

Re-translating Gianni Celati's *Narratori delle pianure*

ROBERT LUMLEY

University College London

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Abstract

Robert Lumley, studioso e traduttore di Celati, affianca alla testimonianza la riflessione teorica e la prassi, tornando a distanza di trentacinque anni sulla propria traduzione di *Narratori delle pianure*, apparsa nel 1988 per l'editore britannico Serpent's Tail con il titolo *Voices from the Plains*. Accanto a una attenta riflessione sulle scelte traduttive compiute in quell'occasione, Lumley ci propone una traduzione riveduta di uno dei racconti della raccolta, "Vivenza d'un barbiere dopo la morte".

Robert Lumley, Celati's scholar and translator, combines testimony with theoretical reflection and praxis, returning thirty-five years later to his own translation of *Narratori delle pianure*, which appeared in 1988 for the British publisher Serpent's Tail under the title *Voices from the Plains*. Alongside a careful reflection on the translation choices made on that occasion, Lumley offers us a revised translation of one of the stories in the collection, 'Vivenza d'un barbiere dopo la morte'.

“Vivenza d'un barbiere dopo la morte”

Last week I re-translated “Vivenza d'un barbiere dopo la morte”. I first translated the story with the title “A barber's life after death” for the English edition of *Narratori delle pianure* published by Serpent's Tail in 1989.¹ It was easier this time. Easier because of learning how vulnerable the disarmingly ‘simple’ prose is to simplification and short cuts on the part of the translator. Easier because of the freedom to step back and see one's work as if another's. I remember how I lived for months with *Narratori* as if I were sharing a house with the stories. My partner, Clare, and I would spend hours poring over them. Being so close to what I was translating made changing and revising passages additionally laborious. When I met Gianni in the summer of 1987, he suggested I loosen up and open myself to the humour of the writing. I can hear him laughing as he said this.

Looking again at my translation of “Vivenza d'un barbiere dopo la morte”, I've tried to recast the story using the historic present, bringing out the fable-like qualities, employing more ellipses as is common in speech, and retranslating the word “vivenza”. The version in the 1989 edition now strikes me as inadequate. It places the story of the barber entirely in the past tense thereby removing it from the sense of the ongoing telling and retelling that is so important for the *Narratori* as a whole. The original translation fails, moreover, to find a way of communicating what is meant by “vivenza” as intended by the barber and understood within the narrative. I'd like to focus on these two aspects by way of introduction to the new, revised translation below.

Found in the title and a key word for understanding the story, “vivenza” presents a special set of difficulties for the translator. Resort to paraphrase or the use of more than one word is not possible given the need to have an equivalent in both title and text. “Vivenza”, as in the dictionary entry “vivenza a carico di”, sounds odd – a rarely used term with distinct bureaucratic associations. When I wrote to Gianni Celati, he referred to the kind of language that might be spoken in an asylum, a term an inmate might adapt from official discourse and adopt for his or her own use. At one level, the difficulty is pragmatic. There is a word in Italian and it is a matter of finding an equivalent word in English. And if there isn't one? Or if there exist words

that somehow stick out like sore thumbs, especially when put in a title or repeated in a sentence? For the author, the answer was simple – create a word that could communicate the sense intended. Don't be a prisoner to dictionaries. Don't be afraid of language that might conflict with what is taken as normal or correct-sounding. For the translator, this invitation was appealing and yet he didn't in the end make the leap. “A barber's life after death”. He kept to a title that was economical and instantly comprehensible. He also kept in place the conventional distinction between life and death. Sense, or lack of sense, however, is what the story concerns. We are told that the barber would speak with his customers about “una cosa persa tra i sassi del Trebbia, a cui è legata la sua vivenza: non usa mai la parola ‘vita’, parla sempre della sua vivenza”. The distinction is of the barber's own making and the term belongs to his personal lexicon. It has to do with how life is understood. Is life a matter of being alive or is it equally a matter being seen to be alive? The barber feels that his wife sees him as no longer living – she denies him his existence. He then comes to feel that everyone else does the same. What starts as a pragmatic question of translating a word leads to what is being said about human relationships and how they take shape in language. The search for words takes us into a territory where clear demarcations and dividing lines can no longer be taken for granted – life and death are not absolute and separate states for the barber nor is his sense of the world discounted. Some things cannot be put into the words of normal discourse. “Vivenza” does not fit in. It appears incomplete, forgotten, lost.

The opening sentence of “Vivenza d'un barbiere dopo la morte” uses the imperfect: “C'era un barbiere che era venuto a Piacenza a fare il militare” and this is the preferred tense in the paragraph as a whole. In the concluding paragraphs, after the death of the barber, the verbs again refer the reader to a time that is past, ending with the definitive “da allora il barbiere non ha parlato più”. The second paragraph, however, opens with “Passa il tempo”, and announces that the barber “crede di vedere sul pianerottolo un'amico che non c'è”. The *presente storico* is used from this point onwards as the story follows the barber and his thoughts. The *presente storico* is much more frequently used in both spoken and written Italian than is the case with the historic present in English. The switch

to the *presente storico*, as occurs in the story, does not sound strange. In written English, the transition is awkward. However, the original translation of mine, which put the whole story into the past tense, paid a high price. The barber is placed apart from us, the readers, and at a moment in time that is distant. It emphasises, moreover, the isolation of the story as free-standing entity rather than part of a journey of telling and re-telling. The re-translation, which replicates the use of the historic present, makes the story live in the immediacy of its telling and encourages awareness of what links the characters, situations and sensations in “Vivenza d’un barbiere dopo la morte” to those already encountered or about to be encountered. The second sentence: “E questo risale al tempo di Guerra” provides one of the many links in this respect as do the hallucinations of the barber.

Observations can also be made about repetition and redundancy. It is important, for example, that the formula “il barbiere accetta” is repeated to convey the feeling of a fable. Some things I found I could not find the equivalent for. The rhyming of “Dio” and “io” in the scene where the fishermen mock the barber is lost in my translation. Ultimately translators are not so unlike the barber in their search for what is missing, for what will make the story believable.

The title

I settled on the title *Voices from the Plains* after a lot of discussion. It was clear that ‘storytellers’ was unacceptable. A storyteller is someone who tells stories, someone with a special facility for telling a ‘good story’ or having the official or unofficial role of storyteller. By implication, the author could be taken as a story-teller by profession and stories as his or her inventions. There was agreement that the title should be free of any folkloric associations. No stories, no storytellers. Gianni was adamant that ‘narrators’ would be the right translation. *Narratori* refer to those who articulate what already exists rather than to any act of the imagination. Narration not creation. Narrators carry and convey the words of others. For Celati, authorship was a status or function that needed to be dismantled. The literary industry requires authors just as Hollywood requires stars. The narrators of his fiction are dispersed across the plains. They re-tell things already heard. The stories belong

to no one unless to the landscape.

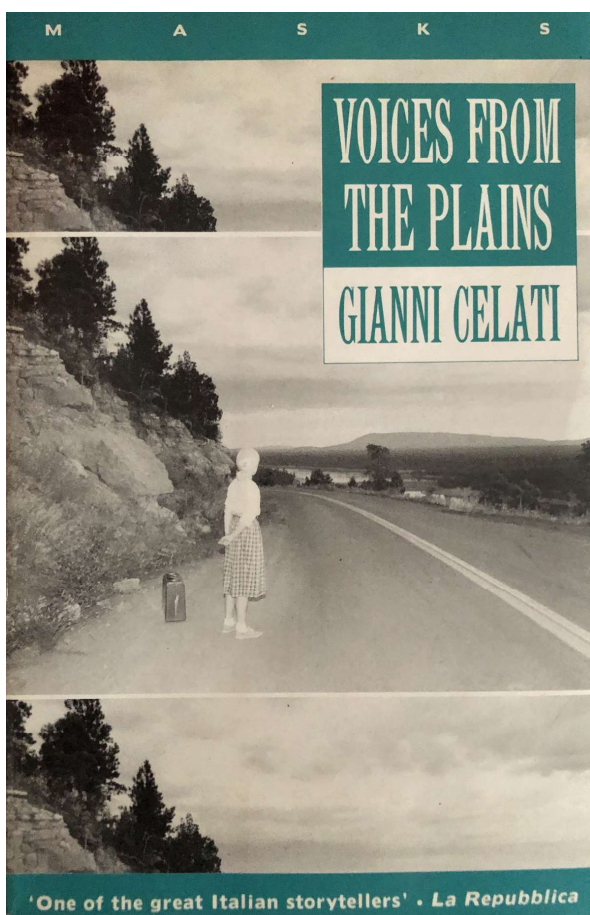
I think the translator understood what the writer was saying. The title was one of the last things to be translated. However, at the time, the English term ‘narrators’ brought to mind a number of unwanted connotations – the narrator of theatre or the narrator of BBC radio, both formal and slightly institutional sounding. Don’t worry, said Gianni, “narrator” sounds odd in Italian. Let it sound odd in English. When I came up with “voices” as an alternative it seemed to meet some of the requirements. “Voices” draws attention to how language and words sound. Voices are independent of what is said or who speaks. Voices float and give an idea of space. The publisher liked the sound of it as a title. At the conference held in Leicester in May 2007, Gianni made it clear that he was still not reconciled to the title in English. I wonder now whether he wasn’t right. Over time, titles attach themselves to books just as names do to people. Maybe nobody today would question *Narrators of the Plains* as a choice of title.

The cover

The choice of cover for a book can also be a conscious act of translation. It was in this instance. *Untitled Film Still No. 48* (1979) by Cindy Sherman shows a young woman seen from behind standing at the side of highway with a suitcase, waiting. I remember coming across the black and white image in the exhibition *Staging the Self: Self-Portrait Photography 1840’s - 1980’s* when I was working on the translation of *Narratori*. Sherman spoke of her preoccupation with fantasies: “There is a stereotype of a girl who dreams all her life of being a movie star”.² The hair and white blouse are slightly over-exposed giving an unreal feel to the picture. The line in the middle of the tarmac disappears in the middle distance. We are in America, says the cover of *Voices from the Plains*. Postmodernism is not far away. The author is Italian but his writing is not limited in its geography and outlook. There are stories in which characters live in Los Angeles or write screenplays for B-movies or watch films with Stewart Granger and Debora Kerr in a hotel room in a small Italian town. Starting with radio hams who make contact with inhabitants on an island out in the Atlantic, stories migrate across continents from North America to Africa and India and characters roam

continuously in search of something.

The Cindy Sherman photograph was redesigned to create the look appropriate to the *Masks* series published by Serpent's Tail to which *Voices from the Plains* would belong. Other authors included Neil Bartlett, Michael Bracewell, Daniel de Souza, Leslie Dick, Juan Goytisolo, Steve Katz and Raul Nuñez. Another Cindy Sherman work was used for the cover of *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze*, which Serpent's Tail published in translation in 1991.³ The artist presents herself, as if in an Old Master painting, in the guise of Judith with a dagger in her left hand and the head of Holofernes in her right. We are in a world of appearances but Sherman's conception of appearances has little in common with that of Luigi Ghirri whose photographs accompanied the books Celati publi-



shed with Feltrinelli in the 1980s and 1990s. I don't remember speaking with Gianni about the cover. At a certain point, he may well have decided to let the English publication take its course without trying to determine its direction.

The metre

"Su Granta (rivista americana) qualcuno aveva tradotto uno dei miei racconti senza accorgersi che c'è una metrica della prosa e che c'è comunque sempre una metrica che fai sentire, come nelle poesie" (letter of 17 September 1987). I checked and found that the translator had abbreviated sentences and rewritten the story according to a standard, Anglo-American idea of what a short story should be. This sorry version of "Idee di un narratore sul lieto fine" also suffered from its isolation as a single free-standing story. The warning proved invaluable. When I translated "L'isola in mezzo all'Atlantico", I realised that sentences that lasted the length of a paragraph lasted as long as was necessary for the sounds to make themselves heard. The sense, of course, lies as much in the ebb and flow of words as in what they are saying, a sensation that the reader can share with the Italian radio ham for whom the words in the airwaves are scarcely comprehensible. In this opening story, Celati provides a kind of meta-text that can guide others trying to reproduce in another language the affects produced by the words.

I feel some stories in my original translation of *Narratori* work well. "Dagli aeroporti" and "Tempo che passa" render some of the slow music of the prose. However, I was not conscious of the range of problems I faced at the time, unlike Lene Waage Petersen who describes and analyses them so well in her discussion of translating *Narratori* into Danish.⁴ I was feeling my way and responding empirically without the aid of linguistic and literary analysis. I have subsequently become much more aware of the scope of the task I was undertaking. It is hardly surprising that a gap has opened up between what I did in 1987 and how I would approach the task today. So much has been said and written that enriches our understanding of *Narratori delle pianure*. It may well be time for *Narratori* to be re-translated.

Our first meeting had a fantastical quality. Clare

and I were staying with dear friends in the hills above Brisighella in the province of Ravenna where Gianni arrived in a beat-up car that had to struggle to get up the steep winding track to reach the small farmhouse. He was in seventh heaven – the stories, the food, the company, the lunar landscape of the *calanchi* all around. When we went for a walk, Gianni spoke of his love for the poplar trees, the stony paths far from tarmac roads. Walking and talking, talking and walking. A moment of how life might be.

Livingness of a barber after death

There was a barber who had come to Piacenza to do his military service at a time when the city was full of barracks and, consequently, full of soldiers on the streets. And this is going back to the war when the barber got to know a girl from Piacenza and married her. After being taken prisoner by the Germans and sent to work in Germany, only some years later did the barber return to his wife's part of the world, where he opened a barber's shop. His wife set up a hair-dressing business above the barber's shop in the country.

Time passes and returning home one evening the barber believes he sees on the landing a friend who is not there - in fact, he died a good many years earlier in Albania. He confides what has happened to his wife and she suggests he goes to the hospital for treatment as she doesn't feel like being with someone who has hallucinations. The barber accepts and is admitted to an asylum.

He remains in the asylum for about a year and for another two years following that, and is then finally discharged and sent home.

In the meanwhile, his wife has both moved house and transferred the hairdressing business to the city where she's opened a shop. So, it's at this shop that the barber one fine day shows up.

His wife tells him that she doesn't feel like having him back in the house as he's only just left the asylum. The whole matter is too recent and she wants to be sure that the barber has truly recovered and no longer has hallucinations. The barber accepts and goes back to living in the house in the country above the old shop.

In the months that follow, the man shows no sign of imbalance and doesn't ever speak of hallucinations. From time to time, he takes his bicycle and goes to the city to see his wife, each time asking her if she's ready to have him back.

His wife shows that she has less and less time to spare on him since she is so busy with her work as a hairdresser. Until she asks him once and for all not to come and see her any more.

The barber accepts but after this begins to think that his wife is denying him his existence. And he tells the customers who come to have their hair cut by him in the old shop in the country, saying that his wife is denying him his existence and this he cannot accept.

What's more, he begins to think that everyone is denying him his existence, like his wife, and that they don't see him as being alive, whether in the street, the bar or the office. He feels this is due to an event that took place during the war when one night on the banks of the river Trebbia a German soldier shot at him without hitting. Evidently everyone thinks the German soldier did hit and kill him at the time, so he's not been alive for a good while.

After convincing himself of this, he begins going every Sunday to search the pebbly bed of the Trebbia with a fishing net. He searches the river bed under the bank where the German soldier shot at him that night, looking for the bullet which that night, missing him, must have finished up on the bed of the river.

He talks to the customers about the thing lost among the stones of the Trebbia on which his livingness depends - he never uses the word 'life' and talks always about his 'livingness'. Seeing him in the water every Sunday inspecting the river bed, the fishermen on the Trebbia sometimes, for a joke, ask him if he's looking for proof of God's existence. Each time, he replies: 'No, I'm looking for proof that I exist'.

Some months after the death of the barber, his wife discovered she was pregnant and put the word about that she was expecting the child of the dead barber. Subsequently, she put it about that the barber had spoken to her at night, saying he was happy she'd acknowledged the child as his as it meant she'd stopped denying him his existence.

According to the woman, the barber had spoken to her at night many times, always claiming that his livingness hadn't come to an end. Until she married again and moved to another city and from that day on the barber spoke no more.

Notes

¹ Gianni Celati (1989), *Voices from the Plains*, trad. Lumley R., Serpent's Tail, London.

² James Lingwood (ed.) (1986), *Staging the Self: Self-Portrait Photography 1840's - 1980s*, National Portrait Gallery, London, p. 55.

³ Gianni Celati (1991), *Appearances*, trad. Hood S., Serpent's Tail, London.

⁴ Lene Waage Petersen (2009), "Come tradurre *Narratori delle pianure* di Gianni Celati: tra aperture semantiche e ascolto sensoriale del ritmo e della vocalità", in RORATO L., SPUNTA, M. (eds.), *Letteratura come fantasticazione. In conversazione con Gianni Celati*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter.