

Celati's Transverse Adventures into the Errant Familiar

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Abstract

Patrick Barron, fra i maggiori esperti celatiani in area anglofona, ripercorre il proprio rapporto con l'opera dello scrittore considerata come un insieme omogeneo di narrazioni, saggi, interventi.

Patrick Barron, one of the leading Celatian experts in the English-speaking area, traces his own relationship with the writer's work, considered as a homogeneous set of narratives, essays, interventions.

Gianni Celati's writings, moving in concentrated flurries from narration to translation to commentary to poetry to screenplays, are hard to pin down because they are driven by an adventurous urge tapped into imaginaries and drawn always on and into the beyond of some small or large homeland of the mind (without monuments or patriotisms) instead of bogged down by a compulsion to follow rules, literary or otherwise. His writings move across others, other ideas, other places, and other texts, wandering into unknowns that are also familiar, rethinking and reinventing as a way, as Celati puts it, of "prolonging the state of non-fixation that exists in imaginative gusts" (Celati in Belpoliti, Sironi 2008: 47). Wandering and re-wandering, whether across places once known or not, invites adventure, however minimal or exaggerated matters little. Celati's adventures range from the "expository adventure of archaeological discourse", or a peripatetic and "uninterrupted encounter with the molecular places of a heterotopic city where residues of extraneity float to infinity", to "swerves of intensity" or "new ways of wandering with one's head", to the "adventures of ordinary humans", or "micro-histories that play out in dimensions to which no one pays much attention because they are not sensational" (1975: 219; 2007: 69; 2011a: 24).

Adventurousness is also behind Celati's many and varied translations, which are driven by an affectionate and light-hearted engagement with the surrounding world, embracing both what he is and is not, as well as what he might be. Key is the idea that all writing can be viewed as a form of translation understood as a process of surrendering, transforming, being transformed, and passing on and through a changeling interplay of relational indices with the awareness that any one place, one meaning, one phrase is never the same as itself, always subject to change. Translation implies always being nowhere, as if in no place, being by definition in multiple places, neither entirely here nor there linguistically or culturally or otherwise, but both here and there. For Celati the reading, writing, rewriting, translating, and retelling of texts constantly overlap in a sort of overlay map or palimpsest of the everyday in which interrelated fragments are constantly brought into relation, and one that resists the "tendency to write in a way that can be passed off as acceptable to

anyone—because in reality no book is acceptable to everyone" (Celati in Belpoliti, Sironi 2008: 49).

Writing for Celati is never stable but rather always in transit and undergoing shifts, with writing implying rewriting, and all literary genres better understood "as collective modes of storytelling, of writing poetry, of imagining life," or as "a collective flux of words" (Celati in Belpoliti, Sironi 2008: 49). Awareness of this flux depends on tapping into a certain sort of *allegria* (mirth, lightheartedness) that he calls "a vital and basic way to go beyond the self, towards an exteriority of everything that we aren't: things, stones, trees, animals, the spirits in the air and darkness inside our bodies" (ivi: 46, 44). As the actor Attilio Vecchiatto clarifies (whose work Celati slyly breathes back to life) in replying to a question as to the identity of an enigmatic poet who has supposedly penned one of Vecchiatto's pamphlets, "Badaluco is within us, he isn't a person with a birth certificate, but a category of the spirit. And thus that question you must pose to yourselves: who is Badaluco? Am I too a Badaluco or his collaborator?" (2010: 49). This is indeed a question at the core of every text, be it a translation or otherwise.

It is worth noting a follow-up question by a reader of Badaluco's sonnets and bar client, troubled by the idea that those who instead of taking part in this "category of the spirit" would seem to exist in some sort of "malignant gloom" engulfing the town. After screwing up the courage to face Attilio, he asks, "Who is outside of this category of the spirit?" (2010: 40). A wide grin soon spreads across Attilio's face as he explains that the answer lies with certain women bearing cornucopia-like shopping bags, "carriers of dreams, enchantments, charms. And from their bags, if they so decide, they can release everything: delicious foods, films, songs, romantic thoughts, the echoes of distant friends, and things people inflicted with Badaluco's thought can't even begin to imagine" (2010: 40). This response then, for reasons unclear to Celati, elicits rapturous applause from the clients at the bar. What perhaps matters most, though again in words that similarly puzzle Celati, is Attilio's theory that "We are all shadows, but only when we understand that we are shadows amid other shadows, do we understand the necessity of pretending to be ourselves. And it is from here that theater begins" (2010: 42). And it also from such

a mischievous, playful view that we can hazard approaching an “exteriority of everything that we aren’t.” As Celati puts it in his introduction to *Alice disambientata: Materiali collettivi (su Alice) per un manuale di sopravvivenza (Displaced Alice: Collective materials on Alice, a survival manual)*,

physical and mental automatisms cause external movements that we share with others; for example, we understand the ways in which Alice moves because they correspond to automatisms that could be our own, and are never closed within the private interiority of someone. And it is exactly this exteriority when combined with light-heartedness that causes an expansive movement that makes evident a commonality with others. It is important that this exteriority materializes as a bodily impulse, surging with desire, without the hindrance of psychology, without vigilant states of consciousness, which always have an inhibitory effect on the automatisms of the body and the mind (2007: 10).

Vecchiatto recalls in some ways the signwriter Emanuele Menini who appears in the story “Condizioni di luce sulla Via Emilia” (“Conditions of Light on the Via Emilia”) in *Quattro novelle sulle apparanze (Appearances)*. While not a once celebrated and now largely forgotten actor like Vecchiatto, Menini is nonetheless an overlooked artist and thinker whose externally-oriented musings on phenomenological minutiae Celati recuperates with a similar playful sleight of hand as he does Vecchiatto’s dialogues and poetry. Menini’s and Vecchiatto’s (and Badalucco’s) writings and discourses – as re-related by Celati in *Quattro novelle sulle apparanze, Recita dell’attore Vecchiatto nel Teatro di Rio Saliceto, and Sonetti del Badalucco nell’Italia odierna* – can also be understood as translations, unstable texts neither here nor there as they negotiate the processes of transformation while passing through shared fluxes of meaning and identity.

As Celati writes, “producing a translation that ‘objectively’ corresponds to the original of course will not do. There is no easy path forward in any translation. But perhaps there is a way to approach the linguistic bent from which a book is born by keenly pursuing its words to eliminate from the text purely functional readings and instead to restore to it an unpredictability that it had in the beginning, as a

single, singular thing” (2019: 58). Though Celati wrote this in relation to his translation of Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*, the central notion of unpredictability, especially as it relates to adventure and wandering, can be applied to much of Celati’s writings in the various forms that they appear. For instance, in “Condizioni di luce sulla Via Emilia”, Menini asks “why [...] do we never see immobility? We think of it only after having seen it, when the tremor is about to come over it and everything begins to move once more” (1987: 56).

This way of thinking is in the same spirit as Giacometti’s decision to stop making surrealist objects and instead dedicate himself to depicting a head, his point being, as Celati puts it, “the virtual impossibility of depicting a head exactly as we perceive it”, or how “it is possible to depict something surreal, imaginary, dreamlike or realistic, anything already officially assigned to a more or less codified category, but not the common appearance of something in plain view. The desire to depict a head exactly as someone sees it in space presents a difficult problem: not ‘how we look’ but ‘how something appears to our perception’” (2011: 81-82). Capturing this act of appearing, focusing on the vividness and active inaction of an object instead of on the act of looking, is akin to breathing instead of attempting to grasp the air, embracing Badalucco’s notions on the (im)permanent atmosphere as expressed at the end of his sixteenth sonnet dedicated to the open air:

Certezze effimere, permanenza incerta,
questa è la mia canzone all’aria aperta (2010: 43).

*Ephemeral certainties, unsteady intransience,
this is my song to the uncluttered air.*

A related musing occurs in the seventeenth sonnet on the passing of time: “tutto è al vento, / noi siamo spore perse in spargimento” (all is in the wind, / we are spores lost in dispersion) (2010: 44).

And yet, as we attempt however futilely to glean some fleeting sense, either from the gusting open wind or (in)stable, (im)mobile objects (whether people, places, or things) all around us, one circuitous path forward lies in what Celati terms “documentaries as unpredictable as dreams” (documentari imprevedibili come i sogni) – pseudo-documentaries based on

what we cannot see or seek out intentionally (but rather encounter haphazardly and without a clear plan) and capable of recounting or demonstrating how any comprehensive sense of the “reality” of the external world is ultimately un-documentable (2011b: 7). As he puts it, “encounters with places are always unpredictable, attracting us to something we don’t know, to something we don’t know what to call” (2011b: 8). Key to this is what Celati calls “il disponibile quotidiano” (the accessible everyday) – everything in landscapes, welcoming and unwelcoming alike, that passes on around us (2011b: 10).

Menini’s interest in the hyper- and hypo-local – in what is over and constantly runs above, as well as what is beneath and runs under any given ordinary place – stems from the unpredictability and imperceptibility of what often seems should be predictable and perceptible because it is either often encountered or seems unmoving. He describes his quest to understand the unease that afflicts people unable to appreciate much less tolerate things that do not move:

I think we have to ask ourselves what is light and what is shadow so as not to leave things alone in their sorry state. I’ll come to the point: you’ll see lots of people going about who become furious if they happen to see something that doesn’t move. For them it’s normal for the light to be splintered, since it goes with the tremor and then everything moves and one must always be busy. Well, what can we say about those people who find no peace in the immobility of things? (2010: 49)

This question is one that Celati too shares, both in his own restlessness as a thinker and traveller, as well as his attraction to the vibrating interstices between objects, the edges that would appear to belong to all things that seem stationary but in fact are always in transition and transitory, whether places, people, objects, or texts and languages.

Menini’s obsession with the impossible urge to observe immobility in a world of rushing and impatient human consciousnesses is related to Celati’s recurrent interest in flux, whether Joyce’s (and Dziga Vertov’s) keen ability to perceive “a general sense of discontinuous yet collective motion located everywhere” or “the idea of a space” as evident in comic slapstick films “entirely full and without voids

in which the void is nothing but a momentary effect of movements, of gestures, that then suddenly disappears amid other movements and gestures”, or for that matter a conception of literature as “a collective flux of words” as opposed to the “old humanistic pretence” of believing that there exist “static monuments of classic literature” (2013: xii; 2017: 314; Celati in Belpoliti, Sironi 2008: 46).

It is somewhere between these two related notions of continual flux and impossible yet essential immobility that we can momentarily locate Celati’s approach to both translation and writing in general, as always from an angle and angling across, in search of nothing in particular and yet certainly searching, with an affection for the ordinary and an anticipation for the unexpected. As Celati writes in his introduction to a collection of stories he edited by Antonio Delfini,

excluding the notion of a perfect correspondence between the thing to be said and its expression, writing transforms into an activity that moves ahead by swerves and approximations. From here, there arises the need to orient oneself by way of an intuitive understanding through those signs which Delfini calls primitive. In place of the ideals of professional bravura, there arises in importance “the ignorance of signs,” a “lack of distain,” and all that which loosens the tension of expressive schemes. Imaginative intuition isn’t born of schemes, but by way of intensive irradiations in the dust of moments; it is thus necessary to disengage thought, to liberate it from the pillory of expression, to give space to the points in which the armor of the self lets pass a bit of air, out of distraction by the world (2008: xxviii-xxix).

These “intensive irradiations in the dust of moments” that arise out of a loosening of the self, a sloughing off of our own skins, a letting-go of accepted means of thought, are related to Celati’s shifting of perception to the external world, “of becoming used to small, scattered attentions in such a way that there is also the substitution of one form of listening with another, in which there also entered seeing, no longer disconnected from listening. We see voices and listen to things; in narrative work there isn’t the dividing up of the senses” (1998: 33). They are also closely tied up with a sort of dual clear-headedness and distance characteristic of not belonging to place and people that Celati, in the introduction to his translation of

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, associates with "someone not immersed in the perceptive habits of a place, the lucidity of an outsider who reconstructs everything from afar and in isolation from his contemporaries. [...] This detached gaze catapults us into a state of complete estrangement, in which the most normal things, the most ordinary habits, become new and surprising objects of study" (1997 xix).

I view Celati's many translations, from Swift and Céline to Stendhal and Melville, as inseparable from his other work over time, whether it be the pared-down descriptive accounts of ordinary, often desolate people and places in books such as *Narratori delle pianure* (*Voices from the Plains*) and *Verso la foce* (*Towards the River's Mouth*), or his playful earlier work, such as the three books – *La banda dei sospiri*, *Le avventure di Guizzardì*, and (completely rewritten) *Lunario del paradiso* – collected in *Parlamenti buffi* that he refers to as "tellings," "games of speech," and "games for all" with "variations and outbursts and cadences and shiftings of voice to follow with the ear, a dance of the tongue in the mouth and a loss of breath" (1989: 7). All of Celati's meandering writings and other output, including his films, in one way or another, pay heed to the belief that "if someone tells me a story, it becomes an event that drags me out of myself, an event in which certain strange turns of phrase continually arise, because 'to fabulate is to fabricate'" (2016: 140). To concoct is indeed to patch together, to imagine is to partake of and in an imaginary, to write is to rewrite, reverse, revert, relate, and yes, to translate. To shed one's skin and assume another, then another, with each passing appearance and its corresponding mode of speech that together reaffirm our essential if all too often (in)tangible humanity, its myriad swarming consciousnesses and bodies in and out of place, amid an immense and paradoxically serene mêlée. To adventure with Celati means not only entering the fray but becoming part of it, zigzagging across textual and extra-textual realms, both here and there, never quite home but always on the edge of the familiar.

Notes

I have here attempted in a hopefully not too abbreviated form to overlay various related strands of Celati's writings over time, many drawn from a selection of his essays and dialogues translated into English and forthcoming from University College London Press, so as to produce a sense of his expansive palimpsestic thought over time, giving precedence to his work rather than (outside) commentary and acting mainly as a (re-)assembler.

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