



**Giovanni Tranchida Editore**

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**I**t was a cold December morning when the admiral Carrero Blanco, the appointed successor of Francisco Franco, named “The Ogre” by the anti-Francoists, was coming home from the church where every day he used to attend Mass. That cold December morning his humdrum routine was violently cut off by 75 kilos of explosive, placed under the road surface. At that very moment, while “The Ogre” was taking flight with his Dodge over Madrid sky, dictatorship rapidly began to crumble.

Four young Basque men, the “Txikia Commando” - Txikia was the name of one of their companions killed by the Francoist police - interrupted the government project to keep the regime alive after the Franco's death.

Driven by an enormous love of freedom, which made them get over doubts and hesitations, and which was so big to made them able to bear the impossibility to have a family, relationships, to live a normal life, the Commando realized something incredible: they could hit strongly the dictatorship, a political wreck deep inside the Western Europe, which had been going on for four decades. “Commando Txikia” bravery and strong perseverance gave Spain the chance to set free from dictatorship and oppression. But it has not been the same for the Basque people, whos right to be a recognized nation was denied also after the built of democracy.

Actually Spain is free from despotism, but Euskal Herria is still an occupied country. Even though no one speaks about that, the Basques – the Europe natives – are still trying to free their people, even if the risk is prison, torture, or their life. The symbol of the Basque people history is Gorka's epilogue, the charismatic leader of the Commando, tragic hero in another cold December morning, five years later.



**Roberto Betz**, graduated in 1989 in Information Science, was born in Milan in 1964. He has been pupil at Scuola Forrester from 2003 to 2007. Tranchida has already published by him *La guerra di Caio* (2008, Caio's war).

## The Blood and the Freedom Interview with Roberto Betz

*In La guerra di Caio you focused a deep attention on the subject of words and language. While deciding on who's side he should be, Caio said: «I say because they had different words inside. Or maybe all of this depends just on fate; one is born with words inside and that's all. Or perhaps you can become like this, I don't really know [...] But now nothing is as before; these questions hammer my brain. It may be words are being born inside of me as well.» On the opposite, all characters in Il sangue e la libertà, have strong, hard words they*

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*use to carry on radical choices. Could we tell the same in these days, or actually in the new generations a deep language is lacking – the language of politics and the social language?*

This kind of language had become weaker and weaker, especially the social one. Now it has a side role in youths' speech. At times you can see an eventual rebirthing, but it is often a fleeting talk: what is missing is the outlet in which to channel language.

The quotation you brought up in your question are referred to September 8th 1943, a moment in Italian history where Caio felt a new awareness was coming up. He wondered, looking for words as you said, because he realized that only words could give a meaning to the future. People like him, on the whole, had nothing else but the opportunity to change things without having the proper awareness. Words are basic to build awareness, to understand, to involve, to gain acknowledgement and define new paths.

Gorka, the main character of *Il sangue e la libertà*, in this sense starts on his task being favoured: the ideals Caio had fought for (in another historical moment, in another Country) had contributed creating a substrate for the new after-war European scenario and they had spread on a large scale. Those ideas were held in high consideration and even the stubborn Franchist Spain, despite the bans, was infected. In that moment people thought that defeat authority's arrogance. Gorka's occurrences take place in the '70s, when the protest and the strong criticism against authority, together with the attempts to knock down or humanize capitalism were built-in in the usual political discussion. Young people really thought that happiness could be reached through practicing politics. They used to see it as an instrument to affirm their ideals. In these days this happens no more. Criticizing is a bounce matter and we are enduring the defeat we have had so that an alternative thought on the world is not possible anymore. Since the protagonists of those days have been rendered harmless, new generations not having any reference, ask themselves: what can we do? It's bound to be like this until the very priority won't become to knock down authority's insolence, that's empoisoning civil society.

*Whilst La guerra di Caio spoke of a modification, a maturation, in Il sangue e la libertà nobody undergo a radical change: all characters are very aware of what they do and don't look back since they know what's their risk. Is it harder to write about the reason of an awareness process, or on*

*the process itself? In this difference, on the narrative point of view, it's necessary a stop to enlighten very different sides, or maybe it's needed to stress the unbalancing between how and why. For the writer how is to be managed this lack of balance?*

It is true, in *Il sangue e la libertà* characters do not change much, even if they act in order to produce the change. What has been more difficult to describe was what happened after having gained awareness. *Il sangue e la libertà* mirrored the very same trouble that all of us face when they have to go for an important choice: after struggle, doubts, difficulties and tearings while deciding, here come the hardest time: acting coherently to produce the change you want to take place. It is not casual that *La guerra di Caio* ends in the precise moment when the main character had decided to act, but beyond last pages, where the weight of action lies on someone else's shoulders, he keeps a sort of innocence, for no one knows about his fate. His task (on the narrative side) has come to an end: his choice's accomplished, he came close to partisans. For me this is the deepest meaning of his long course.

But is in the moment of action that you sum up the consequences of your choices, and this is why I felt to explain it better to Caio's readers.

From the narrative point of view it is easier to build a progressive-awareness story. The situation allows to give more liveliness to characters. They may look unfinished until the decision has been taken; they may look weak, at destiny's mercy, uncertain but on the whole more captivating and human.

Putting on the stage already self-declared characters brings more troubles: you run the high risk to make them caricatures or fake characters. On the contrary they have to act and move, and to do it they must have something on their minds for sure, but they have to soil their hands. Gorka and his companions reach a moment I hadn't prepared for Caio, the hardest to bring on and endure, that I couldn't force the previous work's readers to get: the moment of the loss of innocence and the cross of the inevitable consequences.

*«Never as in this moment it is the small history that I am passionate with.» This famous Nuto Revelli's statement is quite suitable with your work. In your books history with capital H is always on the background, while you focus your attention on human small history surely involved in the general picture but not outstanding in history books. Is it a matter of style or is it a way not to forget those who stay aback and who often pay a worse consequence than first row men? An then:*

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*why do you feel pushed to write about historical facts really occurred?*

I have multiple explanations. First of all I have an interest and passion for History: it often seems to me the only reasonable compass to explain our present. I am obsessed by authority's arrogance: it annoys me, I cannot stand it, and to fight against it, beyond indignation and a non-violent antagonist position, I try to understand what has already happened and I write on it. The historical novel offers a comprehension of what conventional texts won't give: human occurrences, states of mind, fears, weaknesses, passions, the small stories of individuals that History left behind. It also allows me to find the answers to questions that trouble me: why those 20 year-old youths loved freedom to the very extent of death? Were they more naïve than us? More aware? More desperate? Or they simply had no privilege to protect? An then up to what extent you can go to conquer freedom? Is there a limit? Who decides on it? I sit possible to reform the authority's régime? If so, why the great changes in History have occurred only after thraumatological facts?

Technically, the historical novel gives me the possibility to build a grid where I can settle my small story. Using the real facts' chronology it is easier to put it for it already has defines sequences.

*Writing a historical novel means long research and precision. In this specific case facts are far from history books. How much research and study did it take to engage on a novel on Basque independence struggles and the end of Franchism? Was it hard to get materials?*

It is the hardest part of the work. A veritable description is based on a huge quantity of information. A small mistake would compromise the whole work. I have benn lucky enough to move quite often and for a long time to Spain. Mainly I am grateful for Giovanni Lagonegro's help and advice; he is the Italian most renowned expert in Basque history and he enlightened me many times to uncode facts occurred.

*Women are never the main characters in your books, but all the same they have very important roles and "build the story" as much as the men they support. Do you think that behind a great man always stands a great woman as well?*

I know that there are great women before, behind, aside, and that they often are forgotten. Women's role is fundamental to give balance to the narrative world I create. I like creating women charac-

ters, and maybe one day I might be able to make them the absolute protagonists. I haven't done it yet out of respect. Women's psychology is a very complex one and I don't feel I can sketch really intense feminine characters. At present I write on meaningful co-protagonists.

*Many recent and past 'uncomfortable' history episodes tend to be easily forgotten, no matter in what part of the world. La guerra di Caio told partially the story of Val d'Ossola partisans. Il sangue e la libertà tells about the end of Franchism and "democracy" instituted soon afterwards. These modifications have been understood after many years passed though. Here is a question about present days: is there something happening we are not aware of, for example in Italy? Do you think that an actual change is going on just now and we all can't perceive it, even if maybe we will while reading on tomorrow's history books?*

We have no perception that freedom is being taken away from us bit by bit, not only in Italy. Let's think on labour contracts: nowadays we have to suppose that future life will be ever uncertain. I am thinking also that we've been taken away the possibility to choose our favourite politicians, whose identity is decided by the Parties. We witness continuous attacks to our Constitution, which is a founding document for who, like Caio, fought to write it. I think of strike prohibition, introduced in the PA and I fear that will rule in all sectors. I think of marketing and advertisement's market, tightly held by a small group of people who have the strongest influence on information, which brings to total control connected with powers centres. I think of bankers, who do not protect investors but cruelly despoil them, speculating on their savings, on their loans, their retirement bonuses, private pensions, credits and bonds. Finance has grasped greedily everybody's savings. I think of the general behaviours towards the different ones, the foreigners, the weak... recently some hallucinating episodes have occurred: wounded foreigners left uncured because they were clandestines. I think of the moral decay which allows impunity for the most sly, rich and powerful. I think of robberies we keep on experiencing by the corrupted hands of those who consider the State as a property. I think of the attacked pensions system, resisting against dismantling, or of the Italian Army, in a permanent war since years, against all Constitutional principles. On the whole what is happening is what I call the artichoke's politics: if you own an artichoke, that's your potential freedom and is all you have, if they steal it from you,

you get angry and try to defend it as much as you can. But what is stolen is just a leaf, you say who cares, I got so many, and it's not worthwhile a fight for just a leaf. But after the first one, they take away a second one, then another, until bit by bit you find out that what's left is but its heart, tender and unprotected.

*Il sangue e la libertà talks about the most important episode during the end of Franchism: the successful attack on Franco's right hand, the Ogre, Admiral Carrero Blanco. It is not universally known that the attack was carried on by a group of Basque Independentists, this book's main characters. The novel puts an accent is their desire to preserve their land, their language, tradition and culture. They were the first standing against tyranny. The usual association with those Independists is the idea of terrorism. What is your personal point of view?*

It is a long and articulated matter. First of all it will be useful to remind that Basque Independists have existed at all times. They are the most ancient and obstinate people in Europe: they survived and never were conquered not they left behind their culture and language. For us Europeans they stand as the equivalent of the Native Americans. Struggles with Spain are just the most recent episode that reminds of a millenary history lived to decide their own cultural destiny. Basque people do not refer to independence because of economic reasons or because of fear to lose their well-being compared to the Southern populations. They do it because they struggle against the rigidity of borders traced on a small group of self-serving worthies.

Today Basque Region situation has reached a deadlock. On one side there is the government's repression towards independentists politicians; arrests, tortures, hard actions according to Franchist tradition and with repression originated by the socialist González with his death squadrons. On the other side there is an armed organization faithful with its foundation principles, that has intensified its actions' toughness. And then there are the Basque Independentists, the non-violent majority of the community.

The recent socialist Zapatero government, after having shily faltered about an innovative solution (that revealed itself being just propaganda), decided to isolate the Basques assuming as illegal any independentist association. It pursued with the arrests and repression of non-violent people involved in politics on the line of a Latin American dictatorship. The State adopts the principle that punishment is needed against all those

who want to dismember the Reign. Their motto against independentism is: *todos es ETA*.

In my opinion a great mistake has taken place, for the solution, should it ever come, can't be but a political one. Armed independentism is an organization, and doesn't mean to become a party. It is the extreme shape of a quite wider movement felt as fundamental for the majority of Basque society, but if points of reference are missing at the core of the independentist front, there will be problems with negotiation. And in the meanwhile, the more the government chooses repression, the more the armed organization gains followers.

*Among the many themes touched in Il sangue e la libertà one of the strongest is the theme of friendship. Friendship between Gorka and Rosa, friendship among Gorka and his companions, but also the free, generous mutuality born among people who share the same ideals, the same Country and traditions. And you write about those relationships, those emotions, with a great warmth and lyricism, even when bonds are originated from doubts and shared fears. Do you think that today all of this is missing, and we can repair indifference and coldness among people?*

Friendship bonds create and consolidate especially in moments of difficulty, through the process of shared experiences. In my novels' case the political experience is all-absorbing. Today's indifference is due to the lack of shared position against the authority. Power has not changed, but is only less obvious than during the Fascism. We are missing a political response capable to put people together and address them towards a social shared modification. The authority corrupts by privileges: those who come closer to it, maybe from a political so-called alternative, often leave stains on their bank account and their former ideals, and in the end they come to think: I surrender, any reform is in fact impossible and I won't be involved by politicians' traps. But to do without politics means to do without the others.

*The characters in your books tell how it was necessary to undergo many sacrifices in order to preserve their ideals – do without a family, a quiet future. Gorka often says that his choice for militancy – what's more: armed militancy – made him a man unable to make and keep promises or projects. Only when he founds love with Maitte, he comes to think of the possibility to plan for a future. For any man though there is a moment when the doubt of sacrifice's usefulness is a trouble. Not for Gorka. Why is he different?*

Gorka is different because he has a superior sensitiveness. He is so sensitive that he can't stand the Franchists' abuses and he knows he has no choice. This is his nature: he could never stop, he instinctively tends towards sacrifice. Sure, when he meets Maite he discovers new perspectives, a part of him asks for a better life. But even in that very moment he doesn't discuss the effectiveness of his sacrifice, even to an extreme point. Apart from Marxism, I think that he has other strong pushes: his young age, the religious remainders of the to-do ethics and the universal belief that life is worth to be spent in a sacrifice for the others. The revolution man has so much in common with the mission man.

*In the novel you often talk about the Franchist's Régime (similar to other dictatorships) tactics with information: the way to persuade masses and bend their will. In Il sangue e la libertà this becomes an extreme topic: you put some questions also on the correct way to manage information on the part of those who fight against the authority: the resistance. Making proper differences, this is a problem touching anyone of us closely. Gorka, Rosa perhaps can suggest some trick to handle mediatic strategies. What do you think about it?*

Quoting Chomsky, information, top information, is a workshop to create consent. The partisans were classified as outlaws. The Spanish republicans were a bunch of atheists, rapers and murderers. The Basque independentists, that we come to know through Spanish media, are shortly defined as terrorists. The NATO armies instead, who drop billions of bombs on civilians, are the best freedom defenders. Someone has even got important prizes to carry on this weird peace processes. Democracy lies on the exercise of general consent, not on truncheons, and consents based on a convincing narration of facts: a subject that all writers know too well. Hollywood is an example to show how the American Myth has the power and the charm to spread among a large number of people. Those who know how to tell a story, even the story written by the very same Chomsky, could be winners: it is a persuasive story that

describes in all details the ways to construct information.

But generally the one who wins is the one who can tell a persuasive, simplicistic story, and, what's more, has the instruments to diffuse it broadly.

Words are the core of thoughts, of communication and of information. Words are powerful, they have a striking strength. This is why our words have to be tamed, controlled, and when they create uneasiness they must be confined in a small circle, for fear that someday someone may scream: the kings is naked!

What if someone believes it?

