

The *Ali Babà* Project (1968-1972): Monumental History and the Silent Resistance of the Ordinary

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Historical Context of the *Ali Babà* Project

In the wake of May '68, a host of new books saw the light of day, both in philosophy and the human sciences; they were, as Gianni Celati remembers, “daring and complicated, obscure and militant or merely windy and exaggerated, books which gave readers the impression that they were confronting something radically new under the sun” (Celati, *Ali Babà* 316).¹ Together the studies gave the impression of “a collective adventure into unexplored lands” (316); to name just the most important, Claude Lévi Strauss and his structural anthropology, Jacques Derrida’s elaboration of the concept of “différance”, Deleuze and Guattari on repetition and becoming, Michel Foucault’s study of epistemological paradigms (*The Order of Things*, 1966) and his subsequent book on the relationship between power and knowledge (*The Archeology of Knowledge*, 1969). An important role was also played by earlier foreign thinkers whose ideas circulated within French intellectuals only in the sixties, such as Mikhail Bakhtin and his analysis of “heteroglossia” or Ferdinand de Saussure’s fundamental study of linguistics.

Such was the intellectual turmoil, which characterized Paris, both preceding and in the aftermath of the May '68 barricades. Between 1968 and 1972, a group of five Italian intellectuals – each an insatiable and omnivorous reader of the May '68 boom – came together in order to discuss the possibility of founding a new literary review, one which “would

¹ All translations from French and Italian texts are mine.

take literature out of its ghetto” (Celati, *Alì Babà* 313). The expression is by Celati, who explains further:

In attempting to take literature out of its confinement [“ghetto”], we realized that the “something more” we were after involved how literature functions (and its function as well); it was a question of asking ourselves what books, novels, poems are for, of digging under foundations which have been taken for granted, of thinking everything over again. (313)

Together the five – the writers Italo Calvino and Gianni Celati, together with the historian Carlo Ginzburg, the philosopher Ezio Melandri and the critic Guido Neri, saw the project of such a review as an opportunity for enlarging literature’s horizons, for re-establishing its anthropological value, in opposition to an era in which politics and ideology seemed about to prevail. In their view, *Alì Babà* – the most frequently suggested name for such a review – would thus be an attempt to re-found literature by stressing “its capacity to confront itself with everything which exceeds literature itself” (Barenghi, *Alì Babà* 19). Here Calvino envisions the context in which literature “takes on meaning”:

Literature [...] is the field of forces which supports and engenders such an encounter and confrontation of studies and operations in different disciplines, even apparently distant and alien disciplines. Literature as the space of meanings and forms which are valid not only for literature. (Calvino, 199)

Italo Calvino and Gianni Celati were the founders of the *Alì Babà* editorial project. In 1967-68, Calvino was already exploring the possibility of publishing a new literary review which would replace Vittorini’s *Menabò* (Vittorini had died in 1966). He had also moved to Paris, where he had directly witnessed the events of May ’68 with great excitement; he felt

as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders and that the time had come for him “to turn the page” (Celati, *Ali Babà* 314). Yet, as he says in a 1981 RAI interview, the very writer who had himself often been praised for the creative power of his imagination was very suspicious of the famed slogan, “L’imagination au pouvoir.” For Calvino, imagination should never become an institutional constraint or a political practice which regulates forms of discourse. At the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies Calvino is interrogating himself on the right distance an intellectual must keep vis-à-vis historical actuality and politics. He likes to think of himself as a sort of Saint Jerome, someone who lives in seclusion, yet not too far from the city (see *The Castle of the Crossed Destinies* 105-111).

Gianni Celati, who was only thirty when he met Calvino in the summer of 1968, engaged the older author in an intense exchange of ideas and debates. As Celati recalls thirty years later, Calvino, like Kublai Kahn in *Invisible Cities*, used to listen attentively to Celati as if he were Marco Polo spreading out his intellectual merchandise during the visits he paid to Calvino at his “court” in Paris. Calvino’s “Lo sguardo dell’archeologo” (“The Archeologist’s Gaze”) and Celati’s “Il Bazar archeologico” (“The Archeological Bazaar”), two essays which were originally meant as manifestos for the review (but which were finally published separately), bear witness to the extraordinary collaboration which took place between the two writers during those years. Despite their very different intellectual journeys, it is remarkable how close the two writers are in their understanding of history and literature. In the seventies, Calvino takes his distance from both his own direct political engagement of the forties and fifties and from the formal experimentations of Gruppo 63 (“Group 63”). Celati, on the other hand, although he begins his career in the seventies with works which are formal experimentations (“il pararomanzo”), is more interested in translating modernist

writers (Joyce, Eliot, Céline) or their precursors (Swift, Melville, Lewis Carroll) than in belonging to Gruppo 63.

The review which they envisioned – *Alì Babà* – never found its way to publication. In the end, Einaudi did not support the project; Calvino went on with his own literary projects (*Invisible Cities*) and Celati, then the most effervescent mind of the group, left for the States and lost regular contact with the others. Despite this disappointing turn of events, the group's discussions (recorded in articles, prefaces, protocols and letters, and recently collected in an issue of *Riga*, edited by Mario Barenghi e Marco Belpoliti) constitute fertile ground for understanding the seventies, an era of strong fascination for intellectual models and theoretical approaches, and one with an equally strong desire to displace man from the center of such concepts and deconstruct his anthropocentric certitudes.

Alternative History: The Bazaar and the Warehouse

In his 1998 essay “Il progetto *Alì Babà*, trent'anni dopo”, Celati writes: “In those times, it looked like there was an abyss between the unshakeable intellectualism of the cultured elite and the banality of ordinary life” (Celati, *Alì Babà* 315). The more abstract contemporary theories had become, the less successful they had been in accounting for the material conditions of our existence. Calvino begins his essay “Lo sguardo dell'archeologo” with the following realization: “We have understood it now for quite some time: the warehouse of materials stocked by mankind – mechanisms, machines, goods, markets, institutions, documents, poems, emblems, photograms, *opera picta*, arts and crafts, encyclopedias, cosmologies, grammars, *topoi* and tropes, parental, tribal and work relationships, myths and rites, operative models – we can't manage to keep it in order any more” (Calvino, *Alì Babà* 197). Ten years later, we find the same distress in Calvino's character, Mr. Palomar, who is unable to find an adequate model to apply to “the shapeless and senseless reality of human society” (*Mr.*

Palomar 108) and can only “erase from his mind all models and models of models” (111) in an epistemological move which the critic Philippe Daros calls “l’utopie pulvérisée” (“pulverized utopia”, 103).

In Celati, Calvino’s warehouse becomes “the bazaar,” a disordered collection of disparate objects and quotations which have become useless and forgotten. Whereas seventeenth-century *cabinets de curiosités* exhibited one-of-a-kind marvels which could nevertheless be displayed and ranged in a systematic fashion, Celati’s bazaar seems to be material embodiment of an uncanny *enumeración caótica* which resists classification and abstract conceptualization,

In the collectionist’s bazaar everything appears as a Heteroclitian flux, an archeological bric-à brac of rejects, as fragmentary images of an estrangement which can find its expression only in the echolalia of mad speech, as in Eliot: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins / Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo’s mad againe.” (Celati, *Ali Babà* 202)

Celati’s bazaar and Calvino’s warehouse remind us of Borges’s Chinese encyclopedia, that heterotopic ensemble which elicits Foucault’s uncanny laughter by presenting a disordered set and suggesting at the same time, paradoxically, that “fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in [that] dimension” (Foucault 1970, XVII).

Up until this point, what had allowed us to find the correct placement and classification for every single item in the bazaar? In a word, “History,” as Calvino comments. History, that is to say, “the choice of a subject called MAN” which once allowed us to arrange any narrative or justify any classification in the name of a continuous and linear development of a transcendental entity (the “I” man, the white man, spirit,

conscience, thought, civilization, the European subject, the subject of all predicates and metaphors).

In the seventies, both Calvino and Celati saw the need for an alternative history which could replace the old, superseded model (the type of history that Nietzsche had called monumental history). To the historian, they oppose the figure of the archeologist, the intellectual whose duty is to describe piece-by-piece disparate fragments without trying to place them permanently in some historical collocation or explanation. The archeologist's poetics must consequently privilege discontinuity, differences, and minimal signs over tradition, order and general schemata.

The kind of archeology undertaken by the *Alì Babà* writers is both similar and different from that advocated by Michel Foucault in his 1969 study, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, with its focus on the social stratification of discourses. By analyzing language at the concrete level of the specific social rituals, Foucault's archeology enabled him to determine who gets to say what to whom. Rather than being something that one group possesses or uses over other individuals, power is for Foucault a network of relations that encompasses the rulers as well as those they rule in a vast web of discrete, local conflicts. Foucault's archeology therefore works with discontinuities and fragments in a synchronic way, as much as Celati and Calvino do in their archeologist's poetics, yet the latter take as their focus concrete objects, "the materials collected by mankind," a heterotopic *pot-pourri* of objects which mix human beings and machines, culture and nature, rather than limiting their interest to discourses and technologies of power.

Georges Perec's *Infraordinary*

In particular, I would like to analyze the emphasis given by Calvino and Celati to the ordinary as a privileged locus for the study of archeological history – study which takes place, not along the vertical axis of history's teleonomic development, but along the horizontal axis of its multiple and articulated surfaces (Calvino, *Ali Babà* 198). The title *Ali Babà* was understood, in short, not as the enchanted cave in which the treasures of European intellectualisms are stored, but rather as a warehouse in which one can find rejects and discarded residues, “an heterogeneous dust of detritus” (Celati, *Finzioni occidentali* XI), abandoned to the banality of everyday life.

Following Walter Benjamin's interpretation of history (where the historian is not a genealogist, but a collector looking for traces of lost systems), the *Ali Babà* group invites us to focus our attention on the ordinary and its most invisible objects. In his article “Lo sguardo dell'archeologo,” Calvino directs his writerly gaze to things with the hope that “the refusal to use ‘us-here-today’ as an explanation for things will, in the end, oblige things to explain us, here, today” (Calvino, *Ali Babà* 198). In his text “Bazar archeologico,” Celati calls for a poetics of the “objet enfoui” (“buried object”), a poetics that aims at reactivating the lost meaning of silent fragments. In a similar spirit, in *Il formaggio e i vermi*, the historian Carlo Ginzburg develops an analysis of the dispersed traces of microhistory, the history of a subaltern culture forgotten and overshadowed by monumental History.

By scrutinizing the ordinary in its most minute details (whereas Foucault advocates a microphysics of power, a study of power dynamics), the *Ali Babà* group proposes a science of the past not based on representation and evaluative criteria but on the inventory of minimal signs, secondary facts, faults, silences. Once one learns how “to see” the invisible continuum that the ordinary places each day under our very eyes and one learns how to hear a “bruit de fond” (“background noise”) which

faintly speaks to us, one ends up by putting into question the knowledge that our present has of the past.

In its study of the ordinary's resistance to monumental history, the Ali Babà project parallels the studies done, not by Foucault, but rather through the anthropological interests of Georges Perec, a fellow writer Calvino met when invited to join the Oulipo in 1967. In an essay written in 1973 ("Approches de quoi?" "Approches to What?"), Georges Perec coined the term "l'infra-ordinaire" (the infra-ordinary) for those minimal aspects of reality which he hoped to zero in on:

What happens everyday, the banal, the quotidian, the evident, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual; how can one account for it, how can one question it, how can one describe it? (Perec 1989, 11)

Perec noticed that our eyes are conditioned to scan the horizon of our habitat only for the unusual. Yet the scandal, the exceptional, the news-making event, even if more prominent, can hardly be as meaningful as the anonymous "endotic" (a term coined by Perec in opposition to "exotic").

Trains begin to exist only when they are derailed, the more passengers are dead, the more trains exist; planes have access to existence only when they are hijacked; the only meaningful destiny for cars is crashing into a sycamore: fifty-two weekends per year, fifty-two totals; so many dead and all the better for the news if the figures keep increasing! [...] In our haste to measure the historic, the meaningful, the revealing, we leave aside the essential. (9-10)

What really happens, what we live, all the rest, where is it?
(11)

To begin investigating the “infra-ordinary,” Perec invites us to ask what may seem, at first, to be trivial and futile questions in order to provoke the necessary discontinuity between signs and habits of observations. Defamiliarization, Perec notes, is a technique of inquiry which requires both perseverance and inventiveness and which must also resist systematization.

It is of no importance to me that these questions here are fragmentary and simply hint at a method, or, at the most, a project. It is of great importance to me, on the contrary, that these questions appear to be futile and trivial: it is precisely that which makes them as essential as, if not more essential than, so many other questions through which we have vainly tried to capture our truth. (13)

The anthropology of the “endotic” advocated by Perec intends “to rescue [common things] from the mire in which they remain stuck” (11). By creating fissures between common things and their background, by introducing distance and surprise, estrangement, his anthropology makes it possible for things to become visible to the human eye and therefore meaningful. Perec wants to devote his attention to the basic connective tissue of our lives, that “bruit de fond” (background noise), which is the level at which life manifests itself whenever a human body moves in its space and/or uses objects (Venaille 89).

“Approches de quoi?” was written as a sort of manifesto for *Cause commune*, the short-lived journal (1972-1977) founded by the architect Paul Virilio and the sociologist Jean Duvignaud – themselves key figures during the May ‘68 revolution. The journal intended to “to search for common causes, taking as starting point common things;” in other words, an investigation of “everyday life at all its levels, in all its generally disregarded or forgotten folds” (Burgelin 119). Their stated goal was ultimately “to attack at the roots and to put in

question the ideas and beliefs on which the functioning of our ‘civilization,’ of our ‘culture,’ rests” (as quoted by Burgelin 119). Paul Virilio views this new anthropology as a study by man of man “au ras de terre” (at ground level) (Duvignaud, *Perec ou la cicatrice* 51), while Duvignaud quotes Georg Lukàcs and his reference to “everyday life’s chiaroscuro.” (Duvignaud, “Effet d’éloignement” 23-24) Perec asks himself: “What is the real in people’s life, what is the real in people’s consciousness? What real still belongs to them?” (Perec 1972). For him, the real is not what merits inclusion in History, but instead what is likely to be forgotten, what is fleeting, inconsequential. As Duvignaud writes: “The infra-ordinary evokes that labyrinth of sense and familiarity which does not interest either historical powers or its actors” (Duvignaud, *Perec ou la cicatrice* 51). The anthropologist’s task is to rescue things from their opacity: “what we call quotidian is not evidence, but opacity – writes Perec – : a kind of blindness, a sort of anesthesia” (Perec, *Espèces d’espaces* book flap). In order to free oneself from such blindness, phenomenologists prescribe the bracketing of the world as a necessary precondition to understanding. Similarly, Perec’s first step is to detach himself from contingency, yet for him the process of bracketing focuses on what is the narrative material for other writers or journalists, evidence itself (Duvignaud, “Effet d’éloignement” 27). He will scrupulously avoid any “interesting” detail; instead he will launch himself into a diligent analysis of the most trivial aspects of the here and now.

One of the most interesting essays published by Perec within the project of *Cause commune* is “Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien” (“An Attempt to Exhaust a Place in Paris”). Over a period of three days, Perec stationed himself in three different cafés bordering Place Saint Sulpice. Writing on café tables, in between a few sandwiches and numerous cigarettes and cups of coffee, he proceeded to register in a simple, unfigurative and ostensibly neutral language exactly

what he saw. Patrice Delbourg comments: “[Perec’s] *Attempt to Exhaust a Place in Paris* is an herbarium of apparently insignificant details, itineraries of passer-bys recorded with a notary’s diligence; it remains a masterpiece of infra-quotidian anthropology” (7). The text begins with a very long first sentence in which all the buildings, monuments, stores which surround the square are listed. After this quite exhaustive exercise in “topo-analysis” (another of Perec’s newly coined terms), the reader is surprised to learn that:

Many, if not most, of these things have [already] been inventoried, photographed, written about, or itemized. My intention in the following pages was rather to describe what remains: what we generally don’t notice [...]: what happens when nothing happens, what passes when nothing passes except time, people, cars, and clouds. (Perec, *Tentative d’épuisement* 12)

What continues to preoccupy Perec is “what remains;” he wants to explore the interstices, the spaces between the uneventful minutiae of the everyday (Adair 104). He monotonously records the numbers of all buses he sees, the various ways that people walk or carry things, pigeons, cars being driven or parked. From time to time a note of humor comes in to interrupt the litany, for example when Perec wonders why he should bother enumerating bus numbers or when he introduces into the list a line à la Queneau: “passe un papa poussant une poussette” [an alliteration which could be translated: “A papa passes pushing a pram” or “ramming a pram” or “perambulating with pram”] (Perec 1975, 35).

Explication is here intended in its etymological sense of “ex-plicare,” “to un-fold,” to open up those “disregarded or forgotten folds” that are usually engulfed in the unruffled monotony of the everyday. In Perec, recorded experience lends data which resist formalization or rationalization; the world seen

from Perec's café tables becomes a collection of discrete things, synecdoctic signs which no longer stand for a recognizable whole. In such a world, the imprint of our human trace is continuously threatened by the limitless repertory of the indistinct, an unfolding heterogeneity which seems to defy received orders.

Many of the aspects of Perec's endotic can be found in Calvino's attention "to the cracks and faults" (Calvino, *Alì Babà* 197) in his call to retrieve the submerged, the excluded, the marginal. Archeology for Calvino is slow work which entails a step back in order not to regress into complacency ("after all, everything is inexplicable"); it calls for the patient application of new experimental exercises in description (hence Calvino's interest in description in the late seventies and eighties). Calvino writes: "You can't advance except by putting into question something believed from the start to be a conquered certitude" (197). As for Celati, the following passage demonstrates how close he is to Perec's search for "the bruit de fond":

The lost object, the fragment which cannot take us back to some original unity of a design introduces into the present the effect of a subterranean and invisible apocalypse, one which has just past or is still present. As in some horror stories, a strange presence appears and upsets the normal continuity of the present; into this divide, a foundational silence introduces itself, a silence which terrorizes because it is unsayable, unreasonable, undecidable. (Celati in *Alì Babà*, 210)

The incongruous fragments of the past are a scandalous presence which threatens the apparently calm surface of "the endotic". For Celati, however, the "infra-ordinary" is not only, if properly observed, able to disrupt the invisible continuum of our everyday experience; the Italian writer views it as potentially apocalyptic, an abyss where the present can at any moment lose

its material consistency and be engulfed into a silent void which resists meaningful explanation.

Dust as Resistance to Monumental History

By advancing further and further into the smallest cracks of the ordinary – what Denis de Rougemont at the beginning of the XIX century had called “l’inframince” (“the infra-thin”) – one arrives ultimately to dust (Grazioli 66). In this context, dust is not only the invisible fallout from everyday activities (the monotonous, gray and useless trace of entropy), it takes on the active connotations of incongruity, indeterminacy, chaos, and “écart” (deviance). Much as silence in the above quote from Celati, dust can be viewed as a disruptive agent of change and innovation, both materially and metaphorically. One has only to think of the semantic frequency with which images of dust recur in Calvino to be reminded of the literal and metaphoric importance that this substance has for him.² Similarly, many years after *Ali Babà*, in his 2001 collection *Cinema naturale* (“Natural Cinema”), Celati will write a few stories which are centered on the postmodern implications of dust, a dust which promotes nomadic, metaphysical wanderings and musing.³

² Dust and its variations, sand and “pulviscolo” (fine dust cloud), take on philosophical meaning throughout Calvino’s narrative, from the cleaning woman in the short story “All in One Point” in *Cosmicomics* to a few of *Invisible Cities*, such as Laudomia, to the conversations between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo: “Each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents” (137). The posthumous collection of essays *Collezione di sabbia* (“Collection of Sand”) is a philosophical investigation on the connections between sand, everyday objects and knowledge. See Marco Belpoliti’s article “Calvino che crea con la polvere.”

³ See, for instance, the stories “Il paralitico nel deserto” (“The Paralytic in the Desert”), “Nella nebbia e nel sonno” (“In the Fog and Sleep”) and “Cevenini e Ridolfi” (“Cevenini and Ridolfi”).

The two Italian writers are not the first, however, to claim a revolutionary role for dust; its centrality for modern art perhaps began with Marcel Duchamp and his famous work “*Élévage de poussière*” (1920). Thanks to Duchamp, this impalpable matter suddenly discards its traditional symbolic connotations (everything ends up in dust, dust is the product of time) and assumes performative and spatial meaning. If dust is, on one hand, transformation, passage, becoming, entropic energy, as Jean-François Lyotard points out in his essay on Duchamp’s art (*LES TRANSformateurs Duchamp*), it is, on the other hand, inert and receptive matter, that which is formless and open to all forms and signs, a surface ready to be “imprinted” (photography becomes the privileged medium for modernist aesthetic because it is founded on a chemical synthesis which captures light and dust). In avant-garde artists such as Duchamp, as well as for Dubuffet, Rauschenberg, and Pollock, dust is viewed as a subversive substance, something to be rehabilitated and a metaphor for art itself (representing “difference”, those values discredited by society).

In his 1998 essay, Celati recalls the influence that modern and pop art had on his archeological endeavors “to dig out” counter-history during the years of the Alì Babà project. In his opinion, in the twentieth century, literature and art underwent a similar radical change of perspective. Similar to the literary writer, who is meant to reveal the fine dust of heterogeneous traces left behind by monumental History, the artist explores objects as rejects and residues of our present, viewing them “as an archeologist who sees in anonymous pottery pieces the signs of collective cultural systems” (Celati in *Alì Babà* 318). Celati particularly loved Rauschenberg’s paintings because they appeared to him to have “rejects placed in the foreground [...] Everything was there on the surface, as residue or detritus from the general banality which characterizes our everyday life experience” (318).

If modernism looked at the status of our culture in dismay and was overwhelmed by the impossibility of finding meaning in the ruins of our past, postmodernism (or avant-garde artists such as Duchamp) has become suspicious of any grand narrative for history. The postmodern archeologists believe that the most insignificant traces constitute our culture's richest treasure, its cave of Ali Babà. In their artistic practice, those minimal, unrecoverable signs become performative insofar as they are indexes of the incongruous and the entropic, signs of what gets discarded by any narrative which develops teleonomically. Faced with a landscape which reminds us of Eliot's "Waste Land," Calvino, Celati and Perec shore up the dust of the ordinary against the blind unfolding of monumental History.

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