

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Mobility Practices in Biancardi's *La vita agra*

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**Abstract:** *La vita agra* (1962) by Luciano Biancardi is one of the most iconic urban works of Italy's period of economic expansion. For Biancardi, Milan embodies the failure of the myth of progress, burdened by the rhythms of production that render life unbearable. In his portrayal of the city, Biancardi focuses on the everyday practices of movement and spatialization employed by different kinds of subjects, practices that are consistently shaped by social position. Through close reading, this study examines representations of mobility in order to reconstruct the author's critical perspective and the socio-economic context of Italy in the 1950s and 1960s.

**Keywords:** Biancardi; mobility; walking; literary urban studies; labour

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## Introduction

The statement that Luciano Bianciardi ‘is not a modern man, but an object of modernity’ (Coppola and Piccinini 2008: xxvi) underscores the fact that Biancardi does not actively interpret or shape his historical moment; rather, he experiences it directly and is shaped by it – if not ultimately crushed by it. Unable to integrate into the industrial Milan of the 1950s, Bianciardi is progressively worn down by the city, becoming an emblematic figure through which it becomes possible to grasp the profound social and cultural effects of postwar modernization.<sup>1</sup> His work offers a disenchanted interrogation of the city as both a material and symbolic space, foregrounding the failure of urban life and the ideological exhaustion of the myth of progress. Recurrent and structurally central in his writings, the city thus emerges as a privileged analytical lens through which the contradictions and consequences of modernity are articulated.

In his first book, *Il lavoro culturale* (1957), urbanisation is still portrayed as a form of renewal in opposition to an obtuse provincial world (‘We often went to watch our city grow, to see it advance victoriously into the countryside, against the countryside, conquering more land’ (14)). In *La vita agra*, by contrast, the move to Milan – where Bianciardi is initially employed by Feltrinelli as a salaried worker and later, after his dismissal in 1957, becomes a freelance worker – marks the collapse of any remaining faith in urban dynamism.<sup>2</sup> Published in September 1962, *La vita agra* quickly became a manifesto against the ‘identified, precise and labelled phenomenon’ known as the ‘Italian miracle’ (174): the period of rapid economic growth and social transformation that, between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, transformed Italy from a largely agricultural country into an industrial power. For Bianciardi, Milan thus comes to embody both the culmination of this process of growth and the tangible evidence of its failure. The city gradually turns into a hostile and despairing space, a showcase of consumerism, individualism and exploitation. Here, Bianciardi experiences the ‘intensification of nervous life’ (Simmel 1950: 409), which, under the pressure of a continuous flow of stimuli, obligations and rhythms, produces a genuine ‘physical, ideological, contemptuous rejection of the city’ (Corrias 1993: 94). While critics have long acknowledged the central role of the urban context and the alienation it generates in *La vita agra*, little attention has been paid to the fact that the narrating subject is almost constantly in motion, even when he is not truly going anywhere.

This article therefore focuses on the representation of urban mobility in Bianciardi and argues that the mobile practices enacted by the novel’s protagonist allow the city to be reproduced on multiple levels, encompassing not only its physical dimension but also its social and emotional ones. In this way, my aim is to demonstrate that the origin of the malaise of urban consumerist life initially stems from a condition of spatial and temporal destabilisation, as well as from the deprivation of one’s perceptive and expressive space. The mobilities depicted by Bianciardi often align with a frenetic neo-industrial dynamism that drives a loss of both individual and collective awareness. This sense of loss, however, does not affect all subjects equally; rather, certain forms of mobility clearly intensify inequalities in lifestyle and quality of life – far more visibly than in rural contexts. Depending on economic and social

conditions, proximity to or distance from services, and the structure of social networks (Nuvolati 2007: 18), urban dwellers consistently face disparities in the ways they orient themselves within space. On this basis, the article reflects on the characteristics, implications and forms of mobility in *La vita agra* through a textual analysis that brings together geographical approaches, literary perspectives and mobility studies, with the aim of illuminating the relationship between the individual and the complexity of urban space.

With the rise of the modern city, movement ceases to be merely a functional element and becomes an object of inquiry in its own right, capable of revealing the structural dynamics of modernity. From the early twentieth century onwards, mobility practices within urban space point to a profound reorganisation of social relations, in which ‘space contracts, transactions intensify, the metabolism of the city accelerates and social distances tend to compress’ within a concentrated environment, thereby redefining the temporalities, rhythms and forms of urban experience (Sheller and Urry 2006: 209). In this context, the literary narratability of cities soon began to shape the imagination: with the figure of the *flâneur* and the urban wanderer, the city becomes a space to be deciphered, ‘a forest labyrinth, archetype of mass existence’ (Benjamin 2000: 496); in the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, urban walking emerges as a paradigmatically subversive practice; and in postmodernism, the city is conceived as a ‘locus of signs’ to be recombined and deconstructed (Scherpe and Roetzel 1993: 139). Within this context, narrative mobilities provide a unique lens through which to observe the textual city, at the intersection of literary and geographical perspectives.

In recent years, mobility has emerged as a central analytical category within the spatial turn in the humanities, giving rise to the field of so-called ‘narrative mobilities’ (Aguir, Mathieson and Pearce 2019; Merriman and Pearce 2017). This area of research analyses the narrative configurations of movement and considers how the mobility of people, objects and ideas transforms and re-signifies space. Just as literary geography does not treat places as static, but focuses on spatial experience and the everyday practices that produce and transform them, the study of mobility in literature examines how narrative texts represent how we move through and relate to the spaces around us. In this way, the two fields can be considered complementary. Both disciplines reject the notion of literature as an ‘inert and transparent object’ (Brosseau 1995: 23) and instead approach the text as an essential tool for understanding specific aspects of reality. As Marc Brosseau, a central figure in literary geography, argues, the text and its narrative features – form, devices, style and genre – are fundamental for understanding a work not as a static document from which geographic images can be extracted, but as a spatial discourse, an active instrument for the construction and organisation of space. Similarly, Tim Cresswell, a key scholar in mobility studies, emphasises that the study of representations of mobility, and not just the mere collection of data and statistics, is crucial to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon.

In this perspective, attention to what Brosseau terms ‘literary discursivity’ (Brosseau 2022) becomes fundamental to apprehending the text’s agency (Brosseau 1995: 25), understood as its capacity to generate complex perspectives on how space is organised, inhabited, and experienced. Literature, therefore, does not simply reflect the world, but actively reshapes and interrogates it. Moreover, both literary mobility and literary geography

recognise that the spatiality of the literary process extends from creation to reception (Brosseau, 2022; Merriman and Pearce 2017), granting the reader an active role in shaping the literary work. Both disciplines treat the text as an ‘event’ (Hones 2008: 1310–1311), in which author, text and reader collaborate in its creation and interpretation. This approach requires equal attention to the creative process, the discursive devices employed, and the imaginative and spatial experiences they generate in readers.

Space itself can also be understood as a space of mobility, defined by relationships and trajectories between people, objects and ideas (Sheller and Urry 2006; Cresswell 2006). In his seminal article ‘The City in Textual Form’ (1995), Brosseau dedicates a section, on the city in motion, to showing how movement, narratively structured through characters’ paths, transforms and evokes the dynamism of urban space in Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*. As he observes: ‘these kinetic descriptions are so well-embedded in the narrative that it is very difficult, and somewhat artificial, to extract them from their context. They somehow reproduce, by simple juxtaposition, the spatial and temporal succession of the elements of the urban landscape’ (Brosseau 1995: 100). Similarly, Tim Cresswell notes that mobility ‘is always embedded in a dynamic dimension shaped by a social space and social time’ (Cresswell 2006: 5). Studying its representation in literary texts therefore involves examining both space itself and the spatial practices enacted within it. Mobility produces space, highlighting pre-existing social relations while simultaneously generating new ones, whether connected to power, identity, or other socio-cultural discourses (15).

Just as mobility is inevitably shaped by the urban script, the ways of interacting with and moving through space simultaneously influence the perception that the protagonist of *La vita agra* develops of Milan’s various districts. Furthermore, this analysis will show how both mobility and space are closely intertwined with the social condition of the moving subject. Depending on whether it is the activist and intellectual self of the protagonist walking through the Braida district (corresponding in actual toponymy to Brera, one of the most popular and central districts of Milan) in the first part of the novel, or the cynical commuting worker navigating the Milanese periphery in the second part, spatial experience is configured in markedly different terms. This article follows the book’s bipartite structure, as both parts are defined by distinct spatial conditions that mirror the protagonist’s shifting socio-economic and personal circumstances.

### **First movement: from Kansas City to Milan, neighborhood life, walking without purpose**

Before analysing the text and the formal representation of the protagonist’s various mobilities, it is important to acknowledge that *La vita agra* cannot be considered strictly autobiographical (Maiolani 2017), since the first-person narrator never reveals his name and Biancardi himself recognises several events as ‘a literary image’ (Gessani and Terroresi 1985: 108). Nonetheless, this does not preclude observing that many events, situations and reflections closely mirror the author’s own feelings and experiences.

The initial autobiographical trajectory, which carries the author from the periphery of Grosseto (renamed ‘Kansas City’ in *Il lavoro culturale*) to the bustling urban centre of Milan, reflects the historical and social context of post-war Italy: the migration of intellectuals to major cities in search of ‘opportunities for recognition and spaces for realisation unthinkable in their places of origin’ (Varotti 2017: 46). Yet, Biancardi encountered primarily an inner disorientation, in which anger comes to the fore – hence, not coincidentally, *La vita agra* is the concluding text of the *Trilogy of Anger*, alongside *Il lavoro culturale* and *L’integrazione*<sup>3</sup> — particularly directed toward the emerging cultural industry, poised to absorb all cultural energy and reshape it according to the logic of the new consumer society. As the author himself states in a letter to Terrosi, *La vita agra* is nothing more than ‘the story of a damn good anger, written in the first person singular’ (136).

At the level of the plot, the narrative pretext that propels the protagonist toward Milan is the plan for a terrorist attack: to blow up the ‘torracchione’ – a Milanese skyscraper, unnamed in the text, located between Via Moscova and Via Turati – which houses the headquarters of Montecatini, the company owning the Ribolla mine in Maremma. On 4 May 1954, a catastrophic workplace accident occurred there, killing 43 miners in a methane explosion caused by grossly negligent and deliberate managerial practices. Biancardi had previously explored miners’ lives through reportage with Carlo Cassola for *Avanti!*, highlighting both the labour of miners and their connection to territory and tradition; this engagement was later deepened in the co-authored publication *I minatori della Maremma* (1956), which focused specifically on the Ribolla disaster. In *La vita agra*, from the very first pages, the planned attack is portrayed as desperate and futile, prefiguring the protagonist’s professional and existential circumstances, which are marked by the systematic denial of any possibility of change.

This initial macro-movement, both narrative and biographical, underscores a central aspect of Biancardi’s life: the transition from Grosseto to Milan marks the end of a provincial existence closely connected to workers and the working class, where intellectual labour was imbued with hope for emancipation and social progress. Before moving to the city, Biancardi served as director of the Chelliniana Library in Grosseto and, in 1953, acquired a van to operate as a bookmobile, distributing books beyond the library’s walls, still holding a strong conviction in the possibility of ‘starting everything over again’ (Biancardi 1957: 34).

Following the Ribolla disaster and the subsequent political and judicial defeat of the workers – Montecatini was acquitted at trial – Biancardi’s departure for Milan was marked by a lack of clear planning, resembling more an escape than a deliberate strategy. Gian Carlo Ferretti summarises this autobiographical trajectory: ‘Ribolla as a total and irreversible defeat, early intentions or pretextual antagonistic projects soon abandoned in Milan, *La vita agra* as a bitter ironic commentary on those projects and, above all, as a sarcastic and desperate representation of a defeat, which ideally runs from Ribolla to Milan without interruption’ (Ferretti 2000: 27).

Beginning with this desperate migratory movement from the periphery to the metropolis is helpful in understanding the difficulty experienced by the protagonist of *La vita agra* (very close to, yet never fully coinciding with, Biancardi himself) with the space of Milan.

The embodiment of mobility as a subjective practice – both experienced and conceptualised by the protagonist – thus becomes one of the principal mechanisms through which Biancardi articulates his personal mode of relating to the urban dimension. The protagonist's body actively participates in the construction and narrative rendering of the Milanese context, along with its rhythms and social and economic logics. From the opening pages, Biancardi's strong emphasis on walking emerges clearly: walking functions not only as a narrative tool for shaping the architectural and urban space through which the protagonist moves, but also as a means of revealing the character's self. Introspection is in fact limited; instead, the protagonist defines himself through his presence within events, immersed in the surrounding space. Particularly in the first part of the novel, before the advent of his work as a translator – which introduces new reflections oriented towards language and marked by the sedentariness inherent in such labour – the protagonist constructs his interiority almost exclusively through walking.

Before examining the specific form of walking adopted by the protagonist, it is important to recall that not all forms of walking are equivalent, nor do all kinds of movement foster a closer intimacy with the space in which one acts. Walking 'articulates a specific type of energy and emotions' (Amato 2004: 8), depending on both place and intention. As Amato observes, there is a mode of walking for every circumstance, and the modern city 'has produced the quintessential city walker: the pedestrian', who 'moves as part of the traffic, walking among crowds and strangers, traversing a kaleidoscopic and mutating landscape' (167). As Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce argue, movement extends beyond the purely physical act, drawing attention to the socio-economic constraints imposed upon the moving subject by the space being traversed (Merriman and Pearce 2017: 497). Walking in Milan is therefore multiple and variable, changing from one neighbourhood to another. In most of its districts, the city imposes upon the protagonist a particular mode of walking that ultimately calls into question the one he initially adopts:

Those who say I'm clumsy and don't know how to get around are perfectly right. It's perfectly true. I don't know how to walk even, and once I was arrested in the street for just that reason. In the end I lost my job for the same reason. (Biancardi 1965: 104)

In this brief statement, the protagonist's ideological position is already encapsulated: the expression of freedom embodied by the personal rhythm of walking is gradually stifled by the standardisation of movement required by the 'Italian miracle' in order to maintain high levels of productive efficiency. Continuing with the same scene, the protagonist recounts how the police officer scrutinises his gait and judges it unsuitable for the fast, controlled urban movement that surrounds him:

'You were walking slowly, and stopped twice. Where were you going?' 'For a walk.' 'Going for a walk, were you? Going for a walk without a tie? And all by yourself? And not just walking straight ahead? Why were you walking so slowly? And why did you keep stopping? ... I was given the sack for the same reason, because I dragged my feet,

moved slowly, and kept looking all round when there was no actual need to; In our business you have to lift your feet smartly, plant them down again solidly, move briskly and raise the dust, if possible a cloud of it to hide behind. (104-105)

The movement of the *flâneur*, the ‘urban animal par excellence ... [who] embodies the desire for errant freedom of the individual imprisoned by territorial, ideological, and professional constraints’ (Nuvolati 2007: 29), is thus excluded from the new city of Milan, whose rhythms leave little room for hesitation or slowness. Even the owner of the tobacconist near the protagonist’s home cannot tolerate his sitting ‘without any specific occupation’ (Biancardi 1965: 193), drinking coffee and reading the newspaper at the bar. Milan therefore appears to favour a different kind of pedestrian: one who experiences the city as an itinerary to be crossed with specific objectives, where attentiveness is reduced and unexpected stimuli often turn into obstacles that hinder the attainment of point B – ‘to passers we did not speak. They were too busy passing by, and would not have tolerated any intrusion on their daily march’ (72). In this way, walking ceases to be a matter of personal choice and instead conforms to the socio-economic discourses underpinning Milan, reflected in a specific ‘culture of mobility’ (Doughty and Murray 2014: 304), shaped by work and by the equation of time with money: ‘A worker moves quickly, but only because he is on the assembly line, because his tempo of production has been calculated, and if he does not keep it up there will be trouble’ (Biancardi 1965: 105). According to Karolina Doughty and Lesley Murray, institutions prescribe ‘regimes of truth’ (Doughty and Murray 2014: 304) that delineate the parameters within which mobilities are understood and enacted; the significance of these discourses varies according to the contexts in which they emerge, take root, and persist. Similarly, the protagonist of *La vita agra* is drawn into the everyday mobile practices dictated by Milan’s rhythms, which become institutionally embedded (308). When these rhythms are disregarded, he is cast as an outsider.

Although, Milan is never explicitly named and its symbolic locations undergo various disguises, many spatial references remain readily recognisable. Foremost among these is the central, and at the time alternative, district of Brera, which appears to offer the protagonist a more open and freer terrain of mobility. Here, he resides in a shared apartment and spends his evenings with his friends Ugo, Carlone and Mario (in reality Ugo Mulas, Carlo Bavagnoli and Mario Dondero, all photographers destined for fame), moving among inexpensive trattorias, cinemas and historic cafés. In the novel’s opening, the name Brera is transformed through a complex etymological digression into Braida; likewise, the historic Palazzo Brera, home to the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, becomes ‘the old Braida of the One-Eyed Man’ (*La vecchia Braida del Guercio*). After providing a detailed account of the building’s spaces – the picture gallery, the astronomical observatory, the botanical garden and the inner courtyard – and of his movements within it, the protagonist reveals it to be one of his favourite places in the city, precisely because of its capacity to accommodate diverse and marginalised people. Just outside the library, the narrative engages in an exercise of spatialisation and cartography, evoking the urban dimension through which the protagonist moves:

From this point on the Via Adelantemi continues under a different name – only the carriageway in the centre is smooth and the rest is cobbled – and then you come to a second-head dealer's and three or four restaurants, where we used to eat, the choice depending on the state of our funds ... Then there was the latteria kept by three pious women ... and finally there was the Bersagliere, where we went only on pay-day ... It was a quiet street, and entirely our own; traffic hardly ventured into it, but even in the Via della Braidà, which is a busy, central street, drivers seemed to recognise that this was our part of the world and slowed down more than was absolutely necessary, and did not get angry or make rude gestures if pedestrian coming out of the Antille crossed the road without looking and forced them to jam on their brackets. I lived, just beyond the cross-roads where the Via della Braidà, though its width and colour remains the same, changes its designation and assumes a Risorgimento name in memory of the 1859 campaign which was won by the French. (13-14)

The spatial perimeter delineated by Biancardi is organised around precise – albeit masked – cartographic coordinates: Via della Braidà corresponds to Via Brera (the main street of the district of Brera), while Via Adelantemi refers to Via Solferino, where Biancardi himself confirms having lived at number 84. The walks depicted in this first part of the novel unfold within a circumscribed area which, in contrast to other parts of the city, accommodates a bohemian lifestyle at odds with the frenetic and productive rhythms of the surrounding neighbourhoods. Here, the pedestrian who 'wanders' is still tolerated and does not come into direct conflict with other forms of mobility – above all the automobile, which, as will be discussed, Biancardi finds particularly oppressive. The 'island of Braidà' appears to resist the rapid and intense rhythms imposed by vehicles, motorists, and pedestrians hurrying to their destinations; instead, it is marked by a more homogeneous tempo, that of slow walking without pressing objectives, allowing for 'a particular experiential flow of successive moments of detachment and attachment, physical immersion and mental wandering, memory, recognition and strangeness' (Edensor 2010: 70). As Cresswell notes, 'places marked by an abundance of mobility become placeless' (Cresswell 2006: 31), provoking in the walker a sense of dislocation and fatigue that the 'island of Braidà' continues to counteract. As long as the protagonist remains within the neighbourhood, his movements – understood as culturally meaningful practices – carry specific social and political implications that resist the rhythms of the emerging consumer society. Walking through Braidà (Brera) generates distinct spatio-temporal configurations in which movement unfolds slowly and free from obligation, reflecting a form of life that is fragmented and not yet inscribed within a rigid social framework (family–work–home). Instead, it remains loosely organised, allowing for casual circulation between cinemas, lodgings, and the Caffè delle Antille: 'Sometimes I went out with Franz after dinner in the evening, and we strolled round the street, or went for a drink and sing-song to a den full of smoke' (Biancardi 1965: 20); 'We strolled about, and one thing led to another, and so it went on until one o'clock, and then half past, and then we felt the stirrings of appetite and decided to go to the Bersagliere' (24). In both passages, Biancardi deliberately employs the verb *to stroll* (in Italian *passaggiare lemme lemme*) to foreground a mode of walking

that is slow, unhurried, and purposeless, often nocturnal and potentially extending throughout the night, during which time accumulates and activities emerge spontaneously rather than being prearranged.

Within the neighbourhood, the key scene in which walking emerges as a politically significant practice coincides with the depiction of a demonstration against German rearmament. Close analysis of this episode proves particularly productive, as the scene mobilises a narrative strategy of spatialisation that recurs throughout the novel: an internal focalisation closely aligned with the protagonist, which intensifies both the embodied act of movement and the process of spatial orientation. This narrative configuration enables the reader to apprehend the walker's subjective experience as he – guided by Anna – allows himself to be drawn through alleyways and obstructions within the urban perimeter of Braida:

She took me by the arm, we walked quickly round the block, and found ourselves in the middle of the marching column, and we could see the little red vans all ready and waiting, with a police inspector who was about to give the order to disperse ... 'Come along', Anna said, taking me by hand again ... Group of demonstrators were now shouting on the cathedral steps, which the police cars could not mount, and we walked in that direction ... On the cathedral steps she stopped and, as the police were not farther away, she started shouting 'Peace' with the others. Then the police came back again, and she took my arm and led me into the lofty semi-darkness of the cathedral, and then out again by a side door. (58-59)

The protagonist thus emerges as a mobile subject, and this material dimension of the narrative actively engages the reader's imagination. In this scene, the dominant spatial configuration corresponds to the 'body tour' or 'walking tour', which, as Marco Caracciolo observes, depends on the 'presence of a perceiving subject' (Caracciolo 2014: 162) who navigates space through a moving body rather than through a detached, elevated or panoramic gaze. Spatial and temporal markers, together with the frequent use of verbs of motion and perception, enable the reader to immerse themselves in the scene and to follow the unfolding action from within. Just as the protagonist is guided by Anna through the urban space and synchronised in his movements, the reader's unconscious embodied response leads them to experience the scene as if moving through it, aligning perception, motion and spatial orientation within the same narrative framework.

Walking together marks the growing closeness between Anna and the protagonist; from that moment, 'it seemed to me that the Via della Braida was ours alone' (61). The two begin to live together in the shared house; meanwhile, the protagonist loses his job, and a brief period of fragmented walking through the neighbourhood begins, moving between the shared house, the shop, and the restaurant. These spaces, shaped by the pair's erratic movements, emphasise the instability of their lives, as they struggle to find a stable position within a defined social role. Outside Braida, they are confronted by the speed and relentless pace of the city's consumeristic population: 'And we had only to emerge for a moment from our Braida del Guercio citadel to feel that everyone else was against us too' (Biancardi 1965: 72).

This sense of inadequacy persists, and gradually the protagonist no longer feels at ease even in Braida. While his walking initially resembles the *flâneur* of Baudelaire and Benjamin – errant, aimless, observant and tinged with ‘melancholy’ (Varini 2017: 3) – the protagonist of *La vita agra* begins with a concrete goal imbued with strong political intent: the destruction of the skyscraper, ‘il torracchione’. In this context, Braida becomes a space that is both redundant and obstructive, offering no community to which he can fully belong and share his aim. He grows sceptical of both the local Communist Party section and the district’s bohemian, art-oriented *milieu*, so that Braida comes to be seen as ‘a narrow, untypical, actually false and unreal sector’ (Biancardi 1965: 91) of the city, from which he ultimately feels excluded.

The realisation that meaningful change requires a different approach comes through a shift in movement and spatial engagement: ‘I realised now how vain and foolish it would have been to blow up the citadel of power and craftiness, of the axe and the still, by myself ... The thing to do was to ally oneself with the early morning crowd, immerse oneself in it, learn to understand and love it, and then one day we should all rise together’ (92). Biancardi thus links the possibility of fraternity and collective action to a space beyond the city centre: the periphery. The narrative frames this displacement as a break from aimless walking, redirecting the protagonist’s subjectivity and embodied perception toward new rhythms, responsibilities and experiences: the routines of commuting.

### **Second movement: commuting, peripheral life, and hostility towards the automobile**

The relocation of the protagonist and Anna from the central district to the periphery appears driven by a desire for a new spatial understanding; by this point, Braida (Brera) has become nothing more than a simulacrum of Milan, and its bohemian, slow-paced life no longer reflects any real way of living: ‘You don’t know Paris if you never set foot outside Montmartre, or London from living in Chelsea’ (91). In the periphery, the protagonist shares a room with Anna in the house of the Fisslinger couple, who come from South Tyrol, while continuing to work in the city centre. Life in the district is thus replaced by commuting, and the protagonist begins moving daily from the outskirts to the centre and back. Commuting ‘sews places together and produces an itinerary shaped by time, as temporalities of movement are continually reinscribed on places and periods of travel *en route*’ (Edensor 2011: 192). Here too, the experience of movement – both physical and psychological – varies according to the mode of transport, distance, schedule and social context; the commuting experiences by the protagonist is that of the working-class labourers who move *en masse* to their jobs each morning and return to their peripheral home in the evening. This movement is depicted as a repetitive spatio-temporal rhythm, marked by mobile rituals which the protagonist experiences as irritating and frustrating:

The first trains start coming in at five o’clock, and disgorge battalions of grey, swollen-eyed people, who arch shoulder to shoulder towards the trams that take them and dump them at the other end of the city, where the factories are. For two or three minutes they walk rapidly past under the arches, until the next train comes in and disgorges the next

load of sleepy, hurrying humanity ... By the time you look at them they have gone, without even so much as a glance round. (52-53)

In this description, it is evident that, in contrast to the protagonist's evening walks or the militant marching of the young demonstrators, the commuter's movement is associated with a strenuous and unfeeling experience. Working individuals are reduced to a blurred image, from which little emerges beyond the passivity of the body, which, almost as if it were yet another machine, moves from train to tram without observing its surroundings, solely to reach the factory as quickly as possible. The same movement occurs in the reverse journey from work to home, during which they are 'even more in a hurry' because otherwise they would have to wait for the next train and delay their rest: 'But even if it is quite clear from the clock that they have no hope of catching it, the grey men, wrapped up in their coats and with woollen scarves round their necks or balaclavas drawn over their eyes...' (53).

For Biancardi, urban commuting is not an opportunity to create a shared space of belonging for workers, but a symptom of their inability to communicate and sustain a collective experience, due to the exhausting rituals of labour. The mobile workers thus become the material embodiment of an exploitative and repetitive rhythm of life. The performativity of their movement, as depicted by Biancardi, signifies displacement both spatially – characterised by continuous approach and withdrawal – and socially. This form of mobility assumes a destabilising and marginalised character, sharply contrasting with the stability and rootedness of inhabitants of the city centre. In this respect, Biancardi's representation of movement corroborates Adey's observation that 'unequal social relations reproduce themselves through mobility and thus reinforce their differences, whilst mobilities further enable and perform social relations' (Adey 2017: 123). He thus captures the social significance of commuting, which during that period assumed patterns comparable to those observed in contemporary urban contexts. Over the course of the twentieth century, urban movement underwent a radical transformation in terms of infrastructure, the creation of new and distinctive residential areas, and the reconfiguration of historic city centres, giving rise to core cities progressively expanding into surrounding zones, later defined as 'functional urban regions' (Nuvolati 2007: 9).

Beyond commuting, the peripheral area in which the protagonist now lives allows him to re-signify the practice of walking, which takes on a markedly different form from the lively wandering in Braida: 'In the evening, after doing the washing up, we often went out for a walk in the fog. We never met anyone in the street. All we ever caught sight of was a muffled form looking ghost-like in the cone of dirty light from a street lamp, hurrying home among the fleeting black motor-cars' (95). Biancardi becomes a deromanticised *flâneur*, belonging to the subordinate class; the space through which he moves is no longer the bustling city centre, where the unexpected and the surprising catch the walker, who, like an urban detective, observes, searches and simultaneously lets himself be absorbed by 'the incessant movement and the abundance of sensory input' (Valéry 1960: 1012). Now, the protagonist is distant from the vibrancy and multitude of Brera; the streets he traverses have been replaced by 'major traffic arteries and obligatory, functional routes' (Nuvolati 2007: 13), where the figures moving

through the space are depersonalised and the environment is desolate. The peripheral environment generates in Biancardi a sense of inappropriateness, far removed from the communal feeling he desires. He depicts this new dimension in almost apocalyptic terms: dark colours, dehumanised people, and automobiles dominating the streets. The vibrancy of the boarding house and the cafés of Braida is supplanted by the new condition of the suburban worker; the objective deterioration of his lifestyle is thus reflected in the process of spatialisation itself. Near the cinema he occasionally visits on Sundays, an open space unfolds, formerly used as a railway terminus:

It had long since been abandoned, and was now a riot of wild vegetation. There were Christ-thorns as tall as a man, and it was full of irregular, wild growths, holes, gullies and great piles of rubbish. In the daytime children played Red Indians there, but in the dim, foggy light that hung over the whole area at night it was haunted by shadowy ghosts. (97)

The peripheral crowd bears none of the rebellious or collective character Biancardi had hoped for; instead, it takes on the appearance of rejected 'ghosts'. Moreover, to encapsulate this urban incommunicability, the protagonist recounts the episode of a man who dies in the street without anyone coming to his aid.

There is, finally, one last mobile element that constantly influences the protagonist's movement on foot: the automobile. With an anthropological gaze, Biancardi apprehends the impact of the automobile and the profound transformation it would bring to national patterns of mobility. The Fiat Nuova 500, one of the first cars to be purchased on a large scale by Italian families, was released in 1957, providing a low-cost means of private transport. With the introduction of the Fiat 500 as a widely accessible vehicle rather than merely a luxury item, it becomes evident that, at a socio-cultural level, walking underwent a gradual ontological shift, moving from 'a realm of necessity to one of choice' (Amato 2004: 105). This final reflection adds yet another interpretative layer to walking in Biancardi's text.

Biancardi refers to automobiles as 'wolves' (Biancardi 1965: 159, 160) and repeatedly reclaims the act of walking as a moment in which to recover a personal space amid work, travel by public transport, arguments with Anna, and the small peripheral room. In contrast to those who believe that the automobile represents 'their sphere of objective freedom', allowing them 'to be a free man from Piazza del Duomo to the sea at the river mouth' (185), Biancardi asserts throughout much of the book the slow and attentive pace of walking as the only means of truly coming into contact with oneself and with others, recognising that the car 'shuts himself up his little box, deaf to what you say and hostile to all his fellow-men' (161). Although Biancardi's walking never openly assumes a militant or overtly rebellious stance, it nonetheless appears as the sole fleeting moment in which the writer is not crushed by the pressures of the emerging capitalist society, where every effort is measured in terms of productive yield. Even though cars are there, even though policemen try to stop him, even though there is little space on the pavement, he nevertheless chooses to walk at his own pace – slow, improvised, and, in effect, 'free':

But sometimes I walk a good part of the way home. I wait for a tram and it's late, or it arrive full up ... and I decide to walk on to the next stop, particularly as walking is good for you and, being a provincial, I've always been fond of it. So on I go, having to adapt myself to the pace of other pedestrians, it is true, but still alone and independent, free to enter a café if I choose and to look this way or that as I please and not to talk to anybody unless I feel like it. (187)

### Final movement: conclusions

This reading of *La vita agra* shows how Biancardi, through his representation of mobilities, simultaneously delineates both an urban and a social geography of Milan, while also mapping the protagonist's inner space. Marginality, aimless wandering through the city, the forced displacements of commuting, and the constant struggle with automobiles reveal, from multiple perspectives, how access to mobility – and mobility itself – shapes individuals' lives and their quality of existence. Consequently, the experience of Milan emerges as profoundly differentiated, varying according to one's place of residence, type of work, and economic means. Although Biancardi deliberately forgoes cartographic exactitude, he preserves the verisimilitude of the city's urban script.

*La vita agra* thus emerges as a text in which literary construction and political concern are intertwined through the representation of urban movement: it is through this movement that Biancardi's social critique gains precision and force. The novel offers a deeply geographical perspective, elaborating a critical and restless form of urban knowledge capable of interrogating the socio-cultural and economic transformations that shaped Italy in the 1950s and 1960s – achieved, above all, through the simple yet revealing act of walking.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Luciano Biancardi was born in Grosseto on 14 December 1922 and died in Milan on 14 November 1971 at the age of forty-eight, as a result of liver cirrhosis caused by heavy smoking and alcohol dependence.
- <sup>2</sup> English translations of quotations from *La vita agra* are from the 1965 translation by Eric Mosbacher. All other translations are by the author.
- <sup>3</sup> The three texts were published separately – *Il lavoro culturale* (1957), *L'integrazione* (1960), *La vita agra* (1962) – and it was only in 2022, to celebrate the centenary of Biancardi's birth, that Feltrinelli decided to republish them in a single edition titled *Trilogia della rabbia*.
- <sup>4</sup> In 1962, after the success of *La vita agra*, RAI TV produced a short documentary about the book and its author. Filmed for the *Arti e Scienze* series and written by Luigi Silori, the film shows Luciano Biancardi in his home or strolling through a desolate, drizzly Milan showing the key locations of the book. Moreover, in 1964 the release of Carlo Lizzani's film adaptation, starring Ugo Tognazzi, further consolidated the book's success and public recognition.

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