

Gianni Celati's "Natural" Narration and the Call of the Plains

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“Ascoltare una voce che racconta fa bene, ti toglie dall’astrattezza di quando stai in casa credendo di aver capito qualcosa ‘in generale’. Si segue una voce, ed è come seguire gli argini d’un fiume dove scorre qualcosa che non può essere capito astrattamente.” (Celati, *Verso la foce* 57).¹ Dated 20th May 1983, this passage is taken from “Esplorazioni sugli argini”, the second section of Gianni Celati’s *Verso la foce*. Published in 1989, this text originates from the diary that Celati kept during his journey along the Po river with the photographer Luigi Ghirri in the 80s, while collaborating in the project of describing the “new Italian landscape.” Together with *Narratori delle pianure* and *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze* – published earlier in the 80s and similarly set in the Po valley – *Verso la foce* is a focal point in Celati’s poetics or anti-poetics of “natural” narration and an interesting point of departure to reassess the value of literature after the 70s and to tackle the Italian problematic move to the postmodern condition. In this essay I will explore Celati’s notion of natural narration as a “space of affection”, a space that merges the dichotomy between landscape and inscape, the subject and the object, and between listening and narrating, and listening and seeing, in the effort to reject any claims of general truths. With this aim I will first consider Celati as a political writer – for his commitment to

¹ “Listening to a narrating voice does you good; it takes you away from the state of abstraction when you are at home thinking you have understood something ‘in general’. You follow a voice and it is like following the banks of a river where something flows that cannot be grasped abstractly”. Where not otherwise specified, all English translations are mine.

literature and narration – and then focus on the resonance between the notions of voice and listening, as intrinsically ephemeral and impermanent, and on the space of the plains, as anti-monumental and subjective, escaping any exact definition, like the river banks of the opening extract that follow the flow of the river and disappear on the horizon. In the attempt to highlight Celati's centrality in the crisis that from the 70s leads to the present cultural condition, I will move from the "model" offered by Calvino, that Celati seeks to discard in order to build his own poetics.

In a way not too dissimilar from Calvino, Gianni Celati is a political writer in a broad sense of the word, in that he is deeply committed to portraying Italian culture and society, despite his apparent distance from it; to educating his readers to the value of literature and narration; and to renewing the role of literature within society, while protecting it against the impact of media consumerism. This commitment runs throughout his work of fiction and criticism and his collaborative and editorial projects, from the aborted journal *Alì Babà* (for which he collaborated with Calvino in the late 60s and early 70s) to his editorial commitment in the 90s, which appear in his effort to foster the career of young writers with *Narratori delle riserve* and in his establishing a community of writers who share a "simple" poetics and collaborated to the short-lived project of the *Almanacco delle prose Il Semplice*.² When comparing these editorial experiences that are two decades apart we notice both the coherence of Celati's *impegno* and the development of his poetics, which in turn reflects the changes that have occurred in Italian culture since the 70s. Despite the time and cultural gap – that is reflected for example in the less theoretical approach of *Il semplice* when compared to *Alì Babà* (and a less theoretical and

² On this topic see Marina Spunta, "Il narrare semplice, naturale di Gianni Celati e i suoi progetti editoriali".

more broadly educative approach was favoured by Calvino for their project) – we can detect a considerable coherence in the intents of the two projects, from the key role that is attached to literature and particularly narrative to the anti-establishment intents which give the journals a marked ironical tone. This complex relationship to the 70s attests to Celati's liminal position – between the generation of post-war writers and the postmodern age. With the writers of the previous generation, such as Calvino, Celati shares a sense of commitment to renewing both literature and the world, which emerges in his relentless effort to forge a poetics geared towards a new vision of reality, rather than celebrating the death of poetics, as post-modernity advocates.³ Yet Celati strives to reject traditional literary models, which he sees embodied in Calvino's example, in order to embrace a more postmodern sensitivity that celebrates the loss of certainties, while at the same time reverting to a pre-modern idea of literature as shared narrative practice, as storytelling.

“Per prima cosa: la letteratura non è niente di oggettivo in sé e per sé, la letteratura esiste prima di tutto come uso – per l'uso che facciamo di poesie, di narrazioni, di commenti critici, e per come queste cose hanno rilievo nella nostra vita” (Spunta

³ As Carla Benedetti reminds us, “se in Calvino, in Pasolini (e ancora in Celati), il crollo delle poetiche è la conseguenza di un tragico ‘apprendimento’, che contemporaneamente esprime una critica nei confronti della logica artistica moderna, già nei narratori degli anni Ottanta esso è un dato pacifico che può perfino essere sfruttato come una vera e propria poetica.” (If in Calvino, Pasolini (and also in Celati), the collapse of poetics is the consequence of a tragic process of learning, that also expresses a criticism towards the modern logic of the arts. This is already an accepted fact in the narrators of the 80s – a fact that can even be exploited as an actual poetics) (40).

"Dialogo con Gianni Celati" unpublished).⁴ With these words Celati makes the point about literature in a recent unpublished interview that he has chosen to dedicate to this topic – a decision which in itself reveals the high value that he attaches to literature. In stressing its primary nature as usage, Celati puts forward a notion of literature as social practice, which is shared by a community, and whose rituals are learnt through apprenticeship. In so doing, while lamenting the disappearance of "ciò che un tempo chiamavamo fiduciosamente 'letteratura'" ("Dialogo con Gianni Celati"),⁵ Celati takes a distance both from a humanistic view of literature that seeks to express the essence of "man" and postulates the existence of literary experts who pretend to convey the "truth about humanity," and also from the contemporary literary market that turns literature into a show business, considering success as the sole parameter through which to measure literary quality. The debate on the value of literature, which was a key issue in the 70s, took centre stage also in the collaboration for *Ali Babà*, as emerges in the renewed interest for literature, and particularly for narrative and narration, that were indeed equated to literature in the effort to move beyond the constraints of Institutions and the market. Celati's later poetics follows on this line, placing even greater emphasis on narration, as the means of escaping the claustrophobic dangers of a self-absorbed literature. In the preface to *Narratori delle riserve*, Celati defines his "natural narration" as the process of re-reading a text afresh, or describing a common reality as if it was seen for the first time. In so doing – while maintaining the metaphor of reading reality that was central to Calvino's poetics and that he wanted to be

⁴ "First of all: literature is not objective in itself; it exists primarily as usage: for the use we make of poems, narrations, critical comments, and for the relevance these things have in our life".

⁵ "what once we used trustingly to call 'literature'".

the theme of *Ali Babà*'s first issue – Celati changes the value associated to reading, from a strong means of interpreting reality from the fortress of a coherent outlook, to a weak means of seeing reality from a lowered and uncertain perspective. The *Almanacco delle prose. Il Semplice* develops the topic of narration as reading, particularly reading aloud, and especially as listening, which becomes the key metaphor of the sharing of ideas of a community of writers and of their common sensitivity to simple narrations, as opposed to the pompous style of self-proclaimed writers.

As it transpires from the development of Celati's poetics, while rejecting the example of Calvino since the time of their collaboration for *Ali Babà* – and their divergence of views was one of the main obstacles to the realization of the project – Celati repeatedly goes back to Calvino's "model" in order to discard it. While this emerges in the choice of low, comic mode in his experimental fiction of the 70s, it is even more apparent in the 80s, as the adoption of natural narration and of the short form clearly results from the rejection of a "strong" novelistic model and leads to a process of desubjectivization, to the flattening of the narrative voice, and to the shift from the category of a coherent time to that of a horizontal, scattered space. In this perspective, we could read Celati's trilogy of the plains (and particularly *Verso la foce*) as his definitive departure from Calvino's classicist, Newtonian view of reality, as Celati suggests (Spunta "Conversazione con Gianni Celati"), and from the disaffected conclusion of *Le città invisibili* (164), which, in Celati's words, "kills all the affection that you can have for this strange thing that is the world, for you can only have affection for something that is indefinite" (*Narratori dell'invisibile* 166). As *Palomar* shows, the failure of reason to comprehend reality and overcome its vagueness was a real problem for Calvino (Spunta "Conversazione con Gianni Celati"), which, according to Celati, showed his greatness in his very ability to voice this *impasse*. In the effort to overcome the "blocked road" (Ibid.) of

Le città invisibili, Celati finds a new voice, a new “syntax” in the flatness of the Po valley, which he defines as “un punto in cui tirare il fiato” (*Narratori dell’invisibile* 166),⁶ overcoming the risk of excessive literariness and abstraction encountered by Calvino, whose main difficulty was “dove trovare l’ispirazione, standosene chiuso in casa” (*Ibid.*).⁷ According to Celati, this conveyed “un deficit di tutta una cultura, [la cultura di sinistra, e che porta a] una messa al bando dei paesaggi, perché paesaggio, contemplazione e ispirazione fanno parte dello stesso nesso [e sono] sinonimi di perdita di coscienza” (*Ibid.*).⁸

Space of affection

Rather than a fixed and graspable space, in Celati’s fiction the plains become an ambivalent, vague space, “uno spazio di affezione” (a space of affection) that is defined by an equally mysterious and evocative voice.⁹ In a long essay recently published in *Il Verri*, titled “Collezione di spazi,”¹⁰ Celati intends the representation of space, just like narration, as a means to comprehend reality, merging general and subjective categories. The state, or modality of affection – an expression

⁶ “a point where to take a breath”.

⁷ “where to find inspiration without leaving home”.

⁸ “the fear of losing conscience of the dominant left-wing culture of the times, which led to banning landscape description, contemplation and inspiration as synonyms of loss of conscience”.

⁹ Like space, voice for Celati is defined by a state of affection, since, in his words, “quello che voi chiamate oralità non è che un fatto timbrico, una intonazione affettiva”. Celati, in Monica Bandella and Peter Kuon (184). On Celati and space see in particular Giulio Iacoli; Marco Sironi; Spunta, “Lo spazio delle pianure come ‘territorio di racconti’ – verso la foce con Gianni Celati”; Rebecca West.

¹⁰ In addressing the subjective creation of space and its intrinsically fictional nature, the essay focuses on visual arts, especially painting, establishing a dialogue with Calvino’s *Collezione di sabbia*.

that Celati takes from Ghirri, and before him from Spinoza and Leopardi¹¹ – indicates a change in the subject’s conscience when relating to space, a personal way of “sentire la lontananza” (feeling the distance), and the “fusione tra il vedere e la cosa vista, che non può essere oggettivato, perché dipende dal mio piazzamento relativo” (“Collezione di spazi” 62-63).¹² Rather than a clearly defined space, Celati’s plains – and their narration – are a space of affection, a mental space that discards clear-cut divisions between subject and object, and vision and hearing. This is particularly apparent in *Verso la foce*, as emerges in the following extract:

Contro il cielo su un argine papaveri mossi dal vento, e un cielo così cupo, così pesante. Campagne vuote. Tutto questo mi dà voglia di scrivere, come se le parole seguissero qualcosa che è fuori di me. Se guardo in distanza, prima di tutto c’è una grande apertura nello spazio là fuori, il vuoto che accoglie tutte le cose: solo in secondo tempo l’apertura si restringe per fissarmi su qualcosa che manda un richiamo, come in un film di John Ford spunta un indiano all’orizzonte. Noi siamo guidati da ciò che ci

¹¹ On Spinoza see Celati, in Bandella and Kuon (181-82). Celati gave an interesting reading of Leopardi at the Istituto di Cultura Italiana in London, 27th January 1997, by the title “Gianni Celati legge Leopardi”.

¹² “merging of the act of seeing with the object that is seen, which cannot be objectified for it depends on my relative positioning in space”. And also: “‘Vedere’ il paesaggio infatti dipende dal ‘trovare comuni elementi affettivi’. Del resto, aggiungo io, il mondo osservato non è quello che appare attraverso il punto di vista di un individuo singolo. È quello che, prima di lui, è già comune alle varie osservazioni e rappresentazioni, perché appartiene ad una forma di vita.” (“Seeing” the landscape in fact depends on “finding common affective elements”. What is more, I can add, the world observed is not what appears through an individual point of view. It is what, before him, is already shared in various observations and representations, for it belongs to a form of life). Celati, “Commenti su un teatro naturale delle immagini”, 10 May.

chiama e capiamo solo quello; lo spazio che accoglie
le cose non possiamo capirlo se non confusamente.
Idee che mi sono portate in viaggio, ricavate da un
pensiero di Leopardi (agosto 1821). (54-55)¹³

In its simple, fragmented, diary-like style, this passage encodes a number of key concepts in Celati's narration which attest to the centrality and interdependence of the notions of voice and space, on which the author has reflected since the 70s. In the extract they emerge in the emphasis on the open space of the plains that take centre stage, while the human element disappears, and in the impact of the visual, of the low perspective, photographic, cinematic view that moves from the long shot on the empty countryside to the close up onto a mysterious call that has the power deeply to affect the viewer. This state of affection is triggered by the very voice of this vague space – and it is to the voice and to listening that I will now turn.

Voice

Throughout his career Celati has always stressed the importance of the voice as the core element, the music of a text, and the need to develop the ability to listen to this voice, and perform it, by reading texts aloud as in oral storytelling. By adopting this stand Celati clearly voices his critique both of the tradition of high, literary language that has distinguished Italian literature

¹³ "Against the sky on a river bank some poppies moved by the wind, and the sky is so dark, so heavy. Empty fields. All this makes me feel like writing, as if the words followed something that is outside myself. If I look in the distance I see a great openness in the space out there; the void that envelops everything. Only later the openness focuses on something that sends a call, as in a film by John Ford when an Indian appears on the horizon. We are driven by what calls us and only this we can comprehend; the space that welcomes things can only be understood vaguely. Ideas that I've carried with me on my journey, from one of Leopardi's thoughts (August 1821)".

and education, substituting the voice with the written word, and also of the commodification of the voice in much contemporary language and “commercial” fiction. The questions of vocality and orality inform the whole of Celati’s work, starting from his first experimental novels of the 70s – or rather, as he calls them, “lunghe narrazioni di voce” (long voice narrations) – and developing since the 80s into his short natural narrations. As the author explains in the essay “Il narrare come attività pratica,” this new poetics results from his leaving behind the inward-looking experimentation with the voice of his early comic/obsessive protagonists and in opening to others’ voices and disciplines, moving away from a strong notion of the subject (however close to illness or insanity he may be) and from the claustrophobic practice of literary/linguistic experimentation of the 60s and 70s. As the author explains:

Uno dei passaggi, o cambiamenti, è stato quello di spostarmi all’esterno, verso l’esteriorità, e di abituarli a piccole attenzioni sparse: così c’è stata anche la sostituzione d’un tipo di ascolto con un altro ascolto, dove c’entra anche il vedere, non più disgiunto dall’ascoltare. Noi vediamo delle voci e ascoltiamo delle cose, non c’è spartizione tra i sensi nel lavoro narrativo. L’espressione “senso comune” anticamente voleva dire l’insieme di tutti i sensi, cioè il fatto che noi percepiamo l’esterno con l’insieme di tutti i sensi, senza separazioni di compiti. [...] Io credo davvero che si vedano voci, e che il visibile sia qualcosa che si ascolta. Questo è il principio di meraviglia, ed anche ciò che mi fa sentire gli enormi limiti in cui mi trovo e in cui ci troviamo tutti. (33)¹⁴

¹⁴ “One of the shifts, or changes, was that of moving towards the external, the exteriority, and getting used to little things around me, replacing a type of listening with another type of listening, which is deeply connected with seeing. We see voices and listen to things and there is no division between the senses in the narrative work. Traditionally, the expression “common

In this process, Celati shifts the focus from the "subject" and its inscape to a landscape such as that of the plains that, for their vastness and vagueness, escape the very possibility of description, and that are no longer a projection of the "cogito" (as in Calvino's *Palomar*) but rather a "state of affection," in that they are a landscape that calls, that affects the character (as we have seen in the extract from *Verso la foce*) and not a landscape that is defined (or at least attempted to be defined) by the character as in Calvino. In equating listening with seeing Celati moves away from the Western tradition of the philosophy of the eye – which postulates the priority of visibility, thus of the ability to comprehend an external truth – and adopts a philosophy of the ear, of listening, that assumes the need for opening up to alternative narratives that are no longer "grand," that encodes the impermanence of meaning through the metaphor of sound waves, and celebrates it. As suggested by recent works on vocality, such as those by Cavarero and Nancy, turning one's attention from the visual and the written sign to the oral and particularly the vocal (which, unlike the oral, is devoid of meaning implications) leads us to be receptive of the individual and to relate to the other, rather than focusing on the self and theorizing the general and the abstract. Since the late 60s Celati has stressed the importance of re-evaluating the individual voice and has increasingly moved away from abstract theorization, originally encoding the debate on orality, while at the same time reflecting the changes that the Italian language and culture have undergone in the space of three decades.

sense" meant the collection of all the senses, that is the fact that we perceive the external through all of our senses, without dividing up the roles. [...] I truly believe that we can see voices and that the visible is something that we listen to. This is the principle of wonder and is also what makes you feel the enormous limitations of our condition".

Celati's notion of natural narration is closely linked to his effort to recreate an effect of orality in his texts, and in this endeavour he has proved to be one of the most innovative and influential writers in contemporary Italian fiction, as someone who, in Tabucchi's words, "prima che narratore, si è posto come ascoltatore" (10),¹⁵ and certainly not as an "author." After the linguistic experimentation of the 60s and 70s, when orality still had a strong impact, a marked anti-establishment value, as a sign that is external to the system and seeks to subvert it, in the 80s the "lowering" of the standard language into neo-standard Italian reflects the introduction of many substandard, spoken varieties, which make orality increasingly embedded into the "norm." This shift to an orality that becomes normalised, less disruptive, internal to the system, is reflected in Celati's move to a poetics of natural narration, that no longer needs to render orality in such a marked way, but rather embeds it into the simple style of his prose. As I mentioned earlier, this shift is accompanied by a move to the short form, as the best means of rendering the actual dispersal of the voice, the loss of a strong sense of the subject and of a leading role for literature. The paradox that exposes this notion of natural narration can be traced back to Enzo Melandri's imperative, "Be spontaneous", and to Guido Fink's image of the plains, as "questo paesaggio tutto in orizzontale, che sembra privo di asperità, di nascondigli, di zone oscure e di segreti, deve contenere il suo mistero nell'apparente assenza di ogni mistero" (5).¹⁶

In resurrecting a notion of an original, unmediated orality – and in registering the change of values associated to orality since the 70s – Celati renews the myth of oral storytelling, that is of the ritual of listening and narrating to a

¹⁵ "presents himself as a listener, even before a narrator".

¹⁶ "this all-horizontal landscape, that seems devoid of roughness, of hidden zones and secrets, must hide its mystery in the apparent absence of any mystery".

real audience through a simple, natural style.¹⁷ The voice of this narration and of its space can only be heard by a reader that has tuned his or her internal ear to this music, as “un modo imponderabile in cui gli uomini si intendono anche senza parole” (an imponderable way in which people understand each other even without words), as opposed to “il modo in cui i critici e gli universitari parlano di letteratura, come se fosse una cosa che loro sanno bene cos'è” (the way in which critics and scholars talk about literature, as if it were something they really understand) (“Modena, 18 Luglio 1994” 141-42). This notion of an ideal empathy with the text and with a community of “real” readers reminds us of the myth of the Gamuna people, the imaginary population that Celati describes in the story “Fata morgana,” who are scared of heights and believe that everything they see on the horizon is an illusion, a mirage, and who, in conversation, accompany the speakers’ words by softly singing a harmony that is in tune with the interlocutor’s speech, thus focusing on the voice rather than on the meaning of the words they hear.

In conclusion, in his decade-long reflection on the value of literature and narration – particularly on the key notions of voice and space – Celati’s work represents a focal point in contemporary Italian culture, as emerges since his trilogy of the Po valley, and particularly in *Verso la foce*. As a diary/travelog, a “fictional documentary”, this text most powerfully conveys the weakening of the postmodern subject who is lost in a vague space and the loss of a strong role for the writer who can only record fragmented observations and thoughts, which are evoked by the very landscape. In underlying the emotional empathy with space, rather than its rational comprehension, and in embracing listening even before seeing, as a metaphor for the

¹⁷ Like the landscape of the plains narrations are perceived as music, particularly as jazz music, that is continuously realized in new performances. See Celati, “Jazz e scrittura” (18); Giorgio Rimondi.

impermanence of meaning, Celati moves away from the classical model that he still sees informing Calvino's fiction – though Calvino himself sought to question this very model. Celati's poetics results from his rejecting Calvino's lesson of a geometrical, abstractly precise and inward looking prose in order to build an alternative “panoramic mode of narration,” which follows a zigzagging plot direction and is open to multiple voices. In this movement, while retaining a deep belief in the role of literature in mediating reality and in its relief-giving potential, Celati leads Italian culture towards the call of a postmodern space of affection.

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