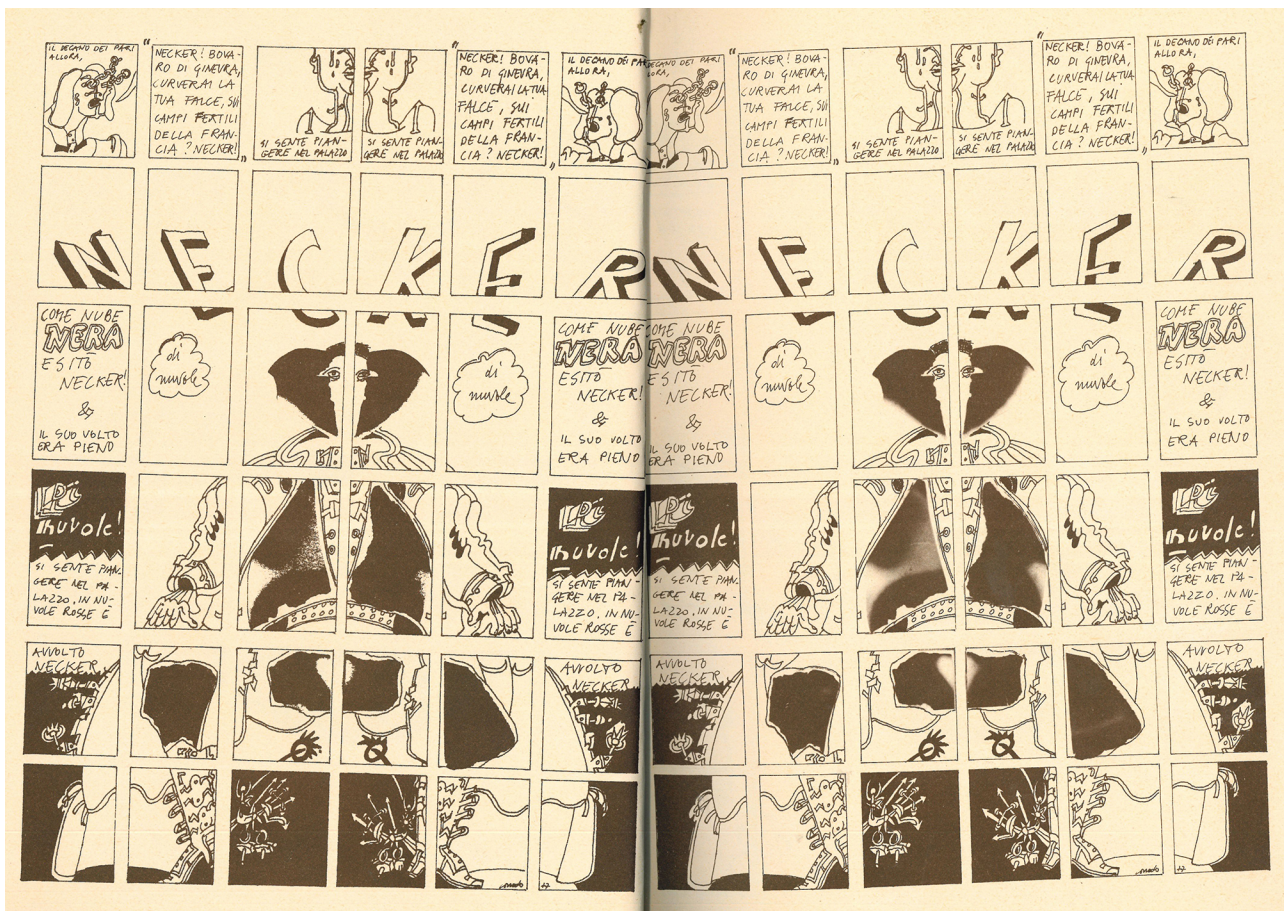


Illustration 3

12 Costa's use of repetition subverts the bibliographic encoding of the book as a medium. The reader's expectation of change upon turning the page is disrupted by the repetition of the recto, because title and design remain unchanged over two spreads in a narrative sequence that extends over five pages: "Si chinò sulle montagne" appears as a title for the left page, and the quotation continues as a title on the right after the page gutter, "poi rialzò la testa" ("[The King] lean'd on his mountains, then lifted his head," *French Revolution* 105, E 290) (illus. 4). The whole quotation is repeated on the right margin of the recto, positioned to look like an epigraph. "Poi rialzò la testa" appears again as a title on the following recto, which reproduces a similar drawing but changes the epigraph and the design of the left page (illus. 5). While Blake identifies the subject as the king, the more ambiguous Italian sentence needs neither to specify the subject through a noun nor to anchor him to a political identity, so his role shifts, following the freedom of the graphic lines. The figure's head peers through what seems

to be a burn in the page, thus occupying a hole in representation. Who is he? Has the head of the body politic been substituted? We see him sitting on the grid of the comic panel, holding its bounding lines, as if in control of visual representation, a modern-day comic-book version of the Parcae, the classical figures of destiny who weave, measure, or cut the threads of life. In Costa's context, the contours of the human form become coterminous with the comic grid. Acting as a puppeteer, the central figure pulls the threads of life. His boot reactivates the Western mode, inviting us to see the dynamic lines undoing the grid at the top as a lasso, though its rhomboid shape suggests a kite. While the figure on the left captures a black hole burned into the page, the figure on the right throws it up into the sky, perhaps to evoke a symbol of looming freedom.

13 In another act of metaphysical defiance, Costa subverts the spatial coordinates of the book and the order of discourse. While the reader might expect to see the face and then the

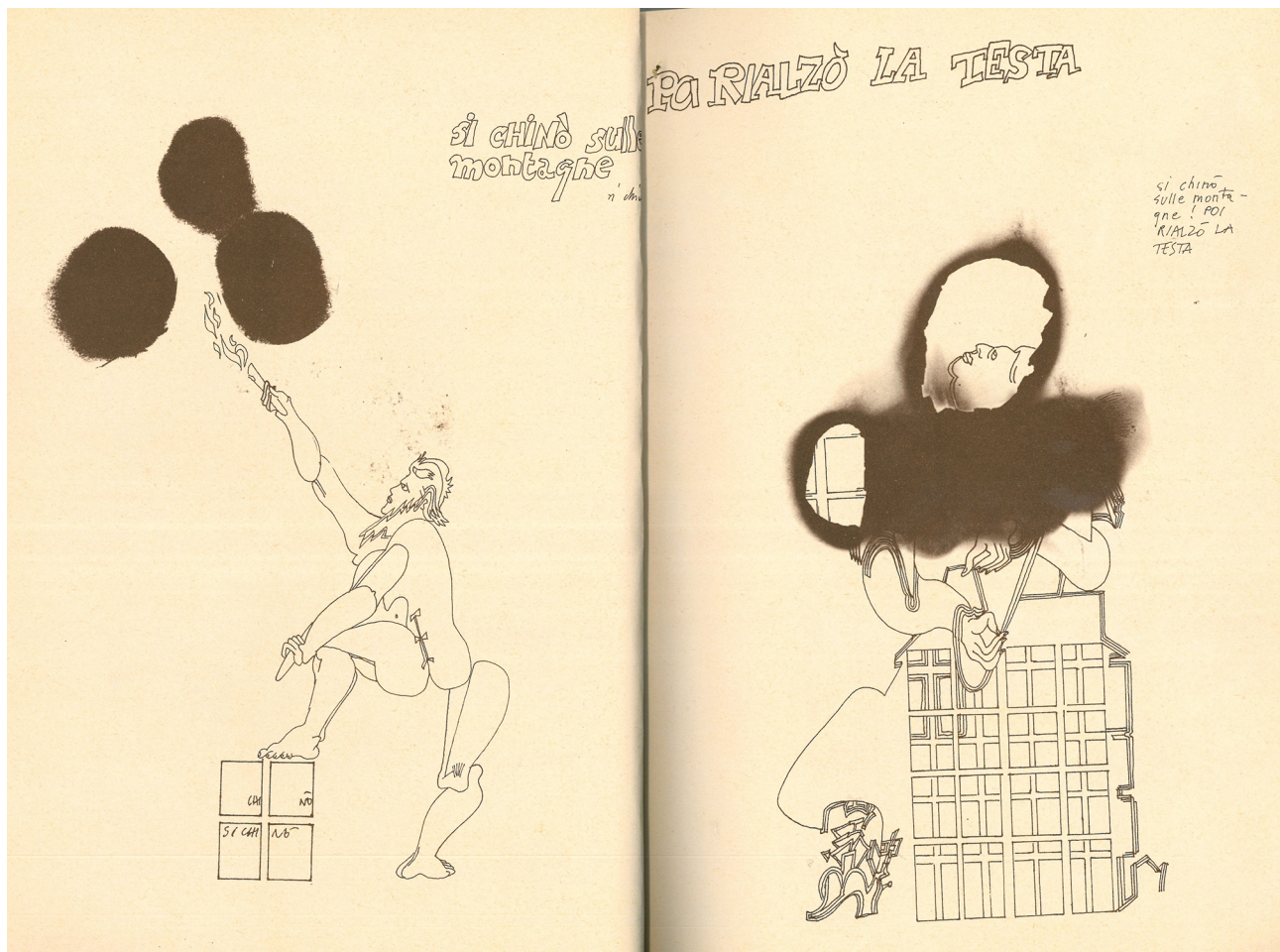


Illustration 4

back of the same figure upon turning the page, the same head peering through the leaf is repeated on the recto (illus. 5, right) and verso (illus. 6, left). This time the rest of the scene changes, as he helps a figure trapped in a comic grid to escape from the boundaries of representation. Who is he? Whom is he freeing? The minimalist design is open to possibilities, and the grammar of Italian allows the action to proceed without specifying a subject, who is missing from the quotation penned in the right margin to anchor the narrative to the rest of Blake's sentence: "e guardò le sue armate, che splendevano tingendo il mattino attraverso il cielo" ("[The King lean'd on his mountains, then lifted his head] and look'd on his armies, that shone / Through heaven," *French Revolution* 105-06, E 290). Historical coordinates are reintroduced by the composition of the page to the right in the same spread (illus. 6, right), which shows the Duke of Burgundy in eighteenth-century clothes, advancing between the reader and the grids behind him on the page and holding a hammer as if ready to strike, though

his position of power seems in doubt, miniaturized as he is as a lonely character within a page populated by an empty comic grid.

- 14 Instead of providing narrative rhythm, stability, and continuity, Costa's comic-panel grids challenge the expectation of sequential action subdivided in discrete spatiotemporal units. The disruption of narrative extends to playing havoc with its physical support by evoking and subverting bibliographic codes that normally ensure the sequencing of book parts. Their disorderly gathering is another sign of the breakup of representation and its symbolic order. A textual segment from an earlier portion of Blake's text is repeated over four pages: "L'impeto del duca stava sospeso nel consiglio" ("The fierce Duke hung over the council," *French Revolution* 87, E 290). In three of these repetitions (illus. 6, right; illus. 7, left and right) the quotation is written above the comic grid, in the position usually occupied by a running title. This typographical feature normally supports the

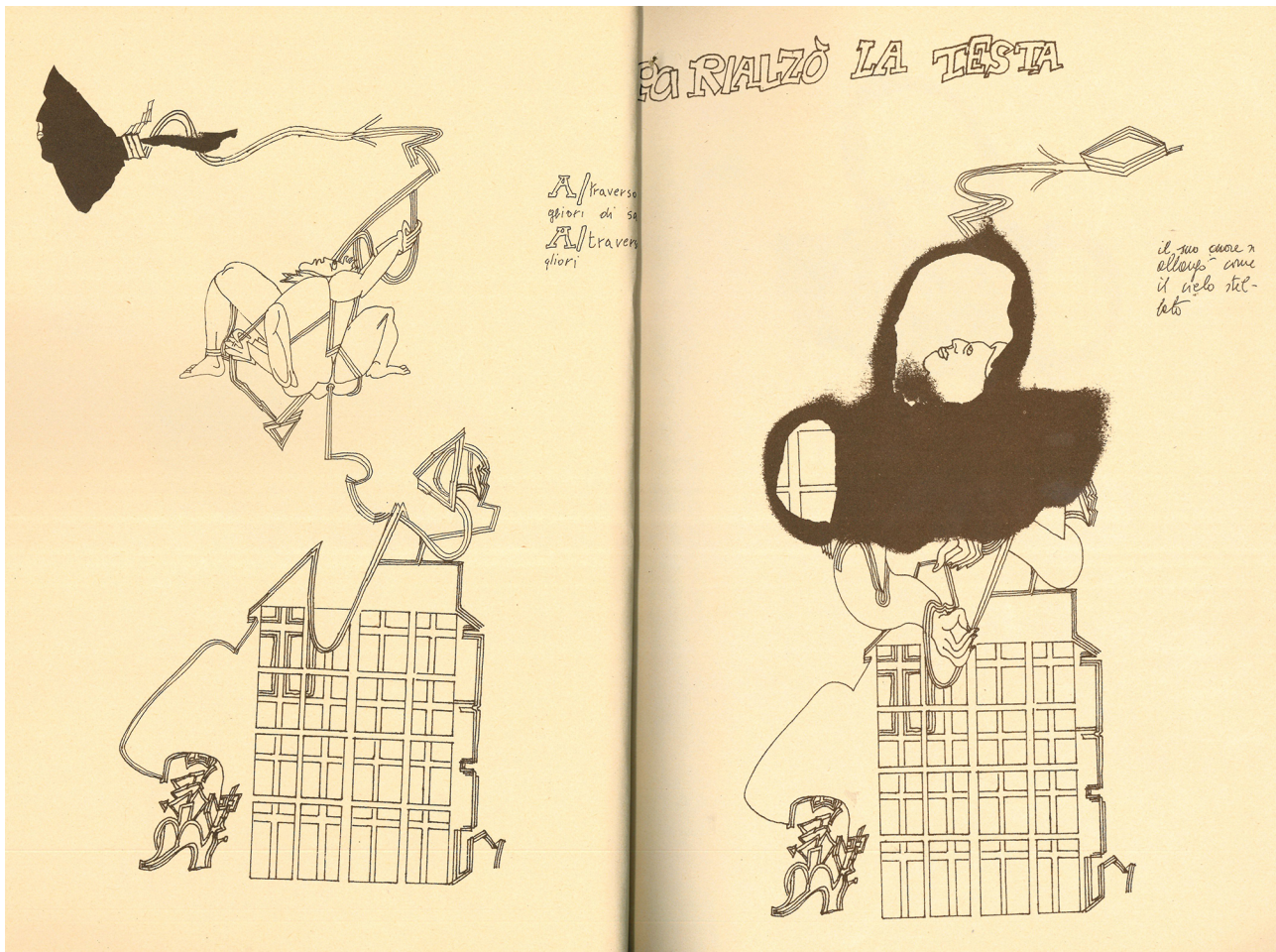


Illustration 5

integrity of a book's sequence, but Costa evokes this bibliographical device in order to subvert it. The perfect geometrical grid overseen by the Duke of Burgundy hanging over the council gives way to a page spread occupied by two empty grids that begin to show signs of dissymmetry (illus. 7). While the quotation at the top suggests cohesion, its function is destabilized by another bibliographical code entered at the bottom of the spread, a misplaced "errata corrigé" positioned in the middle, rather than at the end, of the book. Upon turning the page again, we find that the quotation has moved to a different position in the layout: it has migrated to the bottom-left margin of the right-hand page, near the page gutter (illus. 8, right). Just as the quotation has lost its typographical function as a running head, the frames of the comic panels fall apart. The revolution takes a bibliographic form in which the duke and the grid are edited out of the page.

15 Costa's reading of *The French Revolution* is informed by Italian politics of the time. *Blake in Beulah* was published in October 1977, in a context of escalating students' and workers' demonstrations, civil unrest, and police repression. Over the course of the year the comic strip became a preferred medium of the underground student movement. The most explicit evocation of this political context appears in the juxtaposition of a contemporary text to a passage from *The French Revolution*. In the expanded space freed from the comic grid, signs of erasure suggest a redacted text, irregular blotches evoke bloodstains, and a mower looks on, while another figure lying on the ground seems to be holding a guitar (illus. 9, right). The bottom part of the page is occupied by a comic strip bearing lines from *The French Revolution* distributed at the top of its three panels: "Buia nebbia intorno a me," "Buia nebbia rulla," "rulla oscurando la scrittura sacra oscurando la scrittura" ("Dark mists roll round me and blot the writing of God," *French Revolution* 108, E 291). In Blake's text "the writing of God / Written in my bos-

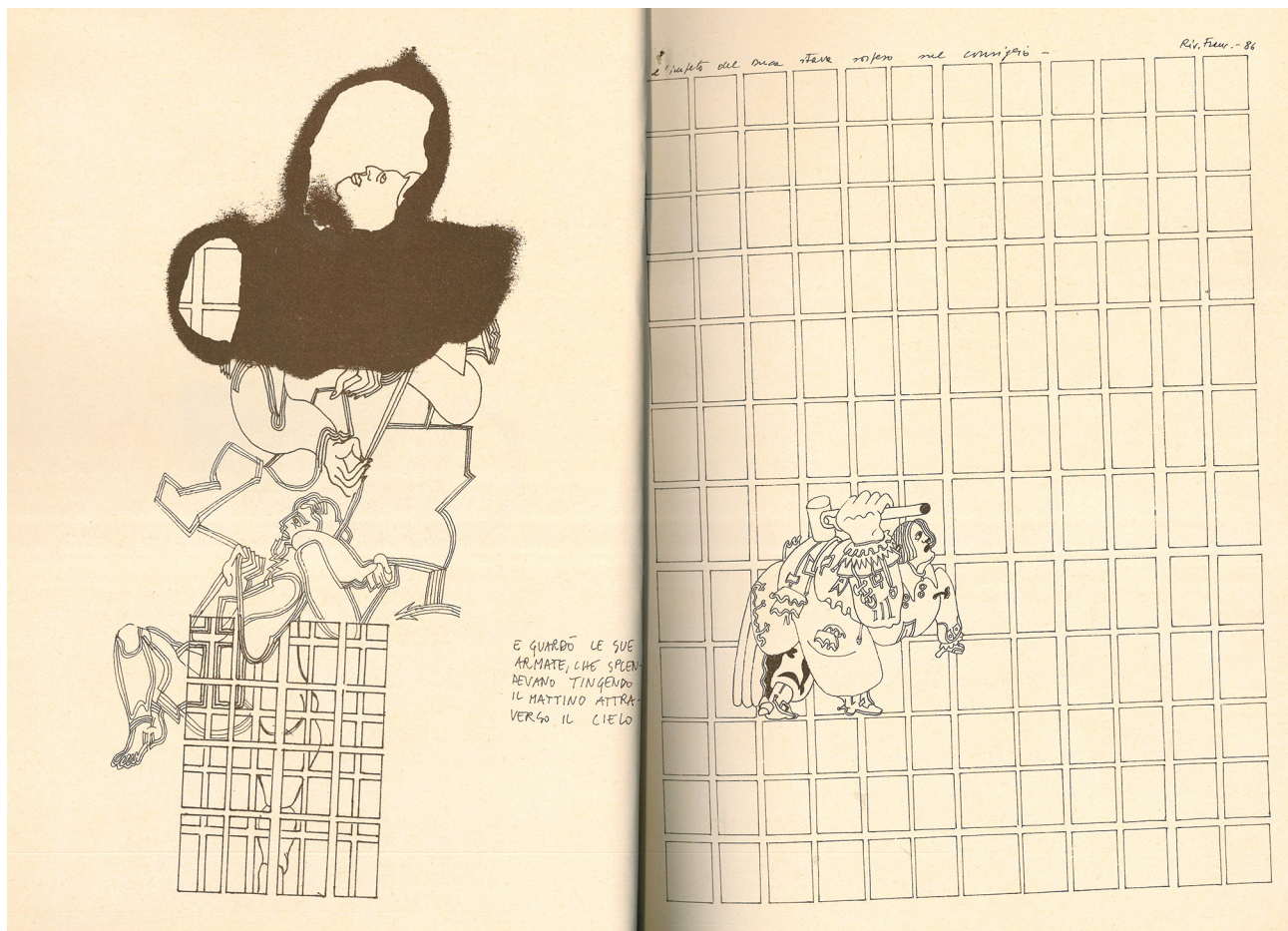


Illustration 6

om” that is being blotted out refers to the king, whose divine right is endangered by the revolutionary process. In Costa’s script the “sacred writing” is detached from the possessive that attributes it to the king and inscribed around a double-headed head wearing a tie, which evokes a reactionary figure. The three views of the man’s head suggest the identifying protocols of a police file, with a frontal view in the central panel and profiles in the left and right panels. The character’s eyes are obscured by black rectangles, as if blindfolded by what looks like a redaction, just like the markings that seem to redact text at the top of the page.

- 16 What is the sacred scripture that is being obscured? In the context of this page the answer might be found on the following recto (illus. 10, right), which seems to be a duplicate of this scene, apart from a new element in place of the redacted text. This new element stands out for being the only instance of typographical text in the comic book. It looks like a newspaper cutting, which appears to have been

pasted at the top of the page and then turned into a speech bubble uttered by a speaking head suspended in midair. The quotation reads “La pratica della felicità è sovversiva, e la sua rappresentazione è istigazione a commettere reato, a sovvertire l’ordine di cose presenti” (“The practice of happiness is subversive, and its representation is an incitement to commit a crime, to subvert the order of things at hand”). The source is identified in a handwritten footnote as “Chi ha ucciso Majakovskij’ di F. Berardi (BIFO),”²⁰ Published by Squi/libri a few months earlier, in June 1977, Berardi’s novel, subtitled “romanzo rivoluzionario” (“revolutionary novel”), juxtaposes different historical characters and layers: a factory worker, a 1968 activist, and the revolutionary Russian poet Vladimir Majakovskij, who enjoyed a range of appearances in the political comic-book scene of 1977.²¹ These different historical moments are alternated in the

20. See Berardi 89.

21. See Castaldi.

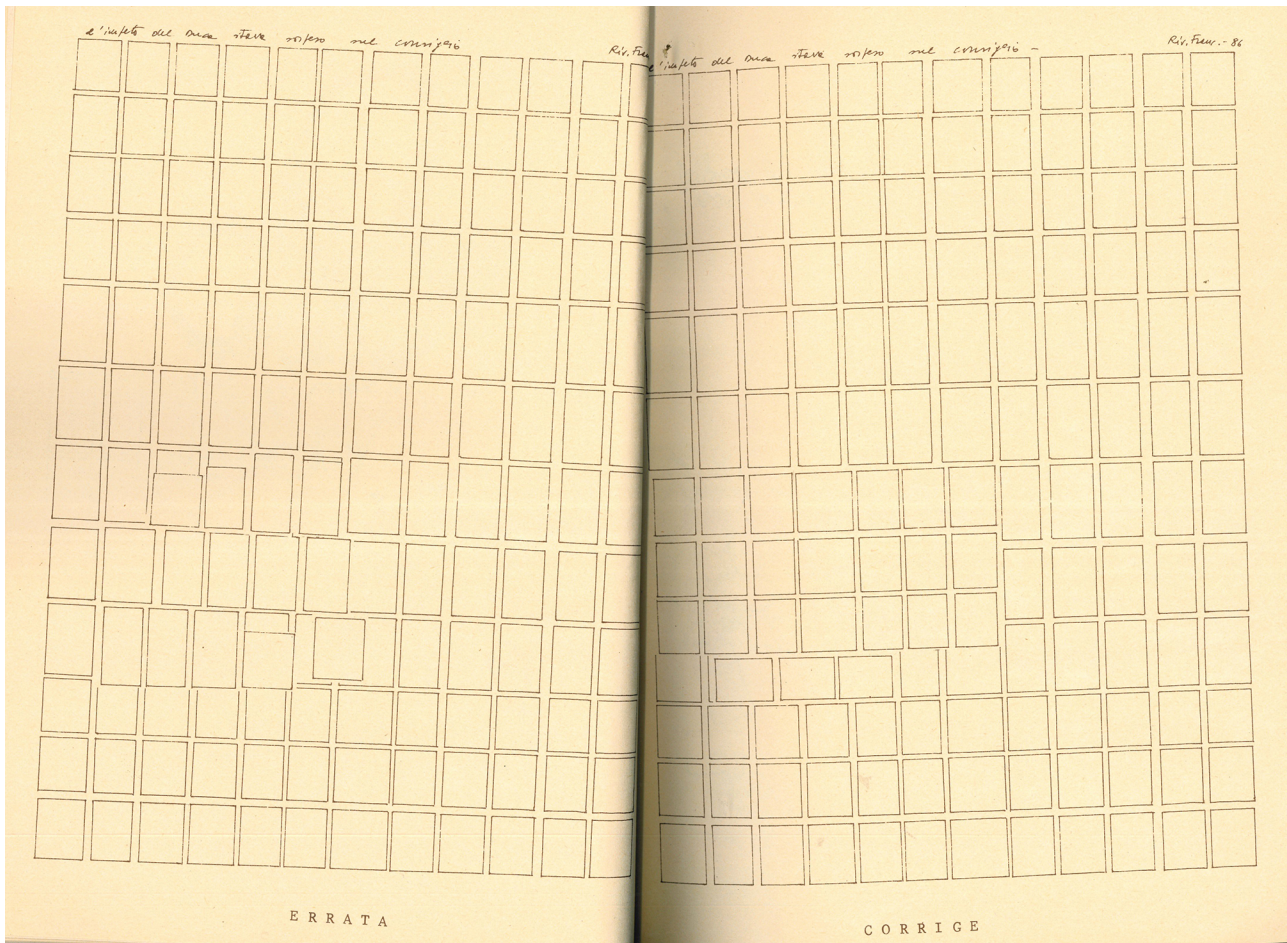


Illustration 7

novel as if in parallel montage, working toward an escalation from strikes to violence.

- 17 The speech bubble added to the newspaper clipping evokes the parodic cut-up style of the repurposed newspaper clippings published in *A/traverso* (1975–81), a Maoist-Dadaist militant avant-garde journal cofounded by Berardi and dedicated to subverting the orders of discourse. Costa’s alignment with *A/traverso* is expressed in his prefatory statement to *Blake in Beulah*: “W. B. *a/traversa* la Rivoluzione Francese. Ne stermina i fantasmi” (my italics; “W. B. crosses the French Revolution. Exterminates its phantoms”). The *A/traverso* collective also issued the volume *Alice è il diavolo. Sulla strada di Majakovskij: testi per una pratica di comunicazione sovversiva* (1976) (*Alice Is the Devil. Following in the Footsteps of Majakovskij: Texts for a Subversive Communication Practice*), which reproduces a statement that Berardi made from prison in March 1976 after being arrested—under the erroneous apprehension that

he was a member of the Red Brigades—on the charges of participation in an illegal armed formation and incitement to commit a crime. His statement includes the claim that “the practice of happiness is subversive when it becomes collective.”²² The first part is repeated in Berardi’s novel and

22. *La pratica della felicità è sovversiva quando la si collettivizza* la nostra volontà di felicità e di liberazione è il loro terrore, e reagiscono terrorizzandoci con il carcere, quando la repressione del lavoro, della famiglia patriarcale e del sessismo non bastano più.

This statement was issued from prison, 20 March 1976, presented at writers’ conferences by the *A/traverso* Collective, and published in *Alice è il diavolo* 45.

The practice of happiness is subversive when it becomes collective.

Our will for happiness and liberation is their terror, and they react by terrorizing us with prison, when the repression of work, of the patriarchal family, and of sexism is not enough. (“Radio Alice—Free Radio” 133)

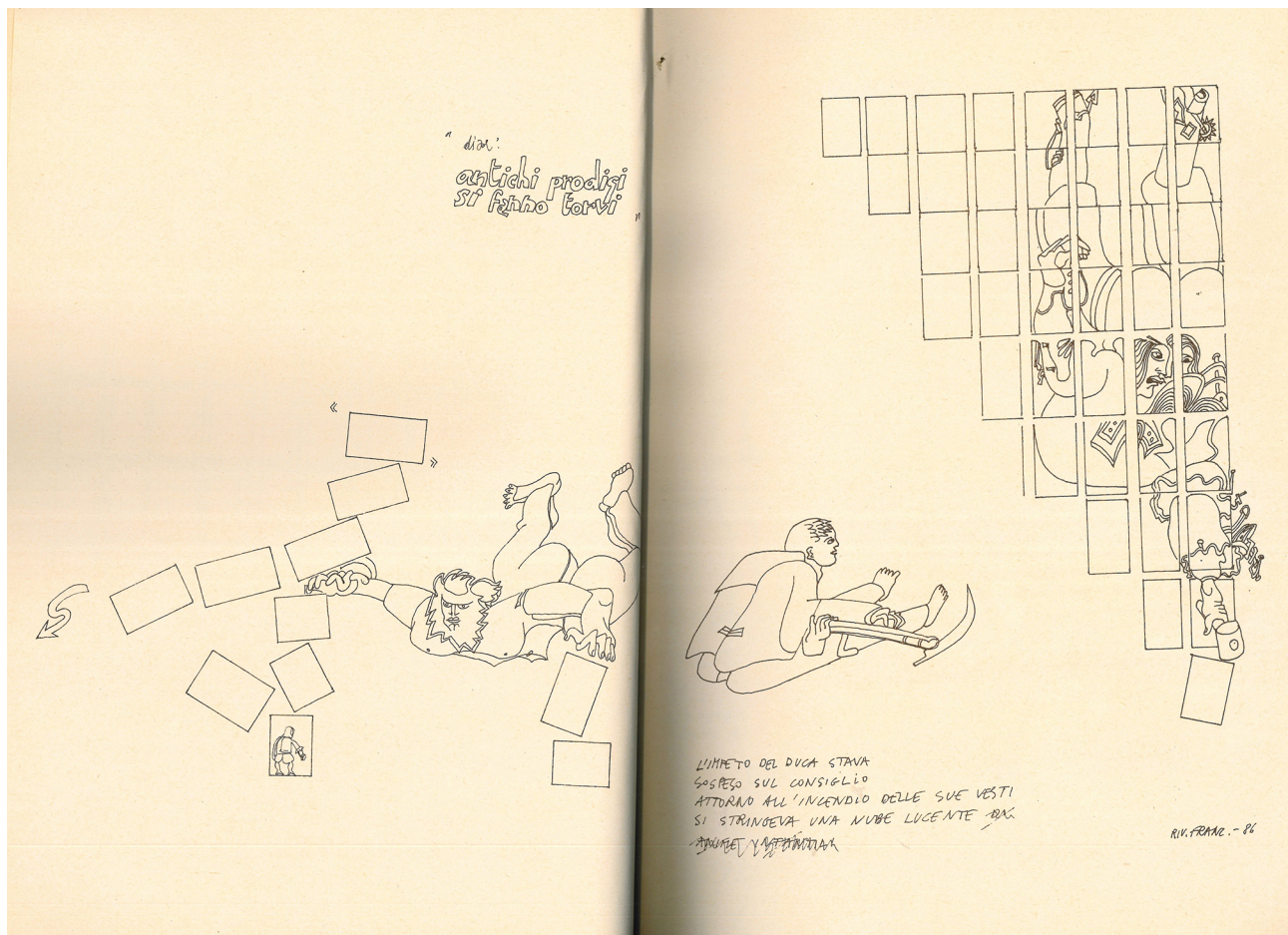


Illustration 8

quoted by Costa, but the subversive practice of happiness is shifted from utopia to praxis: happiness requires joining the personal with the political, subverting the order of things. In the dystopian context of state repression, its representation leads to a criminal offense.

- 18 *Alice è il diavolo* looked to Majakovskij to document and theorize the “subversive” practice of its associated Radio Alice (1976–77), also cofounded by Berardi. Established after the end of the state monopoly of the airwaves, which had been declared illegal by the Constitutional Court in December 1974, Radio Alice was a local free radio station advocating “comunicazione liberata” (“freed communication”) or “comunicazione diretta” (“direct communication”). It pioneered the practice of airing spontaneous interventions from people calling in, as opposed to delegated forms associated with representative democracy. On 11 March 1977 it aired witness accounts of the conflict between demonstrators and police and covered the death of student Francesco

Lorusso, shot dead by police that day. The police held Radio Alice responsible for the organization of the mass demonstrations that followed in Bologna and Rome on 11 and 12 March, arrested its collective, and shut down the station. In this context, the Italian translation of Blake’s words—“oscurando la scrittura sacra” (“blot[ting] the writing of God,” *French Revolution* 108, E 291)—activates a technical reference to the legal initiative that takes a radio or television station off the air (“oscuramento” [“blackout”]). Because Berardi was en route to the Rome demonstration, he escaped and eventually managed to reach Paris, where Guattari welcomed him into his home until March 1978, though he was briefly arrested there in July 1977 in conjunction with the publication of *Chi ha ucciso Majakovskij*. Costa’s acknowledgement of Berardi while he was a fugitive in Paris was a risky gesture.

- 19 Costa’s left-leaning bibliographic acts inflect the physiological operations of the book, using the eye’s movement from

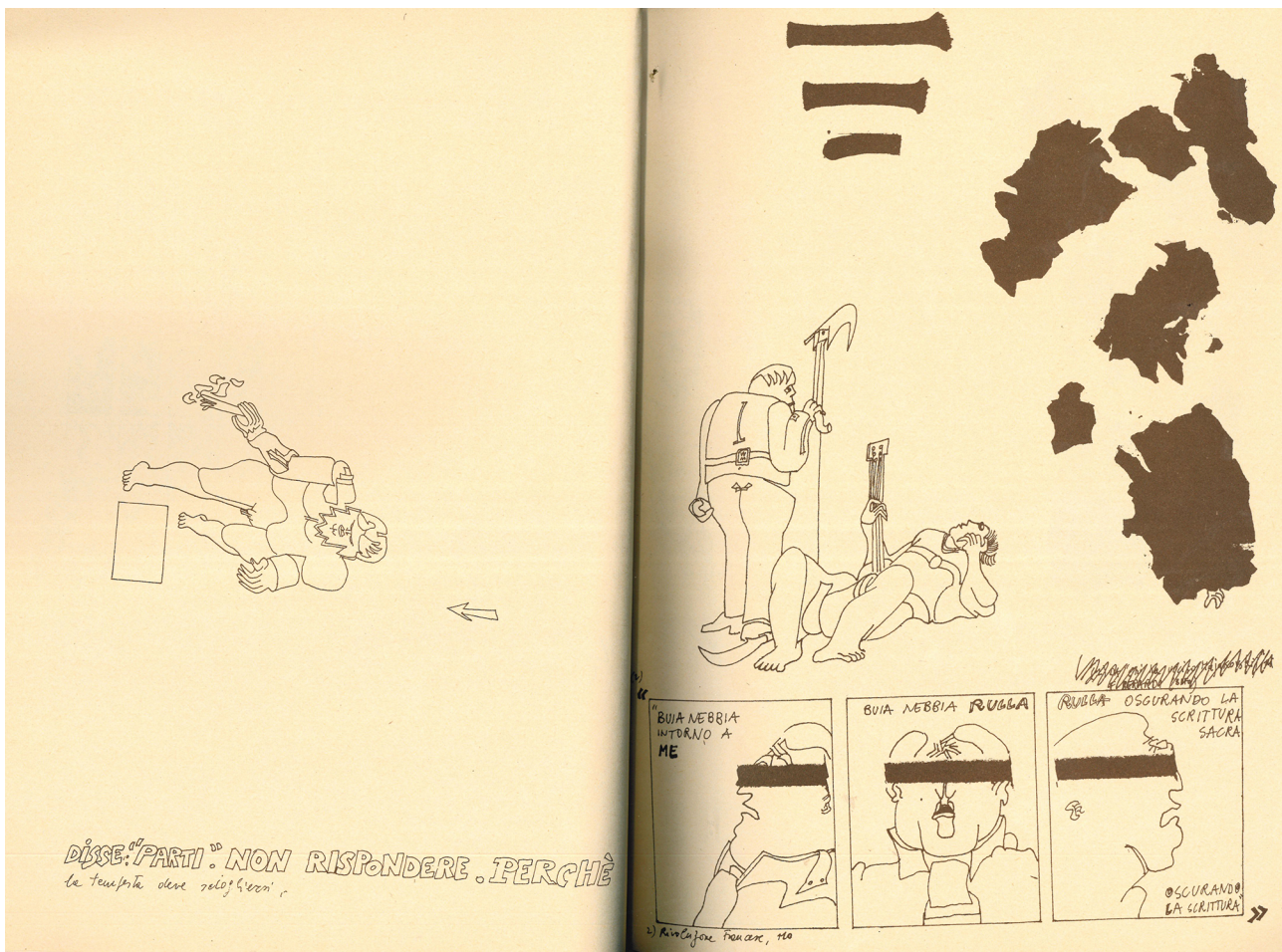


Illustration 9

right to left to produce left-wing acts of revision and resistance to public versions of history. Turning the pages means turning the eyes from right to left, reading backwards, against the grain. Consider the pages on the left of the two spreads devoted to the redacted and possibly bloodstained scene. On the left-hand side of the first spread (illus. 9, left), the incendiary agent of revolution is depicted walking outward, with an arrow inviting him to exit the empty page. A heading at the bottom of the page reads “DISSE: ‘PARTI.’ NON RISPONDERE. PERCHÈ la tempesta deve sciogliersi” (“Depart, answer not, for the tempest must fall,” *French Revolution* 115, E 291). Blake’s words are spoken by the king to Burgundy, but in Costa’s page spread they take on a different meaning in the context of Berardi’s predicament as a fugitive. To draw a speaking head voicing an excerpt from Berardi’s work above what look like bloodstains and redacted police-style identity photos (illus. 10, right) meant to invite the reader to apply Blake’s words about the French Revolution to contemporary politics. The

“bloodstains” on the first recto (illus. 9, right) are, upon turning the page, revealed to be holes burned by two incendiary naked figures on the verso (illus. 10, left): there is no crime scene after all. The mower and the guitar player are peaceful bystanders, illustrating Berardi’s claim that the practice of happiness is subversive, and suggesting how its representation can be demonized as a criminal act. Costa’s political bibliography exploits the operations of the book format as a physical object to lead the reader’s eye from left to right and from right to left, across the double time of the French Revolution and the revolutionary present.

- 20 The association of happiness, subversion, and crime activates another Blakean context: “And thence in Beulah they are stolen by secret amorous theft, / Till they have had Punishment enough to make them commit Crimes” (*Jerusalem* 69.26-27, E 223). These lines are represented later in *Blake in Beulah* in a scene escalating from sex to violence, illustrated with a shooting pistol. The motif of the pistol had al-

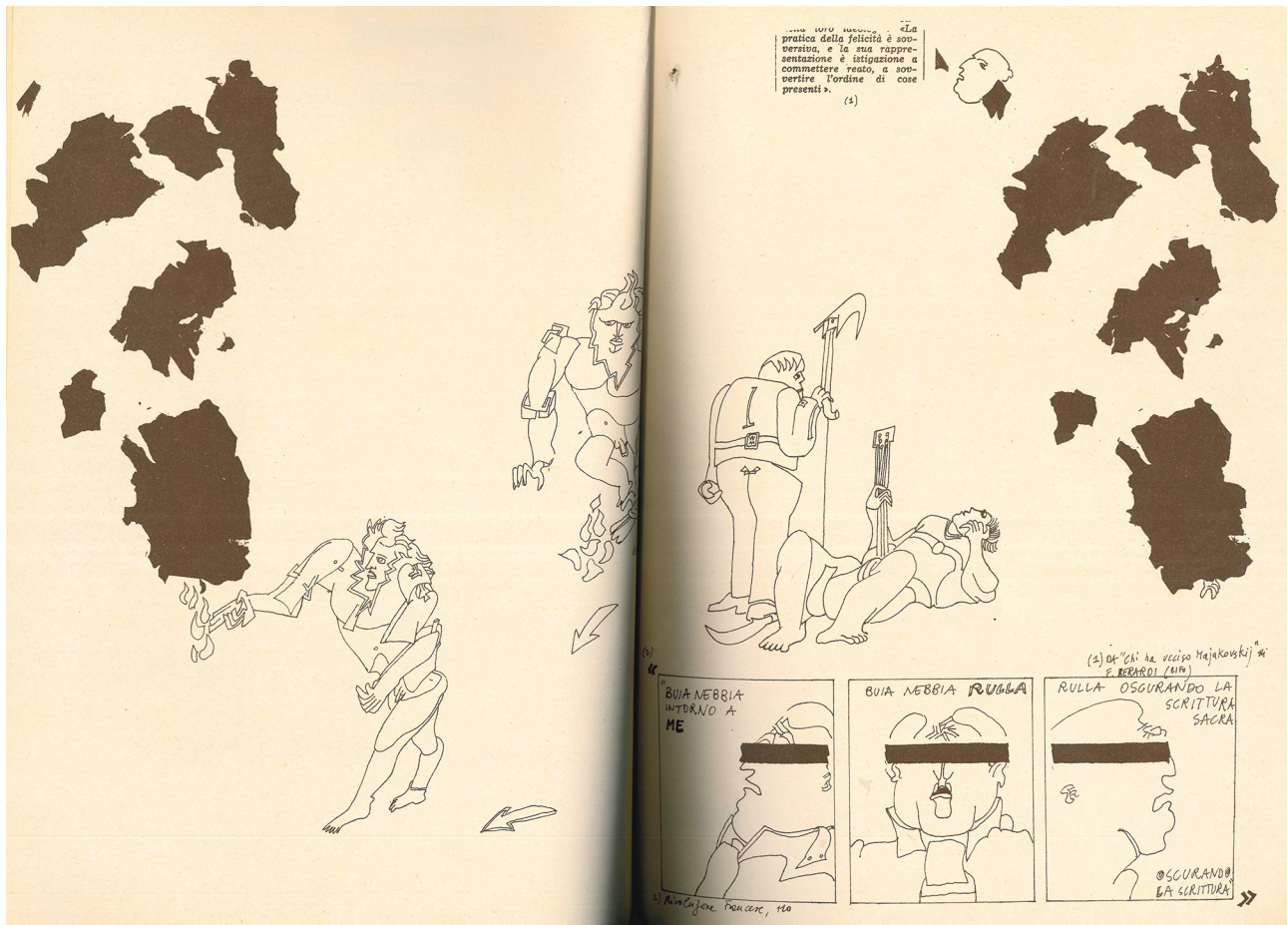


Illustration 10

ready been deployed by Costa in another cartoon strip published in the same year in the periodical *Alter Alter*, under the title “Western Mode Retro.” There he drew holes in the page to mark the trajectories and effects of gunshots, an ironic pop-art allusion to Lucio Fontana’s Spatial Concepts.²³ While Fontana experimented with the infinite opened up by holes that he ripped through the sides of the canvas and the page as part of a metaphysical investigation of his media, Costa’s gunshot holes take on other meanings in the context of the escalation of political violence in 1977. In evoking the violent associations of the hole through the page, his play with the materiality of the medium is part of a wider revolutionary aesthetics. In a review of Nanni Balestrini’s novel *La violenza illustrata* published

in the newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* in 1976, Umberto Eco presents Balestrini as “a red terrorist of literature” (“un terrorista rosso della letteratura”). Balestrini’s avant-garde experiments include newspaper collages that dislocate the layout of letterpress printing. His novel relays episodes of civil unrest in which Molotov cocktails are thrown through the windows of the teletype room of *Il Corriere della Sera*. In Italian, the sentence “scompigliate le righe di piombo”²⁴ can be read as both a description of a past action (“the lines of lead were disrupted”) and an imperative to “disrupt the lines of lead,” no longer locked in the prison-house of typography. Balestrini’s “lead,” in other words, refers to the materiality of type in newspaper print and also evokes terrorist lines of fire. According to Eco, Balestrini’s self-reflexive politics of the medium was thus “a technique of cultural terrorism” (“una tecnica di terrorismo culturale”).

23. For a discussion of “Western Mode Retro,” see Anceschi. For a very different association, consider the metaphysical depth that Ungaretti’s hermetic *Apocalissi e sedici traduzioni* (1965) gains from inserting a Spatial Concept by Fontana in the middle of the Blake section (see Calé 142-43).

24. Balestrini 29.

- 21 In one of his 1977 diaries, Pablo Echaurren advocates “trespassing the borders imposed by the order of discourse which is always discourse of order”²⁵ in the name of a rhizomatic horizontal art that disrupts the concept of the author, the classic, and the commercial world of literary property associated with them.²⁶ While the author is “the principle of unity in writing,” as Michel Foucault argues, the parodic and subversive citational practice of the avant-garde plays with interruption, dissemination, and proliferation. The name of the author might be used to limit the proliferation of meaning, but it can also identify “the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts.”²⁷ Blake’s name in Costa’s title stands for a visionary sexual and political utopia. Costa’s intervention abstracts excerpts from their original grammatical and syntactical cohesion, and from the spatiotemporal coordinates of Blake’s works. As Blake’s sentences shift from English to Italian, from the more defined subject positions required by English to the more abstract possibilities of Italian, verbs become detached from their subjects and open to shifting subject positions. Sentences that Blake attributes to the king float free, ready to be appropriated by different historical figures enacting new visionary possibilities for a new time and space of revolution. In so doing, Costa’s Italian Blake produces a visionary encoding for an open-ended history of the present.

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25. “tracimiamo oltre gli argini dei margini imposti dall’ordine del discorso che è sempre discorso dell’ordine.”
26. Notebook, images 6 and 8, in the Pablo Echaurren Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, <<https://www.postwarcultureatbeinecke.org/pabloechaurren?lightbox=image2k>> and <<https://www.postwarcultureatbeinecke.org/pabloechaurren?lightbox=image1o7v>>.
27. Foucault 128, 131. Foucault’s essay was delivered as a lecture at the Collège de France and published in 1969; it was translated into Italian and published with Foucault’s literary writings by Feltrinelli in 1971.
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