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# Origins of Postmodern *Impegno*: Ethical and Political Commitment in the Works of Gianni Celati

**Michele Ronchi Stefanati**

**Professor Eduardo Saccone PhD Scholar in Italian Studies**

Thesis presented to the National University of Ireland in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Italian

Department of Italian (School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures)

College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences

National University of Ireland

University College Cork

Head of Department: Dr Mark Chu

Supervisor: Dr Mark Chu

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# Origins of Postmodern *Impegno*: Ethical and Political Commitment in the Works of Gianni Celati

**Abstract**

**Michele Ronchi Stefanati, PhD Thesis in Italian Studies, 5 April 2017**

**Origins of Postmodern *Impegno*: Ethical and Political Commitment in the Works of Gianni Celati**

This research investigates the role of Gianni Celati in the development of postmodern forms of *impegno* in contemporary Italy. It examines Celati's entire works, as a writer, literary critic, translator and film-maker, from the perspective of his ethical and political commitment. This study analyses Celati's choices in terms of language, content and style to see in what way his idea of literature engages with society and proposes Celati's ethical and political commitment as a determining aspect to be considered when studying his *oeuvre*. In addition, it investigates what technical and theoretical structures used by Celati represent a relevant inheritance for the following generations of writers who have expressed and conceptualized forms of *impegno* in present-day Italy. It offers three case studies of authors who are directly linked to Celati and develop new forms of *impegno*, partly following Celati's ideas, partly distancing themselves from that model.

Gianni Celati (1937) is usually not considered an engaged writer and he himself would probably refuse this definition. Nevertheless, an ethical commitment constantly precedes and shapes his idea of literature and arts (Schwarz Lausten

2009). Celati's works permanently engage with society and, it is argued, participate actively in revolutionary moments in Italian post-war history.

This research draws on the more recent theories on postmodern 'impegno', which assign to Italian culture the role of 'testing-ground' of new forms of ethical and political commitment. The study draws on the theoretical framework outlined by Burns (2001) and Antonello-Mussgnug (2009). The end of structured and ideological thinking and the demise of Gramsci's 'organic intellectual' do not mean the end of socio-political commitment, which instead arises now in a fragmentary way, refusing dogmatic statements. Celati has a crucial role in the passage between post-war 'impegno' and new forms of ethical and political commitment. Celati has never embraced an all-inclusive ideological view: he has rather differentiated his political commitment through an ethical way of thinking about the role of literature. The characteristics of Celati's engagement anticipated what happened in Italy during the mature postmodern phase, namely what scholars have called 'Postmodern Impegno', addressing issues that have been emphasized by subsequent generations of 'new engaged' writers.

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**Declaration**

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism.

**Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother Maria Teresa Travagli Ronchi, who taught me with her life example the importance of literature and political commitment and who transmitted me the passion for teaching. In our many affectionate and amusing conversations on books we have never spoken about Celati, but I have recently found a copy of *Narratori delle pianure* in her library, with some notes by her hand, and I am now sure that she would have approved. *Hic manebimus optime, nonna*!

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and constant support, and for their capacity of reassuring me every time I needed. Many elements of this thesis are related to them for what they have done in their life, so my first contact with these topics happens through them. I hope they will enjoy the reading.

# Introduction

**On Gianni Celati's *Impegno***

It may appear strange to speak about political engagement for an author like Gianni Celati, who constantly refuses any categorization and who often ridicules politics and ideology, never endorsing any leader or party. Still, the way his works relate with society, going beyond literature, is probably the most characteristic aspect of his entire career, which links all of his works and explains his choices throughout the decades.[1]

In her 2000 monograph on Celati, Rebecca West, while analyzing what she calls the 'antimonumental nature' of Celati's production, has pointed out what I believe is probably the most peculiar characteristic of his *oeuvre*, namely the fact of being, at the same time, intellectual and anti-intellectual, literary and anti-literary, related to institutions (universities, important publishing houses) and radically anti-institutional. I will show how these apparently contradictory statements are, instead, not only possible, but essential to understand Celati's works. The following considerations can thus act as a fundamental premise for every discourse on Celati's *impegno*:

> First, throughout his career as teacher, theorist, essayist, and writer, Celati has consistently distanced himself from the monumental machines known as the Institutions of Literature and Academia, opting instead for a constant but minimal involvement – on the sidelines, so to speak – in the games of these powerful public spheres […]. Celati has consistently refused the role of 'author', which in Italy typically means playing a highly public role: intervening in literary debates pronouncing on the present and future not only of literature but of all manner of social and political issues, and so forth. In sum, his dedication

[1] As underlined by Marco Belpoliti. 'Celati aspira a qualcosa che sta al di là della letteratura, o forse prima della letteratura'. See Marco Belpoliti, 'Gianni Celati, la letteratura in bilico sull'abisso', in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache, racconti*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti and Nunzia Palmieri (Milan: Mondadori, 2016), XI-LXXII, p. XI.
[2] Rebecca West, *Gianni Celati. The Craft of Everyday Storytelling* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 66.
[3] Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno. Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-2000* (Leeds: Nothern University Press, 2001).

> to writing has been 'maximal,' while his involvement in institutionalized letters has been willfully 'minimal.'[2]

After Jennifer Burns' investigation of the crucial role of Celati in the development of the notion of *impegno* in her study *Fragments of impegno*, to which I will return later, other scholarly contributions that specifically address Celati's *impegno* have helped to understand and penetrate this issue.[3] Studies on Celati's political commitment are few, but praiseworthy for their sharp and perceptive analysis. In her 2006 essay on Celati's 'natural narration', Marina Spunta has considered Celati as a political writer, observing that 'commitment runs throughout his work of fiction and criticism and his collaborative and editorial projects' and arguing that Celati's *oeuvre* has an extraordinary internal coherence in terms of his longstanding *impegno* in and through literature and narration. Spunta defines Celati's political commitment as follows:

> 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.[4]

Pia Schwarz Lausten has examined in greater detail Celati's *impegno*, observing how 'tutta l'opera di Celati sia pervasa da un impegno costante inteso come critica (politica, nel più vasto significato del termine) della società contemporanea, e come

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[2] Rebecca West, *Gianni Celati. The Craft of Everyday Storytelling* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 66.
[3] Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno. Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-2000* (Leeds: Nothern University Press, 2001).
[4] Marina Spunta, 'Celati's Natural Narration and the Calls of the Plains', *The Value of Literature in and After the Seventies: The Case of Italy and Portugal*, ed. by Monica Jansen and Paula Jordão, *Italianistica Ultraiectina*, 1 (2006), 559-573 (p. 559).

proposta di un mondo alternativo del quale ci offre un'idea attraverso la sua arte'.[5] Schwarz Lausten distinguishes between two sides of Celati's political commitment. On the one hand, in term of themes, there is a constant critique of some dominant aspects of contemporary society which, however, finds place at a deeper lever rather than simple condemnation:

> Anche se Celati dà l'impressione di essere in opposizione a molti fenomeni attuali (l'individualismo, il positivismo, il consumismo, per non parlare dell'industria culturale e della società dell'informazione), la sua critica verso la società contemporanea si esprime spesso più indirettamente: attraverso l'osservazione sottile delle forme degradate di convivenza e di comunicazione moderne, occidentali, e delle trasformazioni del paesaggio […] oppure attraverso l'immaginazione di mondi alternativi, utopici. (162)

On the other hand, according to Schwarz Lausten, Celati's *impegno* is evident in language and style, which creates what she calls 'impegno della forma':

> Anche a livello formale, nella scelta di generi e di linguaggi, la sua narrativa è lontana dall'impegno del dopoguerra e dalla sua rappresentazione diretta e realistica della realtà. Le strategie del comico e del fantastico, l'uso della descrizione e dell'osservazione […] sono tutti elementi di una retorica che si può definire 'debole', in opposizione ad una ideologicamente 'forte' basata su fatti reali e pronunciata da un soggetto autoritario o moralistico. (163)

Schwarz Lausten thus argues that Celati's commitment is tightly connected to his idea of literature and the approach he chooses in relation to the reader. This shows one aspect of the ethical dimension of Celati's writings:

> L'ideale narrativo di Celati […] si basa infatti su un atteggiamento di reciproco rispetto ed affetto verso il lettore e rappresenta con ciò una comunicazione-modello dal valore simbolico anche per altre relazioni intersoggettive. In questo modo la forma narrativa non è solo uno strumento per la formulazione di un contenuto, ma è in se stessa portatrice di un messaggio impegnato o meglio etico. (163)

[5] Pia Schwarz Lausten, 'Impegno e immaginazione nell'opera di Gianni Celati', in *Letteratura come fantasticazione. In conversazione con Gianni Celati*, ed. by Laura Rorato and Marina Spunta (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 161-184, p. 162.

Monica Francioso has focused her analysis on a specific moment of Celati's career, investigating the writer's relationship with Calvino and the debate on literature that involved the two between the 1960s and 1970s, while they were working together on the periodical *Alì Babà*. Francioso's analysis shows that there was a clear common ground between the journal and the 1968 protest movement. Francioso's essay contains several interesting insights on the political dimension of the journal and on a period of Celati's intellectual activity which is of fundamental importance also for my analysis.[6]

Marco Belpoliti finds the most important aspect of Celati's works in its ethical dimension, which consists, he states, of Celati's interest and commitment in literature for its consequences on practical life, rather than for its ceremony and intellectualism. Belpoliti links this, also, to Celati's opposition to pervasive traits of contemporary Western literature and culture, such as narcissism and the figure of the author as media star. Belpoliti investigates the reasons for Celati's importance and for his legacy for future writers, including Belpoliti himself, and compares Celati's ethical tendency to that of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom Celati returns to read in the 1980s. Celati's *impegno* has a strong ethical dimension as it consists primarily in the way the writer conceives his activity as an intellectual in contemporary times. His *impegno* stands in his practical, personal and styilistic choices as a writer, rather than in a set of topics he treats in his works. In this sense, *impegno* and ethics are tightly linked in his *oeuvre*:

> In cosa consiste l'importanza dell'opera di Celati, perché la sua originale figura di narratore è decisiva nella cultura contemporanea, come scrittore e come saggista […] e perché è diventato una figura di riferimento per almeno un paio di generazioni di autori italiani, tra cui io stesso?

[6] Monica Francioso, 'Impegno and *Alì Babà*. Celati, Calvino and the Debate on Literature in the 1970s', *Italian Studies*, 64, 1 (2009), 105-119.

> Per rispondere a questi interrogativi, che riguardano nel contempo il lascito del suo cinquantennale lavoro, c'è una sola parola: etica […]. La ricerca dell'etica in Wittgenstein […] si mostra attraverso il rigore del pensiero; in Celati, invece, possiamo dire che si applica all'attività stessa dello scrivere, e passa attraverso una forma di rinnegamento di sé, una rinuncia molto evidente alla figura dell'autore come sapiente, se non più spesso come star del sistema mediatico, com'è diventato nell'epoca dei megaseller e della comunicazione di massa il mestiere dello scrittore.[7]

Even though I share the above-mentioned general observations on Celati's *impegno*, I believe that a more complete examination of Celati's works is essential to understand the extent to which the category of *impegno* can be used for Celati, the ways in which his idea of literature engages with society, and the potential consequences this view has for future forms of commitment. Furthermore, all these earlier contributions highlight only some aspects of Celati's *impegno*, usually limiting their analysis to one or, at most, a limited number of works or to a specific period of the writer's production. The aim of this thesis is thus to provide a detailed analysis of Celati's entire *oeuvre* in terms of his *impegno*, seeking to answer the following research questions: how does Celati develop a form of *impegno* in his work as a writer and film-maker and to what extent can this *impegno* be considered postmodern? Has this form of political commitment deep influence in his work from the viewpoints of genre, language and style? What technical and theoretical structures used by Celati represent a relevant inheritance for subsequent generations

[7] Marco Belpoliti, 'Gianni Celati, la letteratura in bilico sull'abisso', pp. XIV-XVII. See also Belpoliti's comments on the role of language in this process: 'Muovendosi nell'ambito del linguaggio, Celati ha cercato di stabilire i confini dell'etica stessa in termini narrativi' (p. XV). Belpoliti contributed to Celati's anthology of writers *Narratori delle riserve* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992) with the short story 'La linea evapora nel piano' (pp. 23-27). On Celati's reading of Wittgenstein in the 1980s and the latter's influence on Celati's writings, with reference to Celati's annotation for an essay on Wittgenstein, never published, entitled 'La media oscurità dell'esperienza', see Nunzia Palmieri, 'Cronologia', in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache e racconti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2016), LXXIII-CXXVII: 'Le riflessioni intorno a Wittgenstein si legano alle letture e ai ragionamenti di quegli anni, che ruotano intorno al vivere quotidiano dell'uomo comune, ai compromessi della vita associata, al valore delle apparenze' (p. CX). On Celati's understanding and use of the notion of 'appearances', see Giuliano Gramigna, 'Se la vita è apparenza', in *Riga 28. Gianni Celati*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti and Marco Sironi (Milan: Marcos y Marco, 2008), 186-187 and Andrea Cortellessa, 'Quattro apparenze sulle novelle. Paragrafi su *Cinema naturale* di Gianni Celati', *L'illuminista*, 3, 8-9 (2003), 149-177.

of writers who have expressed and conceptualized forms of ethical and political commitment?

This study will thus investigate linguistic and stylistic aspects of the works of Gianni Celati, examined within their social and historical context. In this analysis, I will consider his entire work, fictional and non-fictional texts, novels, short stories, essays and documentaries. This research is thus the first systematic study of Celati's works through the lens of his political commitment. I believe that this analysis can not only offer interesting insights into Celati's works, but it permits us to understand his entire career, following the ethical and social dimension of an idea of literature to which Celati remains faithful over the years, despite the extreme variety of his works. In addition, examining Celati's works from this perspective permits us to shed light on the next generations of intellectuals and the forms of *impegno* they adopt. Due to Celati's role as a bridge between the post-war generation of writers and the contemporary artistic landscape, Celati has shaped contemporary literature and culture, directly contributing to the emergence of a number of new authors, especially with his collective projects. I will demonstrate how this happens and the extent to which his forms of *impegno* have influenced the next generation of writers.

I will dedicate the first chapter to the early part of Celati's career, before and after his first published novel *Comiche*, from 1966 to 1979.[8] The second chapter will focus on the rest of Celati's career, from 1980 to the present. In the third chapter, I will examine three case studies of contemporary authors of the same generation, Rossana Campo, Franco Arminio and Grazia Verasani, all directly linked to Celati, having debuted thanks to him. I will investigate the forms of *impegno* in the

[8] Gianni Celati, *Comiche* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971).

production of these three writers and see whether it is possible to speak of a legacy of Celati's political commitment in their works.

**Traditional Criticism and Postmodern *Impegno***

The Italian journal *MicroMega* dedicated its September 2013 issue to a collection of essays on the common topic of intellectual commitment. The discussion involved some of the most important figures in the cultural debate in contemporary Italy, including, to mention just a few, Andrea Camilleri, Ascanio Celestini, Furio Colombo, Paolo Flores D'Arcais, Dario Fo, Moni Ovadia, Piergiorgio Odifreddi, Adriano Prosperi, Ermanno Rea, Salvatore Settis, and Gianni Vattimo.[9] All the essays are based upon the same strong belief: the committed intellectual has disappeared and Italy needs his/her return as soon as possible. This is exactly what Romano Luperini argued in *La fine del postmoderno* (2005), where he described postmodernism as a period of disengagement, nihilism and 'levity' in intellectual production. With his book, Luperini claims that postmodernism has ended and invokes the prompt return of committed writers, whose role in democratic society is essential:

> Il postmoderno è stato il periodo di una generale anestetizzazione […]. C'è stata una anestesia della vita collettiva, e una anestesia specifica degli intellettuali, che, perduta la antica funzione di 'legislatori' e di mediatori civili, si sono ridotti al ruolo subalterno di 'esperti' o 'consulenti' o a quello di 'intrattenitori'. Si è diffuso un nichilismo morbido e soddisfatto, insensibile alla cura del mondo.[10]

[9] 'L'intellettuale e l'impegno', *MicroMega*, 6 (2013). This is a constant theme of the journal, which often dedicates articles to the topic. See the issue 'La scrittura e l'impegno', *MicroMega*, 6 (2005). Similar positions often can be found in newspapers, periodicals and other widespread publications in the later years, see Romano Luperini, 'Intellettuali, non una voce', *L'Unità*, 18 February 2004, p. 24; Alberto Asor Rosa, *Il grande silenzio. Intervista sugli intellettuali* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2009); Caterina Perniconi, 'Flores d'Arcais: 'Intellettuali assopiti, è l'ora della sveglia'', *il Fatto Quotidiano*, 29 September 2010, p. 6; Pierluigi Battista, *I conformisti. L'estinzione degli intellettuali d'Italia* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2010).

[10] Romano Luperini, *La fine del postmoderno* (Naples: Guida, 2005), p. 11. See also Romano Luperini, *L'allegoria del moderno. Saggi sull'allegorismo come forma artistica del moderno e come*

Theses like those of Luperini and the discussion in *MicroMega* clearly show how a traditional view of *impegno* still influences (and somehow dominates) the debate on political commitment in Italy. The idea of *impegno* pursued by traditional criticism seems to be fixed in the incontrovertible judgement that political commitment ended in Italy in the late 1970s, and returned only in the later years, with new forms of realism.[11]

Nevertheless, recent studies have demonstrated how the above-mentioned point of view needs to be challenged and revised. In 2001, Jennifer Burns' *Fragments of impegno* proposed a new perspective: the disappearance of the committed intellectual as traditionally conceived, usually referring to Antonio Gramsci's notion of the 'intellettuale organico', as strictly linked to a party and an overall ideological view, does not mean the end of political commitment in literature.[12] A few years

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*metodo di conoscenza* (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1990). A similar approach is in Carla Benedetti, *Il tradimento dei critici* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002); Alfonso Berardinelli, *L'eroe che pensa. Disavventure dell'impegno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997) and *Casi critici. Dal postmoderno ala mutazione* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2007); Raffaele Donnarumma, Gilda Policastro and Giovanna Taviani, 'Ritorno alla realtà? Narrativa e cinema alla fine del postmoderno', *Allegoria*, 57 (2008), 8-93; Raffaele Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2014).

[11] See the special issue of *Allegoria* 57 (2008), titled 'Ritorno alla realtà? Narrativa e cinema'. Many interesting scholarly contributions have focused on this 'return to realism' in contemporary cultural production in Italy: Daniele Giglioli, *Senza trauma. Scrittura dell'estremo e narrativa del nuovo millennio* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2012); Luca Somigli, *Negli archivi e per le strade. Il ritorno alla realtà nella narrativa di inizio millennio* (Rome: Aracne, 2013); *Scritture di resistenza. Sguardi politici dalla narrativa italiana contemporanea*, ed. by Claudia Boscolo and Stefano Jossa (Rome: Carocci, 2014). *Narrazioni della crisi*, ed. by Natalie Dupré, Monica Jansen, Srecko Jurisic and Inge Lanslots (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2016), *Encounters with the Real in Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema*, ed. by Loredana Di Martino and Pasquale Verdicchio (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017). See also Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2012) and Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic. Letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009).

[12] Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, p. 25. This simplistic use of Gramsci's thought has been challenged by scholars, underlining the complexity and flexibility of his writings and observations, especially of his view of the public role of intellectuals. This has made possible the application of Gramsci in a variety of different theoretical approaches and ideological perspectives. See *Postmodern Impegno*. *Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, edited by Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 15, where the authors also mention how relevant Gramsci's thought is for postcolonial studies. Pierpaolo Antonello has recently suggested that the premises for a more complex definition of *impegno* were already present in Gramsci. See Pierpaolo

later, *Postmodern impegno. Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, a collection of essays edited by Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug, moved from the same premise and extended Burns' conclusions to the entire cultural framework in contemporary Italy, with several examples of social, ethical and political commitment in Italian literature, cinema, and theatre. As stated by the two editors in their introduction, postmodernity – far from being a passive acceptance of the present and an age of political apathy – is perfectly compatible with the notion of *impegno*:

> We do not agree that the postmodern rejection of universalism and metanarratives necessarily marks the end of *impegno*, or indeed of modern emancipatory politics. Quite the contrary: postmodernist anxieties about political legitimation can prompt new forms of political action and help us reformulate the goals of emancipatory struggle.[13]

Starting from this new perspective, the debate on commitment has broadened further in recent years. In her *Postmodern Ethics* (2007), Elizabeth Wren-Owens has challenged traditional criticism on postmodernism as the age of disengagement, focusing on Leonardo Sciascia and Antonio Tabucchi and describing the different forms of their ethical commitment. Another fundamental contribution in this sense is Antonello's *Dimenticare Pasolini. Intellettuali e impegno nell'Italia contemporanea* (2012). Antonello suggests that traditional criticism in the Italian context seems stuck in a one-dimensional idea of the intellectual who engages with society, normally associated to an idealized memory of Pier Paolo Pasolini as 'prototipo dell'intellettuale impegnato', while international debate has already gone beyond this narrow-minded approach to the topic. In 2015, *Gendering Commitment: Re-thinking*

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Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini. Intellettuali e impegno nell'Italia contemporanea* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2012), 16-17.

[13] Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug, *Introduction*, in *Postmodern Impegno. Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, 1-29 (p. 3).

*Social and Ethical Engagement in Modern Italian Culture*, edited by Alex Standen, proposed other categories of contemporary political commitment, focusing on women writers and examining other fields of study, such as 'queer impegno', 'globalized impegno' and 'postcolonial impegno'.[14]

A simplistic view of political commitment is thus challenged by this new scholarship, which refers to a more complex notion of *impegno* and offers examples of the variety of forms that the relationship between literature and politics takes in contemporary Italy. I will thus continue within this critical framework, focusing on the case of Gianni Celati, whose works, I believe, could be considered as important for an understanding of the development of forms of political commitment in Italy. I will thus use the word *impegno* in the sense that Antonello proposes, namely as 'una posizione di carattere etico e politico, veicolata da particolari modalità di espressione personale (artistica, intellettuale o pratica) che scavalcano irrigidimenti di carattere ideologico o strettoie di carattere storico'.[15] This is what I understand as ethics throughout the thesis: the approach the writer choses to have in relation to society and which he/she realizes through his/her poetics, namely the stylistic and linguistic choices of his/her works. In this sense, *impegno* mainly emerges in the way the author shapes his/her poetics, rather than in the political role he/she might have in the public sphere as a writer and intellectual. Following this notion of *impegno*, I will demonstrate how Celati's production represents an example of ethical and political commitment, which is particularly relevant, both for its influence on a wide

[14] Elizabeth Wren-Owens, *Postmodern Ethics. Sciascia's and Tabucchi's Re-appropriation of Committed Writing 1975-2005* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007); Pierpaolo Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini*; *Gendering Commitment: Re-thinking Social and Ethical Engagement in Modern Italian Culture*, ed. by Alex Standen (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2015). Other contributions which share this approach are collected in *Creative Interventions: The Role of Intellectuals in Contemporary Italy*, ed. by Eugenio Bolongaro, Mark Epstein, and Rita Gagliano (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009).

[15] *Dimenticare Pasolini*, p. 142. Author's italics. See also *Postmodern impegno*: '*impegno* could thus be re-described, simply, as an ethical or political position chanelled through specific cultural and artistic activities, against any restrictive ideological brace' (*Postmodern impegno*, p. 11).

range of different cultural fields (literature, photography, cinema, translation) and for Celati's bridging role between post-war intellectuals and contemporary artistic production. The rationale behind the choice of this author is also in the anti-hegemonic nature of his *impegno*, which permits us to consider his works extremely pertinent and fertile in the present. Celati's idea of literature, in fact, matches perfectly Antonello's definition of political commitment in contemporary times, which I completely share:

> Interventi artistici a forte valenza politica in epoca contemporanea non possono definirsi nei termini di un impegno per nuove affermazioni egemoniche – la trasformazione del pluralismo in un nuovo *habitus* -, ma come una *sfida a tutte le egemonie*.[16]

Furthermore, Celati has had a key role in the diffusion of post-structuralist theories in the Italian context, having been one of the first, enthusiastic readers of Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, in some cases personally meeting these figures and often sharing their activity of deconstruction of cultural biases in the structure of language, and their attempt to undermine social and disciplinary norms and liberating contemporary thought from authoritarian systems.[17] Celati's

[16] *Dimenticare Pasolini*, p. 142. For a definition of the Gramscian concept of hegemony, see Gwyn A. Williams, 'The Concept of 'Egemonia' in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci: Some Notes on Interpretation', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 21, 4 (1960), 586-599, p. 587: 'an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotation. An element of direction and control, not necessarily conscious, is implied. This hegemony corresponds to a state power conceived in stock Marxist terms as the dictatorship of a class'. On the importance of hegemony in the Italian context, see what Antonello and Mussgnug state: 'For many post-war Italians, *impegno* was inseparable from the idea of political hegemony: as organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense, the *engagé* writer or filmaker had to shape collective consiousness and co-opt individuals into a communal project for global transformation and revolutionary change' (10). Note that the two do not mean anti or post-hegemonic *impegno* as opposed to Gramscian ideas: 'this view of post-hegemonic intellectual labour is not meant to act against Gramscian ideas of cultural formation, but rather endorses Gramsci's idea of the intellectual as a diffuse, interspersed, not marginal but interstitial actor' (15).

[17] On post-structuralism, see Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and *The Edinburgh Companion to Poststructuralism*, ed. by Dillet, Benoit, Robert Porter, and Iain Mackenzie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

works also clearly show some aspects of postmodernism in the sense that Antonello and Mussgnug refer to, namely as 'a triumph of eclecticism, a skeptical, but above all playful attitude towards social conventions, a loss of faith in definitive or at least comprehensive representations of the real' (2). Even though I believe it is rather problematic to define Celati's production simply as postmodernist, given also the complexity of different and often opposite approaches that this term denotes, it can be argued that his works present forms of ethical and political commitment together with features normally attributed to postmodern narrative, such as the ones mentioned above. His works can thus be included among 'the istanze emancipative e di riflessione critica che sono fiorite all'interno dell'ombrello epistemologico ed estetico del postmoderno', as Antonello defines them.[18] I thus argue that Celati's political commitment can be seen as one possible origin of what Antonello and Mussgnug have called postmodern *impegno*. Due to his liminal position in contemporary Italian literature and culture, in fact, Celati has held a pivotal role in the development of the concept of *impegno*, from hegemony to fragmentation, from 'macropolitics' to 'micropolitics', from rigid ideological definition to a variety of ethical and political positions and singular struggles. In order to show Celati's key role in the passage between post-war *impegno* and the most recent forms of political commitment in contemporary Italian culture, I will now briefly summarize some of the crucial moments in the debate on literature and society that has reshaped the idea

[18] *Dimenticare Pasolini*, p. 30. On Celati and postmodernity I share Marina Spunta's considerations, when she states: '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 postmodernity advocates. 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' ('Gianni Celati's 'Natural' Narration and the Call of the Plains', p. 561). For a full consideration of the debate on Postmodernism in Italy, see Monica Jansen, *Il dibattito sul postmoderno in Italia. In bilico tra dialettica e ambiguità* (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2002). See also Remo Ceserani, *Raccontare il postmoderno* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1997).

of political commitment across the decades, from the end of the Second World War to the late 1960s.

## From Hegemony to Fragmentation: a Brief History of *Impegno* in Post-War Italy

When discussing the notion of *impegno*, it is of fundamental importance to clarify what one means by this term, and how the concept of political commitment has developed and changed over time. The years immediately after the Second World War are characterized by a determined and widespread belief in literature as a tool for the reconstruction of Italy in the aftermath of Fascism. In his 1964 preface to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, first published in 1947, Italo Calvino uses the term 'neorealism' to indicate a series of books, published in the 1940s and 1950s, which were committed to a representation of the material conditions of Italy at the end of the war and in the immediate post-war period. According to Calvino, the 'neorealist school', its desire to tell stories and its style and content, were generated by a common collective experience, namely the Second World War and the Italian Resistance to the Fascist regime:

> L'esplosione letteraria di quegli anni in Italia fu, prima che un fatto d'arte, un fatto fisiologico, esistenziale, collettivo. Avevamo vissuto la guerra, e noi più giovani – che avevamo fatto in tempo a fare il partigiano – non ce ne sentivamo schiacciati, vinti, 'bruciati', ma vincitori, spinti dalla carica propulsiva della battaglia appena conclusa, depositari esclusivi d'una sua eredità. Non era facile ottimismo, però […] era un senso della vita come qualcosa che può ricominciare da zero.[19]

[19] Italo Calvino, 'Prefazione', in *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Milan: Garzanti, 1991), 7-26, p. 7. The rather problematic notion of neorealism has been challenged by scholars, proposing a more complex definition of the phenomenon. See *Ripensare il neorealismo: cinema, letteratura, mondo*, ed. by Antonio Vitti (Pesaro: Metauro, 2008). See also Bruno Falcetto, *Storia della narrativa neorealista* (Milan: Mursia, 1992).

As underscored by Wren Owens, the experience of the Resistance against Fascism bridges the gap between intellectuals and the people, which was seen by Gramsci as the historical cause of the absence of a 'popular literature' in Italy.[20] The Resistance becomes an experience shared between writers and readers (even though only to a limited extent in the *Mezzogiorno*) and it gives intellectuals the opportunity to engage with society and influence it.[21] Many post-war writers shared this objective and contributed to building a widespread awareness of the importance of political commitment. Among the main architects of this blueprint, scholars have recognized Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino as fundamental figures: their essays and interviews in the aftermath of the Second World War demonstrate how the notion of commitment was felt as part of the writer's job itself. Until the mid-1950s, both Vittorini and Calvino shared the idea of literature as education, capable of a constant and active presence in history and society. They also see *impegno* not only as a duty, but as a natural and necessary condition of an author, as Calvino states in his 1955 text *Il midollo del leone*:

> Noi crediamo che l'impegno politico*, il parteggiare, il compromettersi* sia*, ancor più che dovere,* necessità naturale dello scrittore d'oggi, e prima ancora che dello scrittore, dell'uomo moderno*. Non è la nostra un'epoca che si possa comprendere stando au dessus de la mêlée ma al contrario la si comprende quanto più la si vive, quanto più avanti ci si situa sulla linea del fuoco.*[22]

After the Second World War, most of the writers involved in the Resistance joined the Italian Communist Party (PCI), fostering the connection between the

[20] Elizabeth Wren-Owens, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 7.
[21] On Italian literature and the Resistance, see Italo Calvino, 'La letteratura italiana sulla resistenza'*, Il movimento di liberazione in Italia*, 1 (1949), 40-46. See also *Letteratura e Resistenza*, ed. by Andrea Bianchini and Francesca Lolli (Bologna: Clueb, 1997). On Italian Resistance, see Philip Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and *The Italian Resistance*, ed. by Philip Cooke (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).
[22] Italo Calvino, *Il midollo del leone*, in *Saggi 1945-1985,* ed. by Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), I, 9-27, p. 20.

notion of *impegno* and a firm left-wing ideological view, as premises of a potential socialist revolution. However, the relationship between the PCI and intellectuals was controversial during the entire period from the end of the war up until the dissolution of the Communist Party in 1991. The first important issue was represented by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and the reactions which followed that event: from that moment, committed writers started criticizing the PCI for its support of the Soviet action. In the same period, information began to emerge of the atrocities of Stalinism. The communist plan began to be questioned and many intellectuals distanced themselves from the PCI. Besides this, intellectuals had to face a completely new social environment: the economic boom which occurred in Italy, beginning at the end of the 1950s and continuing during the 1960s, completely transformed Italian society.[23] The working class, previously preoccupied solely with the struggle against poverty and unemployment, and still aware of class divisions, became more and more content with its economic situation. The desire for revolutionary change waned and the post-war belief in the possibility of building a new Italy seemed to vanish. In the same period, writers began focusing on literary and linguistic experimentation. Language was seen as the element which modelled perception: many intellectuals (especially in the Marxist area) saw in the revision of the linguistic codes of the bourgeoisie one possible way of undermining its certainties and of promoting a revolutionary change. The emergence of a new generation of writers, united in the so-called neo-avant-garde of the *Gruppo '63*, considered the post-war forms of writing as totally outdated and reacted against

[23] See Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics (1943-1988)* (London: Penguin, 1990), chapter 7, 210-253.

them, engaging with society in a completely different way, through linguistic experimentation.[24]

Burns and Antonello have shown how some of the protagonists of post-war *impegno*, such as Calvino, Vittorini, and Pasolini, challenged the notion of political commitment they had themselves championed until the mid-1950s.[25] The above mentioned changes in Italian society made them consider their previous ways of being engaged as no longer valid. They thus expressed the necessity of new forms of political commitment and tried to elaborate them in their works. In 1964, writing the previously cited preface to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, Calvino rejects the notion of *impegno* as previously theorized and suggests a different idea of political commitment:

> Oggi, in genere, quando si parla di 'letteratura impegnata' ci se ne fa un'idea sbagliata, come d'una letteratura che serve da illustrazione a una tesi già definita a priori, indipendentemente dall'espressione poetica. Invece, quello che si chiamava l''engagement', l'impegno, può saltar fuori a tutti i livelli; qui vuole innanzitutto essere immagini e parola, scatto, piglio, stile, sprezzatura, sfida.[26]

The same process is visible in Pasolini and Vittorini. Antonello, Burns and others have already demonstrated how Pasolini himself considers post-war *impegno* ended, already in 1964, as he states: 'Il famoso tempo dell'impegno è passato di moda; la parola 'impegno' ha perso il mordente, ha perso il significato, ha perso la pregnanza

[24] On this linguistic experimentation and its political dimension, see *Neoavanguardia: Italian experimental literature and arts in the 1960s*, ed. by Paolo Chirumbolo, Mario Moroni, and Luca Somigli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). See also *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria*, ed. by Renato Barilli and Angelo Guglielmi (Milan: Feltrinelli,1976).

[25] Burns examines the debate on *impegno* of the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s and points out that literary commitment, rather than being a monolithic idea about the social role of literature, has, since the years immediately after the Second World War, always been a 'problematic concept […] which reveals acute tensions' (*Fragments of Impegno*, 13). See also Antonello: 'È proprio dagli scrittori comunemente associati alla nozione di 'impegno' che ci vengono delle considerazioni che testimoniano come la consunzione di complessivi progetti egemonici non cancelli automaticamente la nozione, ma piuttosto la risemantizzi, allargandone i confini d'uso' (*Dimenticare Pasolini*, p. 141).

[26] Italo Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. by Mario Barenghi e Bruno Falcetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), 192.

storica che aveva durante gli anni Cinquanta', and he adds: 'C'è stata una lunga crisi involutiva in questo senso, e si sono cercate nuove definizioni di 'impegno''.[27] Vittorini himself discusses and reshapes his own idea of political commitment from the post-war period to the 1960s. This is evident, for instance, in a 1965 interview published in the journal *Il Menabò*, on which Vittorini worked together with Calvino from 1959 to his death in 1966. Here, Vittorini refuses the notion of post-war *impegno*, described as unrealistic in the contemporary world, and describes commitment instead as objectively present in literature, while subjective *impegno* is limited:

> Oggi tutti rifiutiamo il concetto velleitario di *impegno* quale è stato divulgato da Jean-Paul Sartre. Però sta il fatto che un'opera è sempre *oggettivamente* impegnata, cioè ha un significato politico e una funzione *ch'essa prende di per se stessa*, indipendentemente dalla volontà dello scrittore. E allora resta augurabile che lo scrittore cerchi di controllare le forze *che condizionano il senso del suo lavoro*, e magari di contenerle, di correggerle, *ma a ragion veduta*, di esasperarle. Questo è *a mio giudizio* il solo impegno soggettivo possibile: *paradossalmente una specie di contro-impegno.*[28]

Rather than having come to an end, *impegno* takes new forms, from as early as the 1960s. After Vittorini's death, Calvino seems to feel some sort of disillusionment with regard of the power of literature, as his essays of this period confirm. Burns quotes *Lo scaffale ipotetico* to show the distance between Calvino's view of literature in the 1950s and his new positions. Calvino now claims that, above all,

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[27] Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Marxismo e cristianesimo', in *Saggi sulla politica e la società*, ed. by Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), 786-824, p. 788. See *Dimenticare Pasolini*, p. 142. On Pasolini and Calvino's considerations on the necessity of new forms of political commitment in the 1960s, see also Elizabeth Wren Owens, *Postmodern Ethics*, pp. 6-15.

[28] *Il Menabò*, edited by Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino, 10 (1967), 60. Author's italics. See *Fragments of Impegno*, 30. Vittorini seems to refer here to what, after Foucault, we understand by terms such as 'ideology' and 'discourse'. Gramsci also refers to the need to 'know oneself' as the product of the historical process to date, and to compile an inventory of the traces left in you by that process, see Michele Filippini, *Gramsci globale: guida pratica alle interpretazioni di Gramsci nel mondo* (Bologna: Odoya, 2011), p. 32. Among the recent and valuable contributions on Vittorini, which have also examined his impegno, see Guido Bonsaver, *Elio Vittorini: the Writer and the Written* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2000) and *Elio Vittorini: il sogno di una nuova letteratura*, ed. by Lisa Gasparotto (Florence: Le lettere, 2010). See also Anna Panicali, *Elio Vittorini: la narrativa, la saggistica, le traduzioni, le riviste, l'attività editoriale* (Milan: Mursia, 1994) and Italo Calvino, *Vittorini progettazione e letteratura* (Milan: All'insegna del pesce d'oro, 1968).

literature has to recognize that its role in shaping the socio-political context is extremely limited, compared to the extra-literary reasons that regulate reality. Still, he recognizes some role for literature in contemporary struggle, by providing a deeper awareness of events:

> Per prima cosa occorre che la letteratura riconosca quanto il suo peso politico è modesto: la lotta si decide in base a linee strategiche e tattiche generali e a rapporti di forza; in questo quadro un libro è un granello di sabbia, specie un libro letterario. L'effetto che un'opera importante (scientifica o letteraria) può avere sulla lotta generale in corso è di portarla su un livello di consapevolezza più alto, di aumentarne gli strumenti di conoscenza, di previsione, d'immaginazione, di concentrazione, ecc.[29]

I believe that *Lo scaffale ipotetico*, together with other writings of this period that express a crisis of the post-war cultural landscape, like *Il mare dell'oggettività* (1960), demonstrate that Calvino was at this stage in search of a new theoretical framework, that he will find, in part in Giorgio Manganelli, and, mainly, in a young author, Gianni Celati, as will be shown.[30]

**New Forms of *Impegno* and the Role of Gianni Celati**

According to Jennifer Burns 'the definition of impegno which Vittorini, Calvino and Pasolini gradually make space for, and which carries forward to the writers of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, is perhaps: treating responsibly the task of artistic communication in the contemporary social environment'.[31] By focusing her analysis on authors who write in the years of the so-called *riflusso* (1980-2000), an era normally described by traditional criticism as the time of disengagement, Burns illustrates how post-war political commitment finds space in the next decades in the

[29] Italo Calvino, 'Per chi si scrive? (Lo scaffale ipotetico)', in *Saggi*, 199-204, pp. 203-4.
[30] See Marco Belpoliti, 'Calvino, Celati e 'Alì Babà'', in *Riga 14. 'Alì Babà' Progetto di una rivista 1968-1972*, ed. by Mario Barenghi and Marco Belpoliti (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1998), 24-51.
[31] *Fragments*, p. 37.

form of fragments, namely as 'piecemeal engagement'.[32] Burns argues that this process of fragmentation started with authors like Pasolini and Calvino who, during the 1970s, decided to use forms other than narrative, especially mainstream journalism, in order to have an immediate impact on their audience. Calvino moves to Paris in 1967, but continues sending his articles to the *Corriere della sera*, where he comments on the tragic events that involved Italy in the so-called 'years of lead'.[33] Pasolini does the same, and, in his famous article *Che cos'è questo golpe?*, published in *Corriere della sera* in November 1974, he encourages the idea of the political dimension of writers who have the possibility to engage with society precisely because of their role as intellectuals. Following the 1974 terrorist attack (the Piazza della Loggia bombing in Brescia in May, the bombing on the Italicus train in Bologna in August) Pasolini claims to know the names ('Io so i nomi') of the perpetrators and instigators of all the terrorist attacks which occured in Italy from the Piazza Fontana bombing (Milan, 12 december 1969) onwards and underscores that he knows them precisely because he is an intellectual. His reconstruction of the events is thus part of his job as a writer and he uses imagination in order to fill the gaps in establishing the truth behind those terrorist attack. For the same reason, Pasolini claims, he has no proof:

> Io so. Ma non ho le prove. Non ho nemmeno indizi.
>
> Io so perché sono un intellettuale, uno scrittore, che cerca di seguire tutto ciò che succede, di conoscere tutto ciò che se ne scrive, di immaginare tutto ciò che non si sa o che si tace; che coordina fatti anche lontani, che mette insieme i pezzi disorganizzati e frammentari di un intero coerente quadro politico, che ristabilisce la logica là dove sembrano regnare

[32] *Fragments*, p. 1. For a definition of the so-called 'riflusso', see Lino Pertie, 'The Italian Novel Today: Politics, Language, Literature', in *The New Italian Novel*, edited by Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 1-19, pp. 16-17.

[33] On political terrorism in Italy in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (a period known as 'anni di piombo') and the 'strategy of tension', see Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy*, chapter 10, 348-405.

> l'arbitrarietà, la follia e il mistero. Tutto ciò fa parte del mio mestiere e dell'istinto del mio mestiere. Credo che sia difficile che il mio 'progetto di romanzo', sia sbagliato, che non abbia cioè attinenza con la realtà, e che i suoi riferimenti a fatti e persone reali siano inesatti. Credo inoltre che molti altri intellettuali e romanzieri sappiano ciò che so io in quanto intellettuale e romanziere. Perché la ricostruzione della verità a proposito di ciò che è successo in Italia dopo il '68 non è poi così difficile.[34]

In the same article, Pasolini states that he has no proof of those responsabilities, because, being a free voice, he is excluded from power, both by the political power and by his own choice not to be part of a political world that he considers irreparably corrupted. Compromising with power would mean having access to those proofs, but losing the possibility of denouncing publicly those responsible. Pasolini thus confirms that the intellectual has a fundamental political role, but, at the same time, he cannot express it, as 'il coraggio intellettuale della verità e la pratica politica sono due cose inconciliabili in Italia' (*ivi*). Pasolini thus seems to suggest already, even though with a strong sense of disappointment, that the only possibility of political commitment in Italy at the time is a form of *impegno* that is far from any direct involvement in politics, in the sense of power and party, and uses imaginative thinking to engage with society, offering a more complex and insightful view of the present:

> Un intellettuale dunque potrebbe benissimo fare pubblicamente quei nomi: ma egli non ha né prove né indizi. Il potere e il mondo che, pur non essendo del potere, tiene rapporti pratici col potere, ha escluso gli intellettuali liberi - proprio per il modo in cui è fatto - dalla possibilità di avere prove ed indizi. Mi si potrebbe obiettare che io, per esempio, come intellettuale, e inventore di storie, potrei entrare in quel mondo esplicitamente politico (del potere o intorno al potere), compromettermi con esso, e quindi partecipare del diritto ad avere, con una certa alta probabilità, prove ed indizi. Ma a tale obiezione io risponderei che ciò non è possibile, perché è proprio la ripugnanza ad entrare in un simile mondo politico che si identifica col mio potenziale coraggio intellettuale a dire la verità: cioè a fare i nomi. Il coraggio

[34] '14 novembre 1974. Il romanzo delle stragi', in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, 362-67, p. 363.

> intellettuale della verità e la pratica politica sono due cose inconciliabili in Italia. (364)

At the same time, Pasolini confirms his trust in the Communist Party as the only possibility of salvation for Italian democracy, claiming a division of roles in political action: the intellectuals on the side of moral and ideological critique and the explanation of events; the party on the side of direct intervention on the system of power.

> Ma non esiste solo il potere: esiste anche un'opposizione al potere. In Italia questa opposizione è così vasta e forte da essere un potere essa stessa: mi riferisco naturalmente al Partito comunista italiano. È certo che in questo momento la presenza di un grande partito all'opposizione come è il Partito comunista italiano è la salvezza dell'Italia e delle sue povere istituzioni democratiche.
>
> Il Partito comunista italiano è un Paese pulito in un Paese sporco, un Paese onesto in un Paese disonesto, un Paese intelligente in un Paese idiota, un Paese colto in un Paese ignorante, un Paese umanistico in un Paese consumistico. (365)

Pasolini's position might be seen as too polarized and even naïve but it shows the still strong trust in the political party that he supports, as part of one same struggle against power, together with the intellectual. In this period, Pasolini seeks to find solidarity among other intellectuals and when Calvino published his 1976 article *Del mantenere la calma*,[35] in which he strongly criticized political and institutional power, Pasolini believed he had found an interlocutor. Pasolini, however, wanted to push forward Calvino's analysis, in order to give a full explanation of the facts he was denouncing:

> Tu hai steso un 'cahier de doléances' in cui sono allineati fatti e fenomeni a cui non dai spiegazioni, come farebbe Lietta Tornabuoni o un giornalista sia pur indignato della Tv. Perché?[36]

[35] 'Del mantenere la calma' (*Corriere della sera*, 13 June 1976), in *Saggi*, II, 2279-84.
[36] 'Lettera luterana a Italo Calvino' (*Il Mondo*, 30 October 1975), in *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, 700-705, p. 701.

Pasolini believed that he and Calvino had, Burns argues, 'something special and invaluable to offer by the very fact of being writers of literature: they have the capacity to attempt, at least, to provide deeper explanations' of the tragic events that were occurring in Italy at the time.[37] As Burns has observed, however, by using non-fiction as a medium for his *impegno*, Pasolini himself demonstrated how the relationship between literature and society was in crisis: a crisis which concerned the possibility of literature expressing indignation and contributing to stopping those events. Pasolini encourages writers to be politically committed, but he himself does that, for the most part, outside fiction. This same crisis is well depicted in Calvino's article, *Non possono smettere di colpire*, where he also states that not only literature but, more in general, the written and spoken word were helpless in the face of the bombing attacks:

> Almeno un risultato questi delle bombe l'hanno ottenuto, insistendo nel loro monotono lavoro di collezionisti di stragi: di esaurire le possibilità che la parola scritta e parlata ha di esprimere l'indignazione, l'esecrazione, la ferma volontà di impedire il ripetersi, ecc.[38]

Nevertheless, in these years Calvino himself still feels the duty of his engagement with society, even if literature seems not to allow its expression:

> Se scriviamo sui giornali è perché lo spazio in cui la parola può operare non si chiuda. Non perché la parola scritta possa mettere la coscienza in pace a nessuno. La responsabilità di dire e di ripetere quel che va detto e ripetuto cresce con l'inasprirsi dei tempi.[39]

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[37] *Fragments*, p. 43.
[38] ' Non possono smettere di colpire' (*Corriere della Sera*, 6 August 1974); 'La strage', in *Saggi*, II, 2253-56, p. 2253.
[39] 'La responsabilità di chi tace' (*Corriere della Sera*, 10 November 1977); 'Se la parola non serve, in *Saggi*, II, 2332-35, p. 2335.

The debate between Calvino and Pasolini clearly shows that, in the mid-1970s, the two intellectuals were still in search of new ways of engaging with society and their opinion on the solutions to be adopted diverged radically. The same need for different solutions in the relationship between literature and society was at the origins of the project for the journal *Alì Babà*, which Calvino worked on, together with Gianni Celati, from 1968 to 1972. In a document written by Celati for *Alì Babà* in December 1968, after a meeting with Calvino and the other editor of the journal, the French literature specialist Guido Neri, Celati expresses his concerns about how literature was engaging with the 1968 protest movement. The failure of the *Alì Babà* project makes it impossible to have an actual example of a different type of political commitment and to see its impact on the literary context. Nevertheless, notes, letters and other materials give an idea of what it was to be, especially in terms of its political dimension. The materials for *Alì Babà* show that Calvino, and Celati, through *Alì Babà*, had already started exploring new possibilities for literature to be political, in contrast with the solutions found by Pasolini, who decided to dedicate himself mainly to non-fiction. Celati and Calvino, on the contrary, confirmed their strong belief in fiction, claiming that literature 'had to say something more', going beyond the boundaries of its own field.[40] They do this by using an expanded notion of literature, which deeply re-defines the field. As stated in the preparatory materials, literature is, in the editor's view, 'un luogo di significati e di forme che non valgono solo per la letteratura' or 'luogo di fondamenti mitici dell'operare umano'. This

[40] See Calvino's essay 'Per una letteratura che chieda di più. Vittorini e il 1968', in Calvino, *Saggi,* I, 238-251. The essay was published in 1968, following a debate on Vittorini's *Le due tensioni*, and has many aspects in common with the preparatory materials for *Alì Babà*. See also what Celati writes in 1997, remembering that period: 'Calvino diceva che alla letteratura 'si può chiedere qualcosa di più', oltre al solito tran-tran dei libri di successo. Con ciò voleva dire che una letteratura chiusa nel suo ghetto di premi e di best-sellers, di cerimonie critiche e di pose letterarie, diventa priva d'immaginazione proprio perché non ha più nessun termine di confronto esterno […]. Ma siccome quel 'qualcosa di più' che si andava cercando fuori dal ghetto riguardava la sua funzione (la funzione della letteratura), allora si trattava di chiedersi a cosa servono i libri.' (Gianni Celati, 'Il progetto di 'Alì Babà', trent'anni dopo', in *Riga 14. 'Alì Babà'*, 313-321)

definition derives from the editor's belief that every human discourse has to do with literature ('letterarietà instrinseca di qualsiasi uso della parola') and has direct consequences on the capacity of literature to be political: 'la riproposta d'un discorso umano che non occulti i suoi fondamenti mitici […] diviene automaticamente politica'.[41] As I will analyse in detail, the possibility of literature being political is the issue from which the editors of *Alì Babà* started to elaborate the journal. Rather than abandon fiction or confusing literature and politics, *Alì Babà* was to propose another way for literature to be political, still using fiction and imagination. In preparation for the journal, Calvino writes *Lo sguardo dell'archeologo*, while Celati writes *Il bazar archeologico*, two 'twin essays' which complement each other and which Burns sees as fundamental in the passage from forms of *impegno* still linked to the post-war period to a new form of political commitment.[42] Burns observes that *Lo sguardo dell'archeologo* represents for Calvino a return to asserting the possibility of changing things, a position that had been absent from Calvino's writings since the mid-1950s. The encounter with Celati, whom Calvino defines as a 'vulcano di idee',[43] and the discussions around *Alì Babà*, represent for Calvino a positive and even joyful contact with the many revolutionary ideas arising in those years in many different disciplines, which led to a radical revision of Western thought:

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[41] *Riga 14. 'Alì Babà'*, p. 58.

[42] Italo Calvino, 'Lo sguardo dell'archeologo', *Saggi,* I, 324-327. Gianni Celati, 'Il bazar archeologico', in *Finzioni occidentali: Fabulazione, comicità e scrittura* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), pp. 197-227. The two essays clearly refer to Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). Celati has explained that 'Il bazar archeologico' was to be read together with Calvino's text (*Finzioni occidentali*, p. 225). Burns also links *Lo sguardo dell'archeologo* to the collection of stories *Palomar*, published as a volume in 1983 (*Fragments*, p. 46). In the second chapter, I will mention Celati's reading of Palomar and show its connection with Celati's *impegno* in the 1980s.

[43] Calvino uses this expression with regard to Celati in an interview by the writer and journalist Ferdinando Camon, published in 1973, while he states that they were working together on a journal: 'Con Gianni Celati, soprattutto, che è una specie di vulcano di idee, l'amico con cui ho lo scambio di idee più nutrito'. See 'Colloquio con Ferdinando Camon', in Italo Calvino, *Saggi*, II, 2774-2796, p. 2785.

> C'era di tutto che veniva a galla alla rinfusa: Artaud e il teatro della crudeltà, Saussure e la linguistica, Lévi Strauss e le società primitive, Lacan e la psicanalisi, Propp e la morfologia delle fiabe, Benjamin e le sue tesi sulla storia, Foucault e l'archeologia, Deleuze e la logica della differenza, Sade e le perversioni sessuali, Nietzsche e l'opposizione tra storia monumentale e storia antiquaria, Bachtin e il carnevale, il dialogismo, etc.[44]

These and other theories clearly influence *Alì Babà* and, as a consequence, the idea of *impegno* that the journal's minutes contain. Considering the emphasis on fragments and fragmentation as what differentiates history from archaeology, Burns sees in Celati's *Il bazar archeologico* as a fundamental text in her analysis of the transformation of the notion of political commitment, 'a pivotal moment in the development of the idea of *impegno*' (48). Burns argues that, even though Celati's essay deals with a number of issues that refer to very different fields and does not have politics as its main focus, it is revealing of the future forms that political commitment (in fragments) will take:

> The points he makes have striking relevance for any project involving the social role of literature. If the grand narratives of Western thought (history) have been replaced by the traces of past realities washed up on the shore of contemporary culture (archaeology), then the grand narrative of *impegno* – the singular commitment in literature to a political ideal – must also give way to an engagement with the 'minor' issues customarily denied political value.[45]

*Alì Babà* thus contains some insightful considerations on what literature is about and on its social role and, through that, it shows a possible way for literature to have a social function. The relationship between Calvino and Celati highlights a turning point in the development of the notion of *impegno*. Sharing Burns' statement that 'the directions the two men took after, and as a result of, this collaboration are more important, than what the project itself achieved' (47), I will look at the forms of

[44] Gianni Celati, 'Il progetto 'Alì Babà', trent'anni dopo', in *Riga 14, 'Alì Babà'*, p. 317.
[45] *Fragments*, 48.

*impegno* that it is possible to find in Celati's works, demonstrating how the *Alì Babà* premises will have relevant reverberations both in Celati's entire production and in the alternative forms that the relationship between literature and society will take in the next generations of writers. I will thus go beyond Burns' analysis focusing on the case of Celati as a particularly significant and somehow unique example of commitment in and through literature, which links the post-war period to the present.

# Chapter One

## Rewriting *Impegno*: Celati's Critique of Institutions (1960-1979)

## 1.1 Celati's Debut as a Critic and Translator: from *Impegno presente* to *Alì Babà*

Gianni Celati started his intellectual career as a literary critic on journals such as *Marcatrè*, *Uomini e idee*, *Periodo ipotetico*, and *Il Caffè*. It was through one of these (*Marcatrè*) that the poet Edoardo Sanguineti discovered Celati's work of fiction, *Gli annegati della baia blu*, and proposed it to the Einaudi editor, Guido Davico Bonino, giving birth to the long-lasting collaboration between Celati and Einaudi. On 15 September 1966, Davico wrote a letter to Celati in which he expressed interest in *Gli annegati*, even though, in his view, the book needed to be 'riequilibrato'. Davico thus asked Celati if he had something new to be published in the book series *La ricerca letteraria*, that he was about to launch, together with Sanguineti and Giorgio Manganelli. In his letter, Davico also made reference to another letter to Celati, from Italo Calvino, who at the time was also working as an editor for Einaudi. This letter from Calvino had never reached Celati, but it can be seen as the first attempt at contact between the two intellectuals, who would soon be friends and collaborators.[46]

[46] Marco Belpoliti suggests that Celati and Calvino first met in 1968 ('Gianni Celati ha poco più di trent'anni quando conosce Calvino nell'estate del 1968', see Marco Belpoliti, 'Calvino, Celati e *Alì Babà*', *Riga 14. 'Alì Babà'*, 24-52, p. 27). Nevertheless, already in 1966, Celati was supposed to have received a letter from Calvino about Einaudi's interest in Celati's novel *Gli annegati*: 'Se ho ben capito Calvino mi avrebbe scritto, però fin'ora non ho ricevuto niente. Qui pro quo o mancato recapito?'. After that, in a 1967 letter to Davico, Celati writes: 'P.S. Se ha l'occasione potrebbe salutarmi Calvino?'. See Michele Ronchi Stefanati, ''Intonare lo strumento di un altro italiano'. Il carteggio tra Gianni Celati e l'Einaudi (1966-1979)', *Italian Studies*, 72, 3 (2017), 309-322.

*Gli annegati* was thus meant to be Celati's debut novel, but was not ready at the time of this first contact between the writer and the publishing house. An excerpt from the book had appeared in *Marcatrè* in 1965, where Sanguineti had read it, and the correspondence between Celati and Einaudi shows how Celati valued *Gli annegati* as an important work.[47] Celati replied to Davico's letter on 6 October 1966, saying that he had nothing else but a short novel, part of which had been published in a journal. The novel he referred to was, indeed, his future debut fiction book, *Comiche*, which would be published five years later, after a long and tormented process. The journal Celati referred to was *Uomini e idee*, where a very early version of *Comiche* had appeared in May 1966.[48]

Celati had, nevertheless, made his real debut as a writer (though not of fiction) a few years before. Already in 1960, at the age of 23, Celati was in fact on the editorial board of a Bolognese journal, called *Impegno presente*, the main editors of which were Carlo Coniglio and Giancarlo Giardina. The full title of the review was *Impegno presente. Rivista di politica e cultura*. It is worth stressing the point of the political and cultural nature of the review, as it is indicative of the fact that Celati's first attempts as a critic seem to follow a Marxist approach which, as his future works will demonstrate, was very unusual for the writer. Celati's first contribution, *La tomba del romanzo*, is a critique of the *nouveau roman* which he sees as 'un metodo di lavoro i cui prodotti risultano inadeguati ad agire, influire ed inserirsi nella realtà d'oggi'.[49] Celati's article thus condemns the *école du regard* - and authors like Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute, and Alain Robbe-Grillet - for its incapacity for political action and its extreme formalism and decadentism

[47] Celati defines it 'pallino fisso a cui non riesco a rinunciare' (Letter from Celati to Davico, 6 October 1966), where he also says that he is preparing a sequel to *Gli annegati*. See Gianni Celati, 'Studi per gli Annegati della baia blu', *Marcatrè*, 14 (1965), 112-118.
[48] Gianni Celati, 'Materiali di lettura da verificare', *Uomini e idee*, 8, 2 (1966), 43-48.
[49] Gianni Celati, 'La tomba del romanzo', *Impegno presente*, 3 (1960), 39-49.

('inevitabilità decadentistica, senza la possibilità d'uno scatto attivo, d'una salvazione qualsiasi'). The essay also draws on categories like 'current events' and 'revolution', which Celati will rarely use in the years to come:

> Per noi per cui attualità e rivoluzione corrispondono ad idee nuove che si sviluppano ed agitano ed hanno rapporto ed influenzano lo sviluppo della vita, questo formalismo assoluto, questo *degré zéro* del romanzo, per quanta sapienza costruttiva vi sia profusa, non può avere nessun valore se non di sintomo. (48)[50]

In Celati's view, the development of this kind of writing is strictly linked to the effect and diffusion of capitalism. In order to clarify that, Celati quotes writer Giorgio Bassani's comment on the success of the *nouveau roman* in Italy:

> Diceva Giorgio Bassani di questi scrittori: 'Non mi pare azzardato prevedere che la fortuna in Italia di manierismi del genere di quelli di Butor, Robbe-Grillet e Nathalie Sarraute, dipenderà in gran parte dalla sorte che sarà riservata alla democrazia. L'impassibilità mortuaria del *Voyeur* e della *Jalousie* evoca direttamente la dittatura del grande capitale industriale, del moderno qualunquismo neopositivista (e la conseguente messa al bando dei comunisti).' (49)

A discussion on the the pertinence of Celati's (and Bassani's) very limited critique of the *nouveau roman* would be beyond the scope of this thesis: what is interesting for my analysis is the political focus that Celati uses in his article. His claims presume an idea of literature as a means to engage with life and reality, which he puts in contrast with what he considers an arid game of formalism.

Another article, published in the same issue of *Impegno presente*, shows the same attitude, but it also adds an important element. In this essay, Celati praises the works of painter Tullio Vietri, whom he admires for his 'impegno morale', which is far, he affirms, from all forms of simplistic realism, from 'naturalismo ottocentesco'

[50] Celati here refers to Roland Barthes' *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1953), a book to which Celati often returns in his considerations on writing.

and 'banale cronachismo neorealista'. This is the second aspect that I would like to point out: from the very beginning of his career, Celati believes that literature needs to engage with society, as mentioned, but outside the path of realism. Celati's comments on Vietri, whose works he uses to illustrate the essay on Bertolt Brecht, published in the next issue of *Impegno presente* in March 1961, are important for an understanding of the direction Celati's works will take. The study *Appunti sulla lirica di Bertolt Brecht* examines Brecht's political approach (the essay is, as Celati states, 'una verifica dell'atteggiamento politico brechtiano') and wants to overturn the ideas of György Lukàcs, whom Celati considers 'troppo normativo'. Lukàcs claimed that Brecht was, above all, an experimental author, not in line with Lukàcs' idea of realism: 'uno sperimentalista, dal momento che la sua critica sociale rasenta il contenuto senza toccarlo e riduce tutto ad un esperimento formale'.[51] Celati quotes Brecht's essay *Popolarità e realismo* to challenge Lukàcs' view: realism has to be seen in the work's approach to reality, not in its structure ('il realismo dell'opera non è determinato dalla sua forma, ma dal suo atteggiamento nei confronti della realtà').[52] Brecht's statement could easily act as a summary of Celati's *impegno*, as it illustrates well Celati's own attitude towards literature and reality. His future works will show this in detail.

In his essay on Brecht, the young Celati also challenges scholars' idea of a dichotomy between a political and a human Brecht, between lyrics in which Brecht shows a firm and rational Marxism ('lucida e razionale precettistica marxista'; as, Celati specifies, in *Kriegsfibel*) and the more playful and ironic ones (like *An die Nachgeboren* and *Lieder Polly Peachum*). On the contrary, Celati proposes to study Brecht's entire lyrical *oeuvre* as a 'didascalica politica', as a single political poem.

[51] Gianni Celati, 'Appunti sulla lirica di Bertolt Brecht', *Impegno presente*, 4 (1961), 74-83, p. 76.
[52] 'Appunti sulla lirica di Bertolt Brecht', p. 77.

According to Celati, Brecht's poetry is, in fact, always 'popolare e sociale', even if it might be 'fuori dai canoni lukacsiani del realismo'. In Celati's view, Brecht's works are thus capable of answering a political and collective need, uniting intellectuals and masses:

> Il poeta canta perché è richiesto di cantare, come il cantastorie popolare racconta le storie di Orlando e dei paladini per rispondere ad una necessità di spettacolo della gente che lo ascolta. Allo stesso modo la didascalica brechtiana non è il soliloquio pedante del professore in cattedra, ma ha una dimensione di umiltà e di necessarietà come ogni altro mestiere umano. E perciò questo tipo di lirica non può non essere legata alle sorti e ai bisogni delle masse, perché è l'adempimento d'una richiesta di fornitura d'un prodotto, che viene dal basso.[53]

Here Celati links the political dimension of Brecht's poetry to the popular storyteller who narrates the story of Roland and other paladins. Celati suggests that both are the results of an idea of poetry as a collective need, where the poet serves the masses. This is particularly revealing, especially if we consider the depth of Celati's long-lasting interest in the tales of Orlando and in the art of storytelling itself. The passage shows already two elements that will characterize Celati's *oeuvre*. The first is an aversion to the figure of professors (and, in a broader sense, critics, writers and intellectuals) spreading knowledge in a top-down manner, while Celati believes in an idea of literature as the 'craft of everyday storyteller', to quote Rebecca West's monograph on the author.[54] The second is that Celati sees here the craft of narration as a social need. In the following pages, I will try to show how these aspects run through his entire work.

In an interview conducted in March 2015, Celati referred to the period of

[53] 'Appunti sulla lirica di Bertolt Brecht', p. 81.
[54] Rebecca West, *Gianni Celati. The Craft of Everyday Storyteller*.

*Impegno presente* by saying: 'A quel tempo, ero comunista'.[55] Nevertheless, the scholar and poet Paolo Valesio, who shared those years with Celati, remembers him already totally devoted to literature: 'Gianni era la letteratura per me. Non lo ricordo come un attivista politico. Chiaramente tutti noi eravamo di sinistra, ma Gianni non è mai stato dentro il Partito Comunista'. Valesio adds: 'Non ho mai parlato con Gianni di politica, nel senso di partiti e di potere. Parlavamo di ideologia, questo sì'.[56] Valesio plays a special role in the very first period of Celati's career: they shared the reading of Northrop Frye's literary theories and Valesio's essay, *The Language of Madness in the Renaissance* (1971), was met with strong interest on the part of Celati and Calvino. Valesio and Celati belonged to a larger group of intellectuals in Bologna, including Vittorio Boarini (Communist activist and future creator of the Cineteca di Bologna), the philosopher Giorgio Sandri, and the painter Giuseppe Landini. The main aim of the group at the beginning was the creation of the Bologna Gramsci Institute. Valesio joined the Communist Party (PCI) in 1967, but Celati has never been a member.[57]

As I will try to demonstrate in the following pages, Celati's and Valesio's apparently contradictory statements on that period are both true. Celati's passion for politics in his younger years has left traces in his works of the 1970s. His characters are often interested or involved in politics and political discourse is everywhere in Celati's early books, as I will show when analysing the texts. Nevertheless, Celati never participates directly in the political scene, either by joining a party or expressing his opinion on single political choices, laws or elections. I believe that

[55] Interview with the author (Brighton, March 2015, unpublished). See also Aurora Capretti, 'Intervista a Gianni Celati', in *Il comico come strategia in Gianni Celati & Co.*, p. 230: 'Al liceo ero comunista'.
[56] Interview with the author (Orvieto, June 2015, unpublished).
[57] Paolo Valesio, 'The Language of Madness in the Renaissance', *Yearbook of Italian Studies*, 1 (1971), 199-234. Celati mentions Valesio in the correspondence for the journal *Alì Babà* (see *Riga 14.* '*Alì Babà'*, p. 141).

this is a precise choice and has to do with his aversion towards the rhetoric and dogmatism of politicians and activists, which he frequently mocks in his books. At the same time, he is nevertheless involved in all the major political and cultural developments of the 1960s and 1970s: the events of May 1968, radical psychiatry, Goffman's and Foucault's critique of institutions, and the 1977 student movement. Issues linked to these developments are fundamental to his works of the 1970s, as I will show in this chapter.

Even though Celati seems not to be interested in politics as a struggle for power, his *oeuvre* is extremely and radically political. Celati's *impegno* is thus all inside literature and I will demonstrate how this occurs in the following pages.

Besides his work as a critic and narrator, Celati is an active translator. He specialized in Anglo-American literature with Professor Carlo Izzo, a key figure in the development of Celati's interest in language and translation. In 1963 Celati graduated from the University of Bologna with a thesis on James Joyce, under the supervision of the linguist Luigi Heilmann. The same interest in Irish literature brought him to the study of Jonathan Swift. In 1966 he published his translation of Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (*Favola della botte*). The book includes an author's preface in which Celati analyses the political value of Swift's satire, starting from his masterpiece, *Gulliver's Travels*.[58] Swift was one of Celati's main interests in the 1960s, with several essays and contributions dedicated to the Irish author. This activity, as will be shown, provide us with important insights into Celati's *impegno*, and his publications on Swift contain several considerations that prepare his future

[58] Jonathan Swift, *Favola della botte*, trans. by Gianni Celati (Bologna: Sampietro, 1966). Celati will soon after translate, for Einaudi, Jan Myrdal's *Chinese Journey* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967) and William Gerhardie's *Futility* (Turin: Einaudi, 1969). Celati will include a new version of the preface in his collection of essays *Finzioni occidentali*, first published in 1975. The original title of the essay was *Con Gulliver*, then changed in *Finzioni*. The title recalls Borges' *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1944), but the link between the two seems limited to the title.

works. In his article *La ragione degradata*, Celati mentions Swift among the writers and philosophers whom he considers as the subversive side of the Enlightenment, together with other authors such as De Sade, Rousseau and Lautréamont. The influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss is also very clear in these first interventions, and can be considered a key point in the theoretical background of his debut book *Comiche*. In the essay, Celati contrasts what he calls 'ragione degradata' to the main expressions of Western rationalist society. The writer suggests that 'degraded reason' is systematically banned from Western Culture for self-preservation, but something escapes censorship and unexpectedly reappears in the form of savage thought (again, Lévi-Strauss is behind these ideas). The 'degraded reason' thus has a powerful subversive and revolutionary role: it challenges the idea of the superiority of Western culture, its rationalism and its narcissism. In Celati's words, savage thought can subvert capitalist moral impositions:

> Questo pensiero che ha poi varissimi nomi, che nasce come forza eversiva (non più di coesione come lo era stato precedentemente) quando il nostro mondo entra in contatto con quello primitivo, che ha precedenti illustri (del tipo di Swift, Sade, Rousseau, Lautréamont; e si noti: l'altra faccia, quella eversiva, dell'illuminismo), che diventa forza sovversiva e rivoluzionaria quando il capitalismo impone il suo regime estendendo a principi morali i sensi del narcisismo della nostra cultura.[59]

Celati's reading of Swift is through this lens. In *La ragione degradata*, Celati mentions Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as one of the first attempts of modern literature to represent the encounter between savage thought and Western society. In the above-mentioned preface to *Favola della botte*, published in 1966, the same year as *La ragione degradata*, Celati links Defoe's masterpiece to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Here, Celati observes that, in the face of savage thought,

[59] Gianni Celati, 'La ragione degradata', *Uomini e idee* 8, 3-4 (1966), p. 35. The text contains clear references to Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962).

literature can give two possible answers: either a refusal of the savage and a confirmation of Western certainties (in Celati's view, Defoe's answer) or a satirical destruction of Western society's values through a comparison with the savage, and this is what happens in *Gulliver*. Through this analysis, Celati reads classics of literature, and particularly, in this case, Swift's works, as potential and powerful acts of protest or critique of dominant culture. In his view, official culture has, in fact, tried to enclose *Gulliver's Travels* in the corral of literature for children as a way to limit its subversive power, relegating it to the sphere of childhood. Celati affirms that the same happened to *A Tale of a Tub*, which he defines as 'la più giovanile, ma anche la più solforosa di tutte le opere swiftiane'. Celati includes *A Tale of a Tub* in what he calls Swift's 'recherche eversiva' together with other works, such as *A Modest Proposal* (1729), *Directions to Servants* (1730-40), and *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift* (1731-1732). Its subversive force lies in its ridicule of the certainties of Western culture: Swift does that, on the one hand, by giving paradoxical explanations of historical events and reducing them to the consequences of excretion and sexual impulses; on the other, by describing the noblest manifestations of the human spirit as forms of neurosis and paranoia (and this is a line of thought that leads back to Erasmus' 1509 *In Praise of Folly*, as Celati underlines).[60]

I believe that all of Celati's works, and especially his books of the 1970s, could be seen through this lens, as they always show some kind of subversive tendency that intentionally challenges the basis of Western society, often sharing the tools used by Swift (such as irony and satire) and other authors who were at the centre of Celati's studies in that period, such as Joyce (I will develop in this chapter

[60] In a 1971 six-page plan for *Finzioni occidentali*, Celati mentions an essay on folly in Swift and Erasmus entitled *L'ospedale degli incurabili* which he wanted to include in his forthcoming collection. See also Jonathan Swift, *Un serio e utile disegno per costruire un ospizio per incurabili*, trans. by Gianni Celati, *Il Caffè*, 3 (1968), 7-26.

the importance of linguistic experimentation in Celati's works, on which the study of Joyce's use of language have had an extraordinary impact). In the next paragraph, I will show how these considerations on 'savage thought' and 'ragione degradata', which seem central at this point, are fundamental to comprehend fully Celati's first published book of fiction, *Comiche*, and the elements that make this and other works of Celati examples of *impegno*. Before analysing *Comiche*, I will briefly focus on Celati's research and interests of that period, as they shed further light on what he wrote in the years to come.

In 1968 Celati won a two-year scholarship to carry out research at the British Museum. In a letter dated 22 April 1968, he communicates to Einaudi that he will soon move to London and informs Davico Bonino about his research plan. This included a study on the morphology of mystery tales (he mentions Conan Doyle, Poe, Hawthorne), using Vladimir Propp's theoretical framework, and another project that Celati describes as 'uno studio su Swift, come antenato della nostra condizione alienata in regime parlamentare', an element that might suggest Celati's anti-parliamentary position at that time and anticipates his disillusioned attitude towards institutions. In the same year, Celati publishes two more studies on Swift, 'Manifesto dell'invettiva' and 'La quête demoniaca'.[61] Both show an interest in the ways in which Swift uses satire to tackle political issues and opposes in a deep and powerful way the English dominion over Ireland.

'Manifesto dell'invettiva' focuses on the rhetorical art of invective. Celati claims that satire is an invective which uses irony and argues that the aim of invective is external, while it is internal for tragedy: invective seeks to have consequences on a real person, outside fiction (while in tragedy it happens inside the

[61] Gianni Celati, 'Manifesto dell'invettiva', *Il Caffè*, 4 (1968), 50-53 and 'La quête demoniaca', *Il Caffè*, 3 (1968), 48-62.

plot). This is, Celati claims, the first virtue of the invective. The second is that it shows the contradictions of our culture in an abstract form, and increases the awareness of solving them. Once again, Celati refers to Lévi-Strauss, this time for his idea of myth and rituals, and especially for his studies on fertility rites. In Celati's view, invective is a ritual itself: it has to solve the contradictions of a situation and, at the same time, persuade the reader of the necessity of interventions to solve that situation. Invective thus tends to introduce the obstacle using hyperbole and simplifying the discourse in a contrast between Good and Evil. Celati sees in this characteristic the third virtue of the invective: it affirms an anti-relativistic discourse with a specific aim of persuasion. Celati uses examples from Swift's *Gulliver Travels*, *Drapier's Letters* and *A Modest Proposal* and the issue reproduces another of Swift's texts, translated by Celati as *Sommario ritratto del conte di Wharton*. Celati observes that this is another perfect example of invective, as it argues the existence of a Big Oppressor on earth.[62]

Celati's interest for invective and the link he establishes with satire seems to me extremely important in order to understand his forms of *impegno* outside realism, both in his early career and, as will be shown, in his later works. Swift represents a key author for Celati's way of being political. The other study published in *Il Caffè* in the same year 1968, 'La quête demonica', analyses Swift's satires about the condition of Ireland under English domination (*A Modest Proposal*, *A Short View of the State of Ireland*, *Answer to the Craftsman*, *The Truth of Some Maxims*, etc.) from

[62]Jonathan Swift, A *Short Character of His Excellency Thomas Earl of Wharton Lord Lieutenant of Ireland* (1710). At the end of the article, Celati quotes the 1848 Communist Manifesto as the best example of modern invective: 'E come ulteriore prova non sapremmo citare esempio migliore del Manifesto comunista del 1848; il Massimo esempio, a nostro parere, di invettiva moderna, dove quest'arte recupera tutte le proprie virtualità arcaiche, trasformando i dati oggettivi in iperbole allegorica, diffondendo colpa, sospetto, timore, riproponendo nel modo più netto il contrasto tra desiderio e realtà, e la contraddizione viva che l'uomo patisce' (52-53). Using this last example, Celati aims to show invective is part of every human discourse, from philosophy to politics, public or personal debates, science or religion.

the perspective of their capacity to be extremely effective from a political point of view, even if outside realism. Celati argues that Swift's satires show a strong opposition to English domination through allegory and archetypical motifs. Although Swift's books always start from a precise event in reality, the power of the accusation levelled against the English government grows as it remains on a metaphorical level, as Celati's analysis points out, with reference to *A Modest Proposal*: 'consigliando ai possidenti irlandesi di degustare bambini arrosto, bolliti o in fricassee, Swift scaglia contro quei possidenti un'accusa di desiderio cannibalistico, tanto più convincente quanto più rimane metaforica' (62). Celati seems interested in the way Swift moves beyond realism, using myths, archetypes and symbols to make more compelling his denunciation of Ireland's condition under Walpole's government:

> I libelli swiftiani non riflettono passivamente questa realtà, bensì la allegorizzano; è pur vero però che il loro fine è esterno, è al di là della struttura letteraria, nella realtà stessa. Tuttavia questo è il carattere specifico della satira, la quale ha per fine l'esorcizzazione di un male reale per mezzo di una finzione, e nel contempo ha il fine di persuadere sulla necessità di questa esorcizzazione.[63]

In this regard, Swift's works have had a major role in the development of Celati's idea of literature and I believe that the Irish author's works represent exactly what Celati has in mind when he speaks, in the same years, about the necessity of a re-connection between literature and politics. As already discussed in the introduction, from 1968 to 1972, Celati was working on the project for *Alì Babà*, together with Calvino and other important intellectuals. This is also the period in which the relationship between Celati and Calvino is at its pinnacle and Celati often goes from London to Paris to visit his friend ('La quête demoniaca' itself is

[63] 'La quête demoniaca', p. 62.

dedicated 'A Italo Calvino'). Scholars have abundantly underlined the importance of the project in Calvino's career after Elio Vittorini's death and the demise of *Il Menabò*. As Monica Francioso has argued, *Alì Babà* is also extremely important from a political point of view, given the considerations on literature and politics that the preparatory materials for the journal contain.[64]

In December 1968, after a meeting in Bologna between Calvino, Guido Neri and Celati, the latter writes the first programmatic document for *Alì Babà*. This is a sort of manifesto of the journal, as it makes explicit the policy and aims of the project and includes a list of principles that were to be the starting points of *Alì Babà*. The idea of the journal seems to originate from a perception of the necessity to re-connect literature and politics: according to the editors, in the aftermath of the students' and workers' protests in France in May 1968, the Italian literary landscape was incapable of relating to current events. *Alì Babà* puts itself forward as a means to connect literature and the protesters by considering literature able to speak about every aspect of human action, including politics. Rather than being used as a mere instrument of political propaganda, it is exactly by reinforcing its independence that literature could be truly useful for the struggles of those years. The manifesto states that literature in its substance is political. As will be shown, imagination has a key role in the political dimension of Celati's works and in the forms of his *impegno*. Already from his debut, Celati states that literature could give an understanding of the events through imagination and, in this sense, it can help the revolts. The manifesto starts by stating that the protesters could not find in contemporary

[64] On the importance of *Alì Babà* in Calvino's career see Mario Barenghi, 'Congetture su un dissenso', in *Riga 14. 'Alì* Babà', pp. 13-23. See also Monica Francioso, '*Impegno* and *Alì Babà*. Celati, Calvino and the Debate on Literature in the 1970s'. Other interesting contributions on *Alì Babà* are: Monica Jansen, Claudia Nocentini, '*Alì Babà* and Beyond: Celati and Calvino in the Search for 'Something More'' and Anna Botta, 'The *Alì Babà* Project (1968-1972): Monumental History and the Silent Resistance of the Ordinary', both in *The Value of Literature in and After the Seventies: The Case of Italy and Portugal*, 574-589 and 543-558.

literature an effective way of reading society. This shows that the idea behind *Alì Babà* is that literature can be truly political only if it goes beyond its strict boundaries. *Alì Babà* proposes an extended definition of literature as the imaginative dimension that stands behind every human activity. The editors take their distance from intellectuals and writers who improvise as politicians or political experts, often uncritically repeating the slogans of political parties, and propose a different and more effective way for literature of being political:

> 1.2 Si riscontra la carenza assoluta d'una dimensione immaginaria dell'emergenza politica, l'assenza d'una strumentazione tecnica e concettuale che permetta d'investire immaginativamente i fatti che accadono sotto i nostri occhi.
> 1.3 Si constata senza recriminazioni il fatto che i giovani e gli studenti che lottano non si interessano di letteratura (almeno in Italia), né trovano in alcun modo nella letteratura stimoli e parole politiche; ciò permette di capire che il denominatore comune delle produzioni letterarie è troppo ristretto per soddisfare esigenze più vaste che la prassi promuove. E allora i letterati si mettono a parlare *anche* di politica (come avviene su 'Quindici') generalmente improvvisando o ricadendo negli slogan dei linguaggi di partito.[65]

It is particularly interesting for my analysis that Celati mentions *Quindici*, the journal of the neo-avant-garde, as one of the places in which intellectuals reproduce party-political slogans. In the opening lines of this chapter, I mentioned how Celati published his first essays and articles in journals linked to the neo-avant-garde. His mentors at Einaudi, Sanguineti and Manganelli, were part of the Gruppo '63 and Celati himself would then collaborate with *Quindici*. Calvino immediately opposes, in a further letter that is his feedback to this manifesto, Celati's tendency to attack the neo-avant-garde: 'in un testo da pubblicare non attaccherei la neovanguardia tutti i momenti. Soprattutto non la attaccherei genericamente'. Rather than being a contradictory statement, Celati's position proves both his dissatisfaction with the

[65] *Riga 14. 'Alì Babà'*, p. 57.

status quo of literature, which he considers incapable of relating with the political events of those years,and his intention of providing an alternative to the neo-avant-garde's idea of the relationship between literature and politics, which he saw as inadequate.[66]

In Celati's intention at the time of writing this first document for *Alì Babà*, the main aim of the project is thus to establish new ways in which literary and political discourse relate, namely an innovative 'confronto e coordinamento tra discorso letterario e discorso politico'. According to Celati, this would only happen if literature were to go beyond its own boundaries. In this passage of the manifesto, Celati uses an idea that Calvino also expresses in his August 1968 text *Per una letteratura che chieda di più (Vittorini e il Sessantotto)*.[67] Celati and Calvino thus feel the need to free literature from its traditional confines and make it a place for ideas that can be valid for every human activity, not only for literature in its specificity. As I will show in the following pages, this conception of literature as an imaginative rethinking of the human experience, which goes beyond its boundaries and contaminate other disciplines, such as anthropology, linguistics and photography, will be Celati's key idea for his entire career. The *Alì Babà* manifesto shows that this definition allows for literature to be political in a different way than a mere denunciation or condemnation of events regarding politics and society might be. This happens because *Alì Babà* conceives literature as poetic of human discourse ('poetica del discorso umano'), in every sense. This permits us to conceive literature as an instrument of liberation and to re-consider it in its own social functions. In this

[66] Letter from Calvino to Celati, 16 January 1969, in *Riga 14. 'Alì Babà',* p. 73. See on this *Quindici: una rivista e il Sessantotto*, ed. by Nanni Balestrini (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2008). On Celati and the neo-avant-garde, see *Il Gruppo '63 quarant'anni dopo*, ed. by Renato Barilli, Fausto Curi, Niva Lorenzini (Bologna: Pendragon, 2005); Filippo Bettini, 'Ragioni storiche della crisi e risposte attuali della neoavanguardia', *Quaderni internazionali di critica*, 1 (1973), 35-62, and Francesco Muzzioli, *Teoria e critica della letteratura nelle avanguardie italiane degli anni Sessanta* (Rome: Treccani, 1982).
[67] Italo Calvino, *Saggi* 1945-1985 ed. by Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 2007), pp. 240-241.

process, the concept of myth has a preliminary role, as it is what unites literature and every other human activity. It is thus through myth that political and literary discourse can find a common ground. In Celati's idea, the journal has the aim of offering new possibilities for literature to be central in society, giving also political responses as it permits the political discourse to open itself to an imaginative dimension. The *Alì Babà* manifesto states that myth is what stands behind every human activity and what permits literature to be central for every aspect of life, included, but not limited to, the political sphere. Celati's wide readings of that period, such as Lévi Strauss and Northop Frye's archetypal criticism, were at the centre of the conversations between Calvino and Celati and are clearly behind these thoughts. What is particularly interesting for my analysis is that Celati uses those theories to foster the idea of a possibility for literature to be political:

> 1.5 Diviene necessaria la ridefinizione della letteratura come luogo di significati e di forme che non valgono solo per la letteratura; in altri termini: come luogo dei fondamenti mitici dell'operare umano.
> 1.6 Se il mito non è inteso al modo romantico come fabulazione fascinatoria e derealizzante, ma nell'accezione che si è venuta imponendo con l'antropologia moderna (soprattutto Lévi-Strauss), come cosmologia, e quindi come classificazione dei ruoli della prassi e dei punti di riferimento del reale, assolve alla funzione di denominatore comune delle esigenze che la prassi promuove; è l'energetica primaria che pervade non solo il discorso letterario, ma anche quello politico ed ogni forma di discorso umano, compreso quello scientifico.

*Alì Babà* has thus as its main aim to undermine every reductive tendency of contemporary literature, from which derives its inefficacy in the face of the new political challenges and the needs of people in their political fights:

> 3.7 Ciò rappresenta una reazione radicale alle tendenze riduttive della letteratura moderna, orientata verso l'uso d'un unico discorso letterario, che è quello lirico.
> 3.8 Ed è forse da qui, da queste tendenze riduttive che deriva la restrizione del denominatore comune delle produzioni letterarie e la sua inefficienza a

soddisfare le esigenze che sorgono dalla prassi e dalla lotta politica.

Celati's words, immediately shared by Calvino, Neri and others collaborators of the journal, indicate a clear political commitment through literature, as well as strong belief in its possibilities, not limited to the political sphere. Given Celati's anti-literary tencencies, these considerations might sound paradoxical. They express, on the contrary, Celati's rejection of a certain idea of literature, as stuck inside its self-celebrations, literary prizes and self-reflexivity, and his determination to propose an alternative. Although Celati has always been 'in fuga dalla letteratura', his trust in a different idea of literature is a constant of his entire career.[68]

Celati's idea of literature as 'poetica del discorso umano' gives every discourse a potential literary dimension. For this reason, since the beginning, Celati includes in all his writings or collective projects extremely different materials, that are not usually seen as literary. This is what he does already in *Alì Babà* and will continue until the very end, as will be shown in the following chapters, in other collections of writings, such as *Narratori delle riserve* or *Il semplice*. In the first issue of the journal, which was never published, Celati wanted to include oral tales (often from recordings), jokes and reports of dreams. Besides literary works in the traditional sense, such as Céline's *Le pont de Londres*, Shiel's *Price Zaleski*, together with figurative materials, namely illustrations by cartoonists like Guido Crepax or Guido Battaglia, we thus find the following contents:

11) motti, proverbi, indovinelli, scioglilingua; cercarne raccolte;

[68] See on this Ermanno Cavazzoni, 'In fuga dalla letteratura', *Il sole 24 ore*, 14 February 2016, p. 21. On the apparent contradiction between Celati's anti-elitism and his intellectualism, see Marco Belpoliti, 'Gianni Celati, la letteratura in bilico sull'abisso', in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache e racconti*, XI-LXXII; and Gerald Fuchs, 'Gianni Celati, un intellettuale anti-elitario nel segno del 'pudore'', in *Intellettuali italiani del secondo Novecento*, ed. by Angela Barwig and Thomas Stauder (Oldenburg: Verlag für Deutsch-Italienische Studien, 2007), pp. 211-234.

12) fiabe e miti d'ogni paese, ri-raccontati;
[…]
14) raccolta continua di barzellette; costituzione d'un Archivio della barzelletta italiana, con invito ai lettori di collaborare;
15) raccolta continua di sogni; costruzione d'una Oniroteca;
16) raccolte di scritti sui gerghi con esemplificazioni;
17) raccolte di scritte oscene nei cessi;[69]

My analysis will show how Celati's understanding of literature as it already emerges from *Alì Babà* permits his works to be extremely political, even if outside the path of realism. Celati links his research and readings of the time (Frye, Lévi-Strauss, Swift) to a wider consideration on the function of literature and its political consequences. I will now investigate the forms of *impegno* that it is possible to find in Celati's early career fiction, following the ideas that the *Alì Babà* manifesto condenses, namely focusing on the capacity of Celati's works to challenge society and give a political dimension to literature.

### 1.2 *Manicomiche*. Language, *Bagarre* and the Representation of the Asylum in Celati's *Comiche*

Celati's debut book *Comiche*, published in 1971, is tightly linked to the considerations that I have analysed so far. In his 1966 preface to Swift's *Favola della botte*, mentioned above, Celati links the birth of the modern novel to what he calls 'letteratura dell'indiscrezione' which he conceives as an attempt to reveal what is hidden behind official culture: indiscretion, thus, means the disclosure of what society normally removes. Its consequence, Celati claims, is then the desacralization of the hegemonic culture of the white male by undermining its certainties: 'l'indiscrezione sul 'dentro' e sul 'fuori' della civiltà dell'uomo bianco, con

[69] *Riga 14. Alì Babà. Progetto di una rivista*, p. 134.

demolizioni delle sue sacralizzazioni e delle sue estasi narcisistiche'.[70] This 'literature of indiscretion' includes new forms of fiction, and it is thus not limited to materials which Celati calls 'truth', like descriptions or reports which derive from observation, confessions or analysis. In 'literature of indiscretion', Celati claims, fiction relies on the author's approach to what culture imposes, rather than on the creation of new plots. In this description of his understanding of the developments of modern literature in the Western world, Celati anticipates his own approach as a writer of fiction, as it will be particularly clear in *Comiche*. According to Celati, literature can thus contrast and challenge the impositions of society, also revealing what is normally removed from socially accepted behaviours. Through its power of liberation of what is normally not accepted, fiction permits the author and his or her works to be profoundly political. Fiction gives the author the possibility to be free from the impositions of society, and to reveal its most shameful aspects:

> Ora dunque, la finzione non consiste tanto nell'invenzione di sempre nuovi intrecci da parte dell'autore, ma nel suo porsi ipotetico, per mezzo del racconto (che si finge vero e quindi innocente), fuori o a una certa distanza dalla nostra cultura e dagli schemi di recezione che essa impone, per superare così l'inibizione a rivelarne le latenze, a scoprirvi insomma quella parte di 'fuori' che è rimasta inesplicabilmente dentro. (10-11)

Celati's statement is reminiscent of what he points out in his previously cited article on Brecht, where he quotes the German author on the idea that realism is in the attitude towards reality, rather than in the verisimilitude of content. Here again, while expressing his understanding of modern literature, Celati confirms his interest in the author's approach and his/her abilities in challenging the impositions of society (through fiction), rather than in his/her skills in writing a plot. Celati's

[70] *Favola della botte*, p. 10.

*impegno* emerges precisely in the way his works relate with contemporary culture, revealing what society usually prefers to conceal.

The article 'Materiali di lettura da verificare' confirms this perspective and adds new elements. Published in the journal *Uomini e idee* in the same year as the preface to *Favola della botte*, the essay precedes the first version of *Comiche*. Here Celati links the birth of the modern novel to the imitation in writing of what Celati calls 'extra-literary languages' such as travelogues, memoirs, biographies, collections of letters, and diaries. It is particularly interesting that, among the latter, Celati mentions Sechehaye's *Journal d'un schizophrène*, showing once more his interest in the topic of madness, which will be at the centre of his debut book. In 'Materiali di lettura da verificare' Celati confirms that, in his view, 'literature of indiscretion' is what characterizes the modern novel, from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano* (1963), and adds linguistic considerations which, as will be shown, are fundamental for his book *Comiche*:

> Da allora fino a oggi, dal 1719 al 1963 la natura del romanzo si rivela sempre la medesima: l'uso d'un linguaggio vergine con lo scopo […] di provocare un'abreazione. E a mo' di documentazione qui ricordiamo:
>
> 1) come il romanzo moderno (cioè post-Defoe) sia nato proprio a imitazione di questi linguaggi extra-letterari, cioè letterariamente vergini quali le cronache di viaggi, i memoriali, le biografie, gli epistolari, i diari (etc. etc. fino ad oggi, quando la cronaca della malattia, il memoriale del deficiente sembra altrettanto vantaggioso e il diario della schizofrenica della dottoressa Sechehaye appare uno dei più bei romanzi del secolo).[71]

[71] 'Materiali di lettura da verificare', 39-48, pp. 40-41. See Marguerite Sechehaye, *Journal d'un schizophrène* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950). On the function and significance of a 'virgin language', see a further passage, where Celati compares the novelist to a shaman, in line with his interest in anthropolgy: 'Ora, questo linguaggio fornito dallo sciamano alle malate, come quello fornito dal romanziere al lettore, tende ad aggirare questo ostacolo, un'inconscia resistenza per mezzo d'una rappresentazione simbolica che non tocca la barriera cosciente, ma scivola al di là di esse per scioglierla, per sbloccarle, con una discontinuità di simboli, per provocare l'abreazione, per giungere insomma all'indiscrezione su quanto vi è nella cittadella senza toccare le terminazioni sensibili, fingendo un parlato naturale (e per questo il linguaggio deve essere o apparire vergine, cioè non incrostato dalle passate utilizzazioni, perché ciò urterebbe la barriera della coscienza, ostacolando l'efficacia simbolica, impedendo l'abreazione), come la dottoressa Sechehaye finge una situazione di allattamento permettendo alla malata di appoggiarle la testa in seno, con quel che segue.' ('Materiali di lettura da verificare', p. 43).

*Comiche* is indeed a perfect example of virgin language (i.e.: not literary), which I will discuss in more detail below, through which Celati challenges cultural impositions and places himself among the critics of total institutions, in the broad debate on this topic that characterizes the 1960s and 1970s. *Comiche* reproduces the language of a madman as it has as its main source a series of notebooks written by an inmate at the Mental Asylum in Pesaro, the title of which was *Organo mazziniano dell'ospedale psichiatrico di Pesaro*. The narrator is himself a 'madman' and the whole story is set in a mental hospital, which at times appears like a holiday camp, at others like a school. This apparent confusion superimposes three different places which are all seen, in Celati's view, as places of containment. The interest for the language of madmen thus goes together with a representation of alienation and asylum. Celati's works contain frequent references to the protagonists of the critique of institutions, such as Erving Goffman, Michel Foucault, Ronald David Laing, Jacques Derrida and many others.[72] In some cases, he personally met these authors: both Foucault and Derrida gave lectures at Cornell University while Celati was Visiting Professor there in 1972. In 1969, Celati shared a room with radical psychiatrist and mental health reformer Franco Basaglia, during one of the meetings that the publisher Giulio Einaudi would organize in Rhêmes-Notre-Dame (Valle d'Aosta) from the mid-1960s, in order to bring together all his collaborators, writers, philosophers, scholars and editors, with the aim of discussing their theories. The

[72] See also Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1961); Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'age classique* (Paris: U.G.E, 1964), *L'Archeologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); Ronald David Laing, *The Divided Self. An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960); Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la difference* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), *L'istituzione negata. Rapporto da un ospedale psichiatrico*, ed. by Franco Basaglia (Turin: Einaudi, 1968). On Basaglia see John Foot, *The Man Who Closed the Asylums: Franco Basaglia and the Revolution in Mental Health Care* (London-New York: Verso, 2015).

discourse on folly that we find in *Comiche* needs to be read from the perspective of the considerations on radical psychiatry and shows Celati's critical thinking on the role of marginality and the irrational in our society and on the possibility of representation of madness in literature and art.[73]

The interest in madness is constant in Celati's work. Limiting my analysis here to his works of the 1960s and 1970s, it is possible to find many examples of an ample reflection on folly that shows familiarity with all the major scholarly research on the topic. Madmen's tales were included in the preparatory material for *Alì Babà*:

> 10) registrazioni di racconti orali (matti; visionari, per es. quel portiere milanese che ha visto i marziani; disgraziati d'ogni tipo; cittadini normalissimi e pendolari); o racconti tipo documenti, nel senso dei franchi narratori di Feltrinelli;
> […]
> 13) casi clinici (il modello può essere il cap. di L'io diviso di Laing intitolato Il giardino delle erbacce)[74]

The problems related to the representation of madness appear in Celati's essay *Il bazar archeologico* (1975), where he reminds us that it is impossible to speak for madmen without betraying them, as it would mean to rationalize the notion of folly: 'Il folle, come tutte le estraneità, non può farci da specchio, se non razionalizzando la nozione di follia e di estraneità, a tutto vantaggio di chi usa quella nozione come difesa, a tutto svantaggio di chi quella nozione designa'. Here Celati directly refers to antipsychiatry, and quotes Derrida in order to reinforce his argument:

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[73] Although Celati was receptive to Foucault's ideas, he rejected what Foucault represented as a person and as a representative of the role of the intellectual: 'Ricordo anche l'effetto che ha avuto su di me un seminario con Michel Foucault a Ithaca (il paesino dove c'è la Cornell University), e Foucault stesso, i suoi atteggiamenti, la sua incomparabile eloquenza, la sua straordinaria intelligenza, traviate da una velenosità che trovavo insopportabile. Dopo quel seminario ho deciso che non ne potevo più di agonismi intellettuali, non credevo più così ciecamente all'intelligenza, oppure soltanto non era la mia vocazione' (Gianni Celati, *Finzioni occidentali*, p. XII). On Einaudi's meetings, see Ernesto Ferrero, *Rhêmes o della felicità* (Courmayeur: Liaison, 2008) and *I migliori anni della nostra vita* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005).

[74] *Riga 14. Alì Babà*, p. 134.

> Su questo punto abbastanza importante, con cui anche l'antipsichiatria deve fare i conti, Derrida ha detto qualcosa da non dimenticare: 'La disgrazia dei folli, la disgrazia interminabile del loro silenzio, è che i loro migliori portaparola sono quelli che li tradiscono meglio; il fatto è che quando si vuol dire il loro silenzio in sé, si è già passati al nemico e dalla parte dell'ordine, anche se, nell'ordine, ci si batte contro l'ordine e lo si mette in questione alla sua origine'.[75]

It is probably for this reason that in *Comiche* Celati will not be the spokeperson for the madman narrator. He will on the contrary let him speak, exploring the possibilities of his language, without any normalisation. Even though one could argue that Celati is still mediating the language of the madman, what is important for my analysis is Celati's use of the madmen's diary as a model for an experimental language which challenges grammar rules and represents a critique of society, in a period in which the discussion on madness, in which Celati was clearly involved, has a central role in the transformation of Italian society.

This passage from *Il bazar archeologico* is part of a general consideration on marginalization, in which Celati quotes other cases of 'madmen's tales' as examples of the reemergence of what history has removed, such as Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, Walter Morgenthaler's monograph on the Swiss poet and painter Adolf Wölfli (*A Mental Patient as Artist*) and the writings of American schizophrenic Louis Wolfson, who published his *Le Schizo et les langues* in 1970 with a preface by Gilles Deleuze.[76]

In 1976 Celati refers again to the debate on madness, this time in correspondence with his publisher Giulio Einaudi. Celati accuses his publisher of having confined him to a marginal role, publishing books and authors that are the opposite of Celati's idea of literature. In a letter to Davico Bonino, Celati strongly

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[75] Gianni Celati, *Finzioni occidentali,* p. 215. Derrida's *L'Écriture et la difference* is one of the major sources of inspiration of the essay, as Celati states in its posface (*Finzioni occidentali*, p. 226).
[76] Louis Wolfson, *Le Schizo et les langues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

protests against the use that the publishing house was making of his works. The following is a rather violent passage, that indicates how Celati felt at the time. Besides showing Celati's struggle for his ideas, what is now interesting is that, from these lines, it emerges how deep Celati's involvement was in the debate on mental institutions, and that he was clearly on the side of their dismantling:

> Come si collabora con la giustizia borghese dando pareri che portano alla chiusura dei malati di mente nel manicomio, così ora penso che si collabori egualmente con la giustizia borghese accettando che gli altri ti prendano per un matto, un deviante, uno strambo, e che come tale ti concedano una marginalità di sopravvivenza. Come gli omosessuali credo che sia ora di uscire dai cessi a fare le nostre pratiche 'sporche'. Perciò non accetto questa marginalità di sopravvivenza che mi è stata concessa mettendomi a dare pareri su questa collana.[77]

In the same years, Celati was working with poet, scholar and performer Giuliano Scabia, who presented his play *Marco Cavallo* at the Mental Hospital in Trieste while Basaglia was the director of the institution. *Marco Cavallo* itself was initially Basaglia's idea and it was the product of a collaboration between all the patients, who were at the same time authors of the collective text and actors in the play.[78] The final action of the play was to have a blue papier mâché horse invade the

[77] Letter from Celati to Davico (1976). Celati was at the time advisor for the Einaudi's series focused on contemporary and new authors. A full analysis of the reasons behind the breakdown of the relationship between Celati and Einaudi is in Michele Ronchi Stefanati, ''Intonare lo strumento di un altro italiano'. Il carteggio tra Gianni Celati e l'Einaudi (1966-1979)'.

[78] Giuliano Scabia, *Marco Cavallo. Una esperienza di animazione in un ospedale psichiatrico* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976). *Marco Cavallo* was performed in Trieste in 1973, while Basaglia had been director of the institution since 1971. Celati and Scabia were both teaching at DAMS (the Art, Music and Performing Arts Department of the University of Bologna) and they collaborated for Scabia's *Gorilla Quadrumano* and *Fantastica visione*. In his 1976 short text *La bottega dei mimi*, Celati makes reference to his participation in the group of *Gorilla Quadrumano*, ironically talking about himself in third person: 'l'altro si è messo a seguire i percorsi del gruppo del Gorilla Quadrumano facendo anche lui teatro di strada, progettando un itinerario dei comici assieme a Giuliano Scabia e cercando di fare uno spettacolo di strada ricavato dai fratelli Marx' (Gianni Celati, Lino Gabellone, 'La bottega dei mimi', *Nuovi argomenti*, 50 (1976), 9-20. See also Gianni Celati, Nicole Fiéloux, Lino Gabellone, Carlo Gajani, *La bottega dei mimi*, Pollenza-Macerata: La Nuova Foglio, 1977) and Gianni Celati, *Comedie des italiens (1973-2005)*, with Giuliano Scabia (Bologna: Quaderno del Teatro Vagante, 2005). Giuliano Scabia, *Il Gorilla Quadrumàno* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974) and *Fantastica visione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988) with a preface by Celati. *Fantastica visione* was performed in 1979.

city of Trieste, followed by the inmates, as a symbol of the liberation of the madmen from the constraining world of the asylum.

From all these references it is possible to see how deep the influence of the debate on madness is in Celati's work and how the general re-thinking of the role of the asylum contributes to shape Celati's writings of the 1960s and 1970s. This is particularly true for Celati's *Comiche*. As I have mentioned above, Celati chooses an inmate's notebooks as the primary source for his debut book: the attempt is thus to reproduce the madman's language, which appears to him as a 'virgin' speech. This means, in his view, that it is a language capable of going beyond the consciousness of the reader, as it has not been encrusted with other uses: a language that has not been exploited has the capacity to surprise the reader. According to Celati, the language he uses in *Comiche* makes it possible to provoke a physical reaction, similar to that caused by the comic scenes of a slapstick movie. At the same time, in fact, Celati includes the description of alienation and asylum in a comic plot. The inmate who wrote the notebooks was probably a cultured person, and his writings follow the line of his thoughts, continuously jumping from one topic to another and from reality to imagination and dream. In short, it creates a sort of stream of consciousness, where links between sentences do not follow the standard rules of Italian syntax:

> C'era un ignoto nella notte dal giardino il quale senza tregua mi rivolgeva verbigerazione molesta e irritante dice: - schioppate il professore. E: - schioppatelo Otero Otero Aloysio Aloysio. Come a colpire con voce da spavento e pretese strane mettermi in grave stato d'agitazione non si capisce il motivo.[79]

[79] Gianni Celati, *Comiche*, in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache e racconti*, 5-128, p. 5.

This introduces the importance of language in Celati's *impegno*. A non-standard Italian, namely the intentional refusal of the rules of grammar, in order to reproduce the language of the character who speaks in the novel, characterizes all of Celati's works of the 1970s. This constant attention to linguistic aspects, with a strong opposition to all conformist forms of Italian, both imposed by school and, later, by television, newspapers and other media, will be central throughout his career. The importance that Celati attributes to the linguistic side, thus makes it possible to talk about Celati's *impegno* through language. In the case of *Comiche*, language is the fundamental tool that Celati uses to carry on his critique of institutions. On the one hand, the language of *Comiche* reproduces in the form of sounds the comic scenes of slapstick movies, and recreates the effect of *bagarre* (as the central moment of fight and quarrel involving all the characters) in those films. At the time of writing his first books, Celati had in mind comic actors like Buster Keaton, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, Harry Langdon (who is also on the cover of Celati's second book *Le avventure di Guizzardi*)[80] and their films were models for his books, where he often uses the comic effect of gags and *bagarre*. In the essay *Il corpo comico nello spazio*, published in *Il Verri,* in 1976, Celati explicitly refers to the *bagarre* as a moment of complete confusion, where all hierarchies are suspended. In this text, Celati makes a connection between Mikhail Bakhtins' carnevalesque, whose theories I will return to, Antonin Artuaud's theatre of crudelty and the Marx brothers' films, suggesting

[80] Gianni Celati, *Le avventure di Guizzardi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1973). On *Guizzardi* see Michael Caesar, 'Caratteri del comico nelle 'Avventure di Guizzardi', *Nuova Corrente*, 33, 97 (1986), 33-46. On Celati's use of slapstick films, see Giuseppe Ottone, 'Celati e le comiche', *Italianistica*, January-April 1972, 221-222, and Franco La Polla, 'Comiche letterarie e tecniche cinematografiche', *Paragone letteratura*, 23, 272 (1972), 94-98. On language and ideology and the subversive power of comic, see Giovanni Di Iacovo, *Gianni Celati: saggista, traduttore e narratore* (Salerno: Gaia, 2014), 39-60. See also Celati's scripts inspired by the Marx Brothers: Gianni Celati, *La farsa dei tre clandestini* (Bologna: Baskerville, 1987).

that a final moment of *bagarre* unites all these authors as a sort of anarchic utopia, where no hierarchy is admitted.[81] It is something that Celati remarks in a further interview, where he underlines the subversive dimension of that choice, as he states that 'la bagarre era anche per me l'utopia massima, la gioia della confusione irrimediabile, il modo per abolire tutte le bandiere statali e dottrinarie'.[82] On the other hand, non-standard Italian is a critique of homogenization, which directly derives from Celati's experience as a school teacher. In a letter to Calvino regarding *Comiche*, Celati praises the 'anarchic' way his students write, and sees their non-standard Italian as a true example of protest and a model for his works:

> A me interessa una lingua di pure carenze. Un po' ho capito la cosa quando insegnavo in campagna, alla scuola media. I ragazzini scrivevano il loro italiano, il loro abile (perché frutto di una esperienza ormai secolare) adattamento all'italiano, con una capacità di ironia e di tensione che mi sbalordivano; altroché infantilismo; i loro equivoci erano, voluti o no, dei capolavori di contestazione. L'insegnante di italiano poi interveniva a correggere proprio là dove l'effetto era più piacevolmente anarchico, dove la frase seguiva la curva del parlato, dove la frase si allungava straordinariamente per una specie di incontinenza affabulatoria; dove le ellissi saltavano necessità che l'italiano cartaceo conserva come forme atrofizzate. Il disadattamento della lingua è disadattamento al mondo cartaceo-paranoico-verbo delirante.[83]

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[81] Gianni Celati, 'Il corpo comico nello spazio', *Il Verri*, 3 (1976), 22-32. The text is part of a wider study on comic that Celati destroyed before publication, which title was meant to be *Harpo's Bazaar*. On the political dimension of the Celati's use of the comic see Angelo Guglielmi, 'Il comico come discorso politico', in *Il romanzo e la realtà. Cronaca degli ultimi sessant'anni di narrativa italiana* (Milan: Bompiani, 2010), 226-232, and Andrea Cortellessa, 'What a Curious Feeling', in *Alice disambientata*, ed. by Gianni Celati (Florence: Le lettere, 2007), 131-146, p. 133.

[82] Aurora Capretti, 'Intervista a Gianni Celati', p. 232. See also Michele Ronchi Stefanati, 'Il giullare e la bagarre: il comico come modello d'anarchia. Il teatro di Dario Fo e Franca Rame attraverso Gianni Celati', *Spunti e ricerche*, 31 (2017), 101-113. Comic has always been subversive, as Celati himself underlines in his essay *Dai giganti buffoni alla coscienza infelice* where he traces an history of laughter as 'la storia di un rituale che si lega sempre all'ordinamento sociale […] storia di proscrizioni compiuta dalla cultura delle classi alte, contro un'attitudine alla parodia generalizzata che mal si concilia con il sapere assertivo e teologico'. (*Finzioni occidentali*, 53-110 (p. 56)).

[83] The letter has been published in the online journal *Doppiozero*: Italo Calvino, Gianni Celati, 'Caro Calvino, non sono d'accordo', *Doppiozero*, 15 February 2016 <http://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/meridiano-celati/caro-calvino-non-sono-d-accordo> [accessed 9 September 2017]. See also Italo Calvino, 'Nota a *Comiche* di Gianni Celati', *Riga 28. Gianni Celati*, 168-170.

A non-standard language thus represents for Celati a protest against institutions of power and imposed values and behaviours. Despite Celati's distancing from the Gruppo '63 that I have examined above, he certainly shared with the neo-avant-garde an attention to language which emerged clearly in Italian literature from the beginning of the 1960s. The questioning of standard Italian as the language of the dominant class was, in fact, a common tendency in the years in which Celati made his debut. The year 1963, in particular, saw the publication of literary works which did undermine and problematize the language of the centre: Natalia Ginzburg's *Lessico famigliare*; Vincenzo Consolo's *La ferita dell'aprile*; Luigi Meneghello's *Libera nos a malo*; Edoardo Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano***.** Furthermore, the reading of Bakthin's theories on dialogism, polyphony and polylingualism as the specificities of narrative works in comparison to poetry, influences this debate and Celati himself. The simultaneity of points of view and the presence of more than a voice are clear aspects of *Comiche*. Bakthin defined the novel as a genre which allows for different languages to interlace and argues that every linguistic choice is itself the adoption of a specific social and ideological point of view. The use of the language of an inmate and the presence of the voices of other madmen in the novel represents, in this sense, an ideological choice, especially considering the period in which Celati wrote *Comiche* and the political dimension of the debate on madness which involved Italian society, and Celati himself, in those years. I will now examine how the same critique of institutions also permeates the content of Celati's works, with an analysis of the text of *Comiche*.

In his debut book, Celati uses the materials of the madman's notebooks not only as a linguistic model, but also as a source for his content. As the title of the notebook might suggest ('Organo mazziniano dell'ospedale psichiatrico di Pesaro'),

the characters appear to be stuck in a nineteenth-century Italy, at the time of the Italian wars of independence. Many inmates consider themselves monarchists, while the narrator is accused of being an anarchist, and they often refer to a period of history that does not correspond to the time in which the novel is set: 'io ho fatto l'Italia' (15); 'E molti confondevano la mente elevando grida stravolte del tipo: - viva il re. In varie lingue con risposta: - viva' (20); 'V'era anche chi gli gridava in risposta: - viva l'Italia libera. E a parte: - abbasso gli Austriaci' (37).[84] This serves to recreate the alienation of the madman's discourse as partly belonging to a dream and unreal dimension. Other aspects of mental illness, such as paranoia, violent outbursts, persecution complexes, feelings of exaggerated (and historical) grandeur and the confusion between dreams and reality emerge in the description of the characters. The narrator Professor Aloysio appears to be conscious of what he calls 'my disease': 'strascichi della malattia' (66); 'sono stato sempre malato' (113); 'Con inoltre pericolo di danni alla mia salute malferma né mai intieramente riacquistata' (119). Throughout the novel, Aloysio continues writing in his notebook while other patients push him to tear it up, accusing him of divulging what occurs among them. The continuous questions are: 'hai diffuso? Hai sparlato?', and then comes the order: 'strappa', and the menace: 'pagherai' (126). Even though one could observe that Celati himself is betraying trust, as he uses the materials as a model for his writing, Celati's use of the madman's notes permits the author to give a representation of madness which is itself a critique of the condition of the inmates. *Comiche*, in fact, highlights a particular description of the asylum as a place of punishment and

[84] A parallel could be established with Pirandello's Enrico IV. Luigi Pirandello, *Enrico IV*, ed. by Guido Davico Bonino (Turin: Einaudi, 1993).

compulsion, where nurses and doctors chase patients and force them to take drugs in order to calm down:

> La dottoressa invece: - domani facciamo una puntura. Rispondevo: - ah questo poi no. Conseguenze del mio rifiuto […] sono arrivati correndo in due tre apparentemente infermieri di ospedale chiamati per farmi puntura. Da me cacciati con grida acute e improperi poco piacevoli reagivano: - è agitato provvederemo. In ispecie un infermiere Somà che guida gli altri in simili attacchi come ho appreso mentre segnavo il suo nome sul quaderno. È uno violento che all'ospedale sputa in testa ai malati per disprezzo […] il giardiniere Cardogna ha chiamato proprio questo Somà capace di agire con il nessun scrupolo dimostrato in altri tempi da certi che mi facevano uscire il sangue dalle vene (76)

> Gli infermieri d'ospedale Somà Malservigi mi rincorrono per vialetti col fine di catturarmi farmi la puntura. Promettendo: - con questa puntura noi ti vacciniamo. E l'invito: - così diventi socievole e onesto. Io scappavo ovunque in risposta dico: - non sono mica matto […] inseguendomi Somà Malservigi infermieri essi due si sono separati di vialetto. Per accerchiarmi nella caccia con siringa. (113)

Furthermore, from the protagonist's tale it is impossible to separate the asylum from other situations that Celati describes as places of constraint. The asylum sometimes becomes similar to a tourist camp (the temporary title of the book was *Comiche al mare* and the narration is largely set at the seaside); at other times it is more like a school: many characters are schoolteachers or professors ('il maestro elementare Bevilacqua', 'l'altro maestro Mazzitelli', 'il terzo maestro Macchia'; 'il professor Biagini'), there is a head mistress (Lavinia Ricci, 'direttrice di scuole di magistero'), a school janitor ('il bidello Ramella') and the narrator himself is often called 'professore'. This confusion contributes to the description of the asylum as a coercive and violent institution within a highly hierarchical universe, and illustrates Celati's idea of school and other institutions, emerging from this and other texts. All Celati's books of the 1970s contain, in fact, some sort of critique of a variety of institutions, as we will see further on: *Comiche* (asylum, school), *Le avventure di*

*Guizzardi* (family, school), *La banda dei sospiri* (school, family), *Lunario del paradiso* (army, family, university). As Nunzia Palmieri has observed: 'La caserma, insieme alla scuola e al manicomio, saranno, nella scrittura a venire, le prigioni in cui i personaggi si trovano costretti a vivere cercando sempre nuove vie di fuga'.[85] Similarly to other institutions that appear within his *oeuvre*, the asylum depicted in *Comiche* is dominated by absurd prohibitions and orders, often coming from the head mistress Lavinia Ricci or from a mysterious night guard: 'Essendo il Guardiano notturno vietava: - proibito stare sulla spiaggia di notte. Io però spiegavo (…) E lui: - proibito stare sulla pineta di notte (…) nel cesso di notte è proibito' (26). In a further passage, the protagonist is completely banned from the beach, where part of the action is set, and this time the prohibition comes from the inmates themselves. This once again shows that the violence comes from the inmates themselves, not only from the guards or the heads of the institutions:

> Già che i fastidi qui sono cosa d'ogni momento. Nella casa come sulla spiaggia. Dove tra l'altro è proibito persino farsi vedere. Avendo qualcuno scritto sul retro delle cabine a grossi caratteri di vernice rossa: - VIETATO L'INGRESSO AI CANI E AL PROFESSORE. (77)

The asylum in *Comiche* seems to have all the basic characteristics of a concentration camp, such as the loss of one's name (everyone calls the protagonist with a name that is not his, namely Professor Aloysio, as he explains: 'Donde viene l'usanza pessima di farmi chiamare Aloysio che vuole dire cioè senza camera fissa come uno spirito vagante'), the use of forced nudity to humiliate inmates and mistreatment among the patients with a general absence of solidarity between them:

[85] Nunzia Palmieri, *Cronologia*, in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache e racconti*, LXXIII-CXXVII, p. LXXXIV.

> Il Bagnino e il Guardiano Notturno adesso minacciosi: - deve spogliarsi. Devo spogliarmi nudo. Dopo dicevano agitando una lunga frusta: - deve correre intorno. Devo correre intorno al tavolo. E perché io lo facessi mi colpivano ancora sulla mano insanguinata' (55)

The inmates also mock and abuse each other. This increases the effect of paranoia and self-punishment inside the asylum-school-holiday-concentration camp :

> Ma presto con stupore indescrivibile sul mio volto scorgo da basso Cardogna che con chi sa quale trucco butta in aria la mia cartella […]. E lui inveiva: vuole farsi vaccinare? vuole farsi monarchizzare? sì? no? allora sta condannato. Sì? no? allora sta punito. (78)

As mentioned above, this ferocious description of the asylum as a concentration camp is inserted within a comic plot, that Celati bases on the model of slapstick films. He reproduces scenes taken from silent comedy, such as chases and other gags. Examples in the text are many. I quote a passage that has elements in common with the final scene of Laurel and Hardy's film *You're Darn Tootin'* (1928), where an argument between the protagonists ends up with a big *bagarre* where all the characters remain in their underwear. Almost the same happens in *Comiche*, where the inmate Fantini uses a gardener Fioravanti's scissors to cut the other characters' belts:

> Presi i forbicioni correva a me dietro per tagliarmi qualcosa. Nel momento stesso giungevano al galoppo veloce due indiani Sioux col Barbieri che insegue furibondo: - ve lo do io gli indiani. Siccome erano i suoi figli Salvino e Malvino mentre lui aveva cappello trafitto da una freccia. Fantini trovatolo sul proprio cammino osserva: - intralcia questo babbeo. E: - giù le braghe per punizione. Gli taglia la cintura. Calavano i calzoni del Barbieri subito. Procurando capitombolo al possessore. Aggravato da faccia battuta al suolo. Tre denti persi. Esulta Fantini annusando odore d'abuso. Risorge Barbieri idrofobo contro Fioravanti legittimo proprietario dei forbicioni: come hai osato servo? Preso l'annaffiatoio lo irrora. Replica Fioravanti: - adesso stai fresco tu. Preso un barattolo di vernice gli imbiancava la faccia […]. Passa Barbieri biancato insegue Fioravanti per biancare. Portinaio Marani impensieri: - ma che succede qui? […] Villeggiane Graziosi: - to' un

> fantasma. Fantini stralunato accorso: - non permetto non permetto. Credendo si parli di lui. Taglia cintura a Graziosi: - giù le braghe. (125-126)

I have already shown that Celati's main interest in this period was to recreate the effect of *bagarre* in his writings. *Bagarre* is Celati's attempt to undermine the institutions of power he was describing in their violent nature, even though within a comic plot. Celati's *impegno* in *Comiche* mainly happens through language and the recreation of a non-standard Italian that permits Celati to represent his refusal of all hierarchies and his intolerance of violent institutions of power, particularly asylum, following the debate on madness in the 1970s. Celati finds in both the language of madmen and the recreation of the body gestures of slapstick comedies a way of provoking a physical reaction in the reader, and the possibility of creating effects of *bagarre*. Celati's intention is not to provide documentary evidence of the condition of madmen in the asylum, but to use the language of the inmates to unblock in the reader a reaction that has to do with what is normally hidden or removed. Nevertheless, through *Comiche*, Celati also gives a representation of the asylum as a violent place of constriction, alienation and imprisonment, in line with the critique of the institutions carried out by Basaglia and others. In this sense, *Comiche* is also Celati's contribution to the debate on radical psychiatry, with which he manifestly shares the same positions. The intersections between Celati's works of the 1970s and the debate on madness at the time of the reform of psychiatric healthcare and the dismantling of asylums are evident in his writings, with several references to the protagonists of the critique of mental hospitals and the treatment of madness. In the next section I will try to illustrate how Celati's critique goes beyond the asylum, as his works of the 1970s aims to provide a total negation of all institutions.

### 1.3 *Le istituzioni negat*e. Critique of Institutions in Celati's Novels of the 1970s: Asylum, Hospital, School, Family and Army

In 1968, Franco Basaglia edited and published *L'istituzione negata*, a collection of essays, documents, interviews and other materials by the protagonists (patients, doctors, nurses and collaborators) of the Gorizia mental hospital, which Basaglia headed from 1961 to 1972. *L'istituzione negata* represents a strong critique of the institutions of power, not limited to the asylum, which the authors of the book directly want to overturn, both with their words and with their concrete experience, in Gorizia, of an alternative way of treating mental illness. Even though it is impossible to claim that the reformers' language is free of ideology, the critique of the ideological language of institutions and the use of concrete examples of different practices makes their critique effective. The daily, practical dismantling of the institution of the asylum contained a critique of all institutions and their language:

> Il materiale raccolto in questo volume si presenta come un insieme di documenti e di appunti che vogliono essere l'espressione concreta di una realtà istituzionale in rovesciamento, con le contraddizioni in essa implicite. […]. Per questo il nostro discorso antiistituzionale, antipsichiatrico (cioè antispecialistico) non può mantenersi ristretto al terreno specifico del nostro campo d'azione. La polemica al sistema istituzionale esce dalla sfera psichiatrica, per trasferirsi alle strutture sociali che lo sostengono, costringendoci ad una critica della neutralità scientifica, che agisce a sostegno dei valori dominanti, per diventare critica e azione politica.[86]

Similarly to what Basaglia states, Celati's critique of institutions is not limited to the asylum-school-holiday camp that is the setting of *Comiche*. In all of his books of the 1970s, Celati shows his *impegno* in the representation of all institutions of power as violent places, and in the critique of the values they express: from the hospital to the family, from school and university to the army. Once again, Celati does so by using

[86] Franco Basaglia, 'Presentazione', in *L'istituzione negata,* 7-9, p. 7.

a non-standard Italian, which is itself expression of a protest against grammar rules and imposed ways of writing and thinking, and creating comic situations (the model of slapstick movies is still present).[87] I argue that the works of this period constitute a kind of sandbox for the developments of the ideas which will be articulated more fully and in theoretical form in the writings of *Alice disambientata*, as I will demonstrate in the last part of this chapter.[88]

Besides Basaglia, Goffman's and Foucault's critique of institutions certainly plays a significant role in the development of Celati's narratives. The meeting with Foucault at Cornell University during the academic year 1971/1972 had a fundamental influence on Celati's works. As Celati states in an interview, Foucault's works that influenced him most are *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (1961) and *La volonté de savoir*, first volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité*, published in 1976.[89] Celati publishes *La banda* and *Lunario* after the publication of Foucault's *Surveiller et punir* (1975) and we will see later on in the chapter how important this study was (together with *La volonté de savoir*) in the development of Celati's intellectual career, especially when Celati will be involved in the 1977 protest movement. I believe that Foucault's *Surveiller et punir* has a major role in Celati's third and fourth novel, where his critique of institutions is at its peak. Nevertheless, as I will explore in more detail below, the topic of the family is already present in *Le*

[87] As Giulio Iacoli has observed in his *La dignità di un mondo buffo. Intorno all'opera di Gianni Celati* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011), the use of comic is not limited to *Comiche* and *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, but represents a constant feature of Celati's works throughout his entire career.

[88] *Alice disambientata: materiali collettivi (su Alice) per un manuale di sopravvivenza*, ed. by Gianni Celati (Milan: L'erba voglio, 1978).

[89] Aurora Capretti, *Intervista a Gianni Celati*, pp. 230-231. Celati stays at Cornell from September 1971 to November 1972. In the same period, Foucault gives lectures at the Collège de France with the following titles: 'Theories et institutions pénales' (1971-1972), 'La societé punitive' (1972-1973), 'Le pouvoir psychiatrique' (1973-1974). See Gianni Celati, 'Contro-informazione sul potere. A proposito di 'Sorvegliare e punire' di Foucault', *Libri nuovi*, June 1977, p. 3. These very topics seem to be the theoretical framework of Celati's books of the 1970s. Celati attends Foucault's seminar on Sade at Cornell and this might have had consequences on his *Il chiodo in testa*, published in 1974, where Sade's influence is particularly evident in Carlo Gajani's photographs that illustrate the book. See Carlo Gajani, and Gianni Celati, *Animazioni e incantamenti*, ed. by Nunzia Palmieri (Rome: L'orma, 2017).

*avventure di Guizzardi*, a novel that Celati writes during his stay at Cornell: here Celati seems to anticipate Foucault's critique, three years before the publication of *Surveiller et punir*. Some evidence of all these influences are in the depiction of institutions that I will try to explore in this paragraph. Celati focuses his books of the 1970s on a series of negated institutions, to quote the title of Basaglia's groundbreaking text. A consideration of the nature of power is thus behind Celati's novels of this period.

Examples of Celati's critique of institutions beyond the asylum are already in his second novel, *Le avventure di Guizzardi*. Here, Celati describes the Hospital in which the protagonist Danci finds himself at a certain point, as a highly hierarchical and violent environment. The head physician Sesto demands sex with all the women in the hospital, both nurses and patients, and male nurses are called constantly to bring him new women. The abuse of power, evident in this episode of *Guizzardi*, united here with sexual harassment, is an element that Celati often underlines when it comes to describe institutions, as I will explore below. The hospital reappears in Celati's third novel *La banda dei sospiri*, when the narrator-protagonist Garibaldi's communist uncle is admitted to a government hospital because of a chronic disease. Garibaldi's uncle feels like a prisoner waiting for his execution. Both cases show that Celati depicts the hospital as place of violence and imprisonment, but in *La banda* what emerges is also a direct connection between the critique of institutions and the critique of political parties, which is another main aspect of the book. Celati, in fact, describes the violence of the hospital as directly coming from the government. Besides underlining the political ideas of Garibaldi's uncle, this choice adds something to Celati's depiction of institutions, making it more directly political. It is also interesting to observe that the 'virgin language' of *Comiche*, still present in *Le*

*avventure di Guizzardi*, leaves space for the language of the child protagonist Garibaldi, which is itself a rejection of the constraints of standard Italian, even though linguistic experimentalism is less evident:

> Io e il cugino dalla testa rossa siamo andati a salutarlo all'ospedale, e lui piangeva per il dispiacere di doversi lasciare assassinare in un ospedale del governo. E glielo diceva agli infermieri che sono assassini del governo […]. Lo zio chiedeva ogni tanto agli infermieri se potevano lasciargli fare una capatina alla bocciofila, solo per un'oretta. E siccome quelli rispondevano di no, lui gli gridava dietro: assassini venduti del governo infame.[90]

Another example of an institution at the centre of Celati's books of the 1970s is the family. It appears for the first time in *Guizzardi* where it is depicted as a place of violence and psychological traps. In the very first lines, Danci abandons his parents' home, sick of all the advice and invitations to find a job:

> Era questo mio padre uomo burbero di facili castighi e all'occorrenza schiaffi. E teneva nel suo programma di drizzarmi ogni minimo sentimento che potesse costargli sia un dispiacere sia una pena sia anche un po' dell'amato denaro. Cioè a mezzo cinghiate pedate e vari […]. Si tratta che mia madre un pomeriggio è entrata nella camera assegnatami dalla magnanimità del suo consorte e prendeva a farmi pesare un po' troppo l'invito: 'Devi lavorare Danci!' Al punto di aversi come risposta un vaso in testa da me lanciato per persuaderla: 'Non voglio!'[…]. In breve a dirla perciò sono fuggito volando fuori dalla finestra con il grido disperato che mi esce dalla bocca: 'Ahuuu!'.[91]

This image of family as a prison will be a constant of Celati's works and particularly present in *La banda dei sospiri*. This appears clearly already from Celati's note in the back cover of the 1976 edition, where the author establishes a close connection between family and other institutions (asylums, factories, prison, army), that he sees as concentration camps: 'La famiglia è un po' come la malavita, con i suoi capi tirannici, le sue omertà, rivalità, gruppi chiusi. È un luogo concentrazionario come il

[90] Gianni Celati, 'La banda dei sospiri', in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache e racconti*, p. 491.
[91] Gianni Celati, 'Le avventure di Guizzardi', in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache e racconti*, p. 177.

manicomio, la fabbrica, la prigione, il servizio militare'.[92] The child protagonist of *La banda*, Garibaldi, is a victim of the fights and betrayals that occur among the members of his family. Quarrels between members of Garibaldi's family are everywhere in the novel. His father Federico Barbarossa wants to have sex with the fascinating blonde worker Veronica Lake, nicknamed after the 1940s American film actress, who is in their house helping Garibaldi's mother in her work as a seamstress. Veronica Lake's refusal upsets the man, who shouts and hits his wife. He also argues with his sons, Michele Strogoff, who is not doing well at school, and Garibaldi. Celati depicts the family in all its violent aspects and does so from the perspective of the child narrator and protagonist. The perspective adopted in the book is also evident in the name of the protagonists, which is a result of the child who narrates the events and, for this, they are taken from stories of adventure, such as Jules Verne's Michel Strogoff or derived from history (Federico Barbarossa, Garibaldi) and cinema (Veronica Lake, Alan Ladd). This expedient, which is a main feature of the book, also permits Celati to give a representation of the family from an intentionally naïve point of view that discloses all its most shameful and hidden aspects, including domestic and gender violence:

> C'erano sempre più urli nella casa, che non saprei neanche dire da dove provenissero, ma in particolare provenivano dal fatto che il fratello liceale era molto somaro, andando incontro a sicure bocciature che avrebbero portato la rovina della nostra famiglia. La madre lo difendeva e il padre lo voleva impiccato […]. Michele Strogoff era cresciuto uomo e i pugni non se li vuole lasciare più dare. Anzi faceva le mosse da pugile per restituirli al padre. La madre questo non vuole per la faccenda del rispetto del padre che i figli devono avere. Così spesso si prendeva lei una dose di botte destinata al fratello.
>
> […] Il padre faceva così per disperazione non per altro, io lo so. Con la disperazione in corpo e neanche il piacere di toccare Veronica Lake sotto le sottane, delle volte si metteva a sospirare seduto su una sedia in cucina

[92] Gianni Celati, *La banda dei sospiri* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976). I quote from a note by Celati in the book's back cover.

> […]. Lui vedendomi che lo osservavo con interesse mi chiamava e voleva fare conversazione con me. Ma io gli rispondo con stizza per fargli comprendere che sono un gran menefreghista. Al padre gli dispiace di non poter fare conversazione con suo figlio Garibaldi, e dunque si precipitava a darmi schiaffi […] e mi dava ancor più schiaffi oppure cinghiate.[93]

The naivety of the narrator-protagonist, does not impede the novel to be a clear representation of all oppressions, abuses and duplicity that often characterize the family. In the same back cover that I have quoted above, Celati ironically compares the family to a spectacle: 'La famiglia è poi un teatro. È come uno spettacolo di varietà, fatto di tanti numeri fissi secondo le specialità degli attori'.[94] Often in *La banda*, the author describes Garibaldi's family as a theatre show: 'Non finivano più queste litigate, con lo spettacolo di varietà, fatto di tanti numeri fissi secondo le specialità degli attori'. This comparison with the theatre serves to mock what occurs inside the family and reinforces in the reader the impression of stupidity and pointlessness of all those fights.

Garibaldi's mother's jealousy over the attention that Federico Barbarossa dedicates to Veronica Lake generates other arguments. Garibaldi's family will then split for this reason:

> Una volta è scoppiata una scena di gelosia della madre […]. Ha trattato la bionda da donna poco onesta con gli uomini, perché gli uomini hanno le voglie ma le donne non li devono stuzzicare. Questo il ragionamento della madre […]. Federico a sentir così ha fatto quattro urli prendendosela con la madre perché ficca il naso, e ha detto che non intendeva mai più dormire con lei nello stesso letto. (413-414)

[93] 376-377. Characters' names in *La banda* are often nicknames taken from American cinema of the 1940s (Veronica Lake, Alan Ladd, Hedy Lamarr etc), history (Garibaldi, Federico Barbarossa) or literature (Jules Verne's *Michel Strogoff*) as they reflect the mindset and imaginary of the child protagonists.

[94] Gianni Celati, *La banda dei sospiri*, note by Celati in the book's back cover of the first edition (1976).

Later in the novel, Federico Barbarossa will rape Veronica Lake. After that the man returns to Garibaldi's mother on his knees, begging and obtaining her forgiveness. As soon as they can, Garibaldi and his brother Michele Strogoff will leave their parent's house. Even though Celati is not interested in writing a realistic portrait of the family in a certain period of Italian history – the 1950s - Garibaldi's voice clearly describes gender roles as they were in post-war Italy, when the story is set: these were years in which sexism and mysoginist behaviours were commonly accepted.[95] Celati shows his *impegno* on this same topic as he implicitly condemns these aspects by giving a representation of the family as a place of discipline and punishment and mocking it. The comical effect of such a representation is also a consequence of the description of a family environment that appears to be extremely backward-looking to the reader of the 1970s: when the book was published, most of the habits depicted in the book were changed for many Italian families.[96]

Family is also at the centre of *Lunario del paradiso*. The protagonist, Giovanni, goes to Germany to meet again the sixteen year-old girl Antje Schumacher, whom he encountered for the first time during the summer, while she was spending her holidays in Italy. The description of Antje's family is perfectly in line with the violent institution that emerges from the texts that I have analysed so far: when Giovanni enters the world of Antje's conservative middle-class family, as a guest at Antje's house, he describes it as an inhospitable and sterile environment, dominated by absurd prohibitions, and where Antje is never allowed by her parents to be alone with him. Giovanni's feeling of displacement, primarily caused by his

[95] On this see Valeria Federici, 'Television and Cinema: Contradictory Role Models for Women in 1950s Italy', in *Representations of Female Identity. From Neoclassicism to the 21st Century*, ed. by Silvia Giovanardi Byer and Fabiana Cecchini (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), pp. 149-169.

[96] On the representation of women in Celati's works see Rebecca West, 'La donna fantasticata nel mondo celatiano', in *Letteratura come fantasticazione. In conversazione con Gianni Celati*, 197-215.

condition of foreigner, increases in his contact with Antje's family: when Antje cooks an apple pie for a school exercise, Giovanni tastes it but he feels totally out of place: 'Tutti mi guardavano mangiare in silenzio, nessuno ha detto niente, pensavano male di me'.[97] The same condition of Giovanni emerges from the fact that the protagonist is allowed to sleep in Antje's brother room only but Jan, Antje's brother, is extremely cold with him: 'Con me non parlava mai, silenzio completo come muti; gli dicevo buonanotte, lui silenzio completo' (505). Particularly interesting is the realtionship between Giovanni and Antje's father, a former colonel who now works as a light bulb salesman. Mr Schumacher is extremely suspicious of Giovanni: 'Mi chiedeva a me il perché di tutto questo, ma in sostanza per chiedermi: cosa volevo io a casa sua? perché stavo lì non invitato?' (505). Even though Antje's mother is more polite with the guest and the relationship between Giovanni and Mr Schumacher will change further in the novel, the book depicts Antje's family as a place of constriction that imposes on the daughter a severe and conservative education.

Another institution that Celati strongly criticized in his books of the 1970s is school. This is particularly evident in *La banda*. Through the figure of the older pupil Veleno, who leads a school (and social) class battle against the school master 'maestro Pelatone', Celati represents a rebellion against what he describes as a violent place of compulsion, rather than a place of education. The pupils' insurrection abolishes all hierarchies and overturns the values that the school presumes to impose. Celati describes Veleno's revolution as a liberating action and as a necessary challenge to school as an institute of power. All this happens in a comic situation that strongly undermines school as an official institution and creates a situation of chaos where nothing is under control. Celati seems to be advocating

[97] Gianni Celati, *Lunario del paradiso*, in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache e racconti*, p. 505.

liberation from a 'controlling' institution and the revolt of the children is depicted with extreme sympathy. By adopting the perspective of the child protagonist, Celati give a representation of school from the side of the pupils who clearly live the institution as a pointless and violent imposition with no link with what they found interesting in life. Another episode shows well Celati's representation of school from the point of view of the children: when master Pelatone tries without any success to teach poets like Carducci and Leopardi to his students, they make all kinds of jokes behind his back:

> Ci impartiva lezioni scolastiche volendo farci leggere tante poesie che a noi non ci interessano […]. La classe faceva il gesto di masturbarsi quando il maestro parlava di Carducci […]. Altre volte mentre il pelatone stava spiegandoci il libro di letture […], Veleno accendeva un fuocherello per terra urlando che il suo quaderno ha preso fuoco da solo […]. Appena lui si volta un nostro tiratore lo prende nel collo con mosche morte intinte nell'inchiostro. (356-359)

Pupils feel school to be a waste of time in comparison to what they consider more important activities, such as games, dreams about sex, cinema, joyful life in general: 'Non eravamo mica tipi da leggere poesie e recitargliele al maestro, noi compagni di scuola. Noi eravamo tipi che vogliono godere e basta. A noi ci piacevano i personaggi del cinema che danno pugni, altroché le poesie' (359). Behind these considerations there is also a discourse on culture and anti-intellectualism which is a constant in Celati's works. The critique of imposed culture which emerges from the above mentioned passage is also a critique of false culture, namely the acritical reception of study plans which the students feel are completely useless. The apparent contrast between culture and life in the narrator Garibaldi's words underlines the distance between school and real culture, namely what is necessary to learn for life. In Celati's depiction, school seems to promote a passive

transmission of knowledge learnt by heart, with no real passion, effort or interest for the subjects, which teachers introduced to the pupils as inevitably detached from their everyday life. In *La banda*, school appears to be thus committed to the development and diffusion of a form of control and obedience, rather than to the promotion and dissemination of culture and critical thought.

Veleno is thus the leader of a widely shared revolt against school: 'Veleno era un grande nemico del maestro Pelatone e non ammetteva di doversi inchinare ai suoi ordini di fare i compiti' (362). One of Veleno's self-assigned duties is to check that no one does homework. In case of disobedience, the revenge is merciless: 'Abbiamo preso per strada un giorno due compagni che volevano sempre fare i compiti, e gli abbiamo fatto un rapimento portandoli in una stradina stretta […] e gli abbiamo pisciato nelle cartelle' (363). Veleno and Garibaldi threaten the master himself: 'Il maestro pelatone un giorno voleva denunciare ai carabinieri gli ignoti ladri che in classe rubano i libri di lettura ai ragazzi che vogliono leggerli. Gli abbiamo fatto arrivare un messaggio che diceva: zitto o la passi male' (363-364). One could argue that this reaction to the imposition of school is itself violent and authoritarian, and this could be seen also as a critique of the process of revolution which often becomes as violent as the regime it had overturned (or even worse than before). This is possible, given the centrality of the topic in the political debates in 1960s and 1970s Italy, but there is no evidence of that in the text. I believe that Celati's main interest here is to give a liberating representation of school as dominated by pupils, the ones who are constantly subjugated in that institution. The function of these passages is to mock the institution of school and, at the same time, to describe the pointlessness of its impositions. The entire scene is thus to be read as comical: once again it is the child-narrator perspective that gives to the events the

dimension of a game, rather than a serious revolution. The critique of school is nevertheless to be taken seriously, and this is evident when the narrator Garibaldi describes the classist structure of school at the time ('Nella nostra scuola gli scolari erano in gran parte abbastanza pezzenti e senza il rischio io di sfigurare, come invece sfigurava il fratello andando nella sua scuola da ricchi', 367). The headmaster discriminates against Garibaldi, who comes from a lower-class family:

> Però me lo ricordo questo preside con la faccia da schifo, che a me mi stava sul gozzo prima di tutto per la sua faccia e poi per certe parole che mi ha detto, per farmi comprendere che ero un miserabile che lui disprezza e non sufficientemente ricco per i suoi gusti. (366)

Examples of this classist discrimination are many in the book and contribute in giving to the reader an image of school as an unfair, hierarchical and strongly authoritarian institution. The book criticizes all this through the voice of Garibaldi, whose frankness unveils all those aspects to the reader, like in the episode in which the headmaster banishes Garibaldi from school using the excuse that he shouted in class. The real reason is Garibaldi's poverty, as the narrator himself perfectly knows: 'Ha fatto certi discorsi col maestro per dire che essendo io un pezzente, era meglio per me e per tutti se andavo a lavorare i campi invece di venire a scuola' (144).

Related to this, and even worse, is the Catholic school where Garibaldi's thin cousin ('il cugino magro') is segregated in the final part of the novel. Beyond the characteristics highlighted for normal school in previous descriptions, the Catholic *collegio* is a violent place where the priests brainswash the pupils, in order to make them faithful to the Church and to the clerical government. The narrator ironically underlines that this kind of education led the cousin to become a criminal:

> Lo zio magro andava a portare il cugino magro al collegio dei preti. Il cugino non voleva entrarci da quella porta nel timore di prendere botte e dover

> diventare prete anche lui […]. Al cugino magro gli hanno messo addosso la divisa del collegio, e non l'abbiamo più visto per un pezzo, circa per tutti gli anni che ha dovuto scontare in quel posto.
>
> In quel posto a studiare con i preti il cugino è diventato un delinquente, siccome lì trionfavano i delinquenti che avessero l'abilità di derubare altri ragazzi, e anche di ingraziarsi la stima dei preti facendo la spia. (464-465)

The narrator provides a totally negative image of the effects of his cousin's Catholic education, characterized by violent indoctrination and impositions. Attending the Catholic school, the thin cousin therefore learns how to be a thief and a spy. In order not to be hit for insubordination he reveals to the priests the other pupils' offences and he also accepts to masturbate the priests ('accettava anche di fare qualche manichetto a un prete per ingraziarselo', 465). Other students will then bully Garibaldi's cousin as a revenge for his actions. When he is at the hospital to cure his wounds, he decides to escape and not return to the *collegio*. Eventually he is captured and brought back to the Catholic school, the emphasis on the words that have to do with prison confirms the depiction of the *collegio* as a place of detention: 'Il cugino magro l'hanno arrestato mentre mangiava la zuppa, e riportato al collegio di provenienza' (465). After that episode, in order to be safe inside the Catholic school and escape new violence from the other students, the cousin has to use his sexual abilities to please the other schoolmates and avoid being subjected again to their revenge. Garibaldi's narration ironically underlines these aspects, implicitly suggesting that all the cousin learns is the opposite of what the religious school is supposed to teach:

> Lui nel collegio per stare tranquillo ha dovuto riprendere quel lavoro di fare manichetti ai preti, e farglieli anche ai ragazzi scalmanati per placare le invidie e scansare botte. Così dicono che lui sia diventato con gli anni uno specialista nel collegio e nei dintorni per queste cose, tanto che andava a farle anche fuori dal collegio a pagamento a certi signori attratti dalla notizia della

> sua abilità. Dunque è diventato un prostituto e anche ladro, secondo l'insegnamento esatto di quei preti furboni. (466)

The priests are, in fact, extremely happy about their pupil's results: 'Dunque i preti molto soddisfatti di lui sotto tutti i profili' (466). The representation of the Catholic school in *La banda* shows this institution as a prison and a place of brutality, sexual abuses and political propaganda: 'Ma non solo, perché quei preti lo hanno addestrato a diventare un fervente seguace del truffatore De Gasperi, facendogli baciare la sua fotografia notte e giorno. E gli hanno istillato il precetto di amare il governo della nazione.' (466) As I will illustrate in the following pages, the reference to Alcide De Gasperi, founder of the *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) and Italian prime minister from 1945 to 1953, is part of a depiction of politics in the years in which the novel is set. What is interesting now, is that this last quotation makes explicit the link between the institution of school, described in all its violent aspects, and power. This element was already implicitly present in the description of the school that Garibaldi and Veleno attend: its classist structure has the aim of promoting a society with a rigid division between the rich and the poor, with different rights, duties and opportunities. Here, the Catholic school directly supports the party which leads the nation. Celati ridicules both, in the first case through the students' revolt that overturns all pointless hierarchies and the way the master wants to impose knowledge to his pupils. In the second example, Celati uses irony to expose the priests' behaviours and the Catholic school to a radical critique that shows both its nature as violent institution and its distance from the principles of Catholic religion.

In *Lunario del paradiso*, Celati describes the university in the same tone he has used for the school, as another place of constraint. From the distance between

students and professors and the multitude of assistants portrayed like servants, the university is depicted as a place governed by a highly hierarchical order, where fake respect and reverential fear dominate. The narrator Giovanni describes an uncomfortable environment where professors seem neither passionate nor interested in what they teach, as they are focused only on themselves and their careers:

> All'università si andava a lezione in stanzotti tristi e troppo grandi, con lunghi banchi dove altri studenti avevano intagliato scritte per noia mentre ascoltavano una lezione. Poi corridoi, bidelli, scaloni, aule fredde, professori rigidi come baccalà, studenti con spalle chine per farsi piccoli in quel posto di tristezza […]. Certe mattine d'inverno stavamo lì davanti affollati, infreddoliti, aspettando che aprissero un'aula, come le oche quando vogliono il mangime. Arrivavano i professori impettiti senza guardare nessuno, un bidello gli correva dietro per aprirgli l'aula, col seguito di due o tre assistenti per portargli la cartella. E tutti si facevano muti e timidi al passaggio del corteo, come se fosse arrivato il re col suo seguito. Poi ricordo le lezioni, un mortorio di recite da restar stroncati di noia, che sembrava mica possibile nella realtà. Un professore con aria di re riassumeva il libro che aveva scritto per diventare professore in cattedra; ed erano libri da non poter leggere una riga senza sbadigliare. (512-513)

Instead of promoting culture, the university depicted in *Lunario* eliminates all kinds of curiosity in the student Giovanni:

> E io che desideravo tanto imparare la lingua provenzale, per leggere i poeti provenzali, non mi è mai stato possibile. Perché appena prendevo in mano una grammatica di lingua provenzale mi tornava in mente quel professore; e mi veniva una noia in corpo così potente che mi sarei buttato giù dalla finestra. (513)

One last institution that Celati includes in his analysis of *istituzioni negate* is the army. A short but relevant reference is in *Lunario*, where Giovanni significantly recalls his period of compulsory military service. He directly addresses the officers of the Italian army, calling his chiefs and commanders by name and remembering the injustice they have perpetrated against Giovanni's army companion Giuseppe Lopetuso. Giovanni's portait of the army focuses on its absurd violence, together

with the robberies and tortures that were perpetrated there. In Celati's words, the army is therefore a place of corruption and threats, where officials abuse their power and inflict physical and psychological pain on the soldiers. The strength of the voice of the narrator has no peer in Celati's works: this is the only example in which Celati's anger is expressed so directly. It is a clearly autobiographical episode, from the period in which Celati was in the army, in 1962, in Casale Monferrato, which marked the writer very deeply. Lopetuso will then try to commit suicide inside the barracks, exasperated by the violence suffered at the hands of his superiors:[98]

> Signori ufficiali dell'esercito italiano, voi che ci avete fatto vivere come cani o porci nei porcili; che ci mettevate dritti sull'attenti, noi rincoglioniti traballanti per il vostro bromuro nel caffellatte; che ci avete levato le porte dei cessi, perché ci scrivevamo i nostri pensieri su di voi; voi signori ufficiali dell'esercito italiano non lo sapete neanche lontanamente chi era il piccolo soldato Lopetuso.
>
> Giuseppe Lopetuso, di professione cavamonte, con la faccia da vecchio anche se era un bambino […] e da nove mesi chiedeva una licenza per tornare a casa. La licenza? Sì, buonanotte!
>
> Maresciallo Fagioli e capitano Cometto, figli di puttana, in piedi! Maresciallo Fagioli, ti ricordi quando cuccavi i soldi dei nostri vaglia postali, e che hai intascato i soldi del piccolo Lopetuso spediti alla sua famiglia?
>
> Ti ricordi quando lui è venuto a protestare, che l'hai minacciato di galera e cacciato fuori a calci? Poi ti ricordi quel giorno quando gli hai buttato per terra con disprezzo duemila lire per farlo stare zitto, dandogli del terrone incivile baluba?
>
> Ti ricordi, brutto ladro, corrotto, ignorante, vigliacco, come arraffavi a man bassa anche sulla nostra decima, sotto la protezione del capitano Cometto?
>
> Capitano Cometto, ti ricordi quanto ti facevi portare gratis le scarpine di lusso e le borsette di coccodrillo per tua moglie da quel soldato di Vigevano, dandogli in cambio il permesso di tornare a casa?
>
> Ti ricordi quando venendo fuori dal tuo ufficio ti sei imbestialito col Lopetuso che protestava d'essere stato svaligiato dal tuo maresciallo Fagioli, e tu l'hai cacciato in galera all'istante, poi sospese tutte le sue licenze per nove mesi?
>
> E ti ricordi quel giorno che sono andato a denunciarti al colonnello del battaglione, che te la facevi sotto e telefonavi per avere una protezione superiore?
>
> Ti ricordi che nella fureria non mi guardavi più in faccia per disprezzo, come se fossi io l'essere corrotto, tu putrido disonesto, gentleman

[98] As Nunzia Palmieri states in her *Cronologia*, p. LXXXIV.

> dei miei coglioni, prima di farmi trasferire per punizione a un altro reggimento? (527-528)

In the following section, I will investigate the role of party politics in Celati's books of the 1970s, in order to demonstrate how present this aspect is in his works and what the rationale behind this choice could be.

### 1.4 Representation of Party Politics in Celati's Books of the 1970s: *Comiche*, *Guizzardi*, *La banda* and *Lunario*

In his essay *La dignità di un mondo buffo*, Giulio Iacoli has underlined how Celati's work of the 1970s does not tackle political issues with direct reference to current events.[99] Celati's *impegno* does not imply any sort of intervention in political events such as election or similar topics. Nevertheless, references to political ideologies, parties or leaders are everywhere in Celati's works. They arise simply as part of the general human experience, which Celati wants to portray, but this also shows that Celati's interest in politics has been constant through the years. I will now analyse the presence and significance in Celati's novels of the 1970s of several elements which belong to the category of politics. Celati's political passion emerges clearly in his books and gives more relevance to his choice of not tackling current political events, which he is certainly aware of, in a direct manner. This confirms his intention to be a political author in a different way, through imagination rather than realism, through literature and language rather than becoming a member of a party or being himself an opinion leader.

The delirious speech of Celati's debut book *Comiche* touches the political many times, as the characters often refer to political parties or ideologies but none of them refers to the current events of the 1960s or 1970s, when those categories –

[99] Giulio Iacoli, *La dignità di un mondo buffo*, p. 151.

monarchist, republicans – have little sense.[100] They refer rather to late nineteenth-century Italy and the age of Italian Unification (1848-1870). As mentioned above, this is a consequence of Celati's use of the inmate notebooks as his main source. Some remarks that clearly show that the characters seem to be still in the age of Risorgimento: 'V'era anche chi gli gridava in risposta: viva l'Italia libera. E a parte: - abbasso gli Austriaci' (37); 'E all'improvviso mi arriva addosso l'ignoto che voleva insegnarmi le lingue estere. Perché dice col nuovo governo bisogna saperle parlare bene e innanzi tutto il tedesco causa l'imminente annessione dell'Italia al regno asburgico' (62-63). Political terms of the Risorgimento are thus emptied of their significance and contribute instead to describe the inmates as detached and separated from external reality, contributing to recreate the condition of madness and paranoia which dominates inside the asylum. This is the case of the unnamed protagonist, who is constantly accused of being an anarchist: 'sei anarchico Tatò? Con voce notturna nel pomeriggio: - confessa in ginocchio dunque' (35); '- quello è in combutta con l'anarchico Breviglieri. E: - anarchico pure lui' (79). Among the numerous examples, I will mention here the case of the so-called 'unknown' ('l'ignoto'), an inmate who claims to be a monarchist: 'L'ignoto nel giardino diceva essere monarchico e nobile […]. Con inchino cortese ha detto: - sei monarchico tu? In risposta alla sua domanda ho dichiarato essere repubblicano e socialista' (6-7). The other effect of these references to politics is to create a sort of farce, where the dialogue between the characters takes the form of a political satire. Particularly interesting from this perspective is the character of Biagini, as he confirms Celati's

[100] Italy was a Kingdom since the Italian unification (1861). On 2 June 1946, Italy became a Republic after the results of a popular referendum. The Italian Republican Party (PRI) still existed after that date, but the inmates in *Comiche* clearly do not refer to it when they speak about republicans. On this period of the history of Italy, see Martin Clark, *Modern Italy, 1871 to the Present* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2008), particularly pp. 15-112.

negative view of government and power, that the author expresses in *Comiche* by assimilating politics and madness. Biagini is convinced that he is a member of the government: he thus gives orders to everyone and wants to find out if there is any conspiracy against the 'pro-government alliance': 'egli vorrebbe essere ministro dunque unico suo pensiero è come ridurre gli altri all'alleanza governativa con svariati accordi segreti quindi sorvegliare tendenze sospette e riferire in loco' (16). Biagini's propaganda comes out in various passages of the book: 'Biagini sopra il tavolo in piedi spiegava: - dobbiamo allearci tutti. E: - anche i liberali. Poi con voce non sua molto simile a quella dell'ignoto suggeriva a ciascuno dei presenti nell'orecchio: - fatevi monarchizzare l'Italia crolla' (37). Another character, Fantini, represents himself a parody of a ruler and a political satire. Fantini thinks about himself as a guardian of morality and claims to be there in order to preserve Italian interests: 'Si vantava custode della morale affermando: - io sono custode della morale. E: - difendo gli interessi dell'Italia' (27). All this is comical, not to be taken seriously, but it clearly gives a sarcastic representation of politics and politicians: the characters use political slogans which immediately appear nonsensical to the reader, both because they are part of madmen's discourses and because they refer to historical events and categories which are no longer valid at the time in which the novel was set.

Similarly to *Comiche*, in *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, the political elements emerge, above all, as a comic discourse, which is part of the characters' folly. The political references add new elements to the depiction of madness and of the persecution complexes of the characters that is one of the main aspects of the book. The political elements in *Guizzardi* are a peculiar feature of Morabito, a man who lives in the same building as Miss Ida Coniglio, the woman who bought the

protagonist Danci from his parents. Morabito claims to be a firmly anti-government activist: 'ho avuto la sorpresa di sentirmi richiamare dall'inquilino Morabito notoriamente molto sporco: 'Ma a cosa pensa lei?' Insinuando che siccome non penserei io sarei cittadino pessimo e squilibrato del tutto supino alle direttive del governo che a lui non piace e vuole cambiarlo' (192). Morabito influences another character, Mantovani, who at a certain point goes insane and therefore embraces Morabito's view. Celati presents his embracing of political ideas as a consequence of the character's madness: 'Difatti poi va detto che tale Morabito trovando Mantovani del tutto sragionante ha pensato accoglierlo come seguace e ammaestrarlo alla politica. Ed entrambi sempre gridavano: 'Governo corrotto governo corrotto!'' (211). Mantovani represents the neophyte who wants to spread the recently learned lesson. He is thus convinced of his own ideas and his figure thus results comic to the reader:

> Mantovani mi ha detto: 'Te Danci non capisci niente di politica». Spiegandomi la cosa che siccome gli sfruttatori hanno la torta più grossa da mangiarsi e altri invece come lui neanche possono prendersi un pollo in quanto perseguitati da chi non gli vuole bene al popolo ma soltanto alla sua pancia così dunque come risolvevo io la questione? Ho ammesso che non so.' […] Mi diceva: 'Ti spiego tutto'. E poi: 'Tu devi imparare'. Altrimenti diceva ci rimane poco da fare per me nel mondo infame. E dopo non mi ricordo neanche più cosa dicesse ma senz'altro posso confermare delle enormi sbafornie. Che ce l'aveva anche contro la religione questo qui volendo convincermi a tutti i costi che Dio non esiste a suo modo di vedere. (272)

Celati depicts the political discourse from the naïve perspective of the narrator protagonist Danci, whose comments give a rather ridicolous portait of Morabito and Mantovani's statements: 'Per esempio intento a pulire le scale d'un tratto egli esplodeva furibondo: 'Datemi i miei soldi!' E: 'Sfruttatori!' Non si capisce chi. E altre grida continuate a tutti i momenti anche peggio contro i benestanti e il

mondo intero che andava secondo lui rifatto' (211-212). Political words are, for Danci, totally obscure: 'E una volta andando noi a camminare incontriamo grande massa di popolo intorno a oratore su un podio che pronunciava cose incomprensibili ma a quanto mi sembra di politica' (270-271). After that, a comic passage describes a socialist ventriloquist challenging and interrupting the speech of a pro-government politician with rhyming responses pretending to be voices from the crowd. The humour of the episode is evident, especially if the reader focuses on the rhymes used by the ventriloquist:

> Difatti poi si è verificato quando l'oratore diceva poniamo dopo tante svariate cose: 'Nel rispetto di tutte le opinioni'. Da un astante in prima fila esce la voce: 'Tu ci rompi i coglioni!' E quando l'oratore poi diceva: 'Noi confidiamo nella brava gente'. Da un altro astante: 'Ce li hai rotti ugualmente!' […]. L'oratore voleva proseguire con le parole: 'Perché abbiamo in noi la speranza'. Voce da un astante: 'Ce li hai rotti abbastanza!'. E l'oratore accalorato: 'La speranza ci ha sorretto fin d'ora'. E la voce: 'Ce li rompi da un'ora!'. Che alla fine si è sviluppata una confusione di pensiero generale non capendosi più chi voleva l'oratore lasciato parlare e chi lo volesse zitto. (271)

As this last passage itself demonstrates, the book offers a sort of comic denunciation of a corrupt, clerical government which is an evident critique of the power of Italian Christian Democracy from the end of the Second World War onwards. In *Guizzardi*, the government is also a menacing presence. Danci sees it as a threat, especially when he is inside the Hospital: 'Sotto anche minaccia spesso ripetuta di rivelare chi fossi in realtà ossia un malfattore comunicarlo ad autorità competenti di parte governativa e clericale molto pericolose e forti nella nazione' (239). The references to politics in *Guizzardi* confirms Celati's scepticism regarding ideological propaganda. He mocks political discourse, on the one hand, linking it to madness, on the other, adding to the description of *Comiche* some elements of more

direct critique of political parties in post-war Italy, which anticipates one main aspect of Celati's next novel, *La banda dei sospiri*.

*La banda* talks about politics from the point of view of the child protagonist Garibaldi, who absorbs and repeats political discourses that he hears from older people. This permits Celati to present the political elements in a comic way, as the narrator Garibaldi sees politics above all as an adventure, like every other aspect of life described. Similarly to what happened for the critique of institutions in *La banda*, such as school and the family, the naivety of Garibaldi's statements strongly undermines political propaganda in all of its aspects, showing the ridiculous side of political dogmatism. As briefly mentioned above, *La banda* contains several references to the protagonists of the political scene in post-war Italy, such as the leaders of the two major parties, the Christian Democrat Alcide De Gasperi and the communist Palmiro Togliatti. Celati depicts in a comic manner the two politcial and historical figures, De Gasperi and Togliatti, who still have extraordinary importance and inspire respect, calling the first dishonest and a cheater and describing the second as a sort of hero. Through Garibaldi, Celati also gives a representation of Christian Democracy (DC) as a corrupt party, and describes it as the centre of a fraudulent system of power. All this contributes to ridicule politics and especially political propaganda, that Celati mocks as an excess of ideology. In this sense it is part of Celati's *impegno* as analysed so far: a constant critique of all institutions of power, including political parties and leaders.

The figure of Garibaldi's uncle, a former emigrant to Australia who is back in Italy at the time of the novel, introduces some of these notions. 'Lo zio d'Australia', as the narrator refers to him, is a communist carpenter who returned to Italy because, he claims, the Australian government wanted to murder him for his political activity:

'Era un bel po' ammalato di politica bisogna dire, e per questo Federico non l'accetta in casa sua. Andava a tanti comizi con bandiere, e ben presto si è dichiarato a me sinceramente comunista'. The narrator underlines the contrast between the Uncle and his brother, Garibaldi's father, Federico Barbarossa, who knows that he is exploited (he is employed as a delivery man, but then demoted to night watchman because he argues with his bosses) but has no hope in the possibility of change:

> Perché Federico diceva: i nostri governanti sono tutti dei maiali. E il padrone dei ferrivecchi diceva: un giorno pagheranno i loro misfatti. E Federico invece diceva: sarà sempre così. E quell'altro controbatteva: io dico che cambierà. Ma il Barbarossa voleva aver ragione a tutti i costi: gli sfruttatori del popolo ci saranno sempre.[101]

As mentioned above, in *La banda*, political references are neither to current events of the time in which Celati wrote the novel nor to the Italian Risorgimento, as was the case in *Comiche*, but to the Italian political situation after the Second World War. Christian Democracy is seen as a shady and widely corrupted and violent system of power, also linked to the ecclesiastical hierarchies. Two episodes show this with particular strength. The first is the representation of the policeman Gallinone, who was a hunter of government opponents and now chases generic criminals, like Veronica Lake's brother Alan Ladd. This character has a particular meaning to the reader of the time in which the novel was written: the *contestazione* of the end of the 1970s often focused on the State Police's fascist behaviour:

[101] 330. The contrast between the uncle from Australia and Garibaldi's father is evident in the novel. When Garibaldi goes to political rallies with his uncle, he has to hide that from his parents: 'Federico e la madre questo non dovevano saperlo, essendo contrari alla politica, ma noi lo tenevamo segreto'. See also p. 436: 'Federico però non vuole sentire parlar di politica in casa sua. E si inventava tante cose per controbattere […]. Neanche la madre voleva sentir parlare di politica. Lei solo pregava il cielo che quest'epoca brutta passasse presto, ma senza rivoluzioni altrimenti noi disgraziati chissà dove andavamo a finire'. This contributes to underline the distance between the people's needs and the 'game' of party politics.

> Prima di essere cacciatore specialista di ladri era cacciatore di gente contraria al governo, da denunciare e arrestare. La sua specialità consisteva nel dare un po' di botte agli arrestati, per convertire il popolo alla fede cieca nel truffatore De Gasperi. (408)

I have already shown how *La banda* describes Garibaldi's cousin's brain-washing in the Catholic school. In a further passage, the narrator makes explicit the link between the priests' violent propaganda and its political consequences, and the cousin who, himself, becomes a member and activist: 'Ancora quando era nel collegio l'hanno messo al servizio della propaganda per far vincere le elezioni a De Gasperi, e far trionfare i ricchi maiali che si ingrassano sulla pelle di chi lavora.' (466).

De Gasperi and the Christian Democracy are thus the enemies that Garibaldi and his other cousin find when they decide to engage in politics. The reduction of the Cold War and of Italian domestic politics to two sides in contrast show Garibaldi's uncritical adherence to the political ideas that he finds more interesting as a child. This has the effect of mocking the party politics of post-war Italy which becomes just part of the childen's games, similarly to the stories of adventures:

> A me e al cugino testa rossa è sembrata una bellissima idea di aderire anche noi e divenire ribelli comunisti, contro il truffatore De Gasperi che era il comandante del partito contrario alla libertà. E poi anche la mia Veronica Lake era comunista e me l'aveva sempre detto.[102]

[102] 395. For a consideration of the Berlusconi's era, see Paul Ginsborg, Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents: Family, Civil Society, State 1980 - 2001* (London: Penguin, 2003). In other passages of the novel, Garibaldi and his cousin curse De Gasperi without any political reason, just as part of their games and hobbies: 'Col cugino dalla testa rossa facevamo delle corse in bicicletta per arrivare al fiume, cioè fuori dalla città circa otto chilometri. Arrivati sul ponte del fiume lanciavamo nell'aria una maledizione contro De Gasperi […]. Per andare in acqua con la bicicletta bisognava sgonfiare le gomme altrimenti è difficile, e dopo bisognava pulire tutte le biciclette altrimenti si arrugginiscono, anche qui noi lanciando maledizioni contro De Gasperi per quel lavoro che ci tocca fare. Le due ragazze chiedevano perché lanciamo tante maledizioni a De Gasperi. Allora io gliene auguravo ancora peggio a quel truffatore, augurandogli di morire di colera così l'Italia sarebbe stata libera […]. Noi dalle biciclette gridavamo alla popolazione: abbasso De Gasperi viva il comunismo. A sentir così la popolazione ci applaudiva con urli risa battimani, perché capivano che siamo dei campioni del pedale che vanno in giro a spargere il messaggio della libertà' (398-399). Politics is thus part of the children protagonists' imaginary, together with cinema, history and adventure novels. A discussion between Garibaldi and his brother Michele Strogoff well illustrates this connection and confusion, with

More than a real commitment to communist ideology, the child Garibaldi's adherence to communism is shown to be determined by the adoption of someone else's ideas. *La banda* shows politics as part of everyday life at the time in which the novel is set. The choice of Garibaldi as a narrator permits Celati to approach the political scenario in a comic manner, which certainly conveys a refusal of propaganda by mocking some of the major political figures of post-war Italy and their ideology and by challenging the false certainties of any political message. Garibaldi, in fact, relates to politics as a playful adventure, rather than a real political commitment. This is evident when Garibaldi motivates his decision to become a communist by simply stating that it sounds good and that his main political reason was his passion for the communist Veronica Lake. The narrative mode always underlines how Garibaldi is just regurgitating his uncle's ideas as something that sounds nice and adventurous: 'Adesso era un periodo che nella nostra patria si voleva far venire al governo i capi del partito della libertà, i bravissimi Nenni e Togliatti' (396). It is clear that Garibaldi refers to the secretary of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) Pietro Nenni and to the Communist leader Togliatti in an acritical way, with a completely different tone to the one used for De Gasperi. *La banda* also refers to the possibility of a communist revolution in the immediate post-war period, when the Christian Democrats were holding power, but Italy seemed on the point of an overthrow of that government: 'Si credeva a quei tempi che dovesse scoppiare abbastanza in fretta una rivoluzione, con ammazzamento di tutti i maiali superiori e

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reference to Jules Verne's novel, where Strogoff is a courier for Tsar Alexander II of Russia: 'Io ero abbastanza contento di essere diventato comunista perché così potevo essere un predone nomade favorevole alla libertà contro il partito dello zar che era quello del truffatore de Gasperi. Michele Strogoff voleva convincermi che De Gasperi non fosse un sicario dello zar, ma con tutte le sue invenzioni non lo ascoltavo più e gli gridavo: viva il comunismo abbasso lo zar. E scappavo via.' (398).

trionfo del popolo e della libertà'.[103] Garibaldi repeats his uncle words about the supposed forthcoming revolution: 'Invece poi a quanto pare la rivoluzione non scoppia mai, e i maiali superiori ricchi e furbi continuano a vivere alle spalle dei poveri miserabili che tirano la carretta. Questo è quanto spiegava lo zio d'Australia con molte parole anche originali' (436). Another episode in which Garibaldi's approach to politics emerges with clarity is when the narrator protagonist claims that political speeches are better than the cinema, especially if the red flags of the Communist party are present. Garibaldi, similarly to *Guizzardi*'s protagonist Danci, does not understand those speeches but feels attracted by that situation. Even though Garibaldi's reaction to the speeches is different to Danci's, the following scene is comparable to the passage in *Guizzardi* that I have quoted above, as they both focus on the crowd's reaction to what the speaker is saying, rather than on the content of the speech:

> Quando le due amiche non mi portavano più con loro alla domenica io andavo ai comizi con lo zio d'Australia, che era anche più divertente […]. Quei discorsi non ci capivo niente, ma era divertente lo stesso. Perché se erano discorsi giusti, cioè di un vero comunista, allora tutti battevamo le mani urlando dalla soddisfazione di sentire cose giuste e ben dette. Se erano invece discorsi sbagliati di qualche nemico servo del governo, allora il pubblico gli diceva certe battute spiritose all'oratore che c'era da crepar dal ridere, e poi non la smettevamo più.[104]

Another character in *La banda* who shows interest in politics is Norma, Veronika Lake's friend, former hairdresser, then worker in a button factory. The boss fires the woman for promoting strikes and protests against low salaries. The

[103] 436.

[104] 406. The uncle tries to interrupt the speeches of his opponents. His action is similar to the one of the ventriloquist in the above mentioned scene from *Guizzardi*: 'Lo zio d'Australia si andava a mettere sotto il palco e voleva sempre interrompere un oratore del governo che sbaglia. Quando non sapeva cosa dire gli chiedeva: scusi potrebbe ripetere? Oppure delle volte intanto mettiamo che un oratore di nome Casarini stava parlando con grandi gesti per far propaganda al governo, come un governo ottimo che ama il popolo, lo zio si metteva a urlare di colpo: Casarini è chiamato al telefono. Che quello restava confuso, doveva interrompere la propaganda' (406).

passage shows the absence of solidarity between workers that causes the failure of the strike organized by Norma. The layoff is a direct consequence of her activism as a trade unionist which was a very common situation in post-war Italy. The political struggles at the time in which Celati wrote *La banda* focused on workers' rights. Norma's story recalls the famous protest song *O' cara moglie*, written by Ivan Della Mea in 1978, showing the proximity between Celati's 1976 novel and the political struggles of the time:

> La bionda lavorante aveva una amica sua paesana, che prima era stata parrucchiera e dopo era andata a lavorare in una fabbrica di bottoni. Ma nella fabbrica di bottoni questa qui ha voluto fare uno sciopero contro i padroni che pagano male e sfruttano gli operai per comprare le pellicce alla moglie, così la moglie del padrone mette su la superbia delle donne ricche a spese degli operai. Lei nella fabbrica faceva discorsi ardenti per sollevare le operaie contro i cani sfruttatori, ma le altre operaie non le badavano e così l'hanno licenziata per punizione. È tornata a fare la parrucchiera.[105]

The denunciation of the gap between the rich and the poor recurs in Celati's writings of the period, reflecting the climate of the time. The blonde worker, Norma, and her experience illustrate the idea of a highly hierarchical society, with a big difference between the exploiters and the exploited. This is something that I have already underlined in previous pages, as it is particularly evident in the depiction of school. Garibaldi always underlines the division at school between pupils from rich families and poor like him and his schoolmate Veleno, who shares Garibaldi's communist ideas:

> A scuola c'erano questi figli dei ricchi con la parlantina facile e molto avanti negli studi di leggere e scrivere, siccome i ricchi mandano a scuola i loro figli

[105] 405. The lyrics of Della Mea's song refer to the layoff of a worker after a strike and to the division between the workers: 'Proprio stamane là sul lavoro, / con il sorriso del caposezione, / mi è arrivata la liquidazione, / m'han licenziato senza pietà. / E la ragione è perché ho scioperato / per la difesa dei nostri diritti, / per la difesa del mio sindacato, / del mio lavoro, della libertà. / Quando la lotta è di tutti per tutti / il tuo padrone, vedrai, cederà; / se invece vince è perché i crumiri / gli dan la forza che lui non ha.'

> presto da piccoli, così appena si allungano un po' sanno già parlare come dei professori. Il ripetente Veleno in classe si insospettiva a sentirli parlare in quel modo, con quelle cerimonie e smancerie […]. E per insegnargli a stare al mondo gli mollava qualche pugno in testa […]. Allora all'uscita dalla scuola Veleno gli andava dietro e sussurava nelle loro orecchie: tuo padre è capitalista? Tutti i capitalisti moriranno impiccati. Anch'io mi insospettivo di costoro e li tenevo d'occhio […]. Secondo me c'era poco da fidarsi di loro, perché ti sorridono davanti e poi ti fregano di dietro.[106]

One last aspect to be observed is that the novel has an autobiographical nature as it is set in Celati's infancy and the characters have direct correspondence with Celati's relatives. Even though autobiography is not the main aim of the book, this aspect confirms the presence of communist ideas in the author's childhood. This is something that I have underlined before, while focusing on Celati's early career, namely the years before the publication of *Comiche*. Celati's proximity with communist environments in his childhood is something that emerges clearly in *La banda*, while his next novel *Lunario del paradiso*, itself autobiographical, shows how Celati's strong interest for politics continues in the following years.[107] In *Lunario del paradiso*, in fact, the twenty-year-old protagonist Giovanni expresses in a number of passages his passion for political discourses, as part of his life, together with love adventures, which is the main topic of the book: 'Io ho passato la giovinezza tra i richiami della politica e della carne, che quando mi prendevo una mazzata da una parte pendolavo come un salame dall'altra' (565). *Lunario* continues the process of mocking political seriousness and propaganda. At the same time, it

[106] 369. Nevertheless, Garibaldi becomes a close friend of one of the richest pupils, showing that Garibaldi sees the political division just as a pretext for his playful adventures: 'Dopo io sono diventato amico di quel ragazzo che avevamo legato a un lampione, un bambino biondo e vestito di eleganza perché ricco, al quale Veleno ogni giorno diceva questa frase molto spiritosa: tu ricco mi baceresti il culo? Lui sembra che mi ha perdonato per quella azione di pisciargli nella cartella' (368). Veleno shares Garibaldi's communist ideas: 'Nella classe scolastica il ripetente Veleno approvava le mie grida essendo anche lui di quell'idea, e anzi più sfegatato di me nel gridare a tutti sulla faccia che i truffatori del governo e i ladri capitalisti devono morire fucilati. C'erano invece quei compagni scontrosi e ricchi che sentendo che io sono un acceso comunista mi dicevano frasi di disprezzo.' (396)

[107] On the autobiographical origins of *La banda* and *Lunario* see Nunzia Palmieri, 'Cronologia', pp. XCVIII-XCIX and p. LXXXII.

describes politics as a true passion of the protagonist Giovanni (‘A quei tempi cercavo sempre qualcuno disposto alla chiacchiera politica, per sfogarmi un po’’, 656), which the narrator refers to in an ironic and distanced manner, but also illustrating the sincerity of Giovanni’s vehement rebellion against power and injustice. *Lunario* mocks political discourse but also shows some admiration for the protagonist’s passion for politics. It is true, in fact, that Celati’s irony in presenting the protagonist’s confusion while explaining his ideas undermines the political discourse he tackles, but it also shows Giovanni’s political ardour as something genuine and sincere. As briefly mentioned above, *Lunario* is another autobiographical book, set in Hamburg between 1958 and 1959, when Celati was there to meet again a German girl he had fallen in love with in Marina di Ravenna during the summer of 1958.[108] Giovanni’s enthusiasm for political discussions reflects Celati’s own ideas at that time, once again confirming the author’s youthful interest in politics. On the contrary, the first person narrator, Giovanni, remembers those events and distances himself from those positions, particularly condemning the protagonist’s past certainty of being always right and his ideological faith. Even though Celati, through the voice of the narrator Giovanni, parodies the political creed as an ensemble of firm convictions which does not admit doubts or critical thought, he does not do the same for Giovanni’s anti-establishment fervour, which Celati’s life and works demonstrate he continues to share for his entire career.

Giovanni’s radical positions lead him into trouble during the German journey he has undertaken to see his beloved Antje Schumacher. Already from the start, the narrator presents his own beliefs under the veil of self-irony, dealing with political discourse in a comic manner. Giovanni meets another German girl, Gisela, who is

[108] Nunzia Palmieri, *Cronologia*, p. LXXXII.

not convinced by the protagonist's idea of communism as a more peaceful form of anarchy ('Perplessa lei ad esempio alla mia idea che il vero comunismo sarebbe come un'anarchia più tranquilla, un ordine leggero che non disturba nessuno […]. Come? Comunismo e anarchia non sono due cose diverse?', 582). The same ironic tone emerges when Giovanni talks about his first few jobs. Giovanni argued with his boss and attacked him repeating Marxist slogans. Eventually the boss surprised him, claiming that he is communist too. This undermines Giovanni's political remarks and is a critique of a certain type of dogmatic communism:

> Non mi pagavano, mi davano un tanto e il resto: il mese prossimo! Ma quale mese prossimo? Prima di partire ero andato dal padrone a spiegargli che loro sono degli sfruttatori che sfruttano il lavoro salariato ma un giorno questa maledizione finirà, viva il comunismo!
>
> E il padrone se l'era presa molto, perché ha detto: ma cosa vieni a parlare a me di comunismo, piccola merda, non lo sai che io sono comunista dal 1928? Non lo sapevo, l'ho saputo, soldi niente: il mese prossimo! (590)

Nevertheless, political discourse is everywhere in the novel. Giovanni's genuine political fervour comes out from time to time, for example when he is in the city's financial neighbourhood: 'nel quartiere delle banche mi spuntavano certi umori che distraggono dal cielo e dall'aria, cioè gli umori politici' (599). In this passage, Giovanni describes with self-irony his own attitudes while explaining to Gisela his firm Marxist convinctions. This serves to reveal the fact that his political discourse consists largely of empty slogans. It also presents Giovanni's belief that he has the solution to every political problem as a simplistic attitude:

> Dunque nel quartiere delle banche mi mettevo in posa, facevo tutto il discorso da imbonitore a Gisela, spiegandole cos'è il profitto, il denaro, le merci, il capitale. Ma soprattutto, insistevo, il plusvalore! Lei non aveva mai sentito parlare del plusvalore, però come parola le piaceva.
> Spettacolo per strada di me che spiego tutto il sistema di sfruttamento dell'uomo sull'uomo, poi il resto: la visione globale, storica, critica. In due e due quattro le ho spiegato com'è fatto il mondo: la grande piovra che

> acchiappa e strizza i magrolini, i grassi invece fumano sigari e stanno in panciolle. (599)

The narrator immediately establishes distance from his beliefs and behaviours of the time and from his tendency to impose his thoughts on others: 'Eh, se non piazzavo ogni tanto i miei imbonimenti propagandistici, io non stavo mica bene a quei tempi, sempre per diffondere l'idea, cioè per sentirmi dare ragione' (599). Still, the political fervour reappears when Giovanni discovers that Gisela's father is himself an important German politician. The narrator repeats his thoughts of the time: 'Suo padre, l'ho scoperto adesso, era un pezzo grosso della città […], gran politico tra i politicanti della vergogna umana' (601). Giovanni expresses his idea that politicians are always untrue, and Gisela agrees: 'E lei fin da bambina a vedere per casa gente falsa come sono i politici, s'era fatta qualche idea vera sulla vita pubblica e privata' (601). She is now engaged with a man whom she does not love, who is about to become a politician too, as he is a member of the same party as Gisela's father: 'Anche il fidanzato adesso si metteva in politica, nello stesso partito di suo padre; partito di speculatori fetidi, del cancelliere di stato Adenauer' (601). Celati's characters share their rejection of Christian Democracy in Italy or Germany. Even though this comparison between Italian and German Christian Democracy would be valid only to a certain extent on an historical basis, what is important to notice here is that the reference to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) leader Konrad Adenauer clearly recalls that of De Gasperi that I have pointed out in *La banda*. Celati's books of the 1970s give an image of Christian Democracy as a party of profiteers, and the image of the CDU that emerges from *Lunario* is just part of this critique, a critique which was largely common in Italy at the time of these novels and until the end of that party in 1994.

There are other moments in the story in which political discourse dominates. The first is a series of discussions between Giovanni and Antje's father (Mr Schumacher) on the latter's fanatical idea about a forthcoming terrestrial paradise which will combine socialism and order, as I will illustrate below. The second is a dialogue between Giovanni and a man referred to as the Great Dane ('il gran danese') whom he meets in one of his promenades. Both show Celati's *impegno* in undermining and ridiculing political dogmatism and propaganda. In addition to what Celati does in his previous books, *Lunario* presents an explicit critique of totalitarian power and violent imposition of order, which is in an aspect that derives from Celati's experience of the governmental repression of protesters in the year in which he wrote *Lunario*, 1977, as will be analysed in detail in the part of this chapter dedicated to his teaching in Bologna and his involvement in the protest movements of that year through the group of *Alice disambientata*. This element is particularly clear in the dialogues between Giovanni and Antje's father. Schumacher's simplistic belief that humanity will soon encounter a new age of 'Enlightenment' is humorously attributed to his job as a light bulb salesman: 'il mondo va verso la luce. Questo il punto chiave della sua filosofia, collegato al commercio di lampadine' (550). Schumacher claims that this new age will combine socialism and order. In his view, this is what already happens in the Netherlands at the time of the novel. Schumacher's then reveals his nostalgia for the Nazi ideology as he shows Giovanni some pictures of his youth, when he was a Nazi sergeant in Holland.[109] Schumacher then refers to Hitler as the only real cause of Nazism's failure: 'se non c'era Hitler sarebbe stata tutta un'altra faccenda, un trionfo della Wehrmacht per le vie di Londra, tra gli applausi generali. E poi sarebbe venuta la pace universale dei popoli

[109] It is significant in this sense that Giovanni still calls German police with the name of the Secret State Police during the Nazi period ('Gestapo', 557).

che vanno verso la luce' (637). Schumacher's reinterpretation of history sees a secret anti-communist alliance between America and the Nazis. Antje's father believes that everything collapsed because of Hitler's character ('Colpa tutta di Hitler, che era poco simpatico', 637). Schumacher claims that, despite the Second World War defeat, the world anyway recognized the German people's strength and the new age of peace and 'true socialism' is now coming: 'dunque adesso veniva l'epoca della pace universale lo stesso, il vero socialismo che va verso la luce. Dov'era il vero socialismo? Be' era lì da loro; chiunque ha quello che vuole, basta che lavori' (637). Schumacher conflates very different categories, such as Enlightenment, socialism and nazism, which, in the meaning he attributes to them, have nothing to do with their real historical or ideological dimension. This confusion serves to make evident the fanatical nature of his beliefs. What Schumacher dreams of is an order where crime is not admitted: 'Niente delinquenza, prostituzione, assassinii; vietato sputare per terra e bastonare i vecchietti' (637). Later in the novel, Giovanni explains that Schumacher's theories unite totalitarianism, nationalism and rigid discipline achieved through violence and repression: 'L'avevo sempre lasciato sbizzarrirsi quando mi esponeva le sue teorie: che il nazismo non era poi così male, a parte l'antipatico Hitler; e che l'ideale è sotto le armi, tutti un grande esercito per servire la nazione, l'unica e giusta idea del regno degli eguali: sì, eguali, ma con una disciplina ferrea che non si deve trasgredire mai' (664). The protagonist Giovanni tries anyway to build up a relationship with Antje's father and he panders to Schumacher's eccentric beliefs to please his beloved Antje. Nevertheless, the narrator's comments on Schumacher's ideas are always sarcastic ('Non crediate che esagero, lui sapeva certi segreti che nessuno sa', 637). Giovanni mocks both Schumacher's obsession with light bulbs and Enlightenment and his promise that his light bulbs will give him

a vision of paradise: 'Persona illuminata questo Schumacher […]. Anche poeta, che per esempio faceva le lodi del sole paragonandolo a una lampadina speciale all'uranio. Mistico infine e profeta: se aspetto un po' vedrò le visioni del paradiso con le lampadine, poi gli dirò se ha ragione.' (637). The relationship between Giovanni and Schumacher is always uncertain: it goes from initial mistrust, when Giovanni unexpectedly arrives at Schumacher's house to follow Antje, to some sort of male bonding, at least on Schumacher's side. Their relation culminates when Schumacher shows a crazy terrestrial paradise (a spectacle made with light bulbs). The narrator describes this experience and says that it was the end of their 'friendship', as, on that occasion, Giovanni mentioned that in his view the real Paradise was America: 'col capitano Schumacher, dopo la serata delle visioni con le lampadine, non andavamo più d'accordo, finita la nostra amicizia. Per il fatto che gli ho detto che l'America era il paradiso' (659). The figure of Schumacher embodies the belief in the strength of State control and punishment, which the book radically refuses through the irony of the protagonist Giovanni, showing once more Celati's *impegno* in the critique of violent institutions.[110]

On the contrary, Giovanni seems to get along well with the Great Dane. Both are against the German government, as they think it is still somehow fascist ('Ci capiamo subito, d'accordo su tutto; anche sul fatto che c'era ancora la Gestapo, il nazismo mica abolito come si crede', 657). The political conversation breaks down when the Dane, a pacifist, introduces the gandhian concept of nonviolent 'direct action', which Giovanni confuses with direct violent actions during demonstration:

[110] The rupture between the two is just Giovanni's impression in that precise moment. The protagonist will meet Schumacher later on in the novel, and they will spend a night out together (680). Giovanni's ironic conclusion reflects the ambivalent nature of their relationship: 'Ah, che brava persona quel nazista! In fin dei conti è stato il nazista Schumacher che mi ha portato a vedere la vita, il godere all'estero e il peccato, nella mia giovane età. Gli devo tutto, comprese le visioni del paradiso' (680-681).

> Io parlavo del nostro glorioso partito comunista; che là non potevo mica parlarne di solito, i comunisti fuorilegge […]. Il gran danese parlava ancora più di me […]. Gli racconto prima io: da noi grandi lotte, tutte le lotte politiche più entusiasmanti, guidate dal partito nostro comunista, che quasi stava per scoppiare la rivoluzione.
> Lui era stato a fare molte marce, dove si cammina per la pace nel mondo. Era stato in diversi paesi, anche in Inghilterra. Si trattava di migliaia di persone che si ritrovano in un posto, poi camminano molto perché non vogliono la bomba atomica […]. E mi chiedeva: voi cosa fate come azione diretta?
> Come, azione diretta? Non era azione diretta quello che gli ho spiegato: gli assalti alle camionette della polizia, i paletti di ferro piantati in terra per farle volare in cielo, i portuali con uncini in mano che facevano tacere i caporioni? Come le chiamava, lui queste imprese?
> No, no, azione diretta: fermare questa società che col suo sviluppo disumano poi sviluppa il terrore che scoppi una bomba atomica, se gli salta il ghiribizzo ai capi. Non aspettare che i capi si mettano d'accordo; non credere ai russi né agli americani; chiedere tutti insieme il disarmo universale. (657)

Giovanni's comment on the discussion between him and the Great Dane is very telling. The first person narrator position towards politics is more distant and shows ideological discourse as merely the attempt to convince someone about a truer view of reality: 'Molti anni così, a farsi venire i dubbi sulla politica; e discussioni che non finiscono mai, discussioni per convincere un altro, spiegargli che lui non ha capito niente; quasi sempre perché tu non hai capito cosa lui voleva dire' (658). What really upsets Giovanni already is 'political seriousness', that he sees as something not only to be mocked (as it is in *Guizzardi* and *La banda*), but also as a real danger. When the Great Dane brings Giovanni to his friends' house in order to find him a place to stay, Giovanni tells a joke that touches political issues and irritates the listeners. The two friends of the Great Dane are both professors of sociology and both are pacifist activists, engaged in peace marches. Giovanni mockingly proclaims that the marching will be ineffective as a means of securing peace as he says that even though he is not a pacifist, he has been marching a lot since he has been in Germany. If all his walks count, he claims, there will be peace

for a long time. The hosts do not appreciate Giovanni's joke, and the protagonist's comments once more shows Celati's *impegno* against political dogmatism, and the cause behind the choice of humour as the best way to undermine its false certainties: 'Mai andare contro alla seriosità politica!' (662); 'Serietà da catafalchi politici, ne ho visti tanti così, c'è anche poco da ridere. Questi diventano draghi che sputano fiamme, appena il catafalco rimane un po' scosso; bisogna sempre andarci cauti, non turbare la loro pesantezza, sono molto vendicativi' (668). In another passage, Antje's family invites Giovanni and the 'gran danese' for lunch. Once more, a big discussion on politics involves all the characters. The Great Dane introduces his engagement against the atomic bomb and the forthcoming German party of peace marchers, while Schumacher claims that peace has already been achieved, as the world is moving towards what he calls 'vero socialismo'. For the first time here, Giovanni replies to Schumacher's theories, taking courage from the presence of the Great Dane, and reaffirms his view, halfway between Marxism and Anarchism. The reduction of political discourses to slogans that Celati highlights in his previous books takes a new form in *Lunario*: while criticizing his own youthful beliefs, themselves shaped on a rigid adoption of the Marxist dogma, as the passage below well shows, Celati suggests that Giovanni's political thought, despite its verbosity and naivety, still has the quality of contrasting totalitarian ideas, such as those of Schumacher:

> Quella sera, col danese che mi dava coraggio, gli ho risposto francamente: guardi Herr Schumacher che è tutto sbagliato. E là a spiegargli anch'io la teoria: lo sfruttamento di quelli che hanno solo la loro forza da vendere, compiuto dal capitalismo; forza delle braccia e della testa venduta al padrone, pagata un tanto che serve solo per tirare avanti, ma il resto accaparrato dal capitale. Insomma, tipo sfruttamento di bestie al macello, ha afferrato? […] Circa l'esercito della nazione, poi, guardi che con me lo stato o la nazione non bisogna neanche nominarli. Per me gli stati non esistono, gli eserciti vanno aboliti, io non li riconosco legalmente, ha capito? Distruggiamo lo

> stato borghese! bruciamo tutti i ministri e ministeri della terra! Morte ai padroni sfruttatori di qualunque cittadinanza! viva l'anarchia! (664)

The 'gran danese' himself underlines Giovanni's ideological confusion: 'Mi ha detto, prima di tutto, che non capiva se ero anarchico o comunista, bisogna specificare bene le cose quando si parla. Secondo: non capiva se ero per la pace nel mondo, oppure uno che vuole buttare bombe da sovversivo violento' (665). The same sort of anarcho-marxist theories are in other passages of the book: 'Gli faccio la predica a tutti dentro di me: poveri crucchi sfruttati dal padrone, star qui a ridacchiare come gonzi invece di ribellarsi al governo infame!' (681). Giovanni's outburst creates a gelid atmosphere in the house:

> M'ero lasciato prendere un po' la mano […]. Anche il gran danese rimasto senza parole; il Schumacher, la madre spilungona, la figlia, Jan, tutti muti in congelamento […]. Poi il gran danese fa: è meglio che andiamo. Era meglio sì, ci alziamo e saluti nel gelo (664)

As mentioned above, Giovanni will then reconcile with Schumacher as they will spend a night out drinking together. They will talk about the episode in Schumacher's house and Giovanni's generic 'anarchist' statements are again a confirmation of his true passion for politics and his anti-establishment positions: 'va bene, mein Herr, ma quando uno è ribelle è ribelle, ce l'ha nel sangue, lo capisce questo? io tirerei giù tutto se potessi, gli metterei il fuoco sotto il culo a tutti i ministri e politici della terra!'.[111]

To sum up, I would say that references to politics abound in Celati's novels of the 1970s. This does not imply a realistic representation of specific events in contemporary Italy, but Celati's books of the 1970s show an attitude towards

[111] 680. Another reference to politics is when Giovanni plays Shakespeare in front of two little girls that host him for a period. The protagonist acts Hamlet, reading it under the focus of its political consequences: 'Mentre l'usurpatore Claudio festeggia il suo potere, sguazzando e sgavazzando nel vizio coi suoi cortigiani, tipo i nostri governanti che impestano l'aria di miasmi, puah!' (592)

politics, power and government, that has a lot to do with the time in which they were written and, at the same time, contains a strong critique of institutions and political dogmatism that goes beyond any period. As I have analysed in this part of the thesis, all this happens mainly through Celati's sceptical and sarcastic depiction of leaders, parties and political propaganda. I will subsequently examine how Celati's *impegno* takes new form in the materials for his seminar on *Alice disambientata*, a sort of unification of all the aspects of his political commitment that I have studied so far. Before that, I will briefly analyse another example of the presence of political elements in Celati's works, such as the rewriting of his debut book *Comiche*, as it makes explicit the writer's critique of school and Christian Democracy that was partly hidden in the first version of the novel. Even though this is related to *Comiche*, I have preferred not to respect the chronological order and place its analysis here, rather than at the beginning of the chapter, as this permits us to see its links with Celati's other books of the 1970s and prepare the analysis of *Alice disambientata*.

### 1.5 A Satire of School and the Christian Democratic Government: the Rewriting of *Comiche* 1972-1973

After the publication of *Comiche* in 1971, Celati started immediately to rewrite the book, as its first version did not satisfy the author. The new version of *Comiche*, part of which was published for the first time in 2008,[112] is quite different from its original: the language is plainer, the topics of madness and asylum are less evident, and the protagonist's name is clearly Breviglieri, while in the original there was confusion between more than one name (Pozzan, Otero Aloysio or just 'professore'). *Comiche* revisited becomes a satire of school life: while the critique of school was

[112] Gianni Celati, 'Comiche, versione 1972-1973', in *Riga 28. Gianni Celati*, pp. 65-98. I will quote from the text included in the *Meridiano* and published in 2016: Gianni Celati, 'Comiche (Versione 1972-73)', in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache e racconti*, pp. 129-172.

previously only suggested by language and by characters like the professor protagonist and the three masters that harass him, in the new version it emerges as the basic theme of the novel. In the rewriting of *Comiche*, the satire of school goes together with a political satire, which clearly shows a critique of the Christian Democrat power in charge in Italy from 1946 to 1989. All the characters are imprisoned in a cardboard house by the coast, in order to follow a refresher course for teachers that the Catholic government has organized. The house itself has been built thanks to the contribution of a religious order that has one of the ministers among its members. The religious order thus has a dominant role in the organization of the house:

> La creazione della casa si deve alla buona volontà della direttrice Lavinia con l'aiuto di un nano cattolico che l'ha favorita con le sue relazioni governative. Così essa poté ottenere assegnamenti ministeriali per farne non solo un luogo di villeggiatura balneare ma anche la sede dei corsi d'aggiornamento per professori di ruolo mandati per decreto ministeriale […]. qui domina l'ordine religioso cui è affiliato il nano cattolico che favorì il sorgere della casa. (132-133)

When the narrator describes the aim of the course, the satirical tone becomes clear. At the end of the refresher course, teachers will learn how to inflict pain and punishment at school and in their own family on a daily basis. They will be also ready to disturb their colleagues in many different ways. The development of these particular skills will gain them points in the national teachers' ranking. The satirical tone underlines aspects of the scholastic environment that Celati strongly criticizes, such as careerist professors, absence of solidarity between colleagues and excessive personal ambition:

> Le voci dicono scopo del corso è rinforzare la tempra morale degli insegnanti stimolandoli a infliggere pene della vita scolastica o familiare per esercizio quotidiano. Debbono altresì abusarsi a vicenda con invidie offese calunnie

> malignità che portino detrimento alla reputazione altrui e anche ciò a scopo di esercizio. Questo per carriera ottenendo un punteggio valido nella graduatoria nazionale. (132-133)

As Iacoli has observed, the figure of the dwarf catholic minister calls to mind the DC leader Amintore Fanfani for his role, height and Catholic faith.[113] The dwarf minister first appears in the new novel when he arrives at the house for his annual visit. A cannon shot and flying balloons greet him at his arrival. During his stay, the house organizes important celebrations. Among these, a marathon that will be valid for didactic percentage points in the national teachers ranking and will guarantee a salary increment for the winners. Later in the novel the narrator describes the minister's habit of going on holiday in a fortress dedicated to the 'beato Sante', to whom he is devoted. Immediately after this description of the minister's faith, a guest ('il villeggiante Rois') recalls that the year before the dwarf minister had come along for his annual visit together with another Catholic dwarf and a famous film actress. The narrator describes her large breasts ('dal seno esuberante') and her belonging to the same religious order as the minister ('ed egualmente affiliata al loro ordine religioso'). The implication is that her membership of the order is less relevant to her presence than other, more worldly reasons. The woman, in fact, was a prize for the teachers awarded in the refresher course during summer celebrations. The description of the woman, which shows her body as an object for the winners, adds elements of satire of the scholastic context and serves to ridicule the Catholic power which rules the house where Breviglieri and the others are forced to stay.

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[113] *La dignità di un mondo buffo*, p. 150. Fanfani served as minister, president of the Senate and prime minister several times from 1954 to 1987. Dario Fo mocks Fanfani in one of his plays of the 1970s, see Dario Fo, *Il Fanfani rapito* (Verona: Bertani, 1975). On the relationship between Celati and Dario Fo, see Michele Ronchi Stefanati, 'Il giullare e la bagarre: il comico come modello d'anarchia. Il teatro di Dario Fo e Franca Rame attraverso Gianni Celati'.

All through the novel, mysterious voices command the protagonist Breviglieri to stop writing in his notebook. This happens also in the 1971 version, with the significant difference that in the rewriting of *Comiche* they are described as 'voci ministeriali', thus assuming a political dimension which was not present in the original. Orders come directly from the ministry: 'una voce ministeriale mi ordinava di cancellare subito dal quaderno' (144). The voices seem to control the protagonists in every moment of their life: in a further passage Breviglieri, attracted by the vision of a woman, 'la signorina Frizzi', thinks about his mother and a voice comes to censor those unacceptable thoughts: 'Mentre scrivevo queste parole mi è giunta una voce ministeriale dal soffitto che diceva: Breviglieri non deve pensare cose simili di sua madre bensì parlare di lei come una santa' (150). Celati's irony is evident as he underlines that the voices have a Roman accent, with reference to the ministry headquarters in Rome: 'voce ministeriale con greve accento romanesco' (150). Following governmental rules, the refresher course also has the aim of diffusing rage and bad behaviour among the citizens. The continuous brutality that characterizes the house, with the loss of name (the teachers call each other by the wrong name on purpose), abuses and insults among the guests, leads Breviglieri himself to become crueller, changing names and abusing the others. His behaviour is so horrible that eventually he earns the minister's praise:

> Questo è inteso rientrare nel programma di aggiornamento secondo la norma ministeriale che prescrive d'investire con malanimo tutti i cittadini innocenti. E laddove gli angariati protestino l'uomo statale deve rispondere seccamente: Badalucco citrullo cos'hai da dire? […] Così facendo sono giunto ad abusare 6 villeggianti tra i quali Prilli travisato come Bronzino e Bronzino travisato come Fassò. Ed ebbi a meritarmi un elogio del guardiano Cardogna: Bravo professore si fa così […]. Indi fui portato nel corridoio vicino alle latrine dove è situato il telefono a muro ed ebbi l'onore di ricevere una lode da

> ministro Cacone: Come si chiama lei? Breviglieri. Bravo Breviglieri continui così.[114]

Another character, professor Biagini, reinforces the link between the satirical representation of school and a critique of the Catholic government. On his arrival in the house, Biagini introduces himself and proudly stresses his role of permanent professor with extreme arrogance: 'Io sono professore di ruolo'. This contributes to describe the presence of governmental power which controls and heavily intervenes in the educational system depicted. The comic tone of the text and the dependence on the words of the madmen permit Celati to give a representation of this corrupted system in its absurdity as he presents it as the results of an environment in which madness dominates. The character of Biagini is constantly mocked as he is represented as a pompous windbag who asserts his importance on the basis of his relationship with the Catholic government. This is clear in the passages in which Biagini warns Breviglieri to be respectful towards him and to take off his hat every time he greets him as he will be nominated headmaster soon. Biagini finally boasts about his relations with the ministry and about the possibility of being the minister's assistant when the next governmental alliance comes to power.

Despite being just another inmate of the asylum, Biagini seems to be in the house with the special role of ensuring everyone's loyalty to the next governmental alliance which, according to him, will save the country. Thus, he wants to discover if anarchist ideas are hidden among the professors and in what they write in their notebooks. There is here an equation of DC censorship and totalitarian attempts to control citizen's thought. The obsessions and paranoia that were already present in

[114] 148. The loss of name is a typical characteristic of the concentration camp. At the beginning of the book, the narrator describes teachers led by the 'Guardiano Notturno' to the showers at their arrival in the house (132). The figure of 'Badalucco' will be central in two of Celati's later books, which I will analyse in the second chapter: *Recita dell'Attore Vecchiatto nel teatro di Rio Saliceto* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996) and *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010).

the first version of *Comiche* as part of the description of madness, have in the rewriting an explicit political origin, as they are a consequence of the presence of Catholic power in the house:

> Pare tenga per programma di accorciare il proprio tempo e quello altrui sorvegliando che nessuno dimetta la volontà di sostegno al governo nella prossima alleanza politica per salvare il paese. E si dà il compito di scoprire tendenze anarchiche che allignino tra i professori frugando tra le loro carte quando siano altrove. (139)

In a conversation between the protagonist Breviglieri and the child Luciana it emerges that Biagini is also organizing a trade union in favour of the government. Luciana anticipates the dialogue in *Lunario* between the two little girls and Giovanni, that I have mentioned above: in both books the protagonists talk with children about political issues (here 'argomenti politici', 166), and this serves to weaken the seriousness of the topics they touch. In doing so, complex situations have to be explained in simple terms, creating a kind of false naivety which increases the comic effect of the text. Biagini's project is reminiscent of fascist trade unions, but also the stiff division, in post-war Italy, between the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL, founded in 1944), influenced by the Communist Party (PCI) and the Catholic trade union *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* (CISL, founded in 1950), closer to the Christian Democrats and thus the government. Once again, the connection between the satire of school and political satire is visible here. Celati's irony is evident in the passage below: the ministry intervenes to promote the subservient union over the other, over which it has less influence, and a prize sponsored by the Touring Club, the most important tourist organization in Italy, will be given to the teachers who join the union:

> Avendo incontrata la bambina Luciana sullo stradone mi ero intrattenuto a conversare di argomenti politici. Ed essa si era detta al corrente di segreti governativi che mi confidava con la fiducia che si avrebbe di un vecchio amico di famiglia. In particolare mi confidava che il Biagini parla di fondare un sindacato scolastico più consono allo spirito del tempo e devoto al governo. In questo è appoggiato dal ministro Cacone che invia circolari agli insegnanti stimolandoli ad iscriversi subito al nuovo sindacato onde avere in omaggio un portachiavi e un volume rilegato del Touring Club. (166)

The narrator also hints at a secret revolt against the head of the house, Lavinia Ricci, that some teachers are organizing. The conspiracy apparently wants to lead to a dictatorship of professors, that the text ironically compares to the 1917 Russian Revolution ('Sicché molti prospettano una ribellione al fine di realizzare una segreta dittatura dei maestri con lo stesso motto dei soviet russi: Tutto il potere ai soviet delle magistrali'). In order to take power, the teachers want to take advantage of the sexual obsessions of the head Lavinia Ricci with younger professors. The passage can be read as a comment on the obsessive *perbenismo* and sexual repression of the DC in post-war Italy: 'Secondo il comitato rivoluzionario dei maestri elementari se tali segreti scandalosi fossero diffusi ciò potrebbe favorire una presa del potere come quella di Lenin nel palazzo d'inverno a Pietrogrado nel 1917' (172).

In the 1972-1973 rewriting of *Comiche* the topic of madness serves to introduce an explicit satire of the school as an institution and of Catholic power. All the characteristics of the inmates that were originally linked to madness are now part of an ironic description of school and Christian Democrat government. I believe that the rewriting of *Comiche* has a central role in the study of Celati's *impegno*. On the one hand, it confirms the writer's critique of institutions that can be seen already in the original *Comiche* and anticipates the critique of school that will characterize Celati's later books, from *Guizzardi* to *Lunario*. On the other hand, it makes more

explicit the political references that will be characterize the following works, especially *La banda* and *Lunario*, where the political elements are central to the depiction of the characters, as I have already discussed.

### 1.6 Alice versus Gramsci. Celati as a Professor in 1977 Bologna

> 'Ma cosa è saltato in mente a costoro di mettere Alice al posto di Gramsci? Tagliategli la testa!' *Cara Regina non si arrabbi, provi a vedere le cose non nei termini d'un partito politico ma d'una tribù. La tribù di Alice era in America nel movement californiano, ed era a Bologna nel movimento di marzo. E' una delle tante tribù che voi designate con l'equivoco (e pietistico) termine di 'emarginati'. È una pratica di alleanze circolari tra individui che si identificano molto l'uno nell'altro (si innamorano anche), ma non si identificano più in nessunissimo capo. E soprattutto non si preoccupi, cara Regina: non è una 'alternativa' né una 'sfida al potere', è solo un tentativo di vivere in un altro modo, senza patire grossi sensi di colpa, nel vostro limbo socialdemocratico.*
>
> *Rispettosamente suo*
> Gianni Celati

In the fall of 1976, Celati taught a seminar on minor Victorian literature at the University of Bologna. His lectures focused on the reading of passages from Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking Glass*. That experience was crucial in the development of the 1977 student movement and the course materials produced collectively were gathered in *Alice disambientata: materiali collettivi (su Alice) per un manuale di sopravvivenza*, published by psychiatrist Elvio Fachinelli's *L'erba voglio* in 1978.[115] As I will argue below, the decision to use materials produced collectively indicate Celati's aim of eliminating the traditional *docente-discente* hierarchy. The mock letter that I have quoted above is taken from the book's back cover, where Celati parodies the dialogue between the queen and Alice in Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and refers to the Marxist theorist and politician Antonio Gramsci. As underlined by Andrea Righi,

[115] *Alice disambientata: materiali collettivi (su Alice) per un manuale di sopravvivenza*. Quotations are taken from the 2007 edition.

Celati's claim encapsulates a number of concepts that were familiar to the protest movement in the 1970s and expresses the political meaning of the figure of Alice.[116] The PCI leadership and its use of Gramsci represented the notions of orthodox power and order in the eyes of the members of the 1977 movement, while Alice represented the 'attempt to live in a different way'.[117] One could consider that tendency as elitist or utopian: on the contrary, *Alice* brought together ideas that were shared by a large number of students and promoted lifestyles which openly opposed every kind of authority and stystem of power. Celati's words that I have quoted above summarize a clash between two tendencies within the left-wing, often extra-parliamentary, ideology in Italy at the time: the first was more structured and ready for a revolution which was to follow a specific strategy; the second more anarchist and creative. In Celati's view, in fact, the figure of Alice links the 1977 movement to the 1960s Berkeley protesters, rather than to a political party. Alice united a 'tribe' of so-called social outcasts who did not recognize themselves in any ideologue, leader or party. Righi also recalls Alice's importance in American counterculture already from Arlo Guthrie's anti-war song *Alice's Restaurant Massacree* (1967) and its recurrence in films of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Arthur Penn's *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), Wim Wenders' *Alice in the City* (1973) and Martin Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974). *Alice disambientata* itself mentions in its very first pages many other direct and indirect references to the figure of Alice in a wide range of cultural

[116] Andrea Righi, *Biopolitics and Social Change in Italy: From Gramsci to Pasolini to Negri* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011). Fachinelli was another fundamental figure in this period. See Elvio Fachinelli, *L'erba voglio: pratica non autoritaria nella scuola* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971).

[117] At the end of the 1970s, the Communist party was itself considered as part of the power establishment. The reasons must be found in the 'democratic alliance' between the PCI and Christian Democracy ('compromesso storico') and in the participation of the PCI in the division of media among the three main parties ('lottizzazione'), particularly evident for the three channels of public television: Rai 1 was controlled by Christian Democracy, Rai 2 by the Socialist Party, and Rai 3 by the Communist Party (1958-1975). On the transformations of the PCI see Giuseppe Chiarante, *Con Togliatti e con Berlinguer. Dal tramonto del centrismo al compromesso storico* (Rome: Carocci, 2007). On 'lottizzazione' see Franco Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2001).

products, from popular music to cinema and philosophy: The Beatles' *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* and the movie *Yellow Submarine*, Roman Polanski's *What?*, Louis Malle's *Black Moon*, Grace Slick's and Jefferson Airplane's song *White Rabbit*, Gilles Deleuze's *Logique du sens*, Genesis' *Nursery Crime*. Alice is also the name of the radio station considered the voice of the 1977 movement (*Radio Alice*), in which Celati and some of his students were involved.[118]

*Alice disambientata* is a truly collective work, as it gathers together different kinds of student materials from Celati's course, such as notes, loose papers, comments, recordings. Being a multivocal text that challenges the standard, univocal production of knowledge and undermines the authority of the author, perspectives constantly change and *Alice disambientata* contains voices and ideas that sometimes contradict each other. Nevertheless, this text represents the *summa* of Celati's theoretical approach. As Marco Belpoliti has argued, *Alice disambientata* includes many considerations that were the basis of his critical and fictional work of the 1970s.[119]

At the same time, it paves the way for further explorations that will characterize his prose of the 1980s. I would add that this is true also from a political perspective, as the elements that we have been underlining so far in this chapter are all present in *Alice* and, indeed, here, their political value emerges even more clearly.

The opening part of the book illustrates the rationale behind the choice of Alice and *nonsense literature* as main topics of the seminar. First of all, Alice is a

[118] Some of the founders of *Radio Alice* were also Celati's students (Stefano Saviotti, Luciano Cappelli). Celati himself made a series of broadcasts on *Radio Alice*, with the title 'Alice e la repressione', as we read in a letter to Davico Bonino: 'Credo proprio che questo corso su Alice diventerà un libro su Alice e la repressione: comincio adesso delle trasmissioni a Radio Alice con questo titolo' (October 1977). On *Radio Alice* see *Alice è il diavolo – Storia di una radio sovversiva*, ed. by Franco Bifo Berardi (Milan: Shake, 2007) e *Bologna 1977 – fatti nostri*, ed. by Enrico Palandri, Claudio Piersanti, Carlo Rovelli, Maurizio Torrealta, et al. (Rimini: Nda press, 2007).
[119] Marco Belpoliti, *Settanta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001).

figure of displacement and laterality: exactly like the students in Bologna who live far from home (*fuorisede*), Carroll's Alice is displaced and always on the move. Furthermore, she is alternative (the book says 'lateral') to the institutions of her time (the Victorian age) and permitted the students to establish many links with Italy in 1977. The group of students who attend Celati's lessons (called A/DAMS group) refuse the thesis of existing criticism on Carroll, which wanted somehow to 're-position' Alice, explaining the character with ready-made theoretical frameworks which, in the student's view, limited the possibilities of Alice of being a 'figura da seguire' towards the unknown, rather than just a symbol of something known. The first few pages of *Alice disambientata*, for example, host a very strong refusal of the psychoanalytic reading of Alice that gives centrality to phallic symbolism.[120] On the contrary, the group reflects on Alice as a refusal of dominant symbolism: 'Alice è un modo di essere disambientati, nel gioco delle parti stabilito dal simbolismo dominante' (14). The second reason behind the choice of the seminar's topic has to do with *nonsense* literature: the group claims that the label of *nonsense* has its origins in the historical passage from children's literature, orally transmitted, to its written form, literature for children. Children's literature included storytelling and nursery rhymes, each of them with its own function, that is linked to the learning process. When it comes to transferring those oral stories to printed editions, they lose their specificity, and become *nonsense*: 'ciò che per secoli ha avuto un luogo preciso di circolazione e recitazione, e un senso secondo la circostanza in cui veniva recitato,

[120] *Alice disambientata* often includes feminist voices. See the paragraph 'Obiezione delle femministe al problema dell'innamoramento' (*Alice disambientata*, p. 123). In another passage, feminists criticize Carroll's Alice as an alternative to phallic symbolism and rather see in it a confirmation of patriarchal society (p. 102: 'Alice non è per noi un'alternativa'). On the link between Alice and the debate within feminism on the representation of women, see Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

appena fissato sulla pagina diventa nonsenso, insensatezza verbale'.[121] On the contrary, the Victorian age sees the birth of a literature for children, linked to the need for social control, discipline and obedience. *Nonsense* literature (namely the written version of children's literature) is thus seen as a subversive form of writing. *Alice disambientata* thus argues that nonsense literature is in contrast to literature for children:

> La letteratura per l'infanzia serviva a tutto questo, come si vede dalle poesiole didattiche. Sono libri per bambini buoni, contro i bambini anarchici e incontrollabili […]. Sul piano sociale le cose stanno così: necessità di trasmettere ai figli modelli culturali dominanti (come quelli della classe media vittoriana), dissimulando questa imposizione con l'affetto e la protezione del fanciullo (umanitarismo vittoriano). (37)

References and direct quotations of texts like Foucault's *Surveiller et punir* (1975) and Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903) reinforce the connection between *Alice disambientata* and Celati's books of the 1970s. The reading of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipe* (1972) is also clearly behind all these considerations. I have demonstrated earlier in this chapter how these works were fundamental background to Celati's critique of the asylum and other institutions. Through *Alice disambientata*, a critique of the Victorian Age becomes a metaphor for a critique of power in contemporary Italy. The group underlines the violent aspects and the need for control of society and institutions, often using the same texts Celati refers to in his works of the 1970s. As an example, I will mention that *Alice disambientata* uses Schreber's *memoirs* in order to point out the violent methods of social control during the Victorian Age: Schreber describes his father's cruelty in using brutal methods in order to obtain submission and obedience from his son, and

[121] 43. The thesis on orality was already present in Celati's essay 'Su Beckett,l'interpolazione e il gag' (*Finzioni occidentali*, p. 165) and needs to be seen behind these considerations. They also anticipate the role of oral narrative in books like *Narratori delle pianure* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1985) and Goffman's scholarships on conversations.

these lead him to madness. Celati's group makes a connection between those systems and contemporary education, which, in the students' view, has the same aim of domesticating children as Schreber's methods. The group of *Alice* refers to those methods using the term 'theatre of punishment' and warns about the literal meaning of this definition. During the Victorian age, specific machines were used to prevent children's behaviours deemed inappropriate, such as masturbation. There is thus a clear connection between these forms of reasoning and the representation of school, madness and places of constraint in Celati's books that I have analysed in this chapter, from *Comiche* onwards:

> I mille teatri della punizione sono spesso forniti di macchinette da applicare al corpo del bambino. Macchinette per rendere il suo corpo dritto sempre sorvegliato, sano e ambientato nel mondo adulto delle macchine. In epoca vittoriana circolavano molte macchinette del genere: macchine da applicare al bambino quando va a letto perché non si masturbi, macchine perché stia dritto quando scrive etc. Schreber padre ne inventava di tutti i generi, il genialoide: con cinghie, tiranti, stecche, scapolari […]. Quest'arte si chiamava ortopedia […]. L'arte di raddrizzare cioè addomesticare i bambini, come dice Michel Foucault in *Sorvegliare e punire*.[122]

*Alice* states that these tendencies were at the basis of literature for children, especially 'cautionary tales': 'racconti d'avvertimento […], fiabe per inculcare il timore d'ogni possibile gesto del corpo non prestabilito da un programma' (38). Family and school thus continue the work of 'cautionary tales', giving children frightening orders about how to behave. Exactly as in *Comiche* and *La banda dei sospiri*, institutions are presented as means of control and punishment: 'La scuola.

[122] 37. The use of theatre of punishment ('teatri della punizione') recalls Artaud's theatre of crudelty, a definition that the group of *Alice disambientata* also uses: 'Tutti i versi nonsensical di Edward Lear sono piccoli teatri della crudeltà' (35). This does not mean that, for the group, Lear is an accomplice rather than a subversive: *Alice disambientata* only observes that Lear's seemingly playful poems also contain a representation of the exploitation of children and of the violent educational methods during the Victorian Age. The originality of this contibution is still evident today, as the critical attitude towards Lear mainly focuses on his playfulness, see *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, ed. by James Williams and Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Sistema per ambientare ciascuno al suo posto, evitare la distribuzione per gruppi di spaesati, per bande sregolate'. The writers of *Alice* claim that, following the radical transformations of society during the Victorian age, the function of learning is no longer linked to the act of play. From that moment on, games and learning will be separated. *Nonsense* originates from the relegation of games to a useless and meaningless part of life, while learning is identified only with school. While cautionary tales warn of the danger of free play and free movements, nonsense literature represents a harmless pastime. Literature for children has thus a preliminary role together with school and family, in the imposition of socially accepted behaviours on children, through punishment and fear. On the other side, what remains is nonsense literature, the remnant of previous oral tales and nursery rhymes.

The chapter 'Alice e le riforme' shows the link between politics and the choice of nonsense literature as main topic of the course. The Victorian age coincides with the development of industries that exploit child labour. According to the writers of *Alice disambientata*, the history of children is thus comparable to the history of the exploited classes. In stating the comparison, they refer to Marx's *Capital*: 'Così la storia del bambino diventa identica a quella delle classi sfruttate, e tutto questo è riassunto e spiegato nel primo volume del *Capitale* di Marx' (56). Children are thus a workforce, and have the same destiny of exploitation as the working class: 'È ormai, come l'operaio, soltanto forza-lavoro da vendere per campare. Questo è il regime del progresso, dove la forza-lavoro umana è valutata non di più delle altre due componenti necessarie all'industria tessile: la lana delle pecore e i corsi d'acqua per far andare le macchine' (57). Despite being somewhat anachronistic idea of the industrial revolution which was, in this phase, depending on

the development of steam power, it nevertheless shows well the intention of the *Alice* group of seeing nonsense literature in its political shades.

Between 1850 and 1870 new reforms arise from the agreement between industrialists and trades unions, apparently with the aim of improving workers' conditions. This marks, according to the *Alice* group, the beginning of a social-democracy, namely the diffusion of the idea that capitalism could be improved from within, through reforms:

> La società socialdemocratica comincia a funzionare nel migliore dei modi e a proclamare che questo è il migliore dei mondi. È un mondo dove tutti i mali sono risolvibili con le riforme. Le classi medie che si identificano con la Regina non considerano più pericolose le masse proletarie. C'è un'aristocrazia operaia che ha accettato il capitalismo come situazione naturale; e ci sono frange di disoccupati, sottooccupati, marginali d'ogni tipo, masse di gente sradicata, ubriacata dalle macchine, dal disadattamento alla città, al lavoro, all'organizzazione […]. È il miracolo: i sogni rivoluzionari di farla finita con i padroni e l'idea del progresso sociale non sono più la stessa cosa! Dice Hobsbawm: la scoperta che il capitalismo non era una catastrofe temporanea ma un sistema con possibilità di miglioramento futuro ha alterato tutti gli obiettivi della lotta sociale. Tattica dei sindacati, che in molti casi sfruttano le leggi dell'economia politica per diminuire la domanda di forza-lavoro e aumentare il salario dei loro membri. L'economia politica viene prima di tutto. (50)

Literature with children protagonists (e.g. Wordsworth and Dickens) grows inside this framework. The group thus sees the character of the Queen in Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) as the voice of the law in an era of social-democracy:

> La Regina che ripete 'Tagliatele la testa' e urla che il verdetto deve precedere la legge (come in Kafka) è una figura della legge socialdemocratica. È una legge che non deve più badare a contenere i moti rivoluzionari di massa, ma a tenere sotto sorveglianza chi lascia partire la testa per conto suo. È una legge per schizofrenizzare tutti, diffondere colpa e timore, imporre una morale di classe più totalitaria di quella che aveva contrastato i moti operai a partire dal Settecento. (50)

From now on, the only opposition will come from 'chi lascia partire la testa per conto suo': madmen, outcasts, the excluded, odd and marginalized people. In brief, those who do not follow 'common sense' and imposed rules. Strange people like Carroll himself (who was unmarried in a society in which marriage had fundamental importance) and children like Alice have, in fact, the same destiny: 'Tra il bambino espropriato della sua cultura e il maschio adulto 'bizzarro' (non adattato alla condizione media matrimoniale) può avvenire uno scambio. Sono due laterali a eguale titolo, e possono giocare tra di loro, immaginando avvenimenti strani e laterali'. The 'bizzarri' oppose society by their very existence. For this reason, they are subjected to cruelty by the rest of society. Edward Lear was one of them, he lived alone, like Carroll, outside marriage and his *Book of Nonsense* is all about the social repression of the 'odd' that normal people and institutions perpetrate against them: 'Qual è il denominatore comune dei *limericks* e delle vignette del *Book of Nonsense*? La crudeltà che i bizzarri subiscono da altri; oppure l'autopunizione che i bizzarri si infliggono'. For the first time in the book, the authors use the Artaudian expression of 'theatre of of cruelty' to refer directly to the institution of the family:

> Ogni nome di luogo è il nome d'uno spaesamento: ma sotto il nome del luogo c'è un altro luogo che è il teatro della crudeltà familiare. Centro latente di questa geografia è la famiglia, la condizione matrimoniale media. A lato della famiglia circolano i bizzarri solitari come Lear. Ma c'è un'azione e reazione della famiglia sui bizzarri, anche a distanza, dentro e fuori la famiglia […]. Tutto questo ricorda le punizioni in famiglia. Colpa e punizione, castrazione, dita tagliate, persone annientate, respinte. (60)

A comparison with the representation of the family in *Guizzardi*, *La banda* and *Lunario* immediately comes to mind. Odd, displaced people can suffer violence from their family, like Garibaldi in *La banda*, but they can also self-inflict punishment, like Danci in *Guizzardi*. The perpetration of violence over odd people

and self-punishment and paranoia are, therefore, the two sides of that cruelty: 'È un teatro della crudeltà; ma d'una crudeltà non solo come violenza fisica del persecutore sul perseguitato, anche come innescamento di paranoie'. Family is both the place of physical violence and the origin of paranoia: 'Subire la crudeltà dei persecutori e subire l'innescamento di fissazioni maniacali su se stessi, sono i due modi che definiscono il teatro della crudeltà familiare'. The discourse on Lear's *Book of Nonsense* concentrates elements that I have already pointed to as the theoretical background for Celati's first books and once again explains the political dimension of the comic narration on paranoia and self-violence that Celati uses already from *Comiche*:

> In tutti i *limericks* di Lear c'è una divisione precisa tra 'They', cioè quelli che esercitano un controllo sulla lateralità con azioni punitive, e i bizzarri che patiscono pene o punizioni strambe […]. Scatenamenti maniacali, conflitti isterici, persecuzioni paranoiche e autopunizioni depressive. Di questo si ride. (61)

I would stress that the quotation ends by saying that 'this is the object of our laughter' ('di questo si ride') as it confirms the political dimension of Celati's use of comic itself. I have analysed above that the idea of recreating the bagarre of slapstick films in Celati's books of the 1970s, had the aim of destroying all certainties, hierarchies and institutions. *Alice disambientata* quotes passages and illustrations from Lear's book that are extremely similar to the scenes of slapstick movies, and the authors underline exactly that aspect, namely the presence of scenes of bagarre: 'In alcune vignette il protagonista viene preso a botte e cacciato dalla città in cui vive; o impastato a mo' di panettone e messo dentro a un forno' (61). In a book like *Alice disambientata*, the political dimension of this use of slapstick appears even more evident than before, given the role that comic and body gestures have had in

the 1977 movement's opposition to power. The political use of the comic emerges also in the discourse on laterality that involves Carroll and Lear: another political value of Celati's interest in the comical relies on the slapstick preference for marginal characters who suffer violence from the institutions of society, both in a direct and indirect manner. This is stated in *Alice disambientata*, where the book makes explicit the connection between different institutions, such as the family and the asylum, for their oppressive action. Commenting another of Lear's limericks, the book states: 'Qui il teatro della crudeltà familiare rimanda direttamente al teatro della crudeltà manicomiale'. What follows is a list of actions taken from the characters of *Book of Nonsense*, very similar to the ones that I have examined in *Comiche*: 'lapsus, atti mancati, raptus, automutilazioni per autoaggressività depressiva' (62). The *Book of Nonsense* is thus a representation of cruelty over people who are isolated and displaced, rather than a series of fine *divertissements* without sense:

> Chi non ha ancora capito che questo è un teatro della crudeltà e non un teatrino di delicatezze senza senso, crede che il nonsenso sia un'uscita dalla realtà. Invece le poesiole di Lear rimettono sempre in gioco il problema delle intensità del corpo, tutto l'isterismo della realtà e della separatezza. Rispetto a tutto ciò la civile tolleranza del bizzarro è una mossa strategica per non aver niente a che fare con pazzie del genere.[123]

As briefly mentioned above, Deleuze and Guattari's thesis on minor literature had strong influence on all these considerations. Deleuze and Guattari conceived minor literature as the literature of a minority within a major language. This immediately recalls the idea of marginality behind the Alice group, whose members considered themselves a minority at the margins of the social-democratic society that they strongly opposed, perfectly conscious that they were a minority, and the

[123] 63. The same is true for Carroll's Alice, as all the characters tend to correct her, exactly like *Comiche*: 'Correzione infinita dei suoi discorsi da parte di tutti, che innesca automatismi di risposta in forma di sbagli e stranezze' (65).

seminar itself, which considered and examined examples of minor literature. References to *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* run throughout the *Alice disambientata*, especially for the role of animals in Carroll's *Alice* and Lear's *Book of Nonsense*. Animalization itself has a political role, in opposition to dominant discourse: 'Divenire animale è una disambientazione assoluta […]. Gli animali kafkiani, come quelli di Lear, non sono mitici […], sono zone di intensità liberate che permettono di smontare i vari concatenamenti della rappresentazione sociale'.[124]

For the group of *Alice disambientata*, minor literature is thus always radically political, even though this does not necessarily correspond to any sort of belief in politics: 'La letteratura minore è sempre politica, senza volerlo, sempre radicalmente politica senza far politica e senza credere alla politica' (89). The treatment of politics in Celati's novels of the 1970s has exactly these characteristics. On the one hand, they ridicule politics and politicians, showing little trust in them. On the other hand, Celati's works are always radically political without believing in politics. Their political dimension relies on the critique of all institutions of power, very much linked to the broad debate on these topics in the 1960s and 1970s.

In March 1977 some events threatened and undermined the student movement: first the student and far left militant Francesco Lorusso was shot by police during a demonstration on 11 March. The day after, the police destroyed the equipment of *Radio Alice*, closing it down. Finally, the then interior Minister Francesco Cossiga sent armoured cars into university area to quell the riots. Following these events the movement occupied the University in protest. Lectures were suspended, but Celati decided to continue his course, following a negotiation with authorities and after having signed papers in which he took responsability for

[124] 64. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1975). See also the book's critique of Deleuze and Guattari (*Alice disambientata*, 89).

possible damage. In September 1977 a three-day long 'conference against repression' was held in Bologna. Scholars consider the conference a turning point in the history of the movement and in the history of Italy itself. The conference marked the end of the movement and the shift towards the so-called 'anni di piombo', when the 1977 cultural and somehow joyful idea of revolution was superseded by a period of terrorism, homicides, kidnappings and bomb attacks.[125] Celati was among the *Cineamatori militanti* who documented the conference, filming the more than seventy thousand students who peacefully invaded the city of Bologna. Celati himself appears in the video, seated on a van that has on the side the name 'Harpo's Bazaar', significantly the same title of his book on the comic. The A/Dams group wrote the last chapter of *Alice disambientata* immediately after the conference. It thus describes the discrepancies that will lead to the end of the movement. The 'tribù in movimento' who met in Bologna are different and sometimes incompatible, even though they share one common enemy. All the groups are fighting the State and its use of violence to calm down the movement, as well as the plan of reforms that has the aim of keeping everything the same:

> Dal convegno di Bologna si è visto che i luoghi di lotta e di movimento sono tanti e differenziati […]. Tutte queste teste che partono hanno un denominatore comune nel riconoscimento dell'avversario. Un unico avversario per tutte le tribù: la forma poliziesca dello Stato; il piano riformistico per omogeneizzare il consenso e chiudere le falle che si aprono dappertutto; i valori stessi dello Stato come valori egemonici su cui si fonda il consenso. Al di là di questo comun denominatore, nessuna linea predicabile. (128)

The depiction of the disagreements inside the movement in the conclusion of *Alice disambientata* is also representative of the differences between the political

[125] 'Anni di piombo' is the expression used to describe violence in 1970s Italy, as 'piombo' (lead, fire) is a metaphor for fire arms. Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics,* chapter 10, 348-405.

value of Celati's works and other political approaches. The movement is divided between 'lateralità' and 'egemonia'. Some groups or 'tribes' want to impose their ideas on the entire movement, and create a counter-hegemony to fight the State hegemony: 'Ci sono tribù portatrici d'un discorso che vuole essere egemonico, cioè teoria generale e generalizzata a tutte le tribù' (128). Some others, like the group gathered around Celati's seminar, want to follow other paths, without giving instructions to the rest. The contrast between Alice and Gramsci (i.e.: a hegemonic idea and use of his thought among left-wing activists, politicians and intellectuals in 1970s Italy) is a metaphor of those two different ways of thinking about revolution:

> Un volantino diffuso in apertura del convegno dal Partito Comunista d'Italia (marxista-leninista) comincia con una citazione da Gramsci: 'Chi domina, chi imprime alla storia il ritmo del progresso, chi determina l'avanzata sicura e inesorabile della civiltà comunista, non sono i ragazzacci, non è il *Lumpenproletariat*, non sono i *bohémiens*, i dilettanti, i romantici capelluti e frenetici; ma sono le masse profonde degli operai di classe, i ferrei battaglioni del proletariato consapevole e disciplinato'. (129)

On the one hand, the underclass, *bohémiens*, hippies, on the other side the discipline of the working class, whose strength and discipline will lead to the victory of the communist idea. According to the latter, the first will not make history, only the working class can lead to revolution:

> Da una parte le tribù di capelluti, *bohémiens*, sottoproletari e ragazzacci; dall'altra i ferrei battaglioni del proletariato. La linea: l'avanzata sicura e inesorabile della classe. Metafora centrale: quella del ferro, del duro, del compatto e del disciplinato; contro le figure di dissociati, di laterali, di bizzarri e anarchici. È implicito che le tribù non fanno storia, fa storia solo la classe con la C maiuscola. La quale è destinata a eliminare le diverse tribù. (129)

Not only *Alice disambientata*, but Celati's entire works clearly belong to the first group. As demonstrated above, the protagonists of Celati's books are often

'dissociati, laterali, bizzarri, anarchici'. Through the seminar on Carroll's Alice and nonsense, it is possible to fully understand how political this choice is:

> Finirla con le sfide al potere. Il potere si nutre delle sfide che gli vengono lanciate […]. La norma affrontata di petto e in corpo a corpo, la norma violata simbolicamente, non fa che affermare la presenza ineluttabile della legge, diffonde sensi di colpa […]. È quel tempo dedicato alla legge, che viene sottratto alle trasformazioni della vita. Lateralità rispetto alle istituzioni, alle diverse egemonie, ai simbolismi dominanti; lateralità d'una tribù rispetto all'altra, d'una teoria di campo rispetto all'altra. (128)

The group gathered around *Alice disambientata* thus proposed itself as an attempt to live in another manner, following different patterns, outside the values that power superimposes and outside any kind of hegemony. The group did not have among its aims an attempt to substitute the actual government and politicians with other people and ideas. It was rather an ongoing trasformation of life and 'un manuale di sopravvivenza', in order to be alternative to the values that socialdemocracy and capitalism superimpose. *Alice disambientata* was a radical critique of all institutions of power that are based on punishment and control, a truly political challenge to every political certainty.

### 1.7 The Breakdown with Einaudi: A Political Contrast?

At the end of the 1970s, Celati interrupted his long-standing relationship with the Einaudi publishing house. As I have shown, Celati had been working for Einaudi as author, translator and advisor since 1966. His correspondence with the Einaudi editors was evidence of a wide exchange of ideas between him and some of the major protagonists of Italian cultural context at the time.[126]

[126] See Michele Ronchi Stefanati, ''Intonare lo strumento di un altro italiano'. Il carteggio tra Gianni Celati e l'Einaudi (1966-1979)'.

*Lunario del Paradiso* (1978) was to be Celati's last novel published by Einaudi. When, after a long narrative silence, Celati made his return to publish a book of fiction, *Narratori delle pianure*, in 1985, he chose another publishing house, Feltrinelli.[127]

Throughout the period in which Celati published with Einaudi, tensions existed between him and the Turinese publishing house. Celati did not agree with the Einaudi policies and accused his publisher of using his work only as testimony to a different and marginal idea of literature, while confirming a line of publication that was the opposite: 'I miei pareri non sono i vostri', as Celati wrote in a letter of the autumn of 1976. According to Celati, their perspective was totally different and Celati repeatedly asked the editors why they continued to ask for his advice. The reference to established authors of Einaudi, such as Elsa Morante and Leonardo Sciascia showed Celati's attempt to encourage the publication of writings that were based on what he calls 'un altro italiano', meaning the use of linguistic experimentation rather than standard Italian. Celati's harsh criticism was directed also toward Vincenzo Consolo's poetic prose, which was actually very distant from standard Italian, but still to be included, in Celati's view, among the writers who were only able to use the 'italiano del liceo'. The three writers quoted here are very

[127] Gianni Celati, *Narratori delle pianure* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1985). In the 1980s, Celati will publish two more translations with Einaudi, but the agreement and contract date back to 1978: Roland Barthes, *Barthes di Roland Barthes* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980) and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Guignol's band* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982). The books that Celati publishes with Einaudi after the 1970s separation, such as the translations of London's *Call of the Wild* and Joyce's *Ulysses* and a rewriting of Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*, do not mean a return to a collaboration comparable to that of the 1970s between Celati and the publishing house. See Jack London, *Il richiamo della foresta* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), Gianni Celati, *L'Orlando innamorato raccontato in prosa* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994) and James Joyce, *Ulisse* (Turin: Einaudi, 2013). It is also important to mention that at the beginning of the 1980s, corresponding with changes in the editorial market, Einaudi changed its policy, choosing books that were easier to sell. This process of loss of identity culminated in an economic crisis in 1983. See Gian Carlo Ferretti, *Storia dell'editoria letteraria in Italia 1945-2003* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), pp. 371-480 and Ernesto Ferrero, *I migliori anni della nostra vita* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2009).

different and their works display very different forms of 'impegno', in some cases in the sense that I have analysed with regard to Celati (i.e. through language). A full discussion on the three kinds of commitment of the mentioned writers is beyond the scope of this thesis, especially because what Celati focuses on here is the linguistic distance from them, rather than their different forms of commitment. Celati's emphasis on this topic nevertheless shows the importance that the author gives to linguistic choices, and its relevance for comical writing, two elements that, as shown, are fundamental for his idea of literature and for his *impegno*. Celati's irritated tone expresses his disappointment and indicates that the deterioration of the relationship with Einaudi was already at an advanced stage:

> I miei pareri non sono i vostri, perché se ben capisco i vostri si muovono su una linea Morante-Consolo-Sciascia e robe simili, che a me fanno profondamente ripugnanza. Lì altroché suoni sporchi, c'è un casino dilettantistico risolto solo dalla demagogia e dal perbenismo di fondo di sta gente. Gentaglia che non gliene frega niente né di divertire i mortali né tantomeno di venire giù senza difese sulla pagina. Gente d'altri tempi con cintura e bretelle, Liceali che sanno parlare solo l'italiano del liceo, e non sanno neanche come si fa a intonare lo strumento di un altro italiano. Vedo che le vostre scelte negli ultimi tempi, anche quelle femminili (dalla Jarre alla Loy alla Ferri) privilegiano questo artigianato scadentissimo ma vendibile con un po' di propaganda demagogica, e la ricerca più accurata di altri suoni viene sistematicamente messa in un angolo.[128]

I argue that the moment that marked the definitive rupture with the publishing house was when Celati proposed – and Einaudi rejected – a collection of essays on literature and colonialism, *Letteratura, esotismo, colonialismo*, edited by three colleagues of Celati at the University of Bologna in 1977: Anita Licari (Celati's wife at the time), Roberta Maccagnani and Lina Zecchi.[129] Einaudi refused

[128] Letter from Gianni Celati to Guido Davico Bonino, not dated but to be considered as written in autumn 1976.

[129] The essay was published by another publishing house in 1978, significantly the same year as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), which addresses the same topic. Said's study of Western attitudes towards the East, which considers *Orientalism* as a powerful

the book following Calvino's highly critical remarks, as it is possible to understand from Celati's reply: 'L'osservazione di Italo che il primo saggio è allo stato di appunti per un seminario universitario mi sembra una impressione a vanvera'.[130] Celati wrote a furious eight-page long letter to Davico, Fossati and Calvino where he praised the book and strongly criticizes Calvino's feedback. In his letter, Celati stated that the importance of the book stood in the authors' attempt to use literary criticism in order to go beyond literature, undermining its institutions. Celati repeats here a constant principle of his idea of literature, which echoes the *Alì Babà* manifesto and will be present in his future work, as I will demonstrate in Chapter two. Furthermore, Celati's statements make it evident that the attempt to go beyond literature is not only a stylistic issue, but rather an ideological and political one. Celati's involvement in the book, even if he apparently wrote only the introduction, is clear in the use of the first person. Celati contributed to *Letteratura, esotismo, colonialismo* in a deeper way, discussing and sharing its key ideas with the three authors:

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European ideological creation, has deeply influenced literary and cultural criticism, and it is considered the foundational text of post-colonial studies. On Said, see *Edward Said and Critical Decolonization*, ed. by Ferial Jabouri Ghazoul (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007). *Letteratura, esotismo, colonialismo* criticizes the way the Western world deals with the 'Otherness' through exoticism by considering it a reflection of European imperialism and arguing that literature has a key role in this process: 'La burocrazia amministra i territori a distanza attraverso la scrittura. La letteratura non è che un sotto-genere dell'attività burocratica' (p. 24). The back cover underlines all these aspects and shows how this collection of essays could be related to Said's *Orientalism*, as the two books tackle the same issues from a very similar perpsective: 'Attraverso l'analisi di testi letterari che parlano di zone esotiche, vengono qui portate alla luce verie tendenze, conscie e inconscie, del colonialismo'. The link with politics emerges explicitly, once more showing how Celati has always in mind the political consequences of the work of a writer: 'Su questo terreno non è possibile disgiungere l'analisi letteraria da quella politica, perché l'esotismo è parte integrante non solo dell'ideologia colonialista, ma della tradizione letteraria europea e della tradizione etnologica. Così che tutto forma un sistema dove letteratura, esotismo e colonialismo intrecciano variamente le loro tendenze, nell'espansione egemonica del sistema politico e culturale europeo'. See *Letteratura, esotismo, colonialismo*, ed. by Anita Licari, Roberta Maccagnani and Lina Zecchi (Bologna: Cappelli, 1978).

[130] Letter from Gianni Celati to Guido Davico Bonino, Paolo Fossati and Italo Calvino, not dated but to be considered from 1977, p. 1.

> La questione che ci siamo posti in questo lavoro è: come orientare il lavoro della critica letteraria verso qualcosa che non sia più la conferma e la santificazione dell'istituto letterario, ma la sua demolizione, smembramento come istituzione ideologica. Nessuno di noi aveva più voglia di stare a fare esercizi esegetici come puro sfoggio di metodo e di bravura accademica, perché ormai avevamo capito tutti che i cosiddetti metodi della critica letteraria sono solo il supporto del perbenismo e del carrierismo universitario […]. Qui si trattava di dimostrare come nessuna analisi letteraria può sottrarsi alla discussione direttamente politica: la Grande letteratura francese rappresentata da Gide sta al fondo della pratica di esportazione imperialistica della lingua francese.[131]

By stressing the point that the book had the aim of subverting the ideological nature of the literary institutions and making reference to imperialism, Celati stated that 'nessuna analisi letteraria può sottrarsi dalla discussione direttamente politica'.

Celati accused his publishing house of hiding behind the feedback of Calvino in order to reject what is against their editorial policy, without any true interest in the thesis of the book itself. Celati thus addressed the main point: the incompatibility between his ideas and the editorial policy of the publishing house. In the same letter, Celati defined his works as necessarily minoritarian, as it is a constant challenge to the canon, and directly asked the editors if there was still space for that inside Einaudi. The coherence with the discourses on marginality in *Alice disambientata* seems clear:

> Ora mi sembra per tutti una posizione insostenibile, e dunque vengo a farvi la domanda di fondo: devo continuare a proporvi cose che sono diverse rispetto ai vostri punti di vista, oppure devo rivolgermi ad altre case editrici? Vorrei che la cosa mi fosse detta con chiarezza, senza ricatti o mezzi toni. Per una questione di fondo: chez vous c'è posto per la diversità, per i prodotti non ufficialmente riconosciuti, per le posizioni non etichettate, e insomma per quella marginalità in cui vivo e lavoro, che per forza è sempre un attacco alle

[131] 1. The reference to French literature is just one example, that Celati mentions as this is the main case study of the book, but the authors' theses on the imperialistic nature of literature could be easily extended to other languages. On Celati's involvement in the book, see the *Premessa*: 'Gianni Celati si è assunto il compito di introdurre i tre saggi nati dal lavoro comune; tiene a precisare che lo fa non per delega né in rappresentanza delle opinioni del gruppo, ma per suo interesse a riprendere certi temi di discussione e ricavarne linee di orientamento che vadano al di là dell'argomento trattato' (*Letteratura, esotismo, colonialismo*, p. 5).

> posizioni maggioritarie, alla letteratura maggiore etc.? C'è posto per questo?[132]

The separation from Einaudi had its origins in a profound diversity of theoretical and ideological approach, which was also the consequence of a generational gap between Celati and the Einaudi editors. In order to demonstate this, it is necessary to step back to 1972, when Celati proposed for publication the first volume of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Œdipe*. While proposing the translation and publication of the book, Celati expressed his enthusiasm after having read it, but adds doubts that Einaudi could accept, as 'non mi vedo Viano o chi per lui (un Einaudiano qualsiasi) che lo legga di gusto. Io lo leggo di gusto'. This opposition between 'un Einaudiano qualsiasi' and Celati shows the difference of perspectives between Celati and the publishing house, which was the effect of different theoretical and historical backgrounds. In the same letter, a note by Celati reveals what he meant with that expression: 'id est onesto e resistenziale'.[133]

Celati, with that sentence, recognized the ethical stature of the Einaudi editors, but, at the same time, ironically pointed out a diversity of views that was evident from the beginning. The fact that Einaudi did publish the book, could be seen both as a confirmation of Celati's influence in the choices of the publishing house at the time or a proof that he was wrong in judging the Einaudi editors not able

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[132] Letter from Gianni Celati to Guido Davico Bonino, Paolo Fossati and Italo Calvino, non dated but to be considered from 1977, p. 2.

[133] Letter from Gianni Celati to Paolo Fossati, 17 April 1972: 'Adesso volevo segnalarvi un libro che forse ti fa anche a te l'effetto che fa a me, e che credo si lega a certi tuoi interessi: Gilles Deluze et Félix Guattari Capitalisme et Schizofrénie vol I L'Antioedipe Ed. du Minuit 1972 Per ora è uscito solo questo volume ma se ne attende un secondo. Io ho letto un qualche centinaio di pagine e mi ci sono molto appassionato: vado avanti. Magari si potrebbe proporlo lì, prima che lo freghino: per quanto non mi vedo Viano o chi per lui (un Einaudiano qualsiasi) che lo legga di gusto. Io lo leggo di gusto'. Celati refers to the philosopher Carlo Augusto Viano (1929). The volume will be published by Einaudi a few years later: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'anti-Edipo. Capitalismo e schizofrenia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975).

to appreciate the originality of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Œdipe* .[134] In any case, the distance he referred to already in 1972, was no longer bearable for Celati in 1977 and the refusal of *Letteratura, esotismo, colonialismo* created a gelid atmosphere. A few months later, Celati announced changes in his life in a letter to Giulio Einaudi: 'L'anno prossimo lascio l'università spero definitivamente, e dopo l'America voglio fare dei film'.[135]

The relationship between Celati and Einaudi was then strictly professional (from this moment on, Celati often starts his letters specifying that he is writing only a 'lettera d'affari'), devoid of all the sense of intellectual collaboration and friendship that it had in previous years, despite the differences which were already there from the beginning, as I have shown. At the end of the 1970s, Celati was in need of different ideas and his constant dissatisfaction with literary institutions, made it impossible for him to continue doing what he had done until that moment, both as a writer and as a collaborator of Einaudi. For that reason, in 1979, Celati decided to leave Italy for the United States. During his stay and after his return to Italy, one year later, new ideas came from completely different fields, as I will show in the next chapter.

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[134] See a 1970 letter to Davico in which Celati sarcastically refers to the comments of some Einaudi editors (he does not mention the names) who seem not to appreciate *Comiche*. Here it is evident the contrast between their notion of (post-war) *impegno* and the forms that political commitment takes in Celati's books which derives from the lack of a theoretical and generational common ground: 'L'altro romanzo (dico romanzo) che sto scrivendo cercherò di farlo un po' più realistico, un po' impegnato, un po' più come dire? signorile e serio. Vedrai.' (Gianni Celato to Guido Davico Bonino, not dated, but in a reply to the contract for *Comiche*, received by Celati on 18 November 1970).

[135] Gianni Celati to Giulio Einaudi (22 April 1978). As Celati will narrate many years after in the short story *Storia di un apprendistato*, included in *Narratori delle pianure*, Celati indeed tried to work in cinema in Los Angeles, together with his friend Marco Sironi, but the results were not satisfactory. The two friends had to work to a series of B-movies and remakes of famous films for the Asian market. See on this Nunzia Palmieri, 'Cronologia', in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache, racconti*, p. CIII.

# Chapter Two

## New Forms of *Impegno* in Celati's Works (1980-2016): Storytelling, Photography, Theatre and Documentary

## 2.1 'Ero arrivato ad un blocco mentale'. Celati's Narrative Silence 1978-1985: A Real Interruption?

In the first chapter, I sought to demonstrate how Celati's works intersect with some of the major turning points both in contemporary history and in Western thought (Goffmann, Laing, Basaglia, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze-Guattari and many others). The period 1977-1978 is a crucial moment in Italian history, both for the protest movements of 1977 and, the year after, for the assassination of the Christian Democrat leader Aldo Moro, who was kidnapped and murdered by a unit of the militant far-left organisation known as *Brigate rosse*. Moro was working at an agreement between his party and the Communist party, known as the *compromesso storico*. This year also coincides with a sudden interruption of Celati's career as a writer. After the publication of *Lunario del paradiso*, in 1978, Celati decides, in fact, to stop writing fiction. Seven years later, *Narratori delle pianure* (1985) marks a new beginning in Celati's works. In this section I will investigate the rationale behind that suspension and question the idea that Celati's was a complete silence.

Rather than being a real interruption, I will show how the years 1978-1985 need to be seen as a fundamental period of preparation of new ideas that will shape Celati's further works and inspire a number of authors and intellectuals, not limited to the literary context.[136]

The decline of the relationship with Einaudi described in the previous chapter does not explain completely Celati's choice to interrupt his work as a writer, but it is one of the elements to be considered when analysing this period. I have shown how, at the moment of the rupture with Einaudi which followed the refusal of *Letteratura, esotismo, colonialismo*, there was already a certain distance between Celati and Einaudi. Celati was disillusioned with literature and, more specifically, tired of being involved with an editorial policy that he no longer shared.[137] Celati was looking for new ways of 'going beyond literature' and, in 1979, he thus decides to leave Italy and move to the US. In his interviews, Celati himself advances a literary reason as the more compelling one. After *Lunario*, Celati was at an impasse in his career as he had the impression that his works were assigned to a specific comic genre.[138]

When Celati moves to Los Angeles with his friend, director Alberto Sironi, he tries to start a career in cinema, as he mentioned among his future projects in the letter to Giulio Einaudi, quoted in the previous chapter. This results only in his involvement in the production of a series of B-movies which did not correspond to

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[136] In an interview by the writer, poet, journalist and former Einaudi editor (from 1964 to 1977), Nico Orengo, Celati suggests a connection between rock music of the 1980s and the 1977 protest movement: 'La musica rock ha la funzione di riassorbire le sparse tracce del Movimento'. See Nico Orengo, 'Dissenso a tempo di rock', *Tuttolibri*, 6, 3 (1980), p. 7. From 1979 to 1984, while interrupting the publication of new fictional works, Celati publishes three translations and two articles on music journals: Twain's *Le avventure di Tom Sawyer* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1979), Barthes' *Barthes*, and Céline's *Guignol's band*, which I have already mentioned. The two articles are 'Scrivere Jazz si potrebbe e Charlie Parker sarebbe contento', *Musica 80*, 2 (1980), p. 24, and 'Concentrazioni sulle onde di voce. Un testo per Archie Shepp', *Musica 80*, 5 (1980), 10-11. On the *compromesso storico*, see Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: 1943-1980*, Ch. 10.

[137] See Michele Ronchi Stefanati, '«Intonare lo strumento di un altro italiano». Il carteggio tra Gianni Celati e l'Einaudi (1966–1979)'.

[138] On this period, see Nunzia Palmieri, 'Cronologia', p. CIII. See also the interview with Aurora Capretti, in *Il comico come strategia in Gianni Celati & Co.*, 229-239, p. 234.

what he had in mind. Nevertheless, the journey to the US permits Celati to dedicate himself to further studies in a field which will have an extraordinary impact on his future writings. Celati's new studies in sociolinguistics at UCLA lead him to the discovery of the works of Erving Goffman's pupils, such as Harvey Sacks, Livia Polany, and William Labov.

In the first chapter, I argued that Goffman's theories on places of constriction (together with Michel Foucault's and others) seem to stand behind all of Celati's books of the 1970s. If *Asylums* need to be considered one of the key texts for the first part of Celati's career, from now on, a very special role has to be assigned to Goffman's *Behaviour in Public Places* and the influence that this book had on further studies in linguistics. Those theories will shape and better define Celati's already existing ideas on storytelling and especially oral storytelling. When Celati begins his collaboration with the photographer Luigi Ghirri, which will have an extraordinary impact on his works from the 1980s onwards, he uses the ideas taken from sociolinguistics as a theoretical background to better understand and adapt to literature Ghirri's thought: 'Le letture che ho detto, di Sacks, Polany, Labov, assieme ad alcuni testi di Goffman, sono il retroterra mentale di quello che ho scritto dopo: da *Narratori* a *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze* e *Verso la foce*'.[139] This theoretical

[139] Erving Goffman *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963). See also his essay, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). Celati's quotation is taken from 'Letteratura come accumulo di roba sparsa. Conversazione con Marco Belpoliti e Andrea Cortellessa', *Riga 28. Gianni Celati*, 25-37, p. 33. The journey through Italy with Ghirri and other photographers started in 1980-1981. In that period Celati returned to the University of Bologna, this time with a completely different focus from before, as he started a collaboration with the linguist, Guy Aston, following his new interest in sociolinguistics. The link between sociolinguistics, photography and Celati's interest in everyday storytelling is often underlined by Celati in his interviews. See on this Celati's comment on William Labov's *Language in the Inner City* in 'Letteratura come accumulo di roba sparsa'. pp. 32-3: 'di Labov in particolare mi colpiva uno studio linguistico sul mondo di raccontare le storie del ghetto, e su come i ragazzi del ghetto che vanno a studiare al college, dopo non sanno più raccontare nel modo agile e disinvolto della tradizione; perché cominciano a voler spiegare tutto e disprezzano la superficialità dei racconti quotidiani'. For a full consideration on these influences and especially for the role of Labov, see Rebecca West, *The Craft of Everyday Storyteller*, pp. 191-194.

framework permits us to examine Celati's writings and interventions from a slightly different point of view than existing criticism, and to shed new light on his works from the 1980s onwards. In this second chapter, I will demonstrate how this new start shows different forms of ethical and political commitment that varies at each stage of Celati's multifaceted works from the 1980s onwards.

## 2.2 Orality and Observation as Commitment: the Trilogy of the Plains

Although there is a gap in his production of fictional work, in the period 1979-1984 Celati is still active in those years. It is undeniable that there is a seven-year interruption between *Lunario del paradiso* and Celati's next book of prose, *Narratori delle pianure* and the latter represents a turning point in language and style between the first period and the second. Nevertheless, this gap does not represent a complete silence: Celati continues his work, while approaching new field of studies, such as sociolinguistics and photography, which will be of central importance in the years to come. In 1984 Celati officially returns to prose, with the diary *Verso la foce. (Reportage, per un amico fotografo)*. This text is Celati's contribution to Ghirri's project, *Viaggio in Italia*, that involved twenty photographers with the aim of providing a new representation of the Italian landscape.[140] Their idea was to focus on

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[140] *Viaggio in Italia*, ed. by Luigi Ghirri, Gianni Leone, Enzo Velati (Alessandria: Il Quadrante, 1984). Twenty photographers took part in the project: Olivo Barbieri, Gabriele Basilico, Giannantonio Battistella, Vincenzo Castella, Andrea Cavazzuti, Giovanni Chiaramonte, Mario Cresci, Vittore Fossati, Carlo Garzia, Luigi Ghirri, Guido Guidi, Shelley Hill, Mimmo Jodice, Gianni Leone, Claude Nori, Umberto Sartorello, Mario Tinelli, Ernesto Tuliozi, Fulvio Ventura, Cuchi White. Celati was the

ordinary places rather than on the monumental, in opposition to the idealistic and rather stereotypical view of an iconic and touristic Italy. The 1984 version of *Verso la foce* will in part form some of the tales in *Narratori* (namely the short stories 'Traversata delle pianure', 'Il ritorno del viaggiatore' and 'Allo scoperto') while other passages are to be considered the first draft of his 1989 diary-reportage *Verso la foce*. In 1987, half way through the interval between the publication of *Narratori* and *Verso la foce*, Celati publishes *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze*, which continues the tales of *Narratori*, but also anticipates the structure of *Verso la foce*, namely its mixture of description of the external world and personal, reflective remarks. Beginning in 1984, Celati publishes in left-wing newspapers and journals such as *Nuovi Argomenti*, *Alfabeta* and *L'Unità* some of the short stories that will form his later books, namely 'Scomparsa di un uomo lodevole' (subsequently in *Quattro novelle*), 'Dagli aeroporti' and 'Tempo che passa' (both in *Narratori*).[141]

At this point in his career, Celati's writings develop in two ways, which often intersect in his works from the 1980s onwards. First, Celati writes what he calls 'tales of observation' ('racconti d'osservazione'), where he describes and comments on the external world (landscape, animals and people), including apparently meaningless details. Second, he collects and rewrites stories that he has heard along

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only writer involved. The title contains an implicit reference to other famous 'viaggi in Italia', see Guido Piovene, *Viaggio in Italia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1957), also illustrated with photos, Johann Wolfang von Goethe's *Italienische Reise* (published in two volumes in 1816-1817) and Rossellini's 1954 film *Viaggio in Italia*. On the collaboration between Celati and Ghirri, see Marco Sironi, *Geografie del narrare. Insistenze sui luoghi di Luigi Ghirri e Gianni Celati* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2004); Marina Spunta, 'The new Italian Landscape: between Ghirri's Photography and Celati's Fiction', in *Translation Practices. Through Language to Culture*. by Ashley Chantler and Carla Dente (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 223-238; Anna Maria Chierici, 'Ascoltare e osservare il deserto: Celati, Ghirri, Antonioni', in *Bel Paese? La rappresentazione del paesaggio nella letteratura e nel cinema dell'Italia contemporanea*, ed. by Luca Pocci and Paolo Chirumbolo (New York: Mellen Press, 2012), 123-157. Ferdinando Amigoni, 'Guardando la prosa del mondo: Luigi Ghirri e Gianni Celati', *Intersezioni*, 1 (2008), 81-109.

[141] Gianni Celati, 'Scomparsa di un uomo lodevole', *Nuovi Argomenti*, 10, 1984, pp. 17-21; 'Dagli aeroporti', *Alfabeta*, VI, 64, september 1984, p. 10; 'Tempo che passa', *L'Unità (Emilia Romagna)*, 14 April 1985, p. 7.

the road, in ordinary places like bars, streets, squares. In both cases there is an extreme attention to every detail, with no apparent distintion between what is usually considered important and what is not. The observational-philosophical style is particularly clear in *Condizioni di luce sulla via Emilia*, but can be traced already in some of the tales that compose *Narratori*. The descriptive style of *Verso la foce* is thus already present in some passages of the books that precede it. In *Narratori*, for example, tales like *Tempo che passa* can already be considered 'racconti d'osservazione', where the description rules supreme:

> Dopo Cremona, andando verso est sulla Padana Inferiore, si incontra un grande centro commerciale con un'insegna visibile da lontano. Due supermercati lunghi e bassi, con un doppio piazzale di parcheggio a lato della camionabile, occupano uno spazio enorme in mezzo alle campagne. Sui piazzali vengono trasmesse musichette, ogni tanto la voce d'uno speaker annuncia una vendita speciale, e si sentono i fischietti di poliziotti privati che smistano il traffico di macchine nei parcheggi. (771)

The attention to the ordinary rather than the exceptional is not only the main aspect of *Viaggio in Italia*, but a key concept in Ghirri's entire work as a photographer, which had extraordinary influence on the history of photography and indeed on the works of Celati. To explain this concept, Ghirri referred to the screenwriter and theorist of neorealism Cesare Zavattini, especially to his idea of 'qualsiasità' as the possibility of finding any place interesting. According to Ghirri and Zavattini, nothing is banal or meaningless, everything deserves to be watched, especially ordinary, daily life. The influence of Zavattini in Celati's works (already after *Guizzardi*, when they first met) would need to be investigated in a systematic way, but this is outside the scope of this thesis. In a conversation with Belpoliti and Cortellessa, in order to explain the choice of a map of the Po Valley at the beginning of *Narratori*, Celati states: 'Ah, la cartina geografica! Uno dei motivi assoluti per cui

l'ho messa lì è perché c'erano tutti quei nomi di paesini che avevo attraversato. Paesini per lo più spopolati, che nessuno conosceva, in paesaggi ufficialmente considerati d'ultima categoria. Per questo ho voluto metterli in prima pagina, tutti quei paesini di mille abitanti, duemila abitanti, dove nessuno andava e che tutti i bolsi della cultura sono pronti a disprezzare. In questo mi sento zavattiniano fino in fondo, e come Zavattini penso che tutto il 'qualsiasi' dei posti sia il sale della terra. Con Zavattini ci siamo incontrati qualche volta e ci siamo capiti subito. Avevo appena pubblicato *Guizzardi*, e dopo ho fatto molto di quello che ho fatto pensando a lui, con il dispiacere che non sia più qui con noi'.[142] While the photographers follow Ghirri-Zavattini's ideas through their images, Celati, who was the only writer involved in the project, does the same through his own writings. This leads Celati to new considerations on storytelling, as I will examine in this chapter.[143]

The book that marks Celati's return to fiction, *Narratori delle pianure*, is in fact a collection of short stories, most of which are oral tales, rewritten by Celati.[144] During the exploration of the Italian landscape that was part of Ghirri's project, Celati takes note of all that he observes and of the stories that he hears. From those materials he will then form all his books of the 1980s. As I have briefly mentioned above, Celati approaches Ghirri's ideas using his recently acquired knowledge on conversation and discourse analysis in order to apply the concept of *qualsiasità* to storytelling. If scholars like Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel 'inaugurated the

[142] 'Letteratura come accumulo di roba sparsa', p. 35.
[143] Celati's definition of those tales as 'racconti d'osservazione' is in Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, in *Romanzi, cronache e* racconti, 986-1098, 987. On this topic, see Mario Moroni, 'Il paradigma dell'osservazione in 'Verso la foce' di Gianni Celati', *Romance Languages Annual*, 4 (1992), 307-313; and Patrick Barron, 'Gianni Celati's 'Verso la foce': An Intense Observation of the World', *Forum Italicum*, 39, 2 (2005), 481-497. On Zavattini, see Alfredo Gianolio, *Pedinando Zavattini. Immagini e testimonianze dal Cerreto al Po* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2004).
[144] For an overview of the debate on orality and literacy and for a definition of orality in Celati's works, see Marina Spunta, *Voicing the Word: Writing Orality in Contemporary Italian Fiction* (London: Peter Lang, 2004).

study of everyday life as a research focus in its own right',[145] Celati does the same in literature, as he focuses on ordinary stories of everyday life and gives dignity to everyday storytellers. Furthermore, a linguistic change is underway: compared to Celati's previous narrative, where he wanted to recreate in language the body gestures of slapstick films, from *Narratori* onwards Celati uses a plainer, simple language. Scholars have already studied the changes in language in Celati's work, while my analysis will focus on the consequences of this on the side of *impegno*.[146]

The new stylistic choice of Celati's books of the 1980s is a consequence of the collaboration between Celati and Ghirri in those years. This is also true from the point of view of *impegno*: Celati's works at this stage show a form of commitment that is strictly connected to Ghirri's project. *Viaggio in Italia* can be defined as the adaptation in photography of ideas that circulated already in post-war cinema, in what is usually referred to as neorealism. Neorealism had a strong political dimension, which is clear in the work of its protagonists, such as Visconti, De Sica, Rossellini, Fellini, Lattuada, De Santis. These and other directors aimed at

[145] John Heritage, 'Conversation Analysis as Social Theory', in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, ed. by Brian Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 300-320, p. 301.

[146] On Celati's language in his narrative of the 1980s, see Silvana Tamiozzo Goldmann, 'Il 'passaggio di parole di bocca in bocca': oralità ed estro narrativo nell'opera di Gianni Celati', *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, 45, 2 (2006), 93-114; Francesca Gatta, 'Ombre e fantasmi nel remoto della 'bassa'. Deissi e passato prossimo nei 'Narratori delle pianure' di Gianni Celati', in Francesca Gatta and Riccardo Tesi, *Lingua d'autore. Letture linguistiche di prosatori contemporanei* (Rome: Carocci, 2000), 121-137; Elena Porciani, 'L'autore nel moto perpetuo del racconto. Gianni Celati narratore delle pianure', in Elena Porciani, *L'autore nel testo. Sette casi di finti diari, interferenze diegetiche e autofinzioni* (Rome: Perrone, 2013), 95-131; Fernando Marchiori, 'Tra oralità e scrittura: lo spazio narrativo nel 'Cinema naturale di Gianni Celati'', *Nuova Corrente*, 48, 128 (2001), 315-320; Marina Spunta, 'Vocalità e ascolto nella narrativa di Gianni Celati', *Nuova Prosa*, 47 (2007), 83-102; Roberta Piazza, 'The Usual Story: The Narrative Imperfect in Celati as an Indicator of Information Already Familiar to The Reader', in *Sguardi sull'Italia. Miscellanea di studi dedicata a Francesco Villari*, ed. by Gino Bedani (Exeter: The Society for Italian Studies, 1997), 208-221; JoAnn Cannon, 'On the Path of Gianni Celati: A Reading of 'Narratori delle riserve'', *Rivista di studi italiani*, 2 (2001), 162-172; Pia Schwarz Lausten, 'L'abbandono del soggetto. Un'analisi del soggetto narrato e quello narrante nell'opera di Gianni Celati', *Revue romane*, 37, 1 (2002), 105-129; Michael Hanne, 'Narrative Wisdom in Celati's 'Narratori delle pianure'', *Rivista di studi italiani*, 1 (1996), 133-152; Laura Barile 'Un ostinato inseguimento: linguaggio e immagine in Calvino, Celati, Perec e l'ultimo Beckett', *Forum Italicum*, 26, 1 (1992): 188-200; Pina Piccolo, 'Celati's Quattro novelle on Vacillation and Suspense', *Italian Quarterly*, 30, 118 (1989), 29-37.

representing what they considered the real conditions of post-war Italy, in reaction to the fashion of 'Telefoni Bianchi' films, which, in their view, gave nothing but an idealized version of Italy during Fascism. Neorealist films thus include poverty and injustice, that most previous films tended to avoid, and chose its actors and backgrounds from ordinary Italy and daily life.[147] Ghirri makes a similar effort, both liberating the image of Italy from the still Fascist 'postcard' imaginary (an iconic image of Italy that photographers involved in *Viaggio in Italia* recognized in the works of the Fratelli Alinari), and showing an alternative image of Italy in the 1980s, with deserted places, crumbling houses or abandoned factories.[148] These are the places of *Viaggio in Italia*: a new Italian landscape, far from any idealistic view of the 'bel paese'. In the introduction to the catalogue for the first exhibition of *Viaggio in Italia*, the editors summarize the rationale behind the project as a firm opposition to the absence of *impegno* in the description of Italy. Ordinary, daily life now becomes the centre of the interest of a new generation of photographers, gathered around Ghirri's project:

> Una nuova generazione di fotografi […] ha invece rivolto lo sguardo sulla realtà e sul paesaggio che ci sta intorno. Le opere degli autori spostano l'attenzione della fotografia sulla cultura quotidiana dell'Italia di oggi e impongono il confronto con il vuoto d'impegno conoscitivo che paralizza altre attività espressive e altri sistemi di comunicazione. La televisione, il

[147] The notion of real is clearly problematic and the idea that neorealist films simply reflect 'real' life has been challenged by scholars. For a full consideration of the topic and a more complex definition of neorealist cinema, see Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema. From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Ungar, 1988); *European Cinema*, ed. by Elizabeth Ezra (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, ed. by Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2007); Gian Pietro Brunetta, *The History of Italian Cinema: a Guide to Italian Film from its Origins to the Twenty First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[148] This claim might be considered unfair, as the Alinari archive includes many images of a more 'realistic' kind and one might consider some images to share the aesthetics of the earlier literature movement of *verismo*. It is anyway significant that the photographers gathered around *Viaggio in Italia* make explicit their distance from previous images of Italy and think about their work as a form of protest against them.

> cinema, le arti visive appaiono sempre più lontani dal voler conoscere o almeno osservare il volto concreto dell'Italia.[149]

In her preface to *Racconti del paesaggio. 1984-2004. A vent'anni da Viaggio in Italia*, Roberta Valtorta quotes the passage above and underlines that an '*impegno* intellettuale e umano' through photography characterizes Ghirri's project. Valtorta highlights that *Viaggio in Italia* shows a shift towards a new form of political commitment that consists in a conscious observation of the real, rather than in journalistic reports or in the description of social struggles (which Valtorta claims as one of the main features of *impegno* in the 1960s and 1970s), and permits new considerations on the relationship between people and the world in which they live. Valtorta also underlines the limits of the extent to which the representation of the real is possible. The photographers themselves are perfectly conscious of this aspect:

> L''avventura del pensiero e dello sguardo' di cui parla il breve testo che troviamo sul risvolto di copertina di *Viaggio in Italia* è la ricerca di un impegno attraverso la fotografia che, superati gli anni Sessanta e anche i Settanta, resta ancora vivo nei primi anni Ottanta. Un impegno intellettuale e umano che possa favorire un rinnovamento nel modo di porsi nei riguardi del reale: non più il racconto degli stridori sociali, non la denuncia di tipo giornalistico, ma l'osservazione cosciente del reale, capace di evitare i luoghi comuni e di tentare una rifondazione della visione del paesaggio, dunque una riflessione sul mondo in cui l'uomo vive. Un modo che tenga anche in considerazione il fatto che la fotografia è sempre e comunque rappresentazione, è messa in codice. (16-17)

Celati's *impegno* at this point of his career consists precisely in an intellectual and human effort to renew the approach to reality. Far from any sociological portrait of social clashes or a simple report of facts, Celati's works of the 1980s is committed to a conscious observation of the external world. Celati achieves this by looking at hidden, deserted, ordinary places and people, and by

[149] Roberta Valtorta, 'Stupore del paesaggio', in *Racconti dal paesaggio. 1984-2004. A vent'anni da Viaggio in Italia*, ed. by Roberta Valtorta (Milan: Lupetti, 2004), 11-49, p. 13.

describing a normally unnoticed Italian landscape which leads him to reflect on the relationship between people and environment and between people themselves. Although Celati often aknowledges, both in his works of fiction and in his interviews, that a neutral description is never possible (as selection, partial perception, ideology all imply judgement of some kind), he tries anyway to abandon himself to the external word, intentionally refusing any previously ready explanation of what he sees. In so doing, he attempts to free his own and our vision from ready-made interpretations of the real and from stereotypes. He thus gives an alternative description of the external world that necessarily leads to something mysterious, which is not possible to explain or narrate. In his 1984 article *Finzioni a cui credere*, Celati in fact expresses his distance from recent Italian literature and those intellectuals who imagine themselves to be capable of unmasking reality, fighting imagination in the name of the truth and giving all-embracing interpretations of the world.[150] The refusal of this approach brings Celati to refer to the work of a contemporary photographer, Ghirri, rather than a contemporary writer, in order to explain his understanding of the meaning of literature. Ghirri's attention to apparently meaningless details of the landscape, which become protagonists of his photos, deeply fascinates Celati, who finds in that a model for his storytelling. Celati adopts Ghirri's method in his writing activity as it permits one to look at the 'finzioni a cui credere' that humankind uses to make the world an acceptable place to live in. In his article, Celati claims that those fictions are necessary and should not be unveiled in the name of a so-called reality. In Celati's view, every activity that involves human beings is nothing but 'finzioni a cui credere'. Every aspect of life involves imagination in order to create a fiction that makes life itself acceptable. The

[150] Gianni Celati, 'Finzioni a cui credere', *Alfabeta*, 6, 69 (1984), p. 13. See on this Robert Lumley, 'Gianni Celati 'Fictions to Believe in'', in *The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt Baranski and Lino Pertile (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1993), 43-58.

role of observation and representation is thus to organize the human experience. Celati's writings represent daily life as such, both with description and observation (observational tales) and with the collection of daily stories (everyday storytelling). In Celati's view, a concrete experience of the external (observation) allows the writer (and us) to escape abstract, all-embracing interpretations of the world, while listening to voices (oral storytelling) has a therapeutic function. Observation and oral storytelling, tales of observation and the collection of rewritten stories gathered in various contexts, are thus closely linked to each other, as both bring to concrete experience of existence, far from any ready-made explanation of the 'real':

> 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.[151]

As will be shown further in my analysis, this turning point in Celati's career assumes an explicitly political value as it openly contests the dominant neoliberalist ideology and its consequences. It also paves the way for further considerations on the way people relate to each other and, in doing so, it seems to propose an alternative to consumerist lifestyle. I will explain how this happens, making reference to Celati's books of the 1980s. Celati found in Ghirri's photography an authentic intellectual experience that aimed to observe and narrate the world rather than judging it. Ghirri conceives photography as a means of re-thinking the external world, rather than an appropriation of sensationalistic or exciting photographic views to be sold for money. This view has the power to change the dominant contemporary approach to the world itself: while it opposes a consumerist idea of photography as a product for

[151] Gianni Celati, 'Verso la foce', in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache e racconti*, p. 1027. See also Luigi Ghirri, *Niente di antico sotto il sole*, ed. by Paolo Costantini and Giovanni Chiaramonte (Turin: Società editrice internazionale, 1997).

sale, it reflects on the consequences of contemporary society on people and the landscape. Celati does the same through literature: his use of writing to give a concrete representation of the external world, based on observation, allows narrative to be a means of reflection on the external world itself. This is based on curiosity and pure observation rather than on ready-made, all-embracing, expert-like interpretations of the real. As observation led Celati to a representation of the external world 'as it is', it comes to tackle how consumerism affects life and the environment in contemporary society. Celati's books of the 1980s, in fact, deal with the effect of pollution on the landscape and with the impoverishment of human relations. In so doing, Celati presents literature itself as an antidote to consumerism and its consequences: oral storytelling, he suggests, can vaccinate people against apathy towards both the environment and other people. Celati's *impegno* relies both on the tales of observation that come from the exploration of the Po Valley and on the collection and transcription of oral tales that people narrate to Celati himself. Marina Spunta has studied the role of photography in reshaping Celati's style after the collaboration with Ghirri. Spunta underlines how Celati chooses a 'natural, minimalist narration', that is the preference for short stories, linked to 'his effort to recreate an effect of orality in his texts'. This choice 'undermines the higher prestige of writing the 'novel' and challenges the excessive literatiness of canonical literature'.[152] Later on in the thesis I will demonstrate how these considerations reflect Celati's reading of one of his key texts, such as Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*.[153] What is important to observe now is that these styilistic choices coincide

[152] Marina Spunta, *Voicing the word*, p. 63.
[153] Walter Benjamin, *Angelus Novus. Saggi e frammenti*, edited by Renato Solmi (Turin: Einaudi, 1962). On Celati, Ghirri and orality see Marina Spunta, 'Lo spazio delle pianure come "territorio di racconti" - verso la foce con Gianni Celati', *Spunti e Ricerche*, 18 (2003), 5-28; 'Il profilo delle nuvole: Ghirri's photography and the new Italian landscape', *Italian Studies*, 61, 1 (2006), 114-36; 'Esplorazioni sulla via Emilia e dintorni – la fotografia italiana degli anni '80 in dialogo con la

with a focus on ordinary places and ordinary stories, which Celati shares with Ghirri's photography. As Rebecca West has argued, this 'anti-monumental' tendency brings Celati to use a narrative that 'implicitly or explicitly rejects the dominant perception and practice of philosophy as the realm of 'big ideas''.[154] Celati's preference for marginality, which is a constant feature of his works already in the 1970s, from the 1980s onward does not consist anymore in the attention to emarginated types (madmen, adolescents, exiles), but rather in the attention to marginal places. With his 'anti-monumental' approach, Celati re-thinks the external world by focusing on the unexceptional, the unsellable, the normally not-observed. As mentioned above, Ghirri's photography overtly challenged the dominant traditions of Italian photography which, as West observes, were 'strongly tied to authoritarian, institutionalized, and fundamentally conservative cultural and political agendas'.[155] Celati's does the same through his writings: the choice of focusing his works on marginal places and ordinary stories means to continue, in different forms, that anti-monumental, ethical and political commitment that emerge at every stage of Celati's career. This commitment to the ordinary is exactly the idea of *impegno* as Valtorta points out it in the lines quoted above: Celati's works of this period pursue a radical renewal of the relations between human beings and the environment (landscape, animals, plants and other people).[156]

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scrittura di paesaggio', in *The modern Image, Intersections of Photography, Cinema and Literature in Italian Culture*, special issue of *L'anello che non tiene*. *Journal of Modern Italian Literature*, ed. by Giuliana Minghelli, University of Wisconsin, Madison, XX-XXI, 1-2 (Spring-Fall 2008-2009), 158-87;*Luigi Ghirri and the Photography of Place*, ed. by Marina Spunta and Jacopo Benci (London: Peter Lang, 2017).

[154] Rebecca West, Gianni Celati. *The Craft of Everyday Storyteller*, p. 70.

[155] Rebecca West, *The Craft of Everyday Storytelling*, p. 100.

[156] This attempt coincides with the intentional abandonment of every pretention to judge the external world itself. See on this Celati's reading of Calvino's *Palomar*: 'Palomar, la prosa del mondo', *Alfabeta*, 6, 59 (1984), 7-8, and its extended version 'Palomar, nella prosa del mondo', *Nuova Corrente*, 36, 100 (1987), 227-242. In the final part of both versions, Celati establishes a connection between Ghirri's works and *Palomar*. On Celati and Palomar, see Marco Belpoliti, 'Calvino, Celati e

This is particularly true of, but not limited to, *Verso la foce*, published in 1989, the last book of this period of Celati's career. It is a description of the Po Valley that intersects with the stories and voices that Celati collected during his travel throughout the plains towards the river Po mouth. The book is in fact a collection of four diaries with the author's travel notes. These do not follow a chronological order, but a geographical one: from the West to the East, from Liguria and Tuscany towards the Adriatic sea where the Po ends. The first diary, *Paesaggio con centrale nucleare*, is in fact dated 9-17 May 1986. The second, *Esplorazione sugli argini*, goes from 20 to 23 May 1983. The third, *Tre giorni nelle zone della grande bonifica* starts on 9 May and ends on 11 June 1984 and the fourth, *Verso la foce*, goes from 31 May to 4 June 1983. Besides revealing that Celati thus continued his pilgrimage along the Po valley beyond Ghirri's project and even after the publication of *Viaggio in Italia* in 1984, this choice gives a sense of the movement towards the mouth of the Po river which was already present in the short stories of *Narratori delle pianure*. The geographical order has also to do with the ethical dimension of the book, as Celati uses the metaphor of the river as life, where the 'foce' corresponds to its end. Celati states that observation - as an attempt to free our gaze from what we already know – leads to a consideration on the limits of life. In the *Notizia* that precedes *Verso la foce*, Celati presents his new method as a writer not simply as a stylistic choice, but he illustrates its philosophical and ethical implications:

> Ogni osservazione ha bisogno di liberarsi dai codici familiari che porta con sé, ha bisogno di andare alla deriva in mezzo a tutto ciò che non capisce, per poter arrivare ad una foce, dove dovrà sentirsi smarrita. Come una tendenza naturale che ci assorbe, ogni osservazione intensa del mondo esterno forse ci

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'Alì Babà', *Riga 14. 'Alì Babà'*, 24-51, p. 47. On Calvino and Celati, see Massimo Rizzante*, Il geografo e il viaggiatore. Variazioni su I. Calvino e G. Celati* (Pesaro: Metauro, 1993).

> porta più vicini alla nostra morte; ossia, ci porta ad essere meno separati da noi stessi.[157]

In Celati's view, the process of observation leads us to consider ourselves as part of the external world our gaze is observing. The Po mouth is thus a 'natural end' and it is precisely the consciousness of the finitude of life that allows us to reconcile with ourselves. Celati presents its 'racconti d'osservazione' as a philosophical journey and establishes a tight link between the ethical premises of *Verso la foce* and its political and social dimension, namely the attention to restore a sense of community and an attention to the environment. The *Notizia*, in fact, clarifies this concept in the very first pages of the book. Celati suggests that the importance of the four diaries lies in the construction of a new relationship with the environment and with others. According to Celati, observation of the external world has a direct consequence on the way people live in it: a description of the world permits us (the author and the reader) to be less detached from both the world itself and the other: 'Se hanno qualche rilevanza, almeno per chi li ha scritti, questa dipende dal fatto che un'intensa osservazione del mondo esterno ci rende meno apatici (più pazzi o più savi, più allegri o più disperati)'. The *Notizia* also refers to the damages that an ideology of profit has caused to landscape and human conditions, both in terms of pollution and in creating situations of urban solitude, even in the countryside, where a sense of community is usually considered to be still alive:

> Questi quattro diari di viaggio sono nati mettendomi a lavorare con un gruppo di fotografi, che si dedicavano ad una descrizione del nuovo paesaggio italiano […]. Viaggiando nelle campagne della valle padana è difficile non sentirsi stranieri. Più dell'inquinamento del Po, degli alberi malati, delle puzze industriali, dello stato d'abbandono in cui volge tutto quanto non ha a che fare con il profitto, e infine d'una edilizia fatta per domiciliati intercambiabili, senza patria né destinazione – più di tutto questo,

[157] Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, p. 988.

> ciò che sorprende è questo nuovo genere di campagne dove si respira un'aria di solitudine urbana […]. (987)

All this has important consequences from the point of view of *impegno*. Celati's ethical and political commitment is evident in the way he treats the two topics of industrial pollution and rural solitude, both present in *Verso la foce*. An intense observation of the landscape in the Po valley makes Celati deal with the representation of a polluted environment, with plenty of detailed descriptions. This is particularly prevalent in the first diary, which Celati wrote immediately after the catastrophic nuclear accident in Chernobyl in April 1986. Celati's attention for the external world coincides here with an attention for the environment in the description of the consequences of the nuclear disaster:

> Pensieri di questi giorni, su cui voglio scrivere: notizie sullo scoppio di Chernobyl, arrivo della nube atomica, e altri rimuginamenti […]. Tornati in Maremma, a Capalbio, proprio quando la nube atomica era in arrivo e la televisione diffondeva le prime misure di sicurezza suggerite dagli esperti: vietato vendere verdure in foglia e niente latte fresco per i bambini. (989-991)

Celati takes note of what he listens and observes. The nuclear disaster dominates conversations and the news. Among the many possible examples, I have chosen a passage where Celati juxtaposes the then Prime Minister Craxi's reassurences with the levels of radioactive contaminations. Craxi's statements also contrast with the experts' advice:

> Alla sera in un bar-ristorante di Capalbio Scalo, dove si riuniscono a cenare gli operai della centrale nucleare di Montalto di Castro, si parla solo dell'esplosione in Russia […]. Con la macchina di Leda in pellegrinaggio a Caorso, per vedere com'è fatta una centrale nucleare […]. Il ministro Craxi dichiara ingiustificati gli allarmismi, le radiazioni nell'aria in diminuzione, ma aumenta il tasso di contaminazione dei vegetali […]. Oggi la centrale di Caorso chiude 'per manutenzione', niente più pericolo nell'aria ma le sostanze radioattive si sono depositate al suolo […]. Leggo nel giornale che in molte città si provvede a lavare l'asfalto per togliere di mezzo i residui di

> sostanze radioattive; il record di radioattività nell'aria è stato definitivamente assegnato a queste zone, Parma e Piacenza. (991-1018)[158]

Nuclear contamination is not the only kind of pollution that Celati describes in *Verso la foce*. The following diaries often tackle the topic of generic pollution, industrial dumping and the consumer waste that invades the landscape. Several examples can be quoted, where it is also possible to note the pervasive presence of the English names of the products which rapidly became rubbish. Celati's description thus shows both the damages caused by pollution and the effects of globalization through those names and the constant presence of commercial advertising boards:

> Più avanti camminando sull'argine, c'è un punto dove sono stati scaricati molti rifiuti in riva al fiume. Lattine di FANTA e COCACOLA, frammenti di mattonelle, un appendiabiti rotto, un sacco di cemento sfondato. Poi una lattina di fluido altosintetico FLASH, una di olio APIGREASE, una di solvente per ruggine AREXONS. Il sole ancora alto fa riflessi sui rifiuti, li rende abbaglianti […]. In distanza cartelli pubblicitari che costeggiano questa strada sull'asfalto rattoppato dal rettifilo la luce si grana nelle nebule dei gas di scarico […]. Mostrandoci una larga chiazza nel terreno, un signore in bicicletta ci ha detto che lì s'era rovesciato un bidone di diserbanti, e ci vorranno chissà quanti anni perché ricresca qualcosa. (995-1026)

The depiction of the contaminated Po covers many pages of the book. The waste completely dominates the environment:

> Visto di qui, il Po è una vasta corrente nera coperta di rifiuti e macchie oleose e bolle spugnose, che scendono come un esercito in ordine sparso […]. Dal punto in cui siamo si osserva bene il corteo di rifiuti portati dal fiume, e

[158] Bettino Craxi is considered one of the most powerful politicians of the 1980s. He was leader of the Italian Socialist Patry (PSI) from 1976 to 1993 and Prime Minister from 1983 to 1987. He deeply tranformed the party, bringing it closer to the Christan Democrats. In 1992 he was accused of bribery and corruption during the 'Tangentopoli' scandal. Even though the presence of Craxi is isolated and does not represent the focus of the text, it is significant for my analysis to note that another fundamental figure or recent Italian politics is present in Celati's books. Craxi represents a crucial figure for Italy in the 1980s, and Celati thus continues to include references to important politicians in his texts, as he did for De Gasperi, Togliatti and others in his books of the 1970s and will do for Berlusconi in his following works. On Craxi, and the 'Tangentopoli' scandal, see Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents*, Ch. 5 and 6.

> quelle bolle color del pane rimangono impigliate qui sotto in una sporgenza piena di arbusti […]. E sul fiume adesso non scorrono bolle bensì chiazze, sembrano minestrone versato nell'acqua […]. Il Po scorre verso il mare pieno di bolle e chiazze viscose. (1037-1048)

While observing the small villages he passes through, Celati insists on the damage caused by human activities. The factories, their waste and the dumping grounds represent the new landscape of marginal places in the consumerist Italy of the 1980s, where no ecological concern seems to be present:

> Là c'è Pontelagoscuro, le file di cisterne, ciminiere, torri di raffinerie con getti di fuoco e vapore […]. Sulla salita che porta al ponte di ferro di Pontelagoscuro, a lato dello stradone pieno di traffico, dei binari corrono lungo un muro di mattoni anneriti che cinge la cittadella industriale della Montedison. Oltre il muro spuntano le cupole delle cisterne, torri di valvole e serpentine, fasci di tubi con bruciatori a pinnacolo, e ponteggi sospesi tra le torri […]. Qui la vegetazione spontanea copre gran parte del muro annerito, l'asfalto è a pezzi nelle pozzanghere davanti all'ingresso; altre pozzanghere piene di cartoni inzuppati, pezzi di copertone, frammenti di polistirolo, una lattina schiacciata, e paglia d'un imballaggio che qualcuno ha perso per strada […], un campo tutto pieno di rifiuti, sacchetti di plastica, bottiglie, lattine, pezzi di mobili buttati via; un'estensione grandissima di rifiuti, con sopra centinaia di gabbiani che volavano impazziti. (1047).

Is it therefore possible to speak of an ecologist Celati? While it is true that *Verso la foce* definitely shows a strong sensitivity for environmental issues and scholar Monica Seeger suggests that Celati has a true awareness of the consequences of consumerism and industrialization on the environment, I would argue that a condemnation of the effect of human activity on the environment is not the main aim of his writings.[159] I agree with Seeger when she states that 'Celati calls society out for what we have done and are still doing to the environment, just as he simultaneously heralds nature's persistent energy' and for this reason 'he ought to be considered not just a foremost contemporary Italian author but also a foremost

[159] See Leandro Palestini, 'Ecologista io? C'è Lucrezio!', *Il Mattino di Padova*, 10 September 1985, p. 19. On the intersections between literature and ecology, see Niccolò Scaffai, *Letteratura e ecologia* (Rome: Carocci, 2017).

contemporary environmental author, Italian or otherwise'.[160] Nevetheless, the representation of pollution in *Verso la foce* is just a natural consequence of the process of intense observation of the external world that I have examined above. This accepts the possibility of non-judgemental observation and representation. A new consideration of the relationship between human beings and the space around them leads both the author and the reader to an environmental awareness and even an ecological approach, even though Celati's work of this period is not limited to it. The environmentalist and anti-anthropocentric tendency of Celati's works of this period is confirmed with particular clarity in the 1986 introduction to *Traversate del deserto*, another interdisciplinary project with photographers and writers that involved also Celati and Ghirri. In the preface, the authors state that human beings are not owners of the planet: 'Noi non siamo i padroni del pianeta, né lo siamo mai stati, benché questa sia la nostra convinzione più profonda'.[161] The same considerations lie behind *Verso la foce* which shows a highly environmentalist perspective and a deep re-thinking of the relationship between human, animals and plants that are all seen as part of existence, with no hierarchies. This approach seems to be linked to Giacomo Leopardi's thought, whose work is often quoted in Celati's books from the 1980s onwards, including *Verso la foce*. In an interview with Severino Cesari, Celati states: 'È stato Leopardi che mi ha aiutato a pensare a queste cose, e a pensare allo spazio. In Leopardi lo spazio è quel vuoto dove tutto svanisce'. In the same interview Celati links language and environment and promotes the

[160] Monica Seeger, *Landscapes in Between. Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), p. 72

[161] *Traversate del deserto*, ed. by Vilbres Rabboni, Gianni Celati, Luigi Ghirri, Roberto Papetti, Giovanni Zaffagnini, Guido Mazzara ad others (Ravenna: Edizioni Essegi, 1986), p. 9. Photographers are Olivio Barbieri, Paul David Barkshire, Jean Paul Curnier, Vittore Fossati, Carlo Gajani, Luigi Ghirri, Guido Guidi, Klaus Kinold, and Manfred Willmann. Writers: Giorgio Agamben, Jean Baudrillard, Gerald Bisinger, Gianni Celati, Jean Paul Curnier, Max Frisch, Gabriel Josipovici, Gilles Lipovetski, Giuliano Scabia.

protection of both: 'Anche il linguaggio fa parte dell'ecosfera, e la sua degradazione ha effetti paragonabili a quella degli alberi e dei fiumi'.[162]

The environmentalist attitude of Celati's *Verso la foce* is evident and it is undoubtedly one aspect to be considered, but I believe that it would be incorrect to read Celati's entire works through an ecocritical perspective. This explains why it is so evident in *Verso la foce*, while it is less frequent or completely absent in other works of the period. Environmentalism and anti-anthropocentrism are certainly two central features of Celati's *impegno* of the 1980s, but they do not describe it in its complexity and do not represent Celati's main interest.

The second key element of Celati's observations during his pilgrimage along the Po valley is rural solitude, as the author states in the *Notizia*. This is an aspect that surprises Celati more than the incredible amount of pollution in that area. A different comprehension of ordinary life that derives from a new observation of the landscape, also leads to a critical representation of the breakdown of human relations. Often in *Verso la foce*, Celati highlights the mistrust which dominates social relations along the Po Valley. The absence of a sense of community is everywhere in the description of life in the plains, with a total absence of solidarity:

> Gli ho chiesto cosa succederebbe se, mentre attraverso le campagne cremonesi, andassi a chiedere un bicchier d'acqua in una casa […]. Mi ha risposto: 'Non glielo danno mica, sa? Quelli della casa si direbbero: ma perché questo viene qui a disturbarci noi che siamo in casa nostra?'. (999-1000)

The narrator's comment links this relational impoverishment and mistrust to the effect of consumerist society, where only business relationships are accepted and seen as normal while all other kind of relations make people suspicious, and misery

[162] Severino Cesari, 'L'artigiano delle parole', *il Manifesto*, 11 March 1989, p. 15.

is not tolerated: 'Se qui uno va a chiedere qualcosa senza che ci sia un commercio di mezzo, è considerato un miserabile. E quando la gente deve guardare in faccia un miserabile, non è contenta' (1000). People seem not to care about others and poverty needs to be hidden. In another passage, Celati asks for a ride, as he has an injured foot. The appearence of a stranger makes people defensive and indifferent to the conditions of the other. No one gives help to the stranger:

> Ho chiesto se qualcuna di loro poteva darmi un passaggio verso Gussola, perché m'era venuta una piaga al piede. Silenzio perplesso delle donne che si guardavano in faccia l'un l'altra, qualcuna diceva che abitava da un'altra parte o che era venuta in bicicletta, ma senza mai rivolgersi a me. Dopo facevano finta che non ci fossi, così sono uscito sul piazzale. (1008)

People across the plains seem to be frightened by the other and prefer to close themselves inside their own houses, in order to limit encounters with strangers:

> Dalla parte opposta, una donna non più giovane affacciata al balcone di un'altra di quelle villette; mi ha sorpreso che avesse la vestaglia quasi aperta, il reggiseno che sporgeva dalla vestaglia. Non so che faccia avessi io quando ho alzato gli occhi dal quaderno. Fatto sta che quella con gesto brusco s'è chiusa la vestaglia, ha chiuso la finestra, abbassato la tapparella, e poi ha abbassato tutte le tapparelle della casa: dichiarazione di guerra con il mondo esterno che sbircia troppo nelle proprietà private. (1010)

The woman's behaviour could be seen as a natural response to the gaze of a strange man, but Celati's interpretation of her reaction shows the emphasis he puts on the absence of a sense of community in the areas he visits and describes. The countryside is often ideally seen as the place where everybody knows each other and relations are still lively, in opposition to the mass solitude of large cities and metropolises. On the contrary, Celati's description of the inhabitants' behaviour shows how solitude affects rural areas like the Po Valley. People hide themselves, ignoring others in order to feel safe: 'Quelle case non hanno volto, hanno solo

aperture di sicurezza e superfici protettive dietro cui ci si va a nascondere. Si esce a vedere se in giro tutto è normale, poi si torna a nascondersi nelle tane' (1058).

> Ormai pochi nelle campagne quelli che rispondono ad un saluto; ieri un giovanotto ha distolto gli occhi d'imbarazzo, stamattina una donna ha fatto finta di non sentirmi, e poco fa qui a Ostellato un automobilista mi ha risposto: 'Cosa?' Solo i vecchi non fingono di aver altro per la testa per non guardarti in faccia, forse stufi di tante finte che hanno dovuto fare nella vita. (1070)

Only what has to do with money seem to deserve attention. Celati suggests that the role of profit as the only aspect which regulates the world has a direct consequences in the impoverishment of human relations. It is significant, in this passage, the stress on the word apathy, the same Celati uses in the *Notizia*, where he proposes the 'racconti d'osservazione' as curative of the lack of interest for the world and others. Celati describes here human activities as apathetic, with refence to the business and commercial rationale behind them. On the contrary, observation contrasts all this and needs to be seen as Celati's proposal for an alternative, a protest and a resistance against how the world seems to be organized in contemporary time: 'Apatia di tutto il funzionamento esterno. Ci sono gli orari, le corriere e i treni che partono, i traffici commerciali e le ragioni amministrative, l'astratto gioco del mondo da mandare avanti, e per il resto: canzone senza sentimento' (1070).

Celati's trilogy of the 1980s represents a form of *impegno* against those tendencies of contemporary society. Celati conceives his own works and his revisited idea of literature, re-generated after the collaboration with Ghirri, as an effort to fight apathy. Tales of observation and listening to other voices telling stories could serve as a tool to create a new sense of community which seems to be lost: 'Si è disposti all'osservazione quando si ha voglia di mostrare ad altri quello che si vede. È il legame con gli altri che dà colori alle cose, le quali altrimenti appaiono smorte'.

(1075). Observation and storytelling are the two sides of the same coin: Celati sees them as one possible resistance against indifference in contemporary society. This is particularly explicit in *Verso la foce*, but not limited to it. The environmentalist awareness of these works is only one aspect of a wide consideration on existence, which shows Celati's critical approach to contemporary society.

Celati engages with the effect of consumerism on people and landscape through his idea of literature. Storytelling has thus an ethical and social dimension, as it is curative of the 'vuoto centrale dell'anima' and paves the way to a new sense of community, being something that one does with and for the other, outside any logic of profit. On the contrary, abstract theories and interpretations lead to the convinction that everything is known and, for this, to indifference towards the world and others. Once again, the word 'apathetic' returns in the following passage, where Celati expresses the therapeutic role of storytelling, as a way to fight apathy, exactly the opposite of those all-embracing theories:

> C'è sempre il vuoto centrale dell'anima da arginare, per quello si seguono immagini viste o sognate, per raccontarle ad altri e respirare un po' meglio. Ma certuni ti fanno passar subito la voglia di raccontare: loro cercano solo 'le ragioni' del mondo, dunque prendono ogni immagine solo come apatica informazione sul funzionamento esterno. (1075)

In the 1980s, Celati's works engage with contemporary society differently than before. Celati shows here forms of *impegno* that clearly arise from philosophical and ethical premises, less evident in his previous books, and proposes an alternative through his mode of writing, which radically changes with respect to his fiction of the 1970s. I have shown how the observational method, rather than being a mere stylistic choice, represents for Celati a way to contrast the damages of a society based on profit. He describes those damages in details, both for their

consequences on environment and on people, and proposes observation and storytelling as ways to resist and as an alternative. By stating that observation and storytelling lead us to be less apathetic and detached from the world and others, Celati implicitly suggests a new collaboration between people, grounded on the common awareness of the finitude of life, which derives from a concrete experience of the external world. As I have shown, this also means a new relationship with the environment and the development of an ecologist *impegno* which is totally original in Celati's works. In the next section, I will analyse more closely the role of storytelling in this period of Celati's career and its importance in the consideration of the forms of *impegno* in his works, even after the 1980s.

### 2.3 The Ethics of Storytelling. Writing as a Social Practice from *Narratori delle riserve* to *Il semplice*

The idea of literature as everyday storytelling that Celati develops during his collaboration with Ghirri gains new shades of meaning in the years to come and Celati's *impegno* takes new forms.

*Verso la foce* marks the beginning of a second seven-year long interruption: 'Verso la foce è stato il terminale di tutti i miei lavori, e ho perduto l'orientamento', as Celati states in an interview.[163] During this period, besides publishing a new version of his books of the 1970s *Guizzardi*, *La banda* and *Lunario*, collected in the volume *Parlamenti buffi* (1989), Celati dedicates himself to the anthology of writers *Narratori delle riserve*, first published in the communist newspaper *il Manifesto*

[163] 'Letteratura come accumulo di roba sparsa', p. 36.

from 1988 to 1990 and then as a separate volume in 1992, published by Feltrinelli. Celati also works at the journal, *Il semplice. Almanacco delle prose* (1995-1997) together with other writers, such as Ermanno Cavazzoni, Daniele Benati, Ugo Cornia and others, and releases his first film, the documentary *Strada provinciale delle anime* (1991). Besides *Narratori delle riserve*, during this second 'narrative silence' (1989-1996), Celati publishes several articles, essays and translations.[164]

After *Alì Babà*, *Alice disambientata* and *Viaggio in Italia*, Celati is protagonist of other collective experiences: the anthology *Narratori delle riserve*, the journal *Il semplice*, and the documentaries. *Il semplice* is probably the one that most encourages Celati's return to prose. Indeed, in 1996, Celati publishes *Recita dell'attore Vecchiatto nel teatro di Rio Saliceto*, a story that continues in 2010 with *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna*. From 1996 onwards Celati will then publish several narrative works: *Avventure in Africa* (1998), *Cinema naturale* (2001), *Fata morgana* (2005), *Vite di pascolanti* (2006), *Passar la vita a Diol Kadd*, (2007), *Costumi degli italiani* (2008), and *Selve d'amore*, (2013), plus *Recita* and *Sonetti*.

The anthology *Narratori delle riserve* originates from Celati's strong disapproval of what he sees as the tendency, not limited to the Italian context, of publishers to favour the mass production of commercial books with no interest in language and storytelling as an everyday craft and social practice, an idea which I will analyse here. I will not, however, discuss the pertinence of this critique, which might be considered as generic (it is clear that many publishers do not follow the

[164] *Narratori delle riserve* will have a strong influence on a new generation of writers. Many of the participants who made their debut with the anthology will then become prominent voices of Italian literature from the 1990s onwards. Some significant examples are Valerio Magrelli, Grazia Verasani, Franco Arminio and Rossana Campo. On *Narratori delle riserve*, see Mario Boselli, 'I narratori delle riserve', *Nuova Corrente*, 40, 114 (1993), 195-210 and *Altre storie: inventario della nuova narrativa italiana fra anni '80 e '90*, ed. by Raffaele Cardone, Franco Galato, and Fulzio Panzeri (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1996).

editorial policy that Celati criticizes). What I will try to demonstrate is that Celati's new collective project is grounded in a critical rethinking of the function of literature in opposition to new tendencies that consumerism promoted. The word *reserves*, in fact, contains an attempt to preserve narration from the risk of consumerism, as Celati writes in his introduction to the Feltrinelli edition of *Narratori delle riserve*: 'Riserve nel senso di far riserva, di non consumare via tutto per darlo in pasto all'attualità.' The project of *Narratori delle riserve* starts in *Il manifesto* on 30 October 1988. On the front page, the critic Severino Cesari introduces Celati's new column with his article *Nelle riserve di Gianni Celati*. Already from Cesari's introduction, the reader understands the spirit of the project. In opposition to consumerism and authorship, Celati proposes an idea of literature as the craft of everyday, 'natural' storytellers: 'L'idea iniziale di Gianni, subito condivisa, non era quella di proporre un'altra vetrina di autori più o meno noti, ma di avviare un artigianato del racconto breve'.[165] 'Riserva' has multiple meanings: it has to do with endangered species, human groups or cultures to be protected before they vanish, it gives the sense of preciousness (reserve wine, for example), but it is also connected to discretion (a reserved person) and limitation (terms of a contract). I believe that all of these can be used for Celati's idea that stands behind the anthology: Celati and Cesari, in fact, use the term polysemously. *Narratori delle riserve* concentrates all of these concepts as it is an attempt to preserve storytelling as a craftwork, which is in danger of disappearing. The anthology has the aim of protecting it for its

[165] Severino Cesari, 'Nelle riserve di Gianni Celati', *il Manifesto*, 30-31 October 1988, p. 1. Severino Cesari was one of the most influential editorial agents in Italy (director and funder of the editorial series Einaudi Stile libero). Celati often focuses on work as craftmanship. This is for instance a specific aspect of Celati's first film, *Strada provinciale delle anime*, where many of the writers involved in *Narratori delle riserve* and *Il semplice* will be acting (Ermanno Cavazzoni, Jean Talon, Grazia Verasani, Daniele Benati, Marianne Schneider, etc.). On Celati's idea of storytelling as craftmanship, see Claudia Nocentini, 'Celati, artigiano della narrativa', *Civiltà italiana*, 19, 1 (1995), 129-139.

immeasurable value. Discretion, carefulness and self-imposed rules are some of the main characteristics of Celati's understanding of literature at this point. *Narratori delle riserve* thus appears to be in open contrast with some of the ruling tendencies of contemporary society, which on the contrary seems to prefer consumer goods and urgency, always in the name of profit, as Celati states in a 1989 conversation with Cesari about the *Manifesto* version of the anthology:

> Riserve vuol dire qualcosa che non viene subito utilizzato e sprecato. Al contrario, l'attualità consiste nell'utilizzazione immediata di tutto, nel far scoppiare ogni evento con il baccano, così che non resta niente dietro di noi. Non c'è più continuità tra passato e presente, non c'è più alcuna riserva.[166]

This is perfectly coherent with the ideas expressed at the time of *Alì Babà* and *Alice disambientata*, while at the same time it acquires new shades coming from Celati's more specific considerations on oral storytellers which had arisen from the recent collaboration with Ghirri. *Narratori delle riserve* rejects the idea of professional authorship and proposes an alternative idea of literature, based on everyday storytelling, which Celati considers a 'natural' ability that everyone has. Speaking about the *Manifesto* version of the anthology, Celati underlines the role of narrative abilities in practical, daily life and suggests that the function of *Narratori delle riserve* is precisely to reconnect that 'natural' ability to the writing process. Celati thus strongly opposes an idea of literature as social privilege and, on the contrary, promotes the social role of literature, which 'naturally' has, in his view, direct implications in everyday life. A critique of realism finds space here, as Celati criticizes books and authors that consider themselves able to give a faithful representation of reality, referring to it in its objectivity. In Celati's view, a new form of realism in contemporary literature tends to ignore the fundamental role of

[166] Severino Cesari, 'L'artigiano delle parole', p. 15.

imagination in the understanding of all aspects of world and life. Celati claims that the reference to reality is thus just an illusion: 'Illusione di poter circoscrivere quanto accade entro un perimetro di determinazioni 'oggettive''.[167] On the contrary, Celati believes that there is no such a rigid distiction between reality and imagination, as the second is needed to understand the first:

> Noi siamo tutti narratori naturali, perché durante la giornata compiamo l'attività di narrare nelle più varie circostanze, raccontando aneddoti, esperienze, ricordi, barzellette. Del resto la capacità di capire e apprezzare storie viene appresa molto presto dai bambini, assieme a certe possibilità d'uso della lingua madre. E le narrazioni sono dovunque una delle funzioni centrali delle lingue, l'attività verbale più praticata in assoluto, ed un addestramento decisivo dell'individuo umano […]. In breve, le narrazioni ci servono come il pane, ci servono per immaginare com'è fatto il mondo attraverso un buon ascolto delle parole. Ma appena il dogma moderno che distingue la cosiddetta realtà dalla cosiddetta immaginazione si impone, subito le narrazioni appaiono soltanto come fantasie per svagarsi dalla cruda realtà […]. Se la letteratura è divenuta un campo asfittico, un luogo di puro privilegio sociale, un'area di dilettantismo professionalizzato, io credo dipenda in larga parte dal fatto che si è perso di vista il legame strettissimo tra la nostra capacità naturale di raccontare e l'abilità d'un narratore specializzato.[168]

Celati's critique addresses the role of the narrator in relation to the reader. What he would like to promote is an idea of literature as 'ceremony', obtained by reconnecting contemporary fiction to the ancient manner of oral storytellers, who take care of the reader and prepare the events with a set of formulas which have the aim of preventing the reader feeling lost (Celati often quotes examples taken from epic and chivalric poetry, such as Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, and from the *novella*). Literature as storytelling is thus a 'ritual', which recreates a calm environment in which it is possible to listen to a voice telling a story, rather than being set by the writer in a situation of

[167] Gianni Celati, 'L'angelo del racconto', p. 8.
[168] Gianni Celati, 'L'angelo del racconto', *il Manifesto*, 30-31 October 1988, p. 8. On the concept of 'narratori naturali', see Marina Spunta, 'Il narrare semplice, naturale di Gianni Celati e i suoi progetti editoriali', *Rassegna europea di letteratura* italiana, 22 (2003), 53-72.

confusion and emergency. Celati sees in the use of reality and realism in contemporary literature a sly form of production of excitement and false identification in the reader, with the sole aim of selling copies. Celati's critique thus tackles the fact that literature and the editorial processes follow the commercial reasons of the market, and he proposes instead an idea of literature that wants to protect what he sees as the ancient social role of telling stories. Celati seems to have in mind something that goes further than the mere fact of writing books, his struggle being focused on the function of storytelling in orienting people through the often dramatic events of life and, especially, the end of it. What Celati sees in commercial literature is instead the use of death as a tool for producing excitement, namely the reduction of literature to mere entertainment:

> Se qualcuno avesse voglia di fare delle belle statistiche, potrebbe anche accorgersi che il novantanove per cento dei romanzi che vengono oggi prodotti nel mondo intero sono confezionati allo stesso modo. Indipendentemente dalla lingua madre in cui sono scritti. Ed assolvono tutti ad un obbligo di drammatizzare la 'realtà', con patetiche vicende sociali o psicologiche o storiche o criminali, allo scopo di mettere il lettore nella posizione di chi ascolta qualcosa che riguarda uno stato di emergenza. I vecchi narratori non si comportavano mai così; al contrario guidavano a poco a poco il lettore verso una esperienza memorabile, riguardante uno stato d'emergenza. Davano un carattere cerimoniale, rituale, alle storie di calamità, dolore e morte che raccontavano. Guidando il lettore (e non mettendolo di fronte a crude scene che 'parlano da sé') mettevano in gioco tutte le cautele di cui abbiamo bisogno per accogliere un lutto, una disperazione, uno spavento, senza esimerci da quel tributo affettivo che viene chiamato pietà. Al contrario il romanziere moderno campa sull'esibizione di una certa spietatezza. Strana cosa che noi leggiamo un romanzo poliziesco pieno di morti, proprio per dimenticare che la morte incombe sulla vita […]. Ciò che rende falsa la posizione del romanziere, o comunque del narratore specializzato nella nostra epoca, è il fatto che egli dovrà sempre occultare l'unica esperienza della verità che ci può toccare attraverso le parole. Questa

> esperienza è quella che riguarda la continuità tra il gesto del narrare e l'incombenza della morte, come orizzonte di tutte le esperienze.[169]

These considerations express an ethical dimension of writing that is fundamental to Celati's works from the 1980s onwards. As I have already shown for *Verso la foce*, Celati believes that there is a continuity between the act of storytelling and the end of life. Every story has to do with the passing of time and, as a result, with death. In this sense, narration assumes a social feature: the acceptance and awareness of the limit of life leads us to feel compassion for a common destiny that all living beings share. This awareness permits people to behave in a different way, re-considering their relationship with others. Compassion ('pietà') is the essential feature of the narrator in Celati's ideal, in opposition to the cruelty ('spietatezza') of the majority of contemporary authors. Ethical categories often return in Celati's works of this period: empathy versus apathy, compassion versus cruelty. In his view, an indissoluble bond exists between literature and our relationship with others. There is in these remarks a clear understanding of literature as a social activity and people as social animals: as Celati mentions in the same 1989 conversation with Severino Cesari, there is no effective space for real independence or individualism as human beings are always linked to others. It is interesting how Celati uses the concept of common sense and the obvious to indicate what unite people. Common sense is clearly a concept which is considered at best naive, however, Celati uses it with the meaning of a basic shared knowledge directly related to our daily routine and

[169] 'L'angelo del racconto', p. 8. Similar considerations are in Gianni Celati, 'Le posizioni narrative rispetto all'altro', *Nuova Corrente*, 43, 1996, pp. 3-18. In all these considerations there is a strong stress on the 'mother tongue'. This is particularly significant for a translator like Celati. It is also interesting because Celati's travel towards the mouth of the Po in the 1980s also arises from his will to search for the place where his mother was born, Sandolo, close to Portomaggiore. See *Il ritorno del viaggiatore*: 'In treno nell'alba verso Polesella, ho cominciato il viaggio alla ricerca del paese dove è nata mia madre […], un piccolissimo cartello diceva SANDOLO. In quel paese è nata mia madre' (Gianni Celati, *Narratori delle pianure*, p. 105).

deriving from our common destiny of mortality. These considerations also shed new light on the choice of obvious, unexceptional places as the focus of Celati's books and, later, of his cinema. Common sense as the ordinary, the obvious which regulates daily life is the tightest connection between people:

> Io penso che siamo sempre al servizio degli altri, per tutta la vita, quali che siano le nostre illusioni soggettivistiche, o le nostre illusioni di potenza e di indipendenza. Per questo l'ovvietà e il senso comune sono la base di tutti i nostri discorsi e di tutte le nostre aspettative. L'ovvietà è semplicemente il nostro vertiginoso legame con gli altri[170]

Celati's choice to re-connect literature to the tradition of oral storytelling is primarily a revolt against a use of language that seems dominant in contemporary society: the use of stereotypical language, often taken from the media, which hides (or shows) an absence of critical thought. In Celati's view, language has a fundamental role in every aspect of life: 'È il linguaggio che crea i fatti, mettendo in una certa luce alcune serie di eventi, che sarebbero tutt'altra cosa se ne parlassimo in modo diverso'. This once again shows Celati's commitment through language, which is the very characteristic of his entire career: *Narratori delle riserve* in fact confirms Celati's firm belief in the ideological nature of language as it openly contrasts the contemporary tendency to give all-embracing expert-like interpretations of the events using a stereotypical language. The plain, simple style that Celati uses in his works of the 1980s, leaving behind the experimental language of his debut, has the aim of leaving space for thought and the description of what the author observes during his pilgrimage in the Po valley. To preserve narrative instinct from those tendencies is for Celati a battle against a sort of dogmatism that the language of the mass media fosters and spreads. Celati claims that politicians, journalists, successful

[170] 'L'artigiano delle parole', p. 15.

authors, experts and academics are all involved in the dissemination of such a language, with the consequence of a very dangerous absence or surrender of critical thought. In the same conversation with Severino Cesari in *il Manifesto*, when asked about the significance of literature, Celati replies: 'Forse vuol dire riaccostarsi al tranquillo transito delle frasi di bocca in bocca. Il linguaggio e le sue forme si trasmettono nella mitezza, di madre in figlio, di nonno in nipote. Così si trasmettono le favole, i poemi epici, le poesie. Un transito calmo delle parole, questa cura a cui bisogna pure che qualcuno si dedichi'.[171] It is evident how this statement sounds unusual in a contemporary world that endlessly chases the latest events and does not leave time for thought. Literature has the role of preserving spaces for a calm passage of words, for listening to language and to others. The ceremony of literature thus has the fundamental role of preserving memory and trasmitting knowledge:

> Direi che narrare è un cerimoniale. Non importa cosa racconti, le tue intenzioni contano pochissimo, quello che conta è la capacità di formare immagini e figure, e di presentarle agli altri nel modo dovuto. È il compito essenziale d'ogni arte, quello di formare immagini che si trasmettano senza giochi di forza, in una loro riserva. Solo così poi possono diventare per altri memoria, reminiscenza. Tutto ciò che si trasmette, si trasmette per immagini e figure. Si osserva qualcosa soltanto quando si ha voglia di trasmetterlo ad altri.[172]

Celati's considerations draw on the ideas of Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* or *Angelus novus* and the 1936 essay on Nicolaj Semënovič Leskov *The Storyteller* in particular.[173] In the essay, Benjamin refers to the restitution of experience as one of the fundamental components of storytelling – 'the abilty to share experiences':

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[171] 'L'artigiano delle parole', p. 15.
[172] 'L'artigiano delle parole', p. 15.
[173] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', in *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935-1938*, translated by E. Jephcott, H. Eiland and others and edited by H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.-London: The Belknap Press, 2002), pp. 143-166. See also Walter Benjamin, 'Il narratore. Considerazioni sull'opera di Nicola Leskov', in *Angelus Novus. Saggi e frammenti*, edited by Renato Solmi (Turin: Einaudi, 1962), pp. 247-274.

'Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn' (p. 143). Storytelling is set in sharp contrast with the bourgeoise phenomenon of the genre of the novel. Epic remembrance is a key component of the 'muse-inspired' element of the narrative. For Benjamin, 'remembrance [*Eingedenken*], the muse-derived element of the novel' is added to 'recollection [*Gedächtnis*], the muse-derived element of the story' (p. 154). Benjamin also argues that the activity of storytelling is strictly linked to ancient and traditional crafts and it is itself a craftamanship, namely part of practical life.

Celati shares Benjamin's dichotomy between pre-bourgeois activity of 'narrare' and the novelistic 'scrivere' and looks for examples of the first. According to Benjamin, in the activity of 'narrare' there is the restitution of an experience. Often this experience is in the form of a journey, a journey into memory, or a real journey in space and time.

The connection is evident here between these considerations and Celati's works of the 1980s, especially *Narratori delle pianure*, as an example of the activity of 'narrare' rather than 'scrivere', and of *Verso la foce*, which is a real journey in the Po valley which becomes an experience to be told. In his preface, in fact, Celati states that observation and storytelling are possible only if there is the will to transmit what we observe to others. The social function of literature as storytelling thus represents the main aspect of Celati's *impegno* in this period.

The link between language, listening and the ethical purposes of storytelling is explicit in Celati's introduction to the newspaper version of *Narratori delle riserve*. The title, *L'angelo del racconto*, is itself reminiscent of the reading of Benjamin and refers to a symbolic angel that guides narrators to listen to the sound of their mother tongue. Here again, Celati's attention is to language rather than to

content. Storytelling permits people to feel the limits of their lived experience and to act accordingly to that awareness:

> C'è un angelo all'orizzonte d'ogni forma di racconto, e questo è l'angelo che ci guida all'ascolto della lingua madre. Nella lingua madre tutti i racconti sono già presenti, in stato di germinazione, perché i racconti non sono altro che il sentito dire sul mondo. Però evidentemente ci vuole che quest'angelo ci renda capaci di ascoltare quel sentito dire, e dunque ci sfiori con la sua ala per farci sentire non tanto i 'contenuti', bensì il suono di tutti i racconti che nascono ogni momento dalla lingua madre. Ciò non può avvenire con un'altra lingua proprio perché è quel suono così speciale, quel suono che parla solo a noi, a suggerirci i racconti. Nello stesso tempo, quando quell'angelo ci sfiora, noi sentiamo anche gli enormi limiti entro cui ci colloca. Non solo i limiti della nostra morte, ma anche i limiti della lingua stessa, come qualcosa che inarrestabilmente si avvia verso la propria morte e la propria trasformazione […]. In altri termini, quell'angelo sfiorandoci ci rende capaci di raccontare e di usare le narrazioni come una terapia.[174]

The therapy Celati refers to in the last line of the passage is exactly what he sees, already in *Verso la foce*, as the beneficial effect of listening to a narrating voice. In Celati's view, this permits one to be constantly aware of the limit of existence and, at the same time, it makes people conscious of being part of something in common with others.

It is very telling that this new project arises from the opposition to the *status quo* of literature, exactly like *Alì Babà*. Some aspects link this critique to the previous experiences of the journal and the 1977 seminar on Alice. While scholars have argued that *Il semplice* somehow represents the accomplishment of what *Alì Babà* was supposed to be, I would add that *Narratori delle riserve* needs to be seen as the first step towards it. I argue that there is a similarity between the first documents of the 1968 journal (and *Alice disambientata*) and the 1988 newspaper column. In both cases, Celati is looking for 'un altro modo di narrare' and to do so

[174] Gianni Celati, *L'angelo del racconto*, p. 8. See also Anna Maria Chierici, *La scrittura terapeutica. Saggio su Gianni Celati* (Bologna: Archetipo libri, 2011), Ch.1.

he wants to include in his choice of writings that which official literature normally rejects. In Cesari's words:

> Possiamo così innestarci nel sentito dire quotidiano, eliminare la pesante separazione tra 'realtà' e 'finzione', recuperare storie che la letteratura d'autore trascura: eventi comici, storie familiari, leggende locali, notizie su un ambiente oppure un paesaggio, storie cliniche e storie campagnole, parabole e fandonie, visioni oppure miracoli.[175]

Celati's reserves have the aim of opening a space for forms of narration that do not follow the dynamics of industrial production. Those dynamics seem to be dominant from the 1980s onwards, not only in the literary field but also in all aspects of human life. What Celati opposes here is the idea of profit as the driving force of world and life:

> La letteratura, così come gli affari, tende a essere intesa esclusivamente come un prodotto industriale all'americana. Il tentativo di Celati è di provare un altro modo di narrare, diverso dai modelli anglosassoni dominanti del 'romanzo ben fatto' e del racconto come short story. È il modo di narrare più tradizionale della novella […]. Questa struttura più semplice è data dal fatto che in una novella l'accento è posto sul 'dire', non sul 'mostrare': dunque la sua struttura si avvicina di più a quella dei racconti che facciamo ogni giorno.[176]

After *Alì Babà* in 1968 and *Alice disambientata* in 1977, another collective experience that marks a new begin in Celati's career coincides with a very special year in history. Celati completes *Narratori delle riserve* around 1989 when the Berlin Wall was demolished. Nevertheless, the political dimension of those projects (*Alì Babà-Alice disambientata-Narratori delle riserve-Il semplice*) has to do with an opposition to the effect of a long-lasting phenomenon, namely the triumph of free market politics, rather than to contingent events, and lies in their aim of preserving a

[175] 'Nelle riserve di Gianni Celati', p. 1.
[176] 'Nelle riserve di Gianni Celati', p. 1.

space for different forms of literature, which are, at the same time, different ways of existing. Celati locates the beginning of a new phase in global capitalism in 1979, as he states in a 2009 conversation with Luca Sebastiani in *l'Unità*, and links this to his own writing and to editorial policies:

> Quando ho cominciato a scrivere, quasi tutti gli amici che avevo erano di sinistra e davano per scontata una rivoluzione imminente o futura. Ma l'unica rivoluzione che poi ho visto è stata quella della signora Thatcher, primo ministro inglese dal 1979. Tutto era pronto perché succedesse quello che doveva succedere: l'avvento al potere del capitalismo finanziario che schiaccia tutte le forme di produzione (industriale o artigianale), e poi della new market economy con cui il profitto diventa l'unico ideale sulla terra. La signora Thatcher non ha fatto che sdoganare tendenze che già esistevano: le mete oscure del potere finanziario, l'abolizione d'ogni veduta comunitaria, la guerra individuale per passare davanti agli altri. Con la signora Thatcher queste tendenze sono diventate un luogo comune, diffuso in tutto il mondo. E posso dire anche quando sono arrivate in Italia, e come hanno cominciato a condizionare tutto ciò che si chiamava letteratura.[177]

Celati observes that Thatcher's ascent to power was the fundamental contribution that led some already existing tendencies (the free market economy, the pre-eminence of financial power, the elimination of the welfare state) to become dominant all over the world. Celati then identifies in the passage from symbolic books such as Enrico Palandri's *Boccalone* (1979) and Tondelli's *Altri libertini* (1980) to the so-called 'young Italian literature' the moment in which the same characteristics of Thatcher's political and economical revolution started to influence Italian literature itself: 'E mentre la signora Thatcher apriva la nuova era, da noi iniziava la caccia all'autore giovane. Qui sono subito scattati tutti i meccanismi del futuro: il trattamento dello scrivere come merce, il nome dell'autore come feticcio, le etichette stantie con cui parlarne, la competizione tra case editrici'.

[177] *L'Unità*, 2 June 2009: here I quote from Gianni Celati, 'Defurbizzare la letteratura, la vita etc.', in *Conversazioni del vento volatore*, 142-147, p. 142.

While Celati expresses his apocalyptic view, shared with Benjamin, that people are no longer able to tell stories, he simultaneously shows an alternative, both with his works of the 1980s and with the new projects of *Narratori delle riserve* and *Il semplice*. The column and the journal demonstrate that literature as the craft of everyday storytelling is still resisting, despite Thatcher's revolution, as they are themselves collections of writings of what Benjamin referred to as example of 'narrare'. The first tale of the anthology in the newspaper version is Benjamin's *Rastelli racconta…* (from *Geschichten und Novellistisches*), introduced and translated by Anne Barberis. I have already underlined how Benjamin's *Angelus novus* represented a key text for Celati, already at the time of *Finzioni occidentali*, and it is still in his mind while elaborating the ideas of *Narratori delle riserve* (Celati quotes *Angelus novus* in his proemial text *L'angelo del racconto* to refer to a shared idea of the narrator). In the weeks to come, a great number of writers will contribute to the column in *il Manifesto*. Celati himself writes other introductions, namely to Georges Perec's *Il viaggio d'inverno*, Mario Sargiani's *Racconti di luce*, Ermanno Cavazzoni's *Brevi vite di idioti*, Patrizia Guarneri's *L'incantamento*, Charles-Albert Cingria's *Descrizione di un paesaggio*, Gabriel Josipovici's *Incendio nella casa di lei*, Sandra Petrignani's *Vecchio in giardino*, José Bergamín's *Da cuore a stella*, Antonio Delfini's *Ragazza nella notte* and Valerio Magrelli's *Illenomix*.

The quantity and variety of authors involved in *Narratori delle riserve* confirms Celati's idea of literature: the anthology does not aim at establishing a canon or at creating new literary authorities. The principle is quite the opposite and it shows once again Celati's *impegno* for a resistance and opposition to some dominant tendencies: in his view, storytelling is a natural instinct that belongs to everyone, but it needs a space (a reserve) where it can exist, as contemporary society and the

literature industry are following other paths. Despite the fact that it was not among its goals to promote individual authors, but rather a collective idea of literature, *Narratori* has had an extraordinary role in the development and renewal of the Italian literary panorama, giving resonance to the works of many previously unknown writers who would gain centrality and importance in the years to come. Even though participants are predominantly men, important women writers made their narrative debut within the anthology (Rossana Campo, Patrizia Guarneri, Grazia Verasani), while other well-known female authors will find space in the anthology (Ginevra Bompiani, Marina Mizzau, Sandra Petrignani, just to mention a few).[178] The column ends on 25 February 1990. Two years later, in June, Feltrinelli publishes *Narratori delle riserve* as an anthological book. Some of the authors included in the Feltrinelli anthology are the same as the newspaper version, others were eliminated, others were absent in the newspaper and are now included.[179]

In September 1995 Feltrinelli begins publishing the journal *Il semplice. Almanacco delle prose*. Celati is among the editors, together with Ermanno

[178] A complete list of the authors involved in the anthology can serve as an example of the variety of contributions and give a sense of the importance that *Narratori* has had in the development of Italian narrative: Marina Mizzau, Giorgio Messori, Beppe Sebaste, Richard Brautigan (translated by Celati), Grazia Verasani, Elvio Fachinelli, Mauro Sargiani, Ginevra Bompiani, Johann Peter Hebel (transated by Celati), Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, Davide Ferrario, Flann O'Brien (translated by Daniele Benati), Daniele Gorret, Uve Fischer, Sebastiano Vassalli, Liu Ji, Li Zongyuan (translated by Anne Barberis), Giorgio van Straten, Gian Ruggero Manzoni, Tony Cafferky (translated by Daniele Benati), Sandro Veronesi, Georges Perec (translated by Celati), Mauro Sargiani, Severino Cesari, Biancamaria Frabotta, Henri Michaux (translated by Celati), Daniele Benati, Michel Serres, Soren Kierkegaard, Rocco Brindisi, Ermanno Cavazzoni, Luigi Ghirri, Jean Paul Curnier, Peter Handke (translated by Lidia Seci), Giuliano Scabia, Nico Orengo, Patrizia Guarnieri, Charles-Albert Cingria, Attilio Lolini, Arturo Loria, Franco Arminio, Luigi Trombi, Gabriel Josipovici, Claudio Piersanti, Enrico Palandri, Gianni Donaudi, W.S. Porter, Sandra Petrignani, Giampiero Comolli, Marisa Milani, Giuliano Scabia, José Bergamin, Alexander Kluge, Antonio Delfini, Valerio Magrelli. In the same period, in *il Manifesto*, Celati also returns to the works of Carlo Ginzburg. This is not part of *Narratori delle riserve*, but it is interesting to see that Ginzburg is still present in Celati's mind, twenty years after their collaboration for *Alì Babà*. See Gianni Celati, 'Lo stregone quotidiano', *il Manifesto*, 23 April 1989, p. 7 and 'Sciamani d'amore', *il Manifesto*, 30 April 1989, p. 13.

[179] The following are present both in the newspaper version and in the Feltrinelli edition: Arminio, Benati, Bompiani, Brindisi, Cavazzoni, Fachinelli, Magrelli, Messori, Orengo, Petrignani, Piersanti, Sargiani, Scabia, Sebaste. New authors are: Marco Belpoliti, Rossana Campo, Patrizia Cavalli, Alice Ceresa, Mara Cini, Enzo Fabbrucci, Lino Gabellone, Gabriele Latemar, Luigi Monteleone, Roberto Papetti, Nino Pedretti, Massimo Riva, Maurizio Salabelle, Marianne Schneider (who introduced Hebel in *Il manifesto*), Lisabetta Serra, Gaetano Testa.

Cavazzoni, Daniele Benati, Jean Talon, Marianne Schneider and Michelina Borsari. The first issue, edited by Cavazzoni, contains illustrations of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and an artichoke on the cover.[180] Both are constants of the journal: every issue is dedicated to a book and each one has a vegetable or fruit on the cover (a pomegranate, a grape, a pumpkin, a sunflower and a poppy). The other constant elements are illustrations: each issue has imaginary portaits of protagonists of masterpieces of world literature, namely Ivan Aleksandrovic Gončarov's *Oblomov*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Rudolf Erich Raspe's *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Münchhausen*, Ludovico Ariosto's paladin Astolfo and the picaresque novel *Simplicius Simplicissimus* by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen. *Il semplice* gathers other texts and authors that have deeply influenced Celati's entire career, such as Giorgio Manganelli, Antonio Delfini, Luigi Malerba, Luigi Ghirri, Cesare Zavattini (through his friend Alfredo Gianolio's texts), Teofilo Folengo, Samuel Beckett. Furthermore, *Il semplice* involved some of the most important authors of the contemporary Italian literary landscape, such as Antonio Tabucchi, Stefano Benni and Ugo Cornia.

The name *Il semplice* derives from the Garden of Simples, the ancient name for a botanical garden where medicinal herbs grow. 'Semplici' ('medicamentum simplex') was the name of those herbs, the properties of which help to give relief or treat disease. *Il semplice* compares the effect of medicinal plants to the effect of literature as a therapy, confirming an idea that was already present in *Verso la foce* and *Narratori delle riserve*, as pointed out in the previous pages of this chapter: writing fiction and reading it (especially out loud, as the journal was born from the 1992 project *Viva voce*, a series of meetings on the theme of vocality and listening)

[180] On Cervantes and Celati, see Marco Codebò, 'Cervantes in Celati', *Forum Italicum*, XLVII, 3 (2013), pp. 540-556.

have the same therapeutic benefit as medicinal plants and can relieve the pain of existence: 'Anche il leggere e lo scrivere scritti di fantasia contiene un'eminente virtù medicinale, che può aiutare casi gravissimi o accompagnare una lunga convalescenza, lunga a volte come tutta una vita'.[181]

The comparison between fiction and medicinal herbs opens each issue, together with a rather comic catalogue of possible stories, with the function of encouraging imagination. Each issue will then give examples of the categories named in the catalogue:

> Qui segue, come fosse un erbario, il catalogo provvisorio delle prose e narrazioni secondo la specie, con l'avvertimento che tale inventario è parziale, estensibile, forse illimitato e sovrabbondante; tuttavia non è forse inutile, se potrà suscitare lo spirito immaginativo dei coltivatori di prose. Ogni numero dell'almanacco darà esempi di alcune tra le innumerevoli specie, ne aggiungerà all'elenco di nuove da ricercare, cancellerà quelle che si dimostrino non esistenti in natura.[182]

At the moment of its publication, *Il semplice* generates a debate on its apparent disengagement. Scholar Goffredo Fofi accused the editors of the journal of being elitist and detached from reality:

> In un mondo che se ne cade (e se ne cade! se ne cade!...), ci sono letterati […] che si contentano di tirarsi da lato (ma mantenendo tantissime complicità via università, media, editoria…) e giocherellare con un loro modesto e scipito fantasticare […] in quest'Italia preda di così tanta imbecillità politico-

[181] 'Catalogo delle prose secondo la specie', *Il semplice*, 1 (1996), p. 7. It is important to notice that the idea of a curative effect of literature was already there at the time of *Comiche* and *Alì Babà*. In many details, it is possible to consider *Il semplice* a completion of the project of *Alì Babà*.

[182] The use of literary structures for creating stories is very similar to the rules that Georges Perec gave himself for his writings. Not by chance, Perec is a major model for the writers gathered around *Il semplice* and was one of the authors included in the newspaper version of *Narratori delle riserve*. Some of the protagonists of *Il semplice* and *Narratori delle riserve* are members of the *Oplepo* (Opificio di letteratura potenziale): Ermanno Cavazzoni, Valerio Magrelli, Jean Talon. Other members were Edoardo Sanguineti and mathematicians like Piergiorgio Odifreddi and Furio Honsell. The *Oplepo* is the Italian version of the french *Oulipo* (*Ouvriere de Littérature Potentielle*), founded by the writer Raymond Queneau and the mathematician François Le Lionnais. The *Oulipo* had among his members Italo Calvino and Perec himself.

> televisiva […], non credo basti rivendicare silenziosamente una santa complicità.[183]

Fofi's words confirm how a similar idea of *impegno*, which considers politically committed only those works which adopt realism and present themselves as a direct condemnation of specific social or political events, was still strong in Italy in the mid-1990s. This view seems to ignore the presence of different forms of political commitment in contemporary culture, whose *impegno* is instead evident in the critique of aspects of contemporary society through the idea of literature itself. Language, style and content contribute to undermine those aspects, even if those works are outside realism or do not directly refer to current news. Contrary to what Fofi claims, I believe that *Il semplice* is one main example of *impegno* through imagination, which has an extraordinary capacity to challenge the dominating imaginary that Fofi himself refers to in his article ('quest'Italia preda di così tanta imbecillità politico-televisiva') and does so through literature. By collecting ancient and new texts with the aim of re-connecting old storytellers to contemporary writings and of going beyond the barriers between what is normally considered to be literature and what is not, *Il semplice* reinforces the social role of imagination as theorized by Celati in the years I am examining. *Il semplice* contrasts consumerist tendencies in literature precisely because it offers a collection of texts which are not products made to be easily sold or simply to create excitement in the reader with references to her/his contingency. On the contrary, the goal of the editors of *Il semplice* is to create a space in which narration can flow with no hurry, tackling the most relevant themes of life and death, as storytelling has always done in the editors' view. By guiding the reader through the events, often using a comic tone even for

[183] Goffredo Fofi, 'Addio mondo crudele. Il 'semplice' vuole l'autarchia', *l'Unità 2*, 12 February 1996, p. 7. See also Giulio Ferroni, 'Il semplice e il Presente', *l'Unità 2*, 25 March 1996, p. 4.

dealing with the most dramatic facts in one's life, *Il semplice* aims at creating a sense of community through imagination, namely a sense of a shared destiny and proposes literature as a therapeutic way to deal with it. Finally, contrary to what Fofi claims, some of the texts included in *Il semplice*, contains direct critiques of aspects of contemporary society. One example is Celati's contibution to the first issue, namely the comic short story 'Non c'è più paradiso' (category: 'Inferni, purgatori, paradisi immaginati e viaggi nell'aldilà'). For the same issue, Celati writes the theoretical text *Modena 18 luglio 1994* (category: 'Discorsi di metodo'), and a translation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Wakefield* (category: 'L'arte della novella'). I will focus on *Non c'è più paradiso* as it makes explicit the link between the ethical background of storytelling and its possible political consequences. Here, the opposition against stereotypical language leads to a re-consideration of standard, accepted behaviours. The awareness of the limit of life leads to a very explicit critique of consumerist lifestyle. A form of folly takes possession of the tale's protagonist, the homeless Tugnin, whose discourses in a hospital seduce and inspire his listeners, patients and doctors, leading them to resurgence of political indignation and rebellion. Some weeks before Christmas, Tugnin is taken to the hospital. He is unconscious having spent two days in the cold on a street, after a night of snowfall, with only a cardboard shelter. When he comes out of the coma, Tugnin claims that he has met the angels and flown with them. This gave him the possibility of observing the earth from above and of understanding a basic thing: that everything in the world is constantly collapsing and nothing will last. Tugnin also claims to have spoken with God, who revealed to him that he is sick of human beings and has decided to eliminate paradise. What annoyed God the most was human beings' false generosity, aimed only at getting ahead by using others to make a career, both in earthly life and in the

afterlife. Celati refers to the city in which the story is set only as 'la cittadina di economia avanzata', underlining the fact that the periphrasis is taken from the language of newspapers ('com'era chiamata spesso sui giornali').[184] Celati uses this expression in order to represent what he states in the proemial article of *Narratori delle riserve*: the stereotypical language of mass media and supposed experts conceals a concrete situation. The story, in fact, opens with a contrast between the advanced economy city and the conditions of poverty of Tugnin the homeless: 'Nella cittadina di economia avanzata, un vecchio mendicante chiamato Tugnin dormiva per strada su pezzi di cartone, appoggiandosi alla grata dello scantinato d'un grande palazzo sulla circonvallazione ovest, com'è chiamata la parte più benestante della città'.[185] The wealth of the city is particularly evident during Christmas. Celati describes in detail the ceaseless activity of buying products, giving a portayal of consumerism as the insatiable desire to own more than is needed:

> Adesso occorre sapere che nella cittadina di economia avanzata il Natale è davvero una cosa in grande stile. Perché là i ricchi sono così ricchi che non riescono a trattenersi dal comprare gli articoli più costosi d'ogni genere sul mercato. Là tutti vogliono possedere case al mare e ai monti, e yacht per fare le crociere, e vestiti speciali moderni che si vedono solo da queste parti, e moderni orologi di lusso che costano un patrimonio, e potenti macchine fuoristrada che servono per fare i safari o andare sui monti, mentre qui si usano solo per andare al bar o a comprare le sigarette.
>
> Allora se voi capitate da quelle parti, vedrete negozi favolosi nelle vie centrali, montagne di merci sopraffine, vetrine sfavillanti con scritte al neon in parole americane, e masse di compratori che si arrabbiano se gli oggetti più dispendiosi sono andati venduti prima del loro arrivo. Se capitate da quelle parti nel periodo natalizio vedrete che ressa nei negozi, e quante migliaia di pellicce e gioielli, e quanti occhi che non vi guardano perché fissano le merci più sopraffine da comprare! E vedrete che mogli eleganti e

[184] Gianni Celati, 'Non c'è più paradiso', *Il semplice*, 1, p. 30

[185] 'Non c'è più paradiso', p. 30. This passage is reminiscent of Calvino's *Marcovaldo al supermarket*. Tugnin's observation of the earth from a high perspective recalls Astolfo's journey to the moon in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. The topic of the wasting of time in meaningless activities, such as fighting for money and power, is a constant of moral philosophy. This is also what connects the Celati's *Non c'è più paradiso* to Ariosto's considerations that stand behind the episode of the moon. In some way, Tugnin anticipates the actor-playwright Attilio Vecchiatto, protagonist of Celati's *Recita dell'attore Vecchiatto* and *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna*, especially for his critique of contemporary Italy.

> ben fatte hanno tutti i cittadini ricchi di questa cittadina di economia avanzata! Una cosa assolutamente moderna, come si vede solo in televisione.[186]

This description of the opulent city during Christmas confirms what Tugnin was saying. After his encounter with God, Tugnin predicts that everything that people are accumulating is useless. His discourse seems to give a sort of revenge to the patients in the hospital. Tugnin's discourse particularly fascinates the most infirm who know best that everything collapses, including the human body, and that this applies to everyone, rich and poor: 'Diceva che niente che c'è resterà in piedi, e allora quegli uomini ricchi che si credono chissà cosa per i soldi guadagnati in abbondanza, ci resteranno molto presto con un palmo di naso.' (34).

Tugnin's words sound revolutionary as they openly contrast the basis of consumerism. Tugnin overturns the values of contemporary society and, what is more, he does that while he claims that his discourse is coming directly from God. The second part of Tugnin's vision in fact focuses on the encounter between the homeless man and God. Using a comic tone, Celati undermines the cornerstones of consumerist civilization, such as banks, cars, newspapers and television:

> Poi c'era l'altra parte della visione, in cui Tugnin si incontra con Dio […]. E in sostanza avrebbe detto che lui se ne frega, perché non può mica correre dietro agli uomini per convincerli che loro si credono furbi e invece sono dei poveri coglioni. Facciano pure quello che gli pare, avrebbe detto Dio, con le

[186] 'Non c'è più paradiso', pp. 31-32. Celati's description recalls Calvino's *Marcovaldo al supermarket* (1963): 'Alle sei di sera la città cadeva in mano dei consumatori. Per tutta la giornata il gran daffare della popolazione produttiva era il produrre: producevano beni di consumo. A una cert'ora, come per lo scatto d'un interruttore, smettevano la produzione e via! Si buttavano tutti a consumare. Ogni giorno una fioritura impetuosa faceva appena in tempo a sbocciare dietro le vetrine illuminate, i rossi salami a penzolare, le torri di piatti di porcellana a innalzarsi fino al soffitto, i rotoli di tessuto a dispiegare drappeggi come code di pavone, ed ecco già irrompeva la folla consumatrice a smantellare a rodere a palpare a far man bassa. Una fila ininterrotta serpeggiava per tutti i marciapiedi e i portici, s'allungava attraverso le porte a vetri nei magazzini intorno a tutti i banchi, mossa dalle gomitate di ognuno nelle costole di ognuno come da continui colpi di stantuffo. Consumate! e toccavano le merci e le rimettevano giù e le riprendevano e se le strappavano di mano; consumate e obbligavano le pallide commesse a sciorinare sul bancone biancheria e biancheria; consumate! (Italo Calvino, *Marcovaldo ovvero Le stagioni in città*, Turin: Einaudi, 1963, p. 98).

> loro banche e le loro macchine e i loro giornali e le loro televisioni: lui non voleva più saperne niente, perché gli uomini sono diventati troppo seccanti, e che vadano pure sulla forca o a buttarsi tutti in un canale, ormai non se ne poteva più di loro. (35)

God communicates to his spokeperson Tugnin that paradise is abolished. In its place, it is now possible to curse God as a consolation. Even though it is not the same, claims Tugnin, at least the curse is unlike the false honesty of men. Celati uses religion in a comic sense in order to condemn those conformist and sanctimonious people who want to show their moral superiority, and seems always to be looking for a prize in exchange for their good behaviour. By using humour, Celati creates a paradoxical situation in which some of the main tendencies of contemporary society, such as ambition and greed, are strongly criticized:

> Secondo Tugnin adesso Dio non proibiva più la bestemmia, come una volta. Perché si era accorto che quelli che si mostrano più buoni e più educati, quelli che non bestemmiano per come va il mondo, quelli sono di solito i più mafiosi, ignoranti, senza fede e poco di buono […]. Ha detto che Dio aveva abolito tutti i premi e le ricompense per i buoni, perché era stanco di questa gente che vuol fare bella figura e fare carriera anche nell'aldilà. Dunque aveva abolito il paradiso […]. Al posto del paradiso come consolazione c'è la bestemmia, che però indubbiamente non è la stessa cosa. (35)

It is particularly significant for my analysis that the example that Tugnin gives in order to illustrate his argument is about Italian politicians who show fake kindness and generosity, while their only aim is to appear nice in order to further their own career. Even though the critique is generic, it shows once again Celati's intervention in the public debate:

> Ma almeno la bestemmia non mostra la falsità del cuore di tutti quei disonesti senza fede, che fingono di voler far del bene e invece fanno solo i loro interessi: come ad esempio tutti gli amministratori comunali della cittadina di economia avanzata, e tutti quei mascalzoni mandati in parlamento a governare l'infame nazione italiana. (38)

Tugnin's critique fascinates a cardiologist who recovers her youthful political fervour and starts a speech – while looking at television, inside the hospital – where she attacks the government's policies ('Ha fatto un comizio sulla politica del governo, con moltissime cifre e statistiche lette sui giornali', 38). The comic description somehow undermines her argument and warns the reader not to take it seriously. The entire story of the cardiologist itself has a comic dimension: she decides to leave her family and go and live with an old comrade but, in the end, she contradicts all her beliefs by accepting what she had just criticized, in order to advance in her career. Following these events, the cohabitation with the old comrade, who formerly worked for television, ends. The cardiologist's lover instead continues to denounce the corruption of politicians and society, but no one listens to him, except some African immigrants in a park. His critique replicates Tugnin's words and Celati uses humour and parody to ridicule his discourse. The reference to 'nuovi ricchi' does not imply a kind of acceptance of the 'nobility' of 'old money', but a strong critique of those social climbers which the cardiologist's discourse identifies as contemporary Italy's rulers:

> Ma che d'altra parte anche tutta la nazione era in mano ai nuovi ricchi, mafiosi, ignoranti e senza fede, con politicanti così imbecilli come non se n'erano mai visti nel corso della storia patria. E che non c'era nessuna speranza di cacciarli via, perché ormai tutti seguivano lo stesso stile da mafiosi, ignoranti e senza fede: tutti imitavano i nuovi ricchi, tracotanti e senza cervello, tutti parlavano e pensavano come loro. (38)

The emphatic repetition of the words 'nuovi ricchi mafiosi, ignoranti e senza fede' and the contrast between the character's dream of speaking in front of big crowds and the small group of random listeners creates again a comic effect. As shown in the first chapter, Celati has always been critical of political rhetoric, even in those cases in which he could have shared the content behind it. The cardiologist's solitude

also underlines how those ideas were absent or, at least, minoritarian, in the Italian debate:

> L'ex funzionario vagava per le strade della sua città sognando di fare grandi dichiarazioni pubbliche, e sognando che le masse lo ascoltassero e gli dessero ragione […]. Ma trovava ben pochi che lo ascoltassero, e negli ultimi tempi si era messo a fare comizi nei giardini pubblici, ai poveri immigrati africani che andavano a vendere accendini, collanine, statuette d'avorio per le strade. (38)

Nevertheless, it is precisely the comic tone that permits Celati to express in a completely free way his total lack of faith in Italian politicians:

> A quei poveri stranieri senza casa lui annunciava che questa nazione era così corrotta nell'animo e tarata nel cervello, che qui non potevano aspettarsi niente di buono; che qui non avrebbero mai trovato nessun aiuto, in mezzo a tanta opulenza; che qui avrebbero trovato soltanto umiliazioni, per via di questi nuovi ricchi, mafiosi, ignoranti e senza fede, che dominano tutto […]. A questi insegnava che dai nostri governanti non ci si può mai aspettare niente di buono, di giusto, di onesto, perché sono una cricca di inetti falsi e irresponsabili, comprendente dei veri e propri assassini, dei delinquenti da bagno penale, dei puffaroli che arraffano tutto quello che viene sotto mano, oltre ad un vasto corteo di leccaculi con livello morale ancora inferiore.[187]

'Non c'è più paradiso' is a true moral tale, with a strong critique of corrupted habits and politics. It depicts a situation where everyone is devoted to consumerism and wastes his/her life chasing economic wealth and power. Celati's critique also targets every kind of rhetoric, even though he might share the positions that those discourses express. 'Non c'è più paradiso' connects some features of Celati's early *impegno*, such as the use of humour, to the new considerations on storytelling and

[187] 42-43. It is important to consider that the years of *Il semplice* coincide with the huge investigation on Italian political corruption known as *Mani pulite*, that led to the end of the so-called First Republic. *Mani pulite* caused the collapse of many political parties, including the Democrazia Cristiana and the Partito Socialista Italiano and the dissolution of several town councils. An incredible number of public figures were involved. See on this Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents: Family, Civil Society, State 1980* – 2001, chapter 6 'Corruption and the Mafia', 189-212. On the transformations of political parties which followed *Mani pulite*, see Donald Sassoon, *Contemporary Italy. Politics, Economy and Society Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), chapter 14 'The Political Parties', pp. 232-274.

the ethical dimension of his works of the 1980s. Furthermore, it anticipates the critique to Italian politics which will characterize part of Celati's works of the 2000s.

Celati contributes to the other five issues of *Il semplice* with several translations, a text in memoriam of his mentor the philosopher Enzo Melandri, and 'Mio nonno aveva cinque bastimenti', part of Giacomo Cangemi's tale of the story of his life, recorded and transcribed by Celati (Cangemi was a Sicilian mechanic who lived in Tunis, grandfather of Celati's first wife, Anita Licari, and Celati recorded his voice in the 1970s).[188] The only other fictional text is one of the first excerpts of *Fata morgana*, that Celati will publish as a book only in 2005, but previous versions already appeared in the journal *Arsenale* in 1987.[189]

Celati will include 'Non c'è più paradiso' itself in another book of the 2000s, the collection of tales, *Cinema naturale* (2001), together with other texts of the 1980s, namely 'Il paralitico del deserto', 'Novella dei due studenti' and 'Notizie ai naviganti', a fact which justifies my decision to examine those short stories as part of this period – the end of the 1980s. As Nunzia Palmieri has demonstrated, Celati's notebooks of the 1980s show that the idea of a new collection of short stories already existed in 1988, immediately after the publication of *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze* (1987). The title of the new collection was to be *Voci da terra* or *Vita nelle riserve*. This second title clearly marks the proximity with *Narratori delle riserve*. In another notebook there is the title *Racconti dalle riserve*, together with preparatory notes for *Fata Morgana* and some other notes on authors that Celati was studying at the time,

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[188] Giacomo Cangemi, 'Mio nonno aveva cinque bastimenti', *Il semplice*, 3 (1996), 83-94. See on this 'Letteratura come accumulo di roba sparsa', p. 34.

[189] *Arsenale*, 9-10 (1987), pp. 25-34. Other fragments will be published in the journals *Altofragile* (7, February 1997) and *Nuova Prosa* (31, 2001, 39-72). See also Nunzia Palmieri, *Notizie sui testi*, in *Romanzi, cronache, racconti*, 1781-1783. Celati's translations in *Il semplice* are as follows: Henri Michaux's *Gli Hiviniziki,* Dashiell Hammett's *Flitcraft*, William Blake's *Proverbi dell'Inferno* and *Aprire le porte della percezione*, Susan Sontag's *La traduzione di Sarajevo*, Johann Peter Hebel's *Due storie da calendario*, Tony Cafferky's *Nanetti patriottici*, Samuel Beckett's *Da un lavoro abbandonato*, Heinrich Von Kleist's *Considerazioni sul corso del mondo*.

such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jonathan Swift, and translations of William Shakespeare's sonnets.[190]

In his notebooks of the end of the 1980s, Celati illustrates the idea of reserves by making reference to what he observes as a phenomenon of Americanization of global culture and society ('si può parlare di americanizzazione universale') and writes under those notes a list of titles, including *Studenti in mezzo alle acque* (subsequently *Novella dei due studenti*, in *Cinema naturale*), *Il paralitico del deserto* and *Voci da terra* (then *Notizie ai naviganti*).[191] Celati uses the word 'Americanization' to refer to a global process of social transformation towards individualist and consumerist behaviours that he strongly contests with his literature. All the tales of this period, from the end of the 1980s to *Il semplice* show the moral dimension of Celati's literature, namely an ethical commitment that is the very essence of his works of the 1980s, as the endnote of the journal version of 'Il paralitico del deserto' confirms:

> Ridurre la lettura a qualcosa di semplicemente scritto è una teoria che ne fa un'entità astratta, devota allo stile, e il cui consumo è riservato, a seconda dei casi, ai bagni domestici o ai salotti. L'importanza di alcuni narratori è di essere anche filosofi, cioè di non voler prescindere dall'impegno di una riflessione. Non si tratta di un semplice e contingente compito sociale, ma di una meditazione morale sui tempi […]. Gianni Celati esprime nei suoi libri recenti questa tendenza morale ed emotiva.[192]

All of these stories challenge the myth of self and encourage the reader to consider himself or herself just as part of what apparently exists, with no particular glory or merit. In the 1980s, while new political and social tendencies foster the idea

[190] Nunzia Palmieri, *Notizie sui testi*, pp. 1777-1778. 'Il paralitico del deserto' and 'Novella dei due studenti' were already in the journal *Dolce vita* (issue 2, November 1987 and issue 7, April 1988). The first title of *Novella dei due studenti* was initially published in French: 'Etudiants au milieau des eaux', in *L'Arc Lémanique. Vingt et un recits sur le lieu* (Lausanne: Favre-L'Hebdo, 1988).
[191] *Notizie sui testi*, pp. 1777-1778.
[192] Editorial endnote to Gianni Celati, 'Il paralitico del deserto', *Dolce vita*, 1, 2, November 1987, p. 23. The author is probably Daniele Brolli who also illustrates the short story.

of individual success and especially economic success, Celati writes a series of short stories which constantly attack that same idea, showing that money and success do not change the human condition of mortality.[193]

The comic ethnography of *Fata morgana* continues this line of reasoning but represents a particular case as it acts as a mirror of contemporary consumerist society, ridiculing it, but it also offers an alternative, through some of the characteristics of an imaginary people, the Gamuna. As I have mentioned above, Celati publishes the first fragments of *Fata morgana* already in 1987, so the text needs to be considered part of this creative period, even if it was published as a book only in 2005. Celati writes *Fata morgana* immediately after *Verso la foce* (as the diaries are dated 1983-1986), and the later work shares some elements with it, such as the description of abandoned places. Nevertheless, *Fata morgana* is a unique example in Celati's career: here, he invents and describes the habits of the Gamuna, who live in an isolated valley and consider the world as an enchantment that the sorceress Morgana has made. *Fata morgana* thus parodies ethnography, as the narrator claims that his tales are based on the diaries and letters of an old colleague at university, the imaginary Egyptian anthropologist Victor Astafali. Other observations are taken from academic articles written by the Argentinian colonel Augustìn Bonetti, a pilot whose plane crashes in the Gamuna territory and who then after ten years of living with them became the leading expert on that people. Celati thus turns back to his early interest in ethnography and draws new inspiration from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and the works of Henri Michaux which he had

[193] For an historial analysis of these transformations in Italian society see Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents.* On Celati's *impegno* in *Cinema naturale*, Luca Canali has argued: 'in questo libro, Celati è tornato, nei modi propri della sua maestria di manipolatore di linguaggi, ad una continua, esplicita o sottintesa pratica dell' «impegno». Naturalmente sul terreno non certo politico, bensì sicuramente ed energicamente su quello del costume: il consumismo, l' «economia avanzata», il successo, sono i bersagli continuamente centrati, e ridicolizzati' (Luca Canali, 'Celati e l'ironico impegno contro la modernità', *Il Giornale*, 3 February 2001, p. 28).

been translating in the years that separate the publication of the fragments of *Fata morgana* in *Il semplice* and the 2005 book version. Celati once again uses Swift as a model and gives a comic description of the Gamuna, whose behaviour serves as a satire of human societies, but also shows an alternative to Western values.[194]

As Pia Schwarz Lausten has argued, many of the typical characteristics of the Gamuna that the narrator highlights show their anti-individualism, anti-consumerism and anti-materialism. Their description thus contrasts with some of the main aspects of Westen society, in the line with Celati's critique that I have examined above. The Gamuna's behaviour also reflects Celati's philosophical and ethical considerations about mortality that I have highlighted above, and the attention and care for the other and the environment which derives from the consciuosness of not being superior than other species. The Gamuna, at birth, have their face ritually immersed in faeces, while an elder repeats the reminder: 'Tu sei questo'.[195] In the following passage, the narrator explains the notion of private property among the Gamuna, with reference to Bonetti's imaginary articles:

> In un articolo in inglese intitolato *Gamunic Economy and the Desire Factor*, Bonetti spiega la concezione gamuna della proprietà. La forma prevalente di ricchezza è data dal possesso di campi d'orzo, nonché da galline, pecore, capre […]. Se però si chiede a un Gamuna di chi è quel campo dove coltiva il mais, o quelle pecore che porta al pascolo, o gli attrezzi e manufatti domestici che sono a casa sua, lui vi risponderà puntualmente che li ha avuti in prestito dal tal dei tali […]. Risulta dunque che ognuno considera quanto possiede come un prestito avuto da un amico, da un parente, da un antenato, un

[194] The name Morgana is taken from the Arthurian legends. Celati translation of *Gulliver's Travels* and the works of Henri Michaux are: Jonathan Swift, *I viaggi di Gulliver* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997) and Henri Michaux, *Altrove* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2005) and *Viaggio in Gran Garabagna* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010) both translated with Jean Talon. Talon, anthropologist and one of Celati's students in Bologna in 1990, shared with Celati the interest for fictional ethnography. See Jean Talon, *Incontri coi selvaggi* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016). Talon is also the protagonist of Celati's *Avventure in Africa* and participated in Celati's first film *Strada provinciale delle anime*. On Celati's fascination for ethnography as a reaction against realist literature, see Rebecca West, *Gianni Celati. The Craft of Everyday Storyteller*, pp. 221-269.

[195] Pia Schwarz Lausten argues that 'In generale i tratti tipici dei Gamuna sembrano conformi all'ideale verde, egalitario e comunitario di Celati che si ritrova nella sua poetica e nelle sue idee sul mondo contemporaneo' ('Impegno e immaginazione', p. 181).

> prestito che può lasciare in eredità ai figli ma soltanto come ulteriore prestito. (1625)

The narrator tells us that the Gamuna inhabit a place previously inhabited by another people and abandoned by those, along with all their belongings. The Gamuna took only some of them, such as clothes and paintings (interestingly, art is seen as a basic need), and rejected other objects, namely consumer goods, such as radios, cars and television. This shows, on the one hand, respect for the past as a positive value and, on the other, the futility of consumerist comfort objects, which the Gamuna see as not dissimilar to other inanimate bodies, like a stone:

> Gli attuali abitanti di Gamuna Valley si sono installati nelle loro case, coltivano i loro giardini, non guidano le loro automobili, ma si vestono ancora con gli abiti trovati nei loro armadi […]. Tra gli avanzi del passato, la cosa che più li attira e li rende anche litigiosi sono quei ritratti a olio dei precedenti abitatori […]. Invece non sanno cosa farsene di impianti radio, di generatori di corrente, di apparecchi telefonici: oggetti sorprendenti, ma non diversi da un sasso o da una duna di sabbia, o dagli arbusti che sorgono dalla brughiera. Delle automobili abbandonate si servono per i sonnellini pomeridiani. (1485)

The Gamuna seem to focus on essential needs and do not show interest for the renovation of buildings, which look abandoned. As mentioned, the representation of abandoned places links *Fata morgana* to *Verso la foce*, while the 'passive' behaviour of the Gamuna in the face of the collapsing of houses anticipates a specificity of Celati's third film *Case sparse – Visioni di case che crollano*, where Celati proposes leaving crumbling houses as they are, rather than renovating them. This has important ethical consequences for the acceptance of the passing of time, which will correspond to a critique of contempoary obsessions for appearing forever young, as I will examine in detail futher on in this chapter:

> Le case crollano, i muri si screpolano, ma loro non restaurano mai niente, non tolgono di mezzo i calcinacci che hanno invaso una scala d'ingresso, e lasciano penzolare gli infissi che si sono staccati dal telaio delle finestre. (1485)

The description of the Gamuna society thus follows the principles of utopian literature, as Schwarz Lausten has correctly observed, such as its separation from the rest of the world. The Gamuna, in fact, live in a desert, difficult to cross: 'non è attraversabile con normali mezzi di trasporto perché formato da placche d'argille piene di crepe, che appena piove possono trasformarsi in grandi pantani' (1480). This isolation is typical of utopian literature as it stresses the point of the otherness of the population from the rest of the world, and it also represents the possibiliy of preserving a particular social and cultural environment from contact with 'strangers'.[196]

I would add, however, that *Fata morgana* also contains elements of dystopia. One significant example is when the narrator describes the racist tendencies which followed violent studies on the Gamuna that anthropologists decide to undertake. Scientific researches have demonstrated that people in the South-East of the Gamuna Valley are mentally disturbed and dangerous for genetic reasons. These are called 'amigdalo-gamunici', and the president of the federation of cities in the Gamuna Valley, Parson G. La Robbia, has stated that these people have to be exiled to the Steppe. If someone is accused of being an 'amigdalo-gamunico' then the calumny can have catastrophic consequences for his/her reputation, ruin enterprises and political careers. For this reason, politicians – who are not Gamuna even if the Gamuna Valley is part of the territory they rule over - have at their service groups of

[196] 'La costruzione assomiglia inoltre ai racconti utopici classici, come l'*Utopia* di Thomas More (del 1516) in cui l'io incontra un marinaio portoghese che gli racconta dell'isola di Utopia […]. Mi sembra interessante far notare come l'insularismo sia un elemento caratteristico del genere utopico. È il caso dell'*Utopia* di More, e della *Città del sole* di Campanella (1602)'. See Pia Schwarz Lausten, 'Impegno e immaginazione', pp. 179-180.

scientists who are paid to prove the pureness of their origins. The absurd consequences of these racist ideas produce a rather dystopian context that the narrator presents as a parody of politicians' propaganda. In the same passage, in fact, the narrative voice also ridicules careerism. It is clear how these has the function of a parody of aspects of politics in the 'Americanized' society that I have mentioned above as one of the main objects of Celati's critique in this period of his career:

> Ogni uomo politico deve avere al proprio servizio un battaglione di esperti che compiano incessantemente studi per ricostruire le sue più lontane origini e parentele, e al tempo stesso le pubblicizzino sui giornali. Questo è un nuovo mestiere molto ben pagato, verso cui si orientano molti giovani con l'ansia di una carriera sicura: si chiama *Political Genetic Advertising*, ed è il tipo più avanzato di pubblicità politica. Una propaganda del genere può assicurare una brillante ascesa parlamentare anche a qualcuno che viene pubblicamente considerato un imbecille o un truffatore.[197]

The satire of politics continues as Celati lists the skills that a politician must demonstrate to gain votes. The image of politics that emerges is rather discouraging, not only because of its racist premises, which is the main aspect of this part of the satire, but also because it reveals the effects propaganda and slogans have on voters:

> Tanto, è ormai chiaro che per raggiungere una solida base elettorale occorre: 1) avere un sacco di soldi; 2) procurarsi certificati scientifici di purezza razziale non amigdalopatica; 3) evitare ogni accusa di connubi con soggetti di origine gamunica o paragamunica; 4) proclamare ai quattro venti la propria ostilità per quel popolo di inetti e imbecilli desertani, includendo tra i propri slogan anche quello del 'pericolo gamuna'. Nessuno sa cosa voglia dire quello slogan, ma è vero che gli elettori paventano sempre sofferenze e disagi, e temono un'invasione. (1623)

The Gamuna population does not represent a univocal and idealistic model of inspiration for contemporary society. *Fata morgana* represents both a utopian world, elements of which serve as a model for an alternative society, but also contains

[197] Gianni Celati, 'Fata morgana', in Gianni Celati, *Romanzi, cronache e racconti*, 1475-1656, p. 1622.

elements of dystopia, typical of a totalitarian state. The first, utopia, proposes an alternative, the second, dystopia, represents an antidote, but both are part of Celati's critiques of the Western society. Another important aspect of the work is the ridiculing of science and assertive knowledge, which is evident in the parody of ethnographic studies and in line with Celati's tendency to reject grand narratives. Such an important passage in the analysis of Celati's *impegno* happens in the context of a novel that confirms the crucial role of imagination and language in Celati's works and in his ethical and political commitment. The book describes the tonal language of the Gamuna, which has different melodies according to each moment of the day (lively in the morning, andante in the afternoon, slow in the evening) and permits the Gamuna to understand each other through melodies rather than through words and contents. This linguistic utopia is an element of critique of individualism, for the absence of the first person in the Gamuna's language and their skepticism for all forms of narcissism or arrogance through the ostentation of knowledge. On the other hand, *Fata Morgana* is also a confirmation of how Celati intentionally opposes with his style the dominant tendencies of contemporary literature. As Schwarz Lausten has stated: '*Fata morgana* veicola dunque anche un progetto letterario-stilistico, una *écriture*, che si propone come alternativa fantastica al romanzo contemporaneo, attualizzante e realistico'.[198] The Gamuna believe that every word we pronounce came from the desert wind, particularly from a sort of god that they call 'Essere del Largo Respiro'. When someone decides to let the wind speak too much, this is seen as a disease, and makes people ridiculous, as they act arrogantly as a bumptious know-all. The parody of people who think they could explain everything is perfectly in line with Celati's considerations that I have highlighted for

[198] Pia Schwarz Lausten, 'Impegno e immaginazione', p. 183.

*Verso la foce* and a constant in Celati's production from the 1980s onwards. The Gamuna's idea of a god who suggests words expresses Celati's anti-individualist idea of literature as something collective and anonymous, a collective and ancient process of creating stories, where the author has little importance. The passage below once again shows the comic aspects of the imaginary ethnography which dominates the text, for the name the inhabitants give to the disease of boastful and conceited individuals, which the Gamuna also recognize in the anthropologists who study their language and immediately brag to know it all:

> Infatti, se le parole turbinano troppo nei meandri del cuore, uno si sente importante e fa discorsi per vantarsi di sapere questo e quest'altro, di essere più furbo o più intelligente degli altri. Secondo gli anziani così parlano gli studiosi che certe volte sono venuti a visitrarli, i quali pretendevano di capire la loro lingua con l'uso d'un registratore. Quel registratore era per loro il segno d'una vanteria morbosa, come quando uno non ascolta gli altri perché si vanta di aver già capito tutto prima ancora che finiscano di parlare. Per gli anziani questa è una malattia molto poco dignitosa, che loro chiamano «scarico di vescica gonfia» (*pisciola ke fanghi*), ed è un segno di demenza senile che però spesso tocca anche i giovani troppo spavaldi o spiritati. Tale malattia nasce dal fatto che l'Essere del Largo Respiro a volte si diverte a prendere in giro gli uomini; dunque li porta a parlare troppo o troppo seriamente; per renderli ridicoli. (1539)

One last element, linked to that of imagination and realism, that I want to underline is that Celati constantly refers in *Fata morgana* to a confusion between reality and our perception of it. The Gamuna's belief that the world is nothing but a 'grande allucinazione' leaves the reader uncertain about what is real and what is not. The same effect is obtained by Celati through the fictional expedient of notebooks and letters as imaginary sources for his descriptions. This anticipates themes of his future production that I will analyse in the next section.

### 2.4 The Political Role of Imagination: Celati's Latest Works

In 1996, seven years after *Verso la foce*, Celati published the book *Recita dell'attore Vecchiatto nel teatro di Rio Saliceto*. This needs to be considered his first play, and confirms his long lasting interest for theatre and precedes his other play *Bollettino del diluvio universale*, published in April 2010. In March of 2010 Celati continued the story of Vecchiatto, with the publication of *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna*. The three texts are highly connected and I will discuss them together in the first part of this section.[199]

Through *Recita*, Celati's impegno becomes more direct. This does not happen with a return to realism. On the contrary, there is an evident political commitment through imagination. Celati creates a fictional couple of actors and makes up their entire life and artistic career and through them he criticizes contemporary society with specific reference to Italy from the mid 1990s onwards. In *Recita*, Celati creates the biography of a famous actor, Attilio Vecchiatto, and his wife Carlotta and refers to their imaginary life and work as if it were real. The emphasis on actual names, places and facts in Vecchiatto's life leaves the reader never completely sure if the actor and his wife are real people or just fictional characters. Attilio and Carlotta, now old and tired, after a long life travelling and a career with great success all over the world, perform their last play in the small theatre of Rio Saliceto, in the province of Reggio Emilia. In spite of their success, they are almost unknown in Italy and when it is time for the play to start, there is no audience in the theatre. Vecchiatto and Carlotta discuss what to do and Vecchiatto

[199] Gianni Celati, *Recita dell'attore Vecchiatto nel teatro di Rio Saliceto*, *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna*, and 'Bollettino del diluvio universale. Pantomima in due atti', *Elephant & Castle*, 1 (2010) <http://cav.unibg.it/elephant_castle/web/saggi/em-bollettino-del-diluvio-universale-em-pantomima-in-due-atti/19> [accessed 10 September 2017]. See also Nunzia Palmieri, 'Notizie dal diluvio. Il bollettino di Gianni Celati', *Elephant & Castle*, 1 (2010) <http://cav.unibg.it/elephant_castle/web/saggi/notizie-dal-diluvio-il-em-bollettino-em-di-gianni-celati/27> [accessed 10 September 2017]. On Vecchiatto, see Anna Ceravolo, 'Vecchiatto: giustizia postuma per l'attore dalle suole di vento', *Hystrio*, 3 (1997), p. 102.

complains that, after a 45-year international career, he now has to perform in such a place, a small provincial theatre, with only the stink of pigs, ham and cheese all around. Attilio claims that their art, the dramatic theatre, is no longer fashionable, they are out of style ('fuorimoda'). When a woman with a shopping bag finally enters the theatre, Vecchiatto still does not want to start in front of only one spectator, even if Carlotta tries to encourage him to do so. Even though the two actors are supposed to perform a text, Attilio Vecchiato's complaints become the play itself.[200] The *Recita* is thus an invective that gradually touches all aspects of contemporary life, with specific references to the Italian socio-political scenario in the years 1995-2010, when Celati writes these texts. The first target of Vecchiatto's tirade are Italian newspapers as something that deeply upsets him, and especially, the *Corriere della Sera*, whose name Attilio repeats several times:

> ATTILIO Del resto i giornali italiani, signora, mi ascolti bene, sono senz'altro tra i più abominevoli della terra…
> CARLOTTA Non far nomi…
> ATTILIO …e il Corriere della Sera in particolare…
> CARLOTTA Lui non lo legge mai…
> ATTILIO …ah, senz'altro ha la capacità di invadere d'orrore qualsiasi persona un po' sensibile…
> CARLOTTA Ne parla ma non lo legge mai, sa signora?
> ATTILIO Sì, perché se vedo anche soltanto le parole d'un titolo in prima pagina, amen, per me è il crollo! (23)

Vecchiatto accuses newspapers of being the origin of an absence of critical thought in Italy. In Vecchiatto's view, in fact, newspapers spread stereotypical interpretations of reality through ready-made meaningless phrases and terminology with the only effect of making people unable to think with their own mind. Carlotta's comments give a general sense of parody and irony. As usual in Celati's most

[200] An interesting comparison could be established with Luigi Pirandello's *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (1930), where the debate between the actors and the director of the play becomes the key part of the play itself.

directly political texts, rhetoric itself is always mocked, even if the content might be shared by the author. Attilio is thus a comic character, despite the fact that his complaints contain a real critique of contemporary Italy:

> ATTILIO Adesso spesso mi chiedo: ma che razza di civiltà è mai la nostra? Turpilata da parole pesanti che pesano sulla cima della testa e non vogliono dire niente di sensato? Ci ha mai pensato a questo, signora?
> CARLOTTA Signora, io non ci penso sempre come mio marito, invece lui ci pensa troppo…
> ATTILIO Sì, perché mi schiacciano con le loro parole abominevoli!
> CARLOTTA Non ricominciare…
> ATTILIO Oh Dio mio! Ma perché uno non può avere i suoi pensieri, le sue idee, senza che arrivi il ronzio di frasari abominevoli a schiacciargli tutti i pensieri?
> […]
> ATTILIO Le parole dei giornali si sono infiltrate nei pensieri! Sì, le parole dei giornali, e noi siamo impantanati nelle parole, non ne usciamo…
> CARLOTTA Capisce, signora? Quasi tutti ripetono le parole dei giornali senza provare ribrezzo, dice mio marito…
> […]
> ATTILIO Signora, lei crede ai fatti riportati sui giornali? Crede alle statistiche? Crede all'informazione? Sono aria fritta, signora, neanche una parola vera! Sono fantasime, bubbole della vergogna umana, che fanno marcire lo spirito, ci spingono sempre più nel ghiaccio dei gironi infernali! (26-27)

Carlotta comments on Vecchiatto's statements and tries to calm down his angry speech. Besides undermining Vecchiatto's rhetoric, her interventions give information on the couple's life and career. After fifty years of nomadic existence, through South America and Europe, Vecchiatto is now back in Italy and finds his country not a welcoming place ('Questo è un paese di abbruttiti […]. Di pazzi che odiano i loro simili!', 34). During his invective and reading, other spectators enter the theatre, reaching the maximum number of nine people, but Vecchiatto does not seem to appreciate them ('Ma cosa vuoi recitare? Non vedi come vengono a teatro annoiati di benessere?', 40) and they often laugh at him. This self-aware contempt for his audience shows Vecchiato's scepticism and his distance from present time. This has the double function of humorously depicting Vecchiatto as old and

unfashionable but, at the same time, it expresses a critique of the way wealth has deeply transformed culture (as Vecchiatto makes explicit when he sees the cause of his audience's lack of interest in their wealth). At a certain point, Vecchiatto decides to read a text he has written. This is what he calls an 'operetta morale' or 'lezione di tenebre' (38), a rather autobiographical story of a man from his birth to the end that intersects with the description of a highly corrupted society. The title 'operetta morale' is not the only reference to Leopardi in *Recita*. Besides Leopardi, the text contains direct references to Dante's *Inferno*, and most of all, to Shakespeare's works, namely *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. While the latter contribute to give plausibility to Vecchiatto as a real actor, indicating some of his main sources of inspiration, the reference to Leopardi is part of a philosophical and ethical approach which, as alluded earlier, stands behind Celati's critique of contemporary society at this stage of his career.[201] Vecchiatto, in fact, often interrupts the reading with personal remarks on contemporary times. Even though they are all quite generic critiques, they show Vecchiato's protest and express his extraneousness in such a society: he attacks car drivers (he has been run over before starting the play), journalists, television, young people with no interest in culture, advertisements, family life, and wealthy, consumerist society. He criticizes the idea of success ('Il successo che ci rende schiavi delle più basse adulazioni, il successo che ci disfa le meningi col martello delle più stolide velleità!', 49-50), the consumerist interests of his audience ('A voi interessa solo il comfort, le vacanze, la gastronomia, la moglie che fa bella figura, l'automobile da cinquanta milioni, le urla calcistiche della vergogna umana!', 39), family relationships ('Vede che si tengono alla catena l'un con l'altro, si tengono tutti incatenati, genitori parenti marito

[201] For a full consideration on the role of Leopardi in this period of Celati's career, see Andrea Cortellessa, 'Quattro apparenze sulle novelle. Paragrafi su *Cinema naturale* di Celati', *L'Illuminista*, 3, 8-9 (2003), 149-177, and Marina Spunta, *Voicing the word*, pp. 66-67.

moglie…' and 'Come ha visto, signora, è dalle piccole ansie che nascono le grandi nefandezze, perché? Perché le ansie ottenebrano il cervelletto con i loro miasmi mefitici, familiari, d'una vita da topi, mi spiego?', 68). Nevertheless, as mentioned above, Vecchiatto is nothing but a comic figure, even if he speaks 'truths'.

The ethical dimension of this 'operetta morale' draws on the same premises as Celati's works of the 1980s: on the one hand, the awareness that humans are just part of the environment with no preeminent role relative to other species. On the other, the importance of being conscious of mortality. Vecchiatto – and Celati behind him – suggests that these premises seem to be forgotten in contemporary society, which is ceaselessly committed to concealing the effect of the passing of time in the name of optimism, ruthless ambition and mass production of goods for consumer needs. In *Recita*, as in *Non c'è più paradiso* – written in the same years –this ethical critique introduces new political elements, with direct references to the socio-political situation (e.g. Italian newspapers, the corruption of Italian politicians), which will become explicit in *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna*, as will be discussed below.

When Vecchiatto again attacks the audience for not being attentive, eight of the nine people leave. The lady with the shopping bag is the only one to stay, but she falls asleep, and even Carlotta cannot stay awake. Nobody cares about Vecchiatto's anachronistic observations. On the one hand, Celati seems to state that this kind of idea does not have an audience anymore: Vecchiatto's words sound boring or ridiculous. On the other hand, Celati uses irony and comic effects to attenuate the violent reprimand against contemporary society which otherwise might have sounded dogmatic. Nevertheless, through the outdated character of Vecchiatto, Celati gives an extremely critical representation of contemporary life in the years in

which he is writing. The structure of the book permits the author to be completely free in expressing his own opinions and at the same time to take distance from those ideas. This is perfectly coherent with Celati's refusal of the figure of the traditional committed intellectual who is supposed to be voice of the truth and expresses with no doubts his/her all-embracing theories on how things are and how they should be instead. At the same time he does not abdicate the responsibility of a political intervention, following a creative pattern rather than realism: Vecchiatto's discourse represents a ferocious condemnation of the current situation of Italy ('Suburra del vestiario di moda! Vetrina della più zotica esibizione di ricchezza! Questo paese, nazione chiamata Italia, patria? Macché patria d'Egitto! Stige di putridi governanti! Regno della notte dell'anima!', 34) and contemporary consumerist society. The critique still stay at a very generic level, without reference to specific facts or events. This gives Vecchiatto's discourse the capacity of addressing general characteristics of the present times, such as the supremacy of the economy and of profit over all other aspects of life:

> Freddo, freddo è questo mondo!.... Voi non sentite com'è tutto congelato dai numeri, dalla pubblicità, dal guadagno?.... Non si dovrebbe più dire che un uomo viene al mondo, si dovrebbe dire che un uomo viene al gelo cosmico, viene al deserto della notte dell'anima, viene al guadagno da sfruttatori della gente inerme… Ascoltate, ascoltate! (45)

Vecchiatto's diatribe, that Celati represents as sterile, is instead extraordinarily powerful: it avoids the risk of being too serious and gives the author an almost limitless possibility of expression of his own personal remarks. The 'operetta morale' that Vecchiatto reads contains also a wider critique, that touches the human condition, not limited either to Italy or to the contemporary world and has to do with the effect of time on body and minds, with old age (the name Vecchiatto

itself is chosen for this purpose) and the human tendency to waste energy in chasing profit or power through the exploitation of others. This is particularly clear in the final part of *Recita*, where the 'operetta morale' directly intersects with Shakespeare's works:

> Signora, sempre ci ritroviamo allo stesso punto, sempre come il principe Amleto col suo pensiero infelice… Sempre re capi ministri che tessono infamie e gran menzogne, sempre scherani che ghignano come iene dietro il carro del vincitore, sempre uomini che devono schiacciare gli altri per sentirsi potenti, sempre fanciulle che annegano per non sentire l'oscura cantilena della follia generale, sempre uomini in balìa dell'effimero, pronti a rotolarsi nel guazzetto di tutte le corruzioni, perché loro si dicono…si dicono: Eh tanto così va il mondo, non c'è da preoccuparsi. (67)

*Recita* ends with some considerations on old age, in opposition to a sort of mandatory optimism that contemporary society seems to require, in the name of progress and consumerism:

> Forte si sente il maschio, ma per quanto tempo?.... Il giro degli anni scorre svelto nell'ordine del cielo! E ora come re Lear il maschio è diventato vecchio… Ah, signora mia, il vecchio che s'era creduto degno di rispetto perché aveva lavorato sodo, a un tratto diventa una scarpa rotta e nessuno lo ascolta… Carlotta perdìo! Carlotta apri gli occhi!... Per trenta o quarant'anni è corso dietro agli appetiti, ha rifuggito le ansie, ha anche chinato la testa all'obbligo dell'ostentazione e dei profitti, ha fatto tutto quello che era previsto…Ma adesso come Re Lear deve andare in pensione… Andare in pensione! Pensi, signora, con quale orrendo frasario statale noi parliamo dell'accostamento alla morte, la nostra vera unica meta! (68)

Similarly to what happens in *Verso la foce* and other works from the 1980s onwards, Celati's considerations on mortality are central in his writings and shape his ethical positions. Once again, Leopardi's thought seems clearly behind these pages. Celati uses it, together with Shakespeare's works, to depict the human condition in contemporary society, where the tendencies that Leopardi saw at their dawn are disproportionately amplified:

> ATTILIO Diciamolo, Carlotta, la vecchiaia è uno scolo dove tutti i mali del mondo confluiscono nel corpo e nello spirito… E non sarà certo quel loro ottimismo, quel loro ottimismo aziendale obbligatorio, ah no Carlotta! Non sarà certo quello a cancellare il duro glorioso traguardo della nostra vita! (70)

> ATTILIO Signora, io sono il vecchio re Lear che s'era creduto qualcuno e invece era un niente, una muffa, un batterio, una nullità dell'universo, come del resto tutti noi, cara signora.
> […]
> CARLOTTA Attilio, la signora non ascolta, le crolla il capo…
> ATTILIO Signora, mi ascolti ancora per due minuti, la prego! Sono io il vecchio re Lear che le figlie vorrebbero chiudere in un ospizio perché non disturbi il tenore di vita per i giovani!
> CARLOTTA La signora si addormenta…(71)

In 2010, Celati publishes *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna* which continues the story of Attilio and Carlotta Vecchiatto. The book contains 51 sonnets and a detailed biography of the couple. Besides the biography, *Sonetti* contains a note by Enrico De Vivo who describes how he met the actor Attilio Vecchiatto in his house in Angri (province of Salerno). Enrico De Vivo is a school teacher and a fundamental figure for Celati in the 2000s. The two collaborated at the online journal *Zibaldoni e altre meraviglie*, from its foundation in 2002. The sonnets appeared in the journal in five episodes from March 2009 to August 2014.

Celati introduces the book as if he were the editor and not the author of the sonnets, saying that the author is Attilio Vecchiatto. This false authorship permits him to justify the difference between the first version of the sonnets included in *Recita* and these new poetic compositions, which are more focused on the Italian socio-political situation in the years 1994-2010. The period in which Celati writes Vecchiatto's cycle coincides with the rise and consolidation of tycoon, Silvio Berlusconi's system of power in Italy and *Sonetti* contains several references to it, while *Recita* was more focused on a general corruption of social behaviour, with limited and implicit references to Italy. The absolute protagonist of the sonnets is

'Badalucco', a sort of collective Italian identity, which is a mixture of negative shrewdness, shameless ambition, a sanctimonious attitude, imposed optimism, stupidity, wealth and consumerism. The sonnets tackle other issues, such as life and death, love and the end of it, blindness and the importance of imagination, but most of all they focus on contemporary Italy with a strong critique of its present habits ('soprattutto parlano d'una 'Italia trista', che non sa cosa sia vergogna', 8). In his introduction to *Sonetti*, Celati says that a blue notebook with all the sonnets has been found by Roberto Papetti and Vilbres Rabboni in a countryside inn in Sandon (province of Venice), where Vecchiatto died in November 1993. It is also interesting that in the description of what he calls 'Badalucco' Celati again makes reference to Cesare Zavattini, one of the most influential figures for his work since the beginning of his collaboration with Luigi Ghirri:

> È una visione più nitida e meditata del panorama italiano, riassunta in quello strano titolo *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna*. Chi è Badalucco, a chi accenna quel nome? Io, assieme a Enrico De Vivo, Roberto Papetti, Vilbres Rabboni e molti altri, sospettiamo che accenni a un'identità collettiva – alla figura dell'adulto italiano, il furbone che conosciamo tutti – quell'essere per cui Cesare Zavattini proponeva di 'defurbizzare l'Italia'.[202]

The story of Attilio and Carlotta's life intersects with real figures whom Attilio apparently meets during his international career. These are actors, theatre directors and playwrights whom the couple encounter around Europe and the US,

[202] Gianni Celati, *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna*, 7-8. The school teacher and writer Enrico De Vivo, the artist for children Robetto Papetti and the poet and photographer Vilbres Rabboni are not fictional. All of them collaborated with Celati at different stages. De Vivo is the founder of the online journal *Zibaldoni.it*, and editor of the book *Racconti impensati di ragazzini* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999) for which Celati wrote an introduction. Papetti and Rabboni were in the Alice/Dams group who wrote *Alice disambientata* and were among the editors of the photographic book *Traversate del deserto* together with Celati, Ghirri and other authors and photographers. Celati used the word 'Badalucco' in another highly political text, the 1972-1973 rewriting of *Comiche* indicating a stupid person: 'E laddove gli angariati protestano l'uomo statale deve rispondere seccamente: Badalucco citrullo cos'hai da dire?' (Gianni Celati, *Comiche*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2012, p. 166). Umberto Eco uses the word in the same way in *Baudolino* (Milan: Bompiani, 2000): 'Stando con quello là mi diventi un badalucco come lui'.

such as Bertolt Brecht, Laurence Olivier, Danielle Darrieux, Jean Louis Barrault, Louis Jouvet, Tadeusz Kantor, Peter Brooke, Jeanne Moreau, Michel Piccoli. In Italy Attilio and Carlotta are almost unknown, the only one who gives credit to them is the actor Mario Scaccia, and they also had an argument with Dario Fo. Important intellectuals, such as Susan Sontag and John Berger, write on the Vecchiattos' theatre. In Naples, Attilio becomes good friend of the footballer Diego Armando Maradona. These and other details taken from real events, people and places reinforce the hesitation of the reader who is never sure if these are actual facts or not.

In a passage of the biography, the book describes Vecchiatto's personal trick of always being someone else, in order not to be too focused on himself. We can read this as Celati's declaration of the rationale behind the choice of using Vecchiatto for expressing his own political and moral considerations, rather than writing in first person:

> Da vecchio ebbe a dire che un attore veneziano gli aveva insegnato il segreto d'essere sempre un altro da quello che si è, al fine di non tirare mai in ballo se stessi come cosa importuna. Poiché, diceva, l'attore è sempre un altro da se stesso, un altro in assoluto, e quando egli voglia recitare se stesso diviene solo l'agente pubblicitario delle proprie intime falsità e asinerie.[203]

The invented biography says that Vecchiatto was born in Venice in 1910 and left Italy in 1932 after a clash with a fascist 'squadra d'azione'. From Genoa where he was, Vecchiatto sails to Argentina. In Buenos Aires he joins a theatrical company and performs Carlo Goldoni's works in Italian all around South America (Venezuela, Colombia, Uruguay, Argentina). He studies languages, Latin, history, philosophy,

[203] *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna*, p. 11. In collaboration with Maradona, Vecchiatto wants to perform a play against imperialism and the free market economy: 'Attilio incontrava ogni tanto Maradona e mio cugino Patrizio, con lo scopo di mettere in piedi uno spettacolo teatrale particolarissimo, antiamericano, anticapitalista, contrario alla vantata economia di mercato, detta anche mercato libero […]. E Attilio voleva far venire fuori il suo Badalucco come marionetta e personificazione di una peste bubbonica che attanaglia i popoli ingenui come quello napoletano e argentino' (p. 11).

Italian poetry (especially Dante) under the supervision of a close friend of the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. After a European tournée and the foundation of a theatre in New York and one in Paris, Attilio and Carlotta return to Italy in 1984, where they have a very difficult time, first in Rome and Milan, then in Naples and again in Milan and Venice. It is during this period that Vecchiatto writes the sonnets, that he constantly rewrites and corrects until his death in 1993. The only play the couple could perform is indeed the *Recita* in the small theatre in Rio Saliceto, Reggio Emilia.[204]

The sonnets contain the tone and topics of *Recita*, but the critique of contemporary Italy becomes more direct. It is also important to remember that Celati decided to give public readings of the sonnets all around Italy in the same years. This shows Celati's interest in the diffusion of these poetic compositions that contain a strong critique of the central aspects of Italian society in the early 2000s: the role of the mass media and especially television in manipulating public opinion, the use of women's bodies in television, a widespread attitude of shameless, greedy people who defraud others in order to be richer. Vecchiatto depicts Italy as an unwelcoming country and in the hands of liars and cheats. The similarity between Vecchiatto and Celati is evident, as both are emigrant artists, living abroad and returning to Italy. The non-conventional rhyme scheme and structure of the sonnet with three quatrains and a final couplet shows how Celati chooses the English form of the sonnet. This choice is Vecchiatto's hommage to Shakespeare, who is often mentioned both in

[204] See *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna*: 'L'unica recita di Attilio e Carlotta in Italia resta quella di Reggio Emilia, dove sono finalmente accolti dal direttore Normanno Gobbi. È un monologo a due voci, in cui i due parlano sempre assieme come i vecchi coniugi, interpretando il dramma della vecchiaia in un'epoca che crede solo alla pubblicità per i giovani. Si svolge in un teatro vuoto di pubblico, dove l'unico spettatore è una signora che era andata a fare la spesa ed entrata nel teatro casualmente. Nasce così una recita all'improvviso, registrata e trascritta, in cui ricorrono temi trattati nei sonetti. Ma è un canto del cigno: l'annuncio di un'epoca dove non c'è posto per tipi come Vecchiatto' (p. 90).

*Recita* and in *Sonetti*. In the first poem, the Badalucco is less of a collective identity than a representation of Berlusconi, as it is clear in the whole description of the dishonest man who rules the country, with a direct quotation of one of Berlusconi's most famous sentences pronounced in 1994, when he claimed to be anointed by God ('unto dal Signore'):[205]

1.

Torna da vecchio in patria il viaggiatore
e guarda il suo paese ritrovato,
ora inospite, triviale, deturpato,
in mano a furbi senza alcun pudore:

fogna di massa, paese d'orrore
e di vergogne da togliere il fiato,
con quei somari del televisore
che fan del più fetente il più quotato.

Con chi scambiare idee in tal squallore,
dove impera il maramaldo unto e beato?
Cosa fare in balìa d'un truffatore
che aizza tutto il popolo intronato?

Che dire? È in fogne, fango e brulicame
che fa carriera il Badalucco infame.
(13)

Immediately after the proemial sonnet, Vecchiatto deals with the issue of organized crime. It is interesting that a brief explanatory note precedes each sonnet. The summary or abstract describes the context of Naples and the Camorra affiliates who have direct control of politics, as they threaten the mayor of Aversa. Speculative building and greed seems to be dominant:

2.

*Nella piana di Aversa, a 15 km da Napoli, dopo una visita al sindaco minacciato nel suo ufficio da squadre di camorristi in pieno giorno*

[205] See on this: Udo Gümpel and Ferruccio Pinotti, *L'unto del signore* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009).

Ecco la piana di Aversa, che ora consta
di scheletri in cemento e case orrende,
create per il lucro di una cosca
che fa, disfa, massacra e tutto svende.

Peggior danno non c'è che si conosca:
inferno, galera, ricatto che tende
a chiudervi la bocca, nella losca
congrega di assassini che rivende

l'anima vostra, urlando: 'Zitto e mosca!'.
Così arricchirete in orride faccende,
homo homini lupus, grinta fosca,
finché uno sparo in testa non vi stende.

Questo è l'ordine sociale, cosiddetto:
io sto coi can randagi e i senza tetto
(14)

The closure recalls Celati's political approach of the 1970s: here, too, marginality assumes a political role as it represents the radical refusal of the so-called social order. In Vecchiatto's sonnets, Italy seems a hopeless country, where greed renders the majority of people complicit in the corruption of society, with no sense of community. As in *Recita*, there is in the sonnets a moral and philosophical meditation on mortality that recalls Leopardi's thought. This is the origin of sonnets like *Vita terrestre*, which compares the destructive activity of humans to other living beings, or the two *Lezioni di tenebre*, the title of which directly derives from *Recita*. Nevertheless, this moral and ethical attitude seems to have a slightly different function from that of previous books: it serves as the theoretical and philosophical background for the more political poems. The majority of the sonnets depict a contemporary, consumerist society that is committed to forgetting the human condition of mortality in the name of a forced optimism, opulence and the making of money:

9.

Consuma, consuma e andrai in paradiso,
con tutti gli attori e la bella gente
che qui in terra hanno messo su il sorriso
di chi ha la fama dell'uomo vincente.

Continua a consumare e fai buon viso
a fregature, debiti e al demente
obbligo di star sempre sull'avviso,
perché del nuovo non ti sfugga niente.
(26)

Vecchiatto's sarcastic voice unveils all the illusions of consumerism as a dominant lifestyle based on false desires: the myth of power and success, the restless activity in order to accumulate debt and money to spend for the latest product, the necessity of appearing young and attractive all the time, that leads people to conceal the effects of time and aging through cosmetic surgery: 'Fai (come Badalucco) del tuo riso | uno stampo cosmetico lucente; | poi altre operazioni e un nuovo viso, | ti faranno un manichino appariscente'.[206] Vecchiatto's sonnets denounce the vanity of all these supposed values and state that none of them permits humanity to escape its destiny of mortality: 'di morire in pace ormai nessuno spera, | perché fino all'ultimo ha pretese | che il denaro lo salvi dalla fiera | morsa del nulla che sempre lo attese' (66). Many sonnets insist on the tendency of wasting time looking for the newest product:

34.

Hanno ficcato in testa a tutti quanti
che il nuovo sempre sia cosa migliore,
e in massa vedi ovunque gli zelanti

[206] 26. This is an issue that Celati develops also in his films of the 2000s, especially *Case sparse. Visioni di case che crollano* (2003). *Sonetti del Badalucco* contains several references to Leopardi and Leopardi's places such as Villa delle Ginestre in Torre del Greco. The final part of De Vivo's note describes the encounter between Celati and Vecchiatto. The two met close to Vesuvius where Leopardi set his famous poem 'La ginestra'. During the meeting with Vecchiatto, Celati sings an operetta on Leopardi, while Attilio recites parts of Leopardi's *Alla sua donna* and *I nuovi credenti*.

vestire i panni dell'adoratore

d'ogni gadget ch'è nuovo e un po' più avanti
rispetto al nuovo delle sue passate ore,
con nuove macchinette elettrizzanti
esibite come titoli d'onore.

Il Badalucco ne conquista tanti
che più non resta un onesto obbiettore:
s'inchinan tutti ai nuovi fabbricanti
cantando gli inni del consumatore
(73)

According to Vecchiatto's poetry, life itself thus becomes nothing but part of the marketing strategies ('Questa è la vita come target aziendale') and consumerism disseminates obsessions and fanatic behaviour:

33.

Voi contro i disperati ed i depressi
elevate barriere d'ottimismo,
predicando tremila compromessi
fondati su un energico attivismo.

Ma il vostro sperare, e vantaggi annessi,
per lo più sono puro fanatismo:
più soldi, più potere, più successi,
in gare d'ansia nel mar del solipsismo.

E la sterilità di questi eccessi,
di insetti punti da megalomanismo
fa della vita una gabbia d'ossessi:
caduco affanno, fior di parossismo.
(72)

The specific political situation of Italy emerges in other sonnets, still deeply connected to that ethical background. Italian democracy seems itself a matter of trade. Rich politicians promise favours or directly pay for votes, in a widely accepted system of corruption. A rather comical description of Badalucco clearly recalls Silvio Berlusconi's person and behaviour, even without mentioning him. The

emphasis on the concept of freedom is an implicit reference to the names of Berlusconi's party or alliances of parties ('Polo della libertà', 'Casa della libertà' and 'Popolo della libertà').[207] Celati portrays democracy as a matter of trade, with a politician who sells hopes of freedom in exchange for votes. Power directly derives from success and the capacity to make money:

> 10.
>
> Siate liberi – dice Badalucco –
> io do la libertà, voi mi date i voti;
> la libertà è il profitto per chi ha doti,
> e senza doti niente, questo è il succo,
>
> qui siamo in democrazia e non c'è trucco:
> basta coi moralismi da beoti –
> se sei furbo coi quattrini tu ti quoti,
> poi cacci via quei vecchi come il cucco.
>
> Io ho l'arte degli affari e del pilucco,
> e per farvi piluccar profitti ignoti,
> vi do la libertà, voi mi date i voti,
> che i fessi ci resteranno di stucco.
>
> E quelli d'umore poco gaio
> li metto a spalar merda nel mio merdaio!
> (27)

Through Vecchiatto's poems, Celati expresses his strong condemnation of Italy's present condition in its every aspect. A fundamental part of Berlusconi's system of power was television, which he could control as owner of the only three private national channels of the time and the authority over public television as

[207] On Berlusconi's leadership and system of power see, for example, Paul Ginsborg, *Berlusconi. Ambizioni patrimoniali in una democrazia mediatica* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003) and *Berlusconismo. Analisi di un sistema di potere*, ed. by Enrica Asquer (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2011). Another interesting portrait of Berlusconi's impact on Italian society is Alexander Stille, *Citizen Berlusconi. Vita e imprese* (Milan: Garzanti, 2006).

prime minister. Two sonnets are explicitly dedicated to television and its effect on public opinion. Television both distracts citizens and disseminates conformist thought. The following sonnet also establishes an equivalence between political tv debates and football broadcasts. In Vecchiatto's view, both are part of this mass destruction which anesthetizes like morphine:

11.

Signori, quelli che vi dan da bere
il cicaleccio di spettacolistiche
trasmissioni per passar le sere
con frescate politiche o calcistiche,

sono forse le più caratteristiche
facce di criminali da vedere,
più tristi assai delle bande teppistiche,
più torvi di chi sta nelle galere.

E voi sorbite con seral clistere
il succo marcio delle lor casistiche,
la morfina che vi fa stravedere
per vacue sceneggiate scandalistiche.
(33)

Vecchiatto sees the organization of these spectacles as one of the worst criminal actions, as television makes the spectator apathetic. At the same time, it promotes behaviours and tastes that are in line with the dominant ideology, such as opulence and ostentation. A particularly explicit remark focuses on the condition of women in television. The clearly not feminist or complimentary word 'oca' referred to women aims at giving an idea of the only role left for them in television, where they are reduced to exhibition animals:

12.

Bastano trenta serate davanti
all'apparecchio di televisione
e non avrete più alcuna passione

per le cose sottili e dissonanti.

Ammirerete sol l'ostentazione,
le becere battute accattivanti,
il culo e le tette debordanti
di un'oca stridula da esposizione.

E vi parranno davvero esaltanti
le grida pubblicitarie d'un marpione,
che voi applaudite tutti in soggezione,
nello sfarzo di luci là davanti:

luci d'una vita ove tutto s'indora,
nel borghese comfort della malora.
(34)

In this situation, politicians are just robots who repeat advertising slogans of their parties, without any belief. This is the easiest way to make a career, as Vecchiatto suggests in another poem:

15.

Questi automi, messi a governar la gente
(pencolando qua e là come ho già detto)
tutto trasforman nell'assoluto niente:
e ora spiego come ciò va a effetto.

Un sì o un no per loro è equivalente,
e conta solo nell'attimo in cui è detto,
per far carriera e mostrarsi ubbidiente
al branco in cui l'automa verrà eletto.

Dire frasi che non vogliono dir niente
diventa il primo politico precetto,
sparso anche nella massa consenziente:
che imita il suo automa prediletto.

Dunque infine: il niente al tutto si equivale,
e il bene o il male, è sempre tutto uguale.
(37)

In the same year 2010, Celati publishes two other texts in which we find the same critique. The first is a brief poem, *Ma come dicono di vivere così*, and the

second is a play, *Bollettino del diluvio universale*. Besides the critique of optimism and the standard of living of contemporary consumerist society which was already in *Recita* and *Sonetti*, in *Ma come dicono di vivere così* Celati also tackles the issue of immigration. Celati openly condemns those wealthy nations that do not want to open their borders to refugees. The use of free verse permits the poem to be a collection of fragments of stereotypical sentences taken from the media or the political propaganda on migrants. The poet's questions and comments interrupt the sequence of these sentences, showing their nature of stereotypes. The poem presents a narrow-minded, greedy society which wants to keep its wealth for itself, where forms of chauvinism re-emerge, with the consequence of a total absence of solidarity towards those who come from elsewhere:

> e la patria da salvare – da chi? –
> da quelli che migrano come uccelli –
> ma come dicono di vivere qui così?
> nelle case – nelle loro case – chiusi –
> chiusi col tenore di vita – non si può capire –
> chiusi col tenore di vita e il telefono –
> e quelli là non li vogliamo – dicono al telefono –
> quelli che migrano che vadano –
> vada da un'altra parte – dicono loro –
> noi siamo nel giusto e qui non c'è posto –
> noi siamo nel giusto perché ci siamo fatti da soli –
> noi abbiamo la nostra bella patria – dicono così –
> abbiamo la nostra patria con il tenore di vita –
> e quelli là che migrano vada da un'altra parte –
> così parlano – per esempio anche di notte –
> nelle case – nelle loro case – chiusi –
> chiusi col tenore di vita – non si può capire –
> ma come fanno – già – a tenere le facce così serie?[208]

[208] Gianni Celati, *Ma come dicono di vivere così* (Viadana: Fuocofuochino, 2010), p. 1. The text was published only in 11 copies and can be found in writer Paolo Nori's blog: Gianni Celati, *Ma come*, *www.paolonori.it*, 29 January 2010 <http://www.paolonori.it/ma-come/#more-5105> [accessed 29 September 2017].

In the play, *Bollettino del diluvio universale*, a manager is waiting for a theatre director to sign an agreement and trasform the theatre into a shopping centre. The director is late and cannot reach the theatre because of a flood. While waiting, the manager and his assistant, the yes-man Tarozzi, make presumptuous discourses with the aim of imposing on their audience their ideas on the importance of the free market economy, optimistic thought and economic development. Tarozzi himself is a very interesting character. He is literally part of the body of his boss, and wears the same clothes. He is wrapped inside newspapers, such as the *Financial Times* and *Times Literary Supplement* that he reads from time to time. Tarozzi's function is only to confirm all that the manager says, following a spirit of optimism that leads them to understimate even the great flood that gives the title to the play. The manager's view explicitly contradicts all the ideas that Celati has expressed in his entire work, and, with particular strength, from the 1980s onwards: 'Mai perdere tempo, cogliere l'attimo fuggente, puntare alla meta, cioè al bersaglio, il cosiddetto *target*, in inglese nel testo. *Target* e via senza pensieri! Vero Tarozzi?'.

Nevertheless, the other characters − a custodian, the secretary of the theatre's director and her cousin − seem not to understand the manager's words. They are all involved in other activities: the guardian observes with binoculars the state of the flood, the secretary restores her makes up and her cousin yawns all the time as she finds the manager incredibly boring. These female characters make evident the pointlessness and the fanaticism of the manager and his assistant. The custodian himself seems not to care about the manager's concerns about the world economy and his promises of enrichment. The absurd situation recalls Beckett's theatre for the absence of communication between characters waiting for a great flood, and has the function of making the manager's discourse sound ridiculous, as it is pointless and

dogmatic. Celati creates a dialogue which shows the vacuity of the creed of neoliberalism, which the manager wants to spread and impose with his words:

> DIRIGENTE
> [Si tira i polsini, parla sottovoce al pubblico]
>
> Questi non hanno la minima idea
> di cosa sia l'economia mondiale.
> Non sanno che basta un crollo sul mercato
> o una moneta che va a rotoli,
> e può succedere di tutto,
> anche l'irreparabile!
> Altroché il loro diluvio!
> […]
> Meglio aprirlo a Hong Kong il nostro centro commerciale!
> Questi vivono le loro piccole vite paesane, e non capiscono,
> non capiscono le leggi dell'economia moderna.
> […]
> Non capiscono
> che noi creiamo ricchezza e prosperità per tutti,
> e dobbiamo prevedere tutto per cogliere il momento giusto,
> l'ora e il minuto finanziario preciso che mai più tornerà. (34-35)

The idea that an economic collapse is more important than the flood illustrates the ludicrous consequences of rigid and acritical acceptance of the rules of neoliberalism. The manager is so focused on his optimistic view of financial progress that he undestimates the consequences of the great flood that the other characters keep announcing as imminent. Their own lives are in danger but he seems worried only about the agreement that he has to sign for the construction of the shopping centre, and the problems this delay may cause for world economy ('Sentite il rumore del vento la pioggia che scroscia…Ma il vento non importa, perché col pensiero positivo tutto si risolve', 54).[209] The manager's discourse parrots the keywords of free market ideology:

[209] The passage recalls Dante's verses: 'Non è il mondan romore altro ch'un fiato di vento / ch'or vien quinci or vien quindi' (Purg., XI, 104-6).

> Ed ecco ora il quadro riassuntivo
> del *trend* globale, su scala planetaria
> che posso schizzare in poche parole.
> Reddito medio delle famiglie stazionario,
> crescenti i redditi finanziari,
> che mettono in circolazione naturalmente,
> atteggiamenti vari metabolizzati,
> con diversi scenari per il futuro
> e chiare politiche per il rilancio del mercato. (55)

Celati parodies the language that media and experts employ on a daily basis to describe the situation of the world economy. Such a list of watchwords of neoliberalist thought shows the ideology that dominates our lives in contemporary society in all its fanatism. The manager's speech sounds sterile and laughable to the reader: in the manager's view, life seems limited to the market and an obscure and stereotyped financial glossary is sufficient to investigate and solve all its problems. The supposed attractive power of commercial English words used in Italian discourse on this topic ('*trend*', '*mood*') is explicitly mocked in the text: 'Più coscienza di esposizione al rischio, che si dice *risk conscious behaviour*, *risk conscious behaviour*, in inglese nel testo […]' (53). This continues in the following lines, where the manager praises the inexorable force of global capitalism, where optimistic thought will always have the best and no crisis or protest could ever stop the world economy:

> Ecco, signore e signori,
> le tendenze emergenti dell'economia mondiale,
> con fuochi e tumulti di fondo,
> vulcani che eruttano
> lava nel *mood* delle masse metabolizzate,
> ma senza seri intralci all'azione imprenditoriale.
> Dovunque nella globalità del mondo
> si assiste a un rilancio del pensiero positivo,
> contro le critiche depressive alle classi dirigenti.
> È finita l'epoca dell'uomo in crisi, ora si nota
> un rilancio dei valori di base nel *mood* delle masse.
> (56)

The emphasis on the manager's certainties ('Questo giova al mercato, aumentando i consumi, indubbiamente, signore e signori, indubbiamente', 56) confirms the comic representation of neoliberalist thought as a form of collective insanity. Celati presents the speech in its confusion and absence of meaning that derives from a passive acceptance of the creed of the free market ideology, without any critical effort:

> Ecco dunque, signori miei, in sintesi,
> i problemi che si pongono sul tappeto
> nei prossimi decenni del mondo
> E come l'economia mondiale investe la sostanza attuale della cosa in sé
> del nuovo mercato mondiale,
> *free market*, in inglese nel testo.
> Spero d'essere stato chiaro nella mia esposizione. (56-57)

Celati's play thus shows the dominant ideology of our world as completely illogical. When it comes to talking about the problems of economic growth, the manager demonstrates all his indifference: for him, free global finance is the only thing that matters and its development must never stop. Political and environmental issues (wars, famines and other catastrophes) that derive from it are just collateral effects, with no relevance. This last part of his speech reinforces in the reader the absurdity of his proposal, while it reveals the internal cruelty of such ideology:

> Resta da dire i problemi
> dell'economia mondiale
> che si profilano all'orizzonte.
> Handicap dello stato sovrano,
> guerra di tutti contro tutti,
> libera competizione globale,
> tempo-apice dell'*homo homini lupus*.
> Eh sì! l'uomo che sbrana l'uomo!
> Poi guerre e carestie e catastrofi
> un po' dappertutto,
> questo va da sé. (58-59)

Nevertheless, when the great flood reaches the president of the manager's company and the wave devastates his luxurious car, it appears evident that no wealth or position could serve against natural catastrophes:

> Ah io lo vedo il nostro presidente,
> nella sua macchina, con l'acqua alla gola.
> Lo vedo come se fosse qui davanti a me,
> nella sua limousine corazzata
> con chiglia espandibile, a forma d'arca di Noè,
> modello per futuri magnati della finanza
> che attraversino il mare nutrendosi di manna del cielo.
> Ma non è servita a niente,
> vero Tarozzi?
>
> TAROZZI
> [Avvolto nei giornali]
> No, signore,
> purtroppo non è servita. (67)

The great flood renders explicit the human condition of mortality and unveils all the false myths of neoliberalism that the manager has been praising during his speech. Forced by the events, even the manager has to admit that no power or money can help save mankind from its destiny. The description of the president of his company as self-made man, admired by the crowd and president of a football club clearly mocks the former Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who often used to boast himself to be exactly what the manager says in the following lines:

> DIRIGENTE
> [Avanza ancora verso il proscenio]
> Capo ammirato dalle masse,
> presidente d'una grande squadra di calcio,
> uomo tutto d'un pezzo che s'era fatto da solo,
> portato via dalle acque nel giorno del diluvio.
> Ah, vita, vita! Nasciamo votati alla morte! (67)

The manager's final discourse, in memoriam of the president who died in the water summarizes Celati's philosophy on the limits of existence and knowledge in the face of the effects of nature:

> DIRIGENTE
> Signor presidente, signore e signori,
> eccoci qua, anche noi portati via dalle acque,
> voci di nessuno che si perdono nella pioggia
> e nel vento.
> Ed è tutto un gran racconto che non parla di niente,
> né dell'uomo né dell'eternità.
> Parla solo della forma sempre disfatta,
> che avanza là fuori nei resti di tutto,
> magazzini di scarti, detriti di stupidate,
> carrettate di cose perse per strada.
> Rispetto al diluvio che arriva, signor presidente,
> tutto quello che sappiamo, bene o male,
> è un ronzio di parole (69)

In the 2000s, Celati's writings focus on contemporary Italy and Italian identity like never before. I have illustrated how this is the main difference between the 1996 *Recita* (and its contemporary short story *Non c'è più paradiso*) and the 2010 *Sonetti*: the general socio-political and ethical critique becomes a specific and detailed accusation of a collective Italian way of being, the *Badalucco*, whom Celati sees as the origin of Italian corruption nowadays. Four years before the *Sonetti*, in 2006, Celati won the Viareggio Prize, with a collection of stories entitled *Vite di pascolanti*. These were the first part of a wider project that would take the form of three volumes with old and new stories, published between 2008 and 2013: *Costumi degli italiani 1. Un eroe moderno*, *Costumi degli italiani 2. Il benessere arriva in casa Pucci* and *Selve d'amore*. In this cycle the author's memories of his infancy and adolescence intersect with traditional Italian behaviours and morality. The title *Costumi degli italiani* is a direct quotation of Leopardi's *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degl'Italiani* and confirms the importance of the Italian poet

and philosopher in Celati's works of this period. As briefly mentioned above, the other great source of inspiration for Celati's latest narrative is the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico, whose considerations on memory and imagination inspires and guides Celati in these years.[210]

Before analysing the trilogy that concludes Celati's narrative production, I will briefly focus on the text *Fellini e il maschio italiano*, as it concentrates Celati's main lines of reasoning while he was writing *Costumi degli italiani* and helps explain its political dimension. The text is a translation of a lecture that Celati gave as a Binder Lecture at San Diego University in 2006 and then published on the online journal *Zibaldoni e altre meraviglie* in 2009. It investigates the importance of memories of infancy in Federco Fellini's films that Celati reads as a convincing analysis of Italian society, with particular focus on the relationship between power and the idea of masculinity and femininity diffused among the Italian population.

Celati introduces the topic by quoting Vico's *Scienza Nuova* on the importance of imagination and proximity between memory and imagination. Through Vico's words, Celati states that every memory of the past has an imaginative feature and because of that it is poetic. Imagination is capable of giving meaning and passion to apparently meaningless and sterile facts or events. In this sense there is an affinity between Vico and Fellini:

> In uno dei punti più famosi della sua Scienza Nuova, dice: 'Il più sublime lavoro della poesia è dare senso e passione alle cose insensate', cioè rendere le cose inanimate significative per mezzo della nostra immaginazione, come fanno i bambini […]. Fellini era certamente consapevole del pensiero di Vico e nulla è più vicino alla sua presa di posizione poetica. Nelle interviste, tutti i suoi ricordi d'infanzia e adolescenza trascorse in un piccolo paese meta di

[210] Vico's thought was highly critical of modern rationalism and opposed to the Cartesian method. His most important work, the *Scienza Nuova* (1725) is an attempt to organize the human experience as a single science which unites history and philosophy. Its main aim was to achieve a new understanding of the origins of human culture, indicating the universal and eternal principles on which all nations were founded and still preserve themselves.

> vacanze balneari coincidono con quella sorta di 'vigorosa immaginazione' descritta da Vico. Fellini ha sempre guardato all'infanzia come al periodo in cui l'essere umano vive ancora in una specie di animismo che abbraccia tutte le cose, poiché è in quel periodo che l'immaginazione è libera di animare l'inanimato.[211]

This quotation explains why Celati decides to dedicate his last works of fiction to memories of his infancy. In the final part of this section I will demonstrate how this choice has a direct implication on Celati's *impegno*, due to the political role that Celati assigns to imagination. In *Costumi degli italiani* and *Selve d'amore* there is exactly the same effort that Celati ascribes to Vico and Fellini: 'In un gesto simile a quello di Vico, Fellini cerca di esplorare ciò che l'adulto considera i ricordi vergognosi della sua vita adulta: le fantasie inconfessabili che risalgono all'infanzia e all'adolescenza' (2). The same is true for Celati's short stories, where he uses his memories to reveal behaviours and fantasies that are normally not accepted in an adult society, especially on the side of love and sexual relationships.

Celati's reading of Fellini's works leads him to recognize the peculiarity of a widespread behaviour among Italian men – and most patriarchal societies - which consists of seeing women as sexual objects. Celati traces this tendency back to the presence and activity of the Catholic Church, that imposed for centuries a rigid separation between males and females, starting in school. The Church also fostered an exterior morality, where the only admitted form of love and desire is connected to marriage, fidelity and the family. According to Celati, this produced an obsessive desire for women who do not belong to the domestic environment:

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[211] Gianni Celati, 'Fellini e il maschio italiano 1', *Zibaldoni e altre meraviglie* (2009) Fellini e il maschio italiano 1', *Zibaldoni e altre meraviglie* (2009), <http://www.zibaldoni.it/2009/05/29/fellini-1/> [accessed 4 October 2017]. On the link between Fellini and *Costumi degli italiani*, see Elana Kranz, 'Una fonte discutibile: la vita provinciale in *Amarcord* e *I vitelloni* di Fellini e in *Vite di pascolanti* di Gianni Celati', in *Scrittori inconvenienti. Essays on and by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Gianni Celati*, ed. by Armando Maggi and Rebecca West (Ravenna: Longo, 2009), 209-222.

> In associazione ai precetti della Chiesa cattolica (per esempio, quelli espressi dai preti in *8 e ½* che pensavano che le donne fossero maligne tentatrici), la separazione tra i sessi ha assunto una forma molto più rigida in Italia rispetto agli altri paesi. Questo potrebbe aiutarci a spiegare la libidine che circola in una folla di uomini italiani quando fissano una donna, come se la vedessero attraverso una distanza insuperabile.
>
> La donna che passa per strada rappresenta una generica imago per gli uomini che la fissano, una donna qualsiasi che è parte del mondo esterno, desiderabile per lo più perché ella è esterna al controllo dell'ambiente domestico. In un certo modo questa donna viene percepita come un automa dai maschi che guardano, forse anche un bell'automa, ma i cui attributi femminili sono tuttavia più o meno come i pezzi di ricambio di un giocattolo meccanico sessuale.[212]

Even if Celati's position could be challenged and discussed with plenty of arguments, what is interesting for my analysis is that such a description of the causes of sexist behaviour and Italian masculinity expresses the social concerns that stand behind the tales of *Costumi*, where there are plenty of stories on sexual adventures (true or dreamed) and about how men consider women. Furthermore, Celati links Italian masculinity to the Fascist system of power, showing that there might be a connection between the two. In the same text, in fact, Celati quotes Carlo Emilio Gadda to describe how Fascism solved the problem of the fragility of men by using a rhetoric of dominant men and submissive women:

> Gadda scrive: 'Per influenzare le folle (Mussolini) abbisognava di un 'mito' pescato 'dal letamaio dei miti', cioè a dire, la cosa era data più che scontata. Questo mito era il 'fallo universale', il mito stesso della mascolinità, che ha avuto il più grande successo a causa della sua 'sproporzionata trivialità'.(6)

Celati, through Fellini, states that Italian men remained stuck in a never-ending adolescence that leads them to be perfectly comfortable in a regime like

[212] 5. It is also interesting that Celati suggests that this study of Italian masculinity is not limited to Italy as it has to do with an idea of sex in wealthy societies, as he states in the endnote: 'Credo che le osservazioni di Fellini su certi tipi di maschio italiano ci aiutino a gettare uno sguardo sull'Eros malato che bombarda le nostre ricche società'. Sex, love and desire and the idea of women as sexual objects and 'consumer goods' in Western society are issues that Celati will tackle in his last documentary, *Diol Kadd*.

fascism, that Fellini defined as a never-ending adolescence of the nation. The rhetoric of strength is thus a response to the fragility of men. Italian sexist behaviour thus have a direct political consequence:

> Questo è ciò che era il fascismo: un prolungamento dell'adolescenza per mezzo dell'intimidazione, ove l'attività del pensare (che ci espone all'esperienza dell'essere individui) viene o messa da parte per principio o soffocata dalle violenze. Questo è ciò che intende Fellini quando afferma che il fascismo era 'un rifiuto di approfondire la propria relazione individuale con la vita, per pigrizia, pregiudizio o convenienza'. E così, generazione dopo generazione, la costitutiva fragilità maschile viene sommersa dalla retorica della forza. (6)

It is also very telling that in the part of the essay on Fellini and Italian masculinity where Celati deals with these issues he refers to Leopardi's *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degl'Italiani*. This permits us to understand the double function of Celati's latest work: on the one side, the preservation of imagination and imaginative thinking through a form of storytelling, where Vico's philosophy has a central role. On the other side, a discourse on specific Italian behaviour links the series of *Costumi* to that of Vecchiatto and 'Italia trista', where Leopardi's influence is prevalent:

> In un testo del 1824 sui costumi degli italiani, Leopardi sostiene che l'intera vita italiana è caratterizzata da ciò che egli chiama 'società ristretta': quella sorta di società che tende a ritirarsi nella sua propria sfera di potere, producendo uno stagnante conservatorismo in assenza di alcun confronto attivo con culture differenti. L'effetto è quello di restringere gli orizzonti, producendo una mentalità regionale con scarso interesse per l'idea di un bene collettivo. Piuttosto, la tendenza è a promuovere interessi individuali in piccoli centri di potere e consorzi. (7)

In *Costumi* and *Selve* it is often possible to find stories that illustrate this narrow-minded provincial society. Celati uses the reference to Leopardi in order to describe its political consequences, such as the creation of small centres of power

with no interest in the collectivity. As it is possible to read in Celati's text on the back cover of *Vite di pascolanti*, the original project of *Costumi degli italiani* included, besides memories of Celati's own family, other stories from his schooldays and adolescence, as well as 'notizie su vacanze, politica, raccomandazioni, cattolicesimo, sesso, calcio, morale etc.'. As the text on Fellini and Italian masculinity makes explicit, Celati's last project wanted to be a deep analysis of Italian society, but always using imaginative thinking rather than cold realism.

Similarly to Celati's books of the 1970s, especially *La banda dei sospiri*, *Costumi* contains plenty of references to politics and politicians, but always as part of life, with no intention of a real political debate on current events. Nevertheless, the later part of Celati's career shows a more direct critique of Italian society, consumerism and the ideology of neoliberalism, which is a peculiarity of this period, in comparison to Celati's forms of *impegno* in his previous works. Texts like *Recita*, *Sonetti* and *Bollettino* clearly show how this happens. The same is true for the cycle of *Costumi*, also written in the first decade of the new millenium, even though the critique might appear less explicit. Celati's *impegno* relates here to the origins of Italian corruption, with the tendency of being astute, but in a dishonest manner, always with the aim of cheating the other and gaining an advantage. *Costumi* collects stories from which emerge what Celati sees as some of the worst habits and behaviours of Italians. One good example of this is the depiction of the intercession that is necessary to find a job or some other favour. This transforms what should be a citizen's right into a political concession in return for votes:

> Un giorno la signora Pucci s'è decisa a andare in cerca d'una raccomandazione, nel quartiere Sant'Isidoro. Quello era il quartiere dove fiorivano le istituzioni religiose, i convitti per giovanette, i campi sportivi parrocchiali, l'oratorio dei Salesiani con i film western e il ping-pong per tutti. Ma soprattutto era il quartiere dove i postulanti andavano a chiedere

> raccomandazioni. Uno cercava un impiego per un fratello scioperato, un altro un aiuto per scansare il servizio militare, uno aspirava a un posto pubblico che non gli competeva, un altro aveva paura di non superare un esame, due coniugi volevano mandare all'ospizio il nonno diventato un seccatore, uno voleva una pensione anticipata per darsi a traffici in camuffa, un altro voleva piazzare il figlio nella redazione d'un giornale… In tutti i momenti della vita ci voleva una raccomandazione e si andava a cercarla all'associazione cattolica, quartiere Sant'Isidoro.
>
> Qui vedevi un esercito di postulanti in lunghe code che arrivavano fino in fondo al marciapiede: una clientela da guidare alle elezioni politiche con le idee giuste *per mandatum Domini*.[213]

It is thus possible to argue that *Costumi* illustrates with examples Vecchiatto's critique of the 'Italia trista' that I have examined in *Recita* and *Sonetti*. Celati uses comical fiction to reveal some aspects of Italian society and politics, such as dishonesty, fraud and bribery.

The corruption of the small city in which the stories of *Costumi* and *Selve d'amore* are set clearly emerges in the tale *Il caso Muccinelli*, where a fake detective who claims to be sent from the government creates confusion and fear in all the most important political figures of the city council, just by his presence: 'Nel consiglio municipale c'era molta agitazione; si temeva fosse venuto a indagare sui falsi bilanci, su appalti di favore, o altri inghippi di bassa politica' (43). Using this misunderstanding, Celati creates a comical situation where the authorities of the city reveal their own illegal activities, even if the detective's intention is not to find them out. Everyone is worried, from the members of the council to the bishop, who is afraid that Muccinelli could discover his project to transform a rehabilitation centre into new houses to be sold ('lo scandalo dei casoni Pagliuca'):

> Molti consiglieri comunali che avevano favorito l'operazione tremavano all'idea che Muccinelli o Morgagni scoprissero il bandolo delle loro truffe. Ma ancora maggiore era l'agitazione nel palazzo arcivescovile, dove a sua

[213] Gianni Celati, *Costumi degli italiani 2. Il benessere arriva in casa Pucci*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2008, p. 64-65.

> eccellenza l'arcivescovo era scoppiata un'itterizia di carattere nevrastenico per timore che Morgagni avesse in mano le prove per denunciare lo scandalo dei casoni Pagliuca.[214]

Celati's ironic gaze does not touch only political and religious power: members of the middle class are also involved in the scandals, as the character of the rich lawyer Annoiati confirms. Annoiati feels insecure because he organizes night time meetings of neofascists in the huge basement of his villa: 'Senza dire dell'Annoiati, ora sulle spine per paura che Muccinelli ficcasse il naso anche nella sua associazione di giovanotti con l'ideale di riportare l'ordine nella patria'.[215] The description of the young people who gather in Annoiati's house is a parody of Fascist and neofascist behaviours and ideas, based on physical activity, violence against the weak, nationalism, male chauvinism and homophobia:

> Poi ricorda che nei sotterranei della villa Annoiati, molti dei nostri compagni si riunivano ogni settimana per fare esercizi ginnici e temprare i muscoli, con braghette da tennis e tenuta sportiva, in vista del loro ideale politico, che consisteva nel riportare l'ordine nella patria […], cominciavano a correre in tondo inneggiando a certi cimeli che incarnano gli eterni valori della nazione. Ad esempio baciavano una baionetta arrugginita, o un vecchio scarpone da alpino, o un bastone piuttosto nodoso, sempre gridando a squarciagola la loro battuta preferita: 'Vinceremo! Vinceremo!' […], non senza prendere a calci qualche ubriaco incontrato per strada, o un qualche anziano malfermo sulle gambe, che loro trattavano da 'degenerato', o 'finocchione', secondo i loro principi d'ordine etico. Tanto è vero che una sera due picchiatori con l'ideale di riportare la nostra nazione ai suoi eterni valori hanno sorpreso il professor Amos mentre orinava contro un muro, e gli hanno spaccato non so quante costole per punizione.[216]

*Il caso Muccinelli* is a sort of satire of politics the characteristics of which could easily be extended from the small city to the whole of Italy. Political and religious personalities of the city take part in the neofascist meeting at Annoiati's house: the mayor Cagnotto, members of the council, the archibishop, members of the

[214] Gianni Celati, *Selve d'amore* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2013), p. 43.
[215] *Selve d'amore*, p. 57.
[216] Gianni Celati, *Costumi degli italiani 1. Un eroe moderno*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 122-123.

aristocracy and war heroes. Celati mocks here other discourses common in contemporary Italy, such as anti-communist rhetoric, racism and the need for a return of the death penalty:

> In quel salotto si sentivano discorsi contro il pericolo comunista, contro la musica dei negri, contro la gioventù senza ideali, e contro molte altre cose. Circolavano vassoi con lo spumante: 'La patria ha molto sofferto', suggeriva l'eroe di guerra con la benda sull'occhio. L'avvocato Annoiati riaffermava la necessità di restaurare al più presto la pena di morte, per riportare l'ordine in patria.[217]

*Costumi* represents other political situations, such as an anarchist circle ('circolo anarchico Fantuzzi', *Costumi 1*, 41) or a group spreading communist ideology ('tre giovanotti che venivano di notte a spiegarle la dottrina delle classi povere sfruttate dalle classi ricche, e l'ideale del comunismo per cavarsi fuori dalla schiavitù di tutti i rovinati in famiglia', *Costumi 1*, 69). Once again, Celati mentions politics with the double aim of representing it as part of everyday life and undermining the rhetoric of any political dogma with a series of ironic descriptions, as in the episode in the short story, *Un eroe moderno*, in which the communist Babbini challenges a group of intellectuals for being detached from the communist agenda. The critique repeats Celati's early rejection of communist orthodoxy that I have discussed in Chapter One:

> 'Ma da che parte vi ponete voi? Dalla parte della borghesia o del proletariato?'. Così è iniziato l'intervento d'un certo Babbini, che era stato invitato da Barattieri a una nostra riunione. 'Voi vi riunite qui a discutere dell'individuo pensante, come intellettuali che non hanno nessun rapporto con la classe operaia. Ma dove si discutono davvero a fondo i fatti concreti della vita è nella sede di partito'. 'E cioè?' chiediamo noi. 'Cioè nella cellula Juri Papokin, dove potrete veramente sostenere un serio dibattito con la classe operaia, che è la vera coscienza pensante'. 'Ma un dibattito su cosa?'

[217] *Costumi degli italiani 2. Il benessere arriva in casa Pucci*, p. 14.

> 'Un dibattito per prendere coscienza delle vostre contraddizioni, e avvicinarvi alla lotta di classe attraverso il pensiero dialettico'.[218]

Behind the cycle that unites *Costumi* and *Selve d'amore* it is possible to see the influence of a reasoning developed in the online journal *Zibaldoni e altre meraviglie* that has to do with a political role for imagination. I have already mentioned the connection between one of the most explicitly committed works written by Celati, *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna*, and *Zibaldoni*, with the editors of the journal, especially Enrico De Vivo, directly involved in the book. In his ten-year long collaboration, Celati contributes to *Zibaldoni* with several essays (on Swift, Leopardi, Vico, and the one on Fellini and Italian masculinity which I have examined above), translations (from Nietzsche and Baudelaire), fiction, letters, sonnets, and interviews. One of the main topics of Celati's interventions in those years is the importance of imagination in shaping the experience of life. In a 2005 conversation with Massimo Rizzante, Celati refers to Aristotle, Vico, Descartes, Kant and Bachelard to state that imagination has a fundamental role in everyday life, as it is the fundamental tool for interpreting the world in every aspect:

> Noi ci serviamo della fantasia tutti i momenti per interpretare le cose, cercando di capire quello che è fuori dalla nostra portata. E tutto il nostro sistema emotivo dipende da come immaginiamo ciò che sta sotto i nostri occhi. Quando abbiamo paura, quando siamo a disagio, quando siamo in pericolo, quando facciamo progetti, entra in gioco l'atto di fantasticare. Quando siamo innamorati non facciamo che ripassarci nella testa il film delle fantasie sull'altro. L'atto di fantasticare è così comune che lo diamo per scontato. Però se si inceppa, c'è un campanello d'allarme che è la noia, come l'altra faccia degli slanci di fantasticazione.[219]

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[218] *Costumi degli italiani 1. Un eroe moderno*, p. 70-71.
[219] Gianni Celati and Massimo Rizzante, 'Dialogo sulla fantasia', *Zibaldoni e altre meraviglie*, May-August 2005 <http://www.zibaldoni.it/2005/09/19/dialogo-sulla-fantasia/> [accessed 9 September 2017].

Life as a social matter is itself inherently linked to imagination: what unites people is a sort of collective knowledge based on imaginative thinking, that Celati calls 'pensare-immaginare'. Celati gives to imagination a political role as it permits us to think about ourselves as a community:

> Riflettere sulla fantasia aiuta a capire quello che tu chiami senso comune: cosa ci lega l'uno all'altro nei pensieri a distanza, anche nel quadro d'una separazione generale degli individui. Per questo credo sia utile la ripresa del pensiero di Aristotele, di Vico, come ripresa di un'idea di intellezione collettiva. Il che vuole dire che possiamo anche essere soli, ma siamo sempre con gli altri – essere al mondo vuol dire essere con gli altri dall'inizio alla fine. Anche se sono su un'isola deserta, gli altri sono sempre con me in una trama che determina i miei gesti, i miei atteggiamenti, quello che voglio e quel che non voglio.[220]

In the same interview, Celati expresses again his firm opposition to realism and the journalistic style of literary works based on current events. Celati condemns what he sees as one of the main tendencies of contemporary literature, the need to chase the latest news in order to create stories which could sell copies. Celati confirms in the 2000s his continued loyalty to an idea of literature based on a critical effort on the planes of language and thought that is the leitmotif of his entire works. This happens through imagination: in his view, there is not such a strict split between what is to be considered real and what is not. On the contrary, imagination is the tool for approaching all aspects of the so-called reality. Celati's considerations show once again his commitment to an alternative vision of literature, that openly contrasts with the dominant ideology of contemporary society. His literature is a form of rebellion against the dictatorship of what is brand new:

> La narrativa d'oggi è ormai un'appendice dell'informazione giornalistica. È difficile trovare un romanzo d'oggi che non si appelli all'attualità. Ecco l'autore basco che scrive il romanzo sul terrorista dell'ETA, e quello

[220] Gianni Celati and Massimo Rizzante, 'Dialogo sulla fantasia'.

> irlandese che scrive il romanzo sul terrorista dell'IRA e l'autrice americana che scrive il romanzo sulle congreghe di pedofili, e l'autore italiano che scrive il romanzo su certi tipi della mafia. Sono libri che il lettore legge come se fossero commenti a una realtà di fatto. Qui però la 'realtà' indica solo modi di vedere giornalistici – i modi dell'attualità – il tutto categorizzato secondo il criterio del 'nuovo'. Per i giornali i fatti hanno valore solo quando cadono nella categoria del nuovo. Il nuovo è un dogma ma anche una continua intimidazione, perché tutti dobbiamo aver paura di essere visti come dei sorpassati dal nuovo, il che nel mondo attuale vuol dire essere scarti senza valore.

Celati's discourse gives a central role to imagination in shaping reality. In order to illustrate this concept, the author refers to one of his favourite sources of inspiration, chivalric poetry, and particularly Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, as one model for an alternative to realism in contemporary literature. It is imagination that gives importance to so-called reality, which otherwise appears lifeless:

> A questo proposito c'è qualcosa di illuminante nel *Don Chisciotte*, dove si affaccia per la prima volta la questione della 'realtà', posta in un contrasto con l'immaginazione e le tendenze fantasticanti. E si affaccia anche l'idea che il nuovo sia qualcosa che spazza via le inutili anticaglie (i romanzi cavallereschi che hanno invaso il cervello di Don Chisciotte). Ma, posto questo schema, dove *Don Chisciotte* ha sempre torto, in quanto invasato dalla fantasie cavalleresche, poi succede che sono proprio le sue tendenze fantasticanti a arricchire di senso il mondo, episodio dopo episodio. Sono le sue fantasie e riflessioni a farci intravedere l'aperto mondo sotto l'aperto cielo come la nostra vera casa. Tutto il Don Chisciotte resta un esempio meraviglioso del pensare-immaginare, del vedere la memoria figurale attraverso la trasparenza delle immagini.

Celati's entire work is thus committed to the preservation and development of imagination as essential for human beings. The political role of imagination emerges clearly in a 2006 interview, where Celati quotes Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* in order to explain that it is the absence of imagination that leads to the cruellest actions and to apparently inexplicable evil behaviours:

> Non so se conoscete quel libro di Hannah Arendt, *La banalità del male*, sul processo a uno degli artefici dei campi di sterminio nazi – Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann si è sempre difeso dicendo che lui 'aveva obbedito agli ordini', 'aveva fatto il suo dovere'. Il che sembra anche vero. Era come un impiegato che makes his job [*sic*], pensando il job solo in termini tecnici e funzionali. Hannah Arendt commenta che tutto questo è il segno d'una spaventosa mancanza di immaginazione. Ed è questo che dobbiamo temere più di tutto negli anni a venire, perché ancora una volta sarà la mancanza di immaginazione a tirarci nell'abisso.[221]

In the same interview Celati makes a connection between the new market economy and the publishing policy that he sees as dominant at the time. In his view, the savage action of capitalism is the cause of a process of sterilization of all cultures and the diffusion of cultural conformism. The comparison between the action of the US marines during the 2003-2011 war on Iraq and the policy of publishing houses and new literary authors expresses the tight link between contemporary society and literature in Celati's idea:

> Il fondamento di questa campagna di sterilizzazione di tutte le culture sta nell'attuale fase feroce del capitalismo, chiamata *new market economy*, dove è d'obbligo aver la stessa ideologia d'attacco dei marines del presidente George W. Bush. E ormai direi che sono una maggioranza i nuovi scrittori che concepiscono i libri come assalti militari, con un modo di parlare e pensare simili a quello dei marines di Bush. I quali in Iraq dicevano: 'We came here to make our job' - come se il contenuto morale del loro job fosse fuori discussione. La stessa idea extramorale del making our *job* ce l'hanno gli esperti delle case editrici, e i nuovi autori – marines della letteratura ufficiale, letteratura d'assalto in stile americano. (51)

Celati's *impegno* is necessarily fragmentary, non-systematic, non-ideological. Following his post-structuralist theoretical background, Celati has a deconstructive approach that leads him to disseminate doubts rather than expressing certainties. Nevertheless, his works show a constant attention to the contemporary world and an unexhausted will of intervention through and in literature. The references to and

[221] 'Intervista per la pubblicazione basca di 'Parlamenti buffi', Conversazione con Jon Benito', *Riga 28. Gianni Celati*, 50-54. The text was originally published in the Basque newspaper, *Berria*, in 2006.

critique of contemporary society become even more explicit in the last part of his career, where he deals with different phenomena and events and focuses, like never before, on Italian habits. It is particularly significant that the more direct *impegno* of this period coincides with a strong commitment to preserving imagination, rather than with a return to the real. Contrary to the stereotypical idea of *impegno*, Celati not only rejects realism, but the idea of reality itself as he claims that all basic human activities are possible thanks to imagination. Imagination itself thus has a fundamental political role in Celati's works as it is through imagination that humans act as social animals. Besides this, Celati expresses his commitment always through an imaginative re-thinking of the world, not limited to what is usually considered as real.

### 2.5 *Qualsiasità* and the Documentary: Celati as a Film Director

After *Alì Babà*, *Alice disambientata*, *Viaggio in Italia*, and *Il semplice*, Celati finds in another collective experience – cinema – new energy for his works. Celati has, in fact, explained that the decision to switch to documentary relies in its collective nature, while he now sees writing as a solitary task: 'Scrivere è un'attività solitaria. Io credo d'essermi convertito al film documentario perché è un lavoro che fai con gli altri'.[222] The first aspect to highlight is thus that Celati sees the documentary as a collective activity, which allows him to involve a large group of people in his works. This starts in *Strada provinciale delle anime*, where he collects his relatives and friends with a blue bus and guides them through some of the places of *Verso la foce*. By looking at the external world together with the others, Celati finds a way of

[222] 'Intervista a Fabrizio Grosoli', in *Documentari imprevedibili come i sogni. Il cinema di Gianni Celati*, p. 12. The idea of writing as a solitary task contrasts with what Celati thought at the time of *Alice disambientata*, where writing was meant to be a collective process: 'un gioco praticato da tutti, uno scrivere romanzi in milioni di persone' (*Alice disambientata*, p. 90).

seeing it differently, as he follows that idea of affection that has an extraordinary place in his works, especially from the 1980s onwards.[223]

In the first part of this chapter I have shown how the collaboration between Ghirri and Celati represents a turning point in the development of Celati's *impegno*. The collaboration with Ghirri is also essential to understand Celati's cinema and the forms of commitment that it is possible to find in it. Ghirri died in 1992. One year earlier, in 1991, he took part in Celati's debut as a film director and the influence he had on Celati's work as a writer continues in his four documentaries. Ghirri appears in *Strada provinciale delle anime*, while Celati's second film, *Il mondo di Luigi Ghirri* (1999), is explicitly dedicated to the memory of his photographer friend. The third documentary, *Case sparse – Visioni di case che crollano* (2003), is the fulfilment of a project on crumbling houses in the Po Valley that Ghirri had in mind before his sudden death. Finally, the fourth film (*Diol Kadd. Vita, diari e riprese in un villaggio del Senegal*, 2010) is linked to Celati's experience in Africa. Here, the sign of Ghirri's thought may appear less evident, but it is still present in the observational method that Celati adopted to describe the small Senegalese village of Diol Kadd where the film is set.[224]

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[223] People involved in the documentaries are writers and intellectuals like Ermanno Cavazzoni, Daniele Benati, Grazia Verasani, John Berger, Giorgio Messori, translators like Marianne Schneider and Jean Talon, the director Alberto Sironi, Zavattini's friend Alfredo Gianolio, etc. As the latest example of the importance of 'affection', see the volume of essays *Studi di affezione per amici e altri* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016). On the same concept, see Marina Spunta, 'Ghirri, Celati e lo «spazio di affezione»', *Il lettore di provincia*, 36, 123-124 (2006), 27-39.

[224] Celati's relationship with cinema is complex and not limited to this period of his career and to his own work. Cinema plays a very special role in all of Celati's writings and his first attempt as a documentarist is in 1977 with the group *Cineamatori militanti*. I have already mentioned that in the late 1970s director Memè Perlini wanted to make a film adaptation of *Comiche* (but the project failed) and, after *Lunario*, Celati had the idea of dedicating himself only to cinema. Besides being the director of four documentaries, Celati is also the screenwriter, together with Giuseppe Tornatore e Alberto Sironi, of Sironi's film *Il grande Fausto* (1995) and of Paolo Muran's *La vita come viaggio aziendale* (2006). Celati himself appears in Davide Ferrario's *Mondonuovo* (2003), with whom he collaborated already in 1997 for the texts of *Sul 45esimo parallelo*. Finally Celati took part in the RAI documentary *Narratori di pianura e da bar* (2010, the directors, Francesco Conversano e Nene Grignaffini, are also quoted among the authors of *Alice disambientata*). See Michele Ronchi Stefanati, 'Dal cinema alla letteratura e ritorno: il documentario nell'opera di Gianni Celati', in

In Celati's cinema it is thus possible to recognize many of the features that are typical of his writings of the 1980s. The same is true for commitment: Celati's films show a form of *impegno* that derives from the intense observation of the external world which is capable of building new relations between people and with the environment. Nevertheless, in Celati's documentaries his *impegno* becomes more directly engaged with Italy's situation in the 1990s and 2000s, following new patterns that emerge already in his writings of the same period.

Celati's cinema shows some aspects that are strictly linked to his works as a writer in the 1980s, such as Ghirri's considerations on observation and against a consumerist idea of photography. Already from *Strada provinciale*, it therefore deals with the notion of tourism as one of the most typical representations of a consumerist attitude in Celati's view (this critique of the modern tourist attitude is central in *Avventure in Africa* and *Diol Kadd*, but was already present in other texts, such as the short story *Baratto* in *Quattro novelle*, in *Fata morgana* and *Verso la foce*).[225] A discussion between Celati and a politician (mayor of the Po Valley village of Comacchio) in *Strada provinciale* focuses on the second's idea that the image of the Valley needs to be sold to attract tourism. Celati's reply criticizes the mayor's view which he considers a consequence of that process of 'Americanization' that it is possible to find in his writing of the 1980s an 1990s: 'Ma lei mi sta descrivendo però

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*Lingue e linguaggi del cinema in Italia*, ed. by Marco Gargiulo (Rome: Aracne, 2015), pp. 357-379.

[225] On Celati's critique of Western tourism in Africa, see Luca Canali's analysis of *Avventure in Africa*: 'In apparenza non c'è in questi taccuini alcuna traccia d'«impegno», e tantomeno di solidarietà «politica» con questi popoli *apparentemente* decolonizzati […]. Ma sia pure con il *sense of humour* che gli è proprio […] la punta del suo stile si fa più aguzza sino a ferire, quando si parla della colonizzazione rovesciata che fa degli europei in Africa una specie di ghetto di privilegiati.' (Luca Canali, 'Tutti i mali del continente nero', *Il Giornale*, 30 August 1998, p. 19). On the same topic, see Elvio Guagnini, 'Italiani in Africa da Scarfoglio a Celati. Alcune linee per un bilancio', *Narrativa*, 14 (1998), 89-101; Charles Klopp, 'Buster Keaton Goes to Africa: Gianni Celati's *Avventure in Africa*', *Forum Italicum*, 21 (2001), 337-347; Laura Rorato, 'Casi esemplari di turismo africano: la figura del turista in *Avventure in Africa* di Gianni Celati', *Italica*, 2-3 (2007), 262-273; Rebecca West, 'Celati e l'Africa', *Bollettino '900*, 1-2 (2007).

un processo totalmente americano e americanizzato che è un processo di vendita di qualcosa che diventa immagine, che diventa doppio di se stesso' (min. 37). The mayor is a former communist who deals with the new needs of his city in an economic crisis, but also shows some sensitivity towards Celati's discourses ('con la poesia non ne usciamo, ne escono le persone individualmente, ma la problematica che abbiamo deve impegnare certamente i cervelli e deve riuscire a sfondare in un mondo che è questo, che è quello commerciale, dell'immagine').

Celati's ideas on storytelling as craftmanship reappear in his documentaries, too: from the small tales of *Strada provinciale*, all linked to the dignity of craftwork and artisans (a master builder, a lithographer, a translator, a tailor, etc.), to the stories of each character depicted in *Diol Kadd*, where a major role is played by an African *griot*, or oral storyteller. The *griot* Mussaka re-tells the stories of the Murid Saints and his ability as a narrator attracts Celati. The encounter between the two leads to a dialogue which sounds like a Celatian narrative manifesto:

> Io volevo sapere cosa c'era al fondo di questa sapienza o abilità narrativa e Mussaka, attraverso Mandiaye, mi ha risposto: la strada dei Murid è quella dell'amore e tu non puoi ascoltare bene qualcosa se non la ami, tu devi essere innamorato della cosa che ascolti e solo allora i racconti vengono bene ed è l'amore che fa questo.[226]

A strong connection with Neorealism makes evident the link between Celati's documentaries and Ghirri's ideas on representation as a form of *impegno*. Every time that Celati explains the reason behind his commitment in film-making, he makes strong reference to the tradition of documentary and quotes masterpieces of

[226] Min. 44. In *Strada provinciale*, the story of an invisible population and the story of a woman who goes around during the night because her husband preferred staring at naked women on television is reminiscent of the tone of *Narratori delle pianure*. A recurrent element in the documentaries is also the presence of Giacomo Leopardi. The protagonists of *Strada provinciale* reads Leopardi's *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*, while John Berger makes a reference to 'Leopardi's bird' in *Case sparse* (See Leopardi's *Il passero solitario*).

the genre's origins such as Joris Ivens' *Rain*, Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*. The connection with Neorealism emerges with clarity in *Sul cinema italiano del dopoguerra mezzo secolo dopo*, where he directly quotes some of the milestones of the genre, such as De Sica-Zavattini's *Ladri di biciclette*, Fellini's *La strada*, *Roma* and *I vitelloni*, and Rossellini's *Paisà*. Celati also dedicates to Fellini the articles *Fellini, il clown e la sua ombra* and *Fellini e il maschio italiano*, which I have analysed above. Two other essays are dedicated to Antonioni's *L'avventura* and Wenders' *Nel corso del tempo*. This does not represent a contradiction with Celati's rejection of realism: on the contrary, what Celati admires of Neorealism is precisely what he calls, in his writings and interviews on cinema, the 'documentary vision' of Neorealism. In Celati's view, documentary gives the possibility to deal with what is unexpected or unpredictable, both to the film-maker and the spectator, as it is not decided before, in a script, as it is instead in a fictional movie. Celati is not interested in giving representation to the so-called truth, but prefers to leave space for the unpredictable. This is why he tries to include in his documentaries what is normally cut out, such as random voices, people passing in front of the camera, radio messages, etc. This does not aim at creating a form of high realism, but quite the contrary: Celati's films unmasks the fact that behind the documentary itself, which is widely considered as a mirror of reality, there is a strong presence of the director in its subjectivity, who decides what to keep and what to cut out, according to what he/she wants to demonstrate. Celati also praises the tradition of Neorealism for the nomadic nature of its characters and, above all, for the openness to what is normally not included in a feature film. Zavattini's ideas on *qualsiasità* that had such an importance for Ghirri's photography and Celati's narrative of the 1980s, thus return in Celati's works as a

film-maker. Thanks to all these characteristics, Celati sees in the documentary an effective instrument to challenge some aspects of contemporary society that he has always opposed. In a 2003 interview with Sarah Hill, Celati connects the choice of documentary to the situation of the US during George W. Bush's administration (2001-2009). At the time of the American occupation of Iraq, Celati was in Chicago and observed how American television was focused on fostering a fake vision of the nation, totally involved in what Celati calls the 'fiction of the war'. Ordinary lives were left out of the media representation of the nation, while the government's patriotic propaganda was dominant, in order to justify the invasion of Iraq. It is very telling that such an outburst against the American government ends in the interview with a reference to documentary. Celati describes his turn to documentary as a personal revolt against that 'totalitarian fiction', where some sort of so-called reality was imposed top-down. On the contrary, in his view, documentary allows the representation of a plurality of subjective visions of the real:

> Quando è scoppiata la guerra in Iraq ero qui a Chicago, e per una settimana ho passato le giornate guardando la televisione. C'erano i reportage dal fronte, i responsi degli esperti, i discorsi dei conduttori di trasmissioni, ma per una settimana io non ho sentito una sola frase che non fosse propaganda patriottica. A un certo punto non ne potevo più e dovevo scappare fuori, anche perché quei giornalisti non informavano su niente e parlavano solo con frasi prescritte. La loro era una realtà tutta fatta di parole e decisa in partenza, che non doveva essere perturbata da niente. Poi fuori c'era il mondo, le case, le vecchie signore con l'artrite al supermercato, i quartieri disastrati del ghetto. Ma tutto questo era come se non esistesse, spazzato via dalla fiction della guerra. Era il modello d'una fiction totalitaria, che ha bisogno di sempre nuove rimozioni e censure del pensiero. Con i documentari si può almeno tentare di rimettere in gioco uno scarto nella visione, in mezzo a tutti questi superspettacoli pubblicitari che sostituiscono e sostituiranno sempre più ciò che noi chiamavamo 'vita'.[227]

[227] 'Documentari imprevedibili come i sogni. Intervista con Sarah Hill', in *Riga 28. Gianni Celati*, 55-64, p. 55. Most of Celati's interviews and essays on cinema are collected in the volume *Documentari imprevedibili come i sogni. Il cinema di Gianni Celati*. On Celati's cinema, see Beatrice Barbalato, 'Il mondo di Luigi Ghirri: Gianni Celati, videomaker', in *Sul palco c'è l'autore* (Louvain: Presses Universitaires de Louvain: 2006), 189-204; Giulio Iacoli, 'Lo sguardo in macchina. Note sull'immaginario cinematografico di Gianni Celati', in *Sinergie narrative: cinema e letteratura*

On the side of content, Celati's documentaries engage with some of the aspects of contemporary culture that his works have always strongly criticized. The first documentary *Strada provinciale* already shows many of the issues that will be constant in Celati's work as a film-maker. One example that is particularly interesting in my analysis is the consideration of wealth and poverty. In *Strada provinciale*, Celati's comments during an evening walk critique Western lifestyle and this motif will reach its peak in *Diol Kadd*. Besides expressing his disapproval of consumerism, Celati suggests lifestyles that resist that model:

> Questa sera passeggiando a Comacchio ho pensato che la ricchezza spesso è molto più squallida della miseria, lo squallore della ricchezza non è ancora arrivato qui. Ho visto muri scrostati, case vuote, disabitate e inabitabili ma una specie di felicità per le strade, a star tra la gente. Stasera non ho visto uomini che vivono nell'arroganza del denaro, né belle donne che sembrano uscite da un film pubblicitario. Per fortuna stasera non ho visto niente del genere. Ho visto molte facce con i segni di un destino, facce da guardare a lungo. (min. 11:41-13:08)

The same happens in *Case sparse*, where Celati links a critique of the use of time in Western society and the representation of the effect of time on the crumbling houses in the Po Valley. The narrator is the English art critic, novelist, poet and painter, John Berger. His comments on the refusal to accept the passing of time in contemporary society at the beginning of the documentary show the main theme of *Case sparse*. Celati argues that people are no longer used to ruins. These need to be hidden, cancelled both from the landscape and from bodies, as they represent a

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*nell'Italia contemporanea*, ed. by Guido Bonsaver, Martin McLaughlin, Franca Pellegrini (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2008), 139-152; Giuliana Minghelli, 'Epilogue as Prologue: Zavattini/Celati. Documentaristic Visions from *Un paese* to *Mondonuovo*', in Giuliana Minghelli, *Landscape and Memory in Post-Fascist Italian Film* (New York-London: Routledge, 2013), 176-190; Rebecca West, 'Gianni Celati's *La strada provinciale delle anime*. A «Silent» Film About «Nothing»', *Romance Languages Annual*, 4 (1993), 367-374.

constant reminder of the passing of time which is not acceptable nowadays. In Silvio Berlusconi's Italy, this was one of the main aspects of the 'cultural revolution' brought about by the then Italian prime minister. Berlusconi's television broadcast for decades a model of eternal youth, usually reached through cosmetic surgery and the hiding of the effects of time. Berlusconi himself embodied the refusal to accept the passing of time, a model in which wealth and power were proposed as the only guarantee of happiness and success. The role of women in such a society was also strongly criticized, also leading to the rise of feminist movements, such as *Se non ora quando*. Celati's last documentary *Diol Kadd* needs to be read in this context and seems to be a response to that model, as it engages with the representation of women's bodies in Western society:[228]

> Al giorno d'oggi uomini e donne si restaurano la faccia cadente, cioè le facce che a poco a poco crollano e diventano una specie di rovina, perché tutto ciò che porta con sé il passare del tempo è qualcosa che ci spaventa. E così le case che crollano sono sentite come una specie di malattia, una malattia che è semplicemente l'effetto del tempo che passa.
>
> La vita come spettacolo…, c'è da aspettarsi che tutto ciò che non va d'accordo con questa parata, con questa idea della vita come spettacolo, dovrà essere cancellato, spazzato via oppure restaurato, con qualche tipo di chirurgia cosmetica. (min. 5:14)

All the elements of Celati's previous films seem to find their fulfilment in *Diol Kadd*. Here, Celati describes the small Senegalese village close to the capital Dakar, focusing on the times of habits that regulate life in Diol Kadd. Celati's voice-over often insists with admiration on the 'ordine femminile' that apparently guides the village, where women seem to have a primary role. It is true that Celati probably gives an idealized version of life in Diol Kadd, without expressing all the issues regarding women in traditional Senegalese society. Nevertheless, what is interesting

[228] Two documentaries, both released in 2009, represent well this 'cultural shift': Erik Gandini's *Videocracy* and Lorella Zanardo's *Il corpo delle donne*.

from my point of view is that Celati uses Diol Kadd as a contrast to Western society. This is evident, for instance, in the description of the Wolof dance ritual called *Sabar*: rather than considering it a confirmation of a masculine-centred society where the women's dance is performed in relation to men's desire, Celati's observations lead to a comparison between the eroticism of traditional Senegalese behaviours and the use of the female body in the Western world. This also functions as a critique of Berlusconi's Italy in that period:

> Da noi il corpo femminile è sempre come in una vetrina, con le parti appetibili messe in mostra come una merce, invece l'umorismo di Nianga e delle sue amiche mostrano la gratuità del gesto. Mostrano che l'eros armonizza la diversità tra gli individui. (min. 29:30)

Besides this, *Diol Kadd* deals with the topic of time, once again in opposition to Western consumerism. Celati describes the passing of time in Diol Kadd always in comparison with Western society: 'Qui il tempo non è quello degli orologi, qui c'è un'altra specie di tempo, il tempo indefinito delle abitudini e della vita che passa' (min. 15:48). Time is probably the main aspect of analysis in the whole Celati's works as a director, and in *Diol Kadd* it acquires a more evident commitment, as it directly engages with Western society where time is subject to the rush of a different lifestyle. Even though this is also a sort of a cliché, as postcolonial theory has pointed out, what is interesting for my analysis is Celati's use of the Senegalese village to foster his critique of Western habits.[229] Celati interprets what he observes in light of his concern with time. He finds in Diol Kadd an idealized vision of time that contrasts with Western society and presents it as an alternative:

[229] See, for instance, the classic work of Johannes Fabian that focuses on the topic of time in the relationship between anthropologists and their subjects of study. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

> Tempo? Ma cos'è il tempo? Sembra che qui il tempo abbia perso la sua micidiale falce […]. E noi, cosa è successo da renderci sempre così indaffarati, stravolti, affamati, con la fretta di passare il tempo, di correre avanti, consumare i giorni il più presto possibile? (min. 55:48)

*Diol Kadd* also follows the preparation of a comic *pièce* that will be set in the Senegalese village. The director and only professional actor is Mandiaye N'Diaye who wants to stage a comedy on wealth and poverty drawn on Aristofane's *Plutus*.[230] If on the one side this recalls a topic that is already present in *Strada provinciale*, on the other it shows Celati's *impegno* in a more overt manner than before. Celati's condemnation of the effect of the accumulation of wealth on people and the environment serves as an explicit accusation against capitalism, the same that it is possible to find in his writings from the 1980s onwards. In one of the scenes, Mandiaye N'Diaye explains the origins of the comedy. The comedy itself is explicitly committed as it represents inequality in Senegalese society and the corruption of the local political elite. It also portrays the effects of money on a small village based on farming, while the spreading of Western-like lifestyle models threaten its traditions and habits:

> La mia commedia è un dibattito tra un povero e un ricco, sulla povertà e la ricchezza, ma è anche un dialogo fra un essere che chiamiamo per intenderci un dio della ricchezza e un dio della povertà. Fedeltà dei contadini a quell'essere che possiamo chiamare il dio della povertà, perché il contadino si è sempre aggrappato alla povertà e in questo sta la sua fedeltà al passato. Ma se si parla dei politici vediamo tutto il contrario, vediamo uomini ben vestiti, che gli abitanti dei nostri villaggi considerano ricchi e potenti e senza nessuna fedeltà a niente. Il mio testo, politicamente, parla dei politici, e dei contadini che sono lasciati al loro destino (min. 35:48)

[230] On the Senegalese actor Mandiaye N'Diaye see Gianni Celati, 'Dedicato al mio amico Mandiaye N'Diaye e alla sua famiglia', *Doppiozero*, 11 June 2014, <http://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/ricordi/dedicato-al-mio-amico-mandiaye-n-diaye-e-alla-sua-famiglia> [accessed 10 July 2017].

Celati's cinema thus confirms and develops the forms of commitment that I have examined in this chapter with regard to his works as a writer. The idea of cinema as a collective activity, the connection with Neorealism and Ghirri-Zavattini's concept of *qualsiasità*, the critique of consumerism and capitalism and the ethical dimension of Celati's considerations on the passing of time are all elements that express the ethically and politically committed background of his works of this period. The extraordinary coherence of Celati's *oeuvre* emerges in the recurring topics both in his works as a writer and as a film director. Celati's works from the 1980s onwards show new forms of *impegno* that cross borders between media and involves narrative, cinema and theatre.

# Chapter Three

## Celati's Legacy in Contemporary Italian *Impegno*

## 3.1 The Influence of Celati's Works on Contemporary Culture and the Role of *Narratori delle riserve*

In every stage of his career, Gianni Celati has collaborated with other writers and intellectuals, often encouraging them to publish for the first time. The idea of going beyond the boundaries of literature in a strict sense has permitted Celati to involve a wide range of different personalities in the projects he has worked on, as already analysed in the first two chapters: psychiatrists like Elvio Fachinelli, linguists like Paolo Valesio, established novelists like Italo Calvino, historians like Carlo Ginzburg, anthropologists like Jean Talon, playwrights like Giuliano Scabia, photographers like Carlo Gajani and Luigi Ghirri. Experts from different fields collaborated with Celati throughout the decades: other examples I have referred to are French literature scholars Guido Neri and Lino Gabellone, the scholar of Irish and American literature Daniele Benati, translator Marianne Schneider, film directors like Paolo Muran and Alberto Sironi, art critic John Berger, actor Mandiaye N'Diaye.

Celati has had a profound influence on literature, creating a line of narrators who clearly draw inspiration from his works and who include authors such as Daniele Benati, Ermanno Cavazzoni and Ugo Cornia. His influence is also evident in cinema (Davide Ferrario), music (Roberto Freak Antoni, Vasco Brondi) and art (Andrea Pazienza). Celati has fostered or inspired the debut of many different writers, some of whom have then become prominent voices of the Italian literary panorama, like Enrico Palandri and Pier Vittorio Tondelli.[231]

[231] Both were Celati's students in 1977 Bologna and both their debut books are related to Celati. See Enrico Palandri, *Boccalone. Storia vera piena di bugie* (Milan: L'erba voglio, 1979) and Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Altri libertini* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980). See also Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Un week end postmoderno. Cronache dagli anni ottanta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990); Enrico Palandri, *Pier. Tondelli e la generazione* (Milan: Laterza, 2005); Monica Francioso and Enrico Minardi, *Enrico Palandri* (Florence: Cadmo, 2010). On the influence of Celati on Benati, Cavazzoni, and Cornia, see *Il comico*

The three authors I will focus on are Rossana Campo (1963), Franco Arminio (1960) and Grazia Verasani (1964). I have chosen these authors for a number of reasons that I will now briefly summarize. First, they are directly linked to Celati for having debuted within his anthology *Narratori delle riserve*, around 1988. Second, they all belong to the same generation of writers and were between 20 and 30 when they started publishing and each of them subsequently became prolific and successful authors. Third, each author is representative of distinct phases of Celati's work, as I will demonstrate: Rossana Campo recuperates elements of Celati's works of the 1970s, Arminio reflects the production of the 1980s, while Verasani is more linked to the next decade, having taken part in Celati's 1990 film, *Strada provinciale delle anime*. At the same time, however, these three authors distance themselves from Celati's model, both in terms of style and in the forms of political commitment that it is possible to trace in their works. In this sense, all are representative of Celati's influence on contemporary literature and provide testimony to the fact that Celati's legacy is in line with the anti-hegemonic nature of his thought. The works of these three authors offer new elements that were not in Celati's writing or were present only in an embryonic stage. An analysis of their most significant works in this sense permits us to see both the fertility of Celati's legacy and the way in which these authors develop forms of commitment that significantly distinguish their works from Celati's model. This is even more interesting as the three began writing in the

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*come strategia in Gianni Celati & Co.*; Marina Spunta, 'Ugo Cornia e la spensieratezza della vita (e della morte)', in *Scrittori degli anni Duemila: gli esordienti*, ed. by Marie Hélène Caspar (Nanterre: Université Paris X, 2003), 169-186 and Marina Spunta, 'Voci dalle pianure nell'Emilia di Daniele Benati', *Romance Studies*, 21, 3 (2003), 215-230. The comic artist and painter Andrea Pazienza was himself one of Celati's students at that time. Another protagonist of *Alice disambientata*, Roberto Freak Antoni, was then leader of the punk rock band *Skiantos*. Other songwriters were involved in Celati's projects, like Luca Carboni, who appeared in Celati's *Il mondo di Luigi Ghirri*, or the punk band CCCP's leader, Giovanni Lindo Ferretti, who collaborated on Davide Ferrario's film *Sul 45° parallelo*, together with Celati, who wrote the texts for it. More recently, the songwriter Vasco Brondi constantly mentions Celati among his main sources of inspiration. See Vasco Brondi, 'Cronache emiliane d'epica geografia artistica', *Pagina 99*, Sabato 11 ottobre 2014, 10-11.

same period as the *Cannibali* developed, but the former clearly differentiate themselves from the latter.[232]

*Narratori delle riserve* had a fundamental role in the further development of Italian literature in the 1990s. *Narratori delle riserve* anticipates by eight years the other anthology, *Gioventù Cannibale*, which scholars usually indicate as one of the main innovations in recent Italian literature. It is interesting to note that the editor of the 1996 *Cannibali* anthology is Daniele Brolli who, in 1987, created the journal *Dolcevita*, which published some of Celati's short stories.[233] Despite this, none of the features of the young writers who made up the *Cannibali* can be assimilated into Celati's idea of literature. On the contrary, the *Cannibali* seem to pursue a radically different path. Extreme realism, a style that related to the horror genre and the mixture with pop culture has led scholars such as Pierpaolo Antonello to share the opinion of Remo Ceserani, Filippo La Porta and Marino Sinibaldi who talk about the *Cannibali* as an 'astute marketing operation'.[234]

*Narratori delle riserve* had a completely different aim and shape from that of *Gioventù cannibale*. In the first place, it was not limited to young or previously unpublished authors. It unites some of the fundamental figures in Celati's life, whom I have already mentioned, such as Giuliano Scabia, Lino Gabellone and Elvio Fachinelli, other novelists, poets or translators who had already published extensively before the anthology, like Ginevra Bompiani and Alice Ceresa, and others who had crossed Celati's career at various stages, like his former students

[232] *Giovani Cannibali* is a group of writers active from the 1990s onwards, including Aldo Nove, Silvia Ballestra, Elena Stancanelli and many others. The name derives from the anthology *Gioventù cannibale: la prima antologia dell'orrore estremo*, ed. by Daniele Brolli (Turin: Einaudi, 1996).
[233] Gianni Celati, 'Il paralitico del deserto', *Dolce vita*, 2 (1987), 19-23; 'Studenti in mezzo alle acque', *Dolce vita*, 7 (1988), 41-45.
[234] Pierpaolo Antonello, 'Cannibalizing the Avant-Garde', in *Italian Pulp Fiction: The New Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers*, ed. by Stefania Lucamante (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), 38-56 (p. 45).

Claudio Piersanti and Beppe Sebaste, the scholar and future editor of Celati's *Meridiano*, Marco Belpoliti, or some of the future protagonists of the journal *Il Semplice*, such as Daniele Benati and Ermanno Cavazzoni.[235] Each of them was deeply influenced by Celati's scholarship, in different ways, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse how this happened and what writing style was developed by each of the authors involved in the anthology. Nevertheless, besides all of the above, *Narratori delle riserve* included authors who were new to the literary landscape, like those on whom I am focusing in this chapter. Furthermore, it opposed all commercialized forms of literature: I have illustrated in the previous chapter how this was a key part of the anthology, already from its origins in *il Manifesto*.

*Narratori delle riserve* provided the opportunity for many non-professional writers to be part of an important collection of stories, on the basis of what Celati calls the 'natural' narrative ability that everyone has in his or her view, as I have discussed in Chapter Two. Examples of this type of contributor include Massimo Riva, the guitarist in the band of the Italian songwriter, Vasco Rossi, Celati's brother

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[235] Ginevra Bompiani is a translator and writer. Before *Narratori*, she published several translations and the books *Bàrtelemi all'ombra* (Milan: Mondadori, 1967), *Le specie del sonno* (Segrate: Franco Maria Ricci, 1975), *Lo spazio narrante* (Milan: La tartaruga, 1978), *Mondanità* (Milan: La tartaruga, 1980) and *L'incantato* (Milan: Garzanti, 1987). Alice Ceresa was a feminist writer and translator, whose novel *La figlia prodiga* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967) was published in the series 'La ricerca letteraria' directed by Davico Bonino, Manganelli and Sanguineti and won the Viareggio Prize. Claudio Piersanti is a writer and playwright, some of his books are: *Casa di nessuno: romanzo* (Milano, Feltrinelli, 1981), *Gli sguardi cattivi della gente* (Milan, Feltrinelli, 1992), *Luisa e il silenzio* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997), *L' amore degli adulti* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1998), *Stigmate* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), *L' appeso* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2000), *Charles* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2000), *Il ritorno a casa di Enrico Metz* (Milan, Feltrinelli, 2006), *I giorni nudi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010), *Venezia, il filo dell'acqua*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2012), and La forza di gravità (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2018). Beppe Sebaste is a writer, poet, translator and journalist, who collaborated with *L'Unità* and *la Repubblica* and published several essays, short stories and novels, including *Cafè Suisse e altri luoghi di sosta* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992), *Niente di tutto questo mi appartiene* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994) *Tolbiac* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 2002), *Panchine. Come uscire dal mondo senza uscirne* (Bari: Laterza, 2008), *Oggetti smarriti e altre apparizioni* (Bari: Laterza, 2009) and *Come un cinghiale in un macchia d'inchiostro* (Turin: Aragno, 2018).

Gabriele, who was a lawyer and who published with the nickname of Gabriele Latemar, and the naïf painter Enzo Fabbrucci.[236]

I will now analyse the works of Rossana Campo, Franco Arminio, and Grazia Verasani, referring to examples in which it is possible to see, on the one hand, the stylistic and theoretical connections with Celati's idea of how literature can engage with society and, on the other, their distance from that model and their attempt to find new forms of commitment in contemporary Italy.

### 3.2 Women's Liberation through Spoken Language: Rossana Campo's Feminist Narrative

Antonello and others have suggested a possible link between the *Cannibali* group and the neo-avant-garde. This is particularly interesting for one of the authors that I am focusing on, Rossana Campo, who is included both in *Narratori delle riserve* and among the *Cannibali* – together with other female writers such as Silvia Ballestra, Simona Vinci, Isabella Santacroce and Francesca Mazzucato – even if she was not in Brolli's anthology. I believe, instead, that her writing differs considerably from that of the original contributors to the *Cannibali* anthology and shares very little with them. What is instead evident is her link with the neo-avant-garde: on the one hand she graduated with a thesis on the *Gruppo '63* under Sanguineti's supervision, on the other, her companion, the writer Nanni Balestrini, was a key figure in the neo-avant-garde. I have already shown how the relationship between Celati and the neo-avant-garde of the *Gruppo '63* is problematic. The neo-avant-garde is the cultural environment in which Celati begins his intellectual activity, but, at the same time, he

[236] It is true that such a selection of authors is clearly personal and subjective and derives from Celati's connections within the cultural scene, albeit alternative. Nevertheless, Celati introduces each author in the anthology, with a brief description of the characteristics that led him to choose those texts. These are always linked to some specific aspects of Celati's idea of literature, as expressed several times in this thesis.

refuses from the beginning to be part of it and he strongly criticizes the literary movement already in the materials for the journal *Alì Babà*, as demonstrated in Chapter One. What Celati and the neo-avant-garde shared was an attention to language, the idea that everything happens through it, both in literature and in life. Apart from those common elements, Celati and the neo-avant-garde had completely different approaches. Still, when preparing the anthology, Celati includes authors who were close to the *Gruppo '63*, like Alice Ceresa, and Rossana Campo herself. I have stressed the point of Campo's link with *Gruppo '63* as I believe that Celati's legacy in her production needs to be seen on the linguistic side and, particularly, for the similarities with Celati's use of language in the first period of his career, from *Comiche* to *Lunario*.

Campo was not in the newspaper version of *Narratori delle riserve*, while she appears in the Feltrinelli edition with only one short story, *La storia della Gabri*. La Gabri is also one of the main characters of Campo's second novel, *Il pieno di super*, which could probably be considered the closest to Celati's style, a sort of feminine version of *La banda dei sospiri* for its experimental language, particularly for its attempt to recreate the language of schoolboys (schoolgirls in Campo's novel):

> Comincio col raccontare degli incontri che facciamo noi amiche femmine in casa della Silvia Padella. La Silvia ha questa grande fortuna che il padre fa il camionista, e la madre che invece fa la parrucchiera. Il padre se ne sta via di casa per settimane e settimane e anche mesi e mesi a volte, se deve andare all'estero, la madre invece sta via tutto il giorno nel negozio.
>
> La casa di Silvia Padella è il posto dove veniamo a conoscenza di quanto c'è di più interessante nella vita. Così ecco che appena cominciamo a fare la salita che ci porta su verso la casa di Silvia si sente che abbiamo tutte una grande esaltazione dentro. La Michi dice sempre: Uh sento come se mi scappa, uh mi scappa da matti.

> Invece alla Gabri viene subito paura e dice: Cribbio se lo sa mia madre mi apre il culo. Porca madosca se lo sa mi fa un culo come una casa.[237]

When presenting Rossana Campo as a new writer, Celati makes reference to her master Edoardo Sanguineti, whose role was fundamental for Celati himself, as demonstrated in the first chapter. I have mentioned already that Celati really appreciated Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano* when it came out (1963) and he recalls almost thirty years later the impact it had on him in his introductory note to Rossana Campo's short story *La storia della Gabri*, included in *Narratori delle riserve*. Celati finds in Campo some of the same characteristics of Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano* that inspired him in his debut, namely the use of all the possibilities that language and rhythm have in order to support different and unconscious imaginative experiences that literary texts normally tend to avoid. Such a description links Campo's works both to the style that Celati adopted in *Comiche* and to his later considerations on traditional oral storytellers and their narrative 'natural ability', as discussed in Chapter Two, especially for the stress on the importance of the act of listening during the writing process:

> Rossana Campo è napoletana, ha studiato a Genova e adesso abita a Parigi. Sono capitato su alcune sue pagine scorrendo la rivista letteraria d'un gruppo di Genova di cui Rossana Campo faceva parte. Quando l'ho incontrata mi ha spiegato che aveva studiato con un maestro d'eccezione come Edoardo Sanguineti, e allora mi è venuto in mente qualcosa. Il libro che mi ha più

[237] Rossana Campo, *Il pieno di super* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993), p. 9. Immediately after *Narratori delle riserve*, Campo publishes her first novel, *In principio erano le mutande* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992). Five other novels follow her debut book: after *Il pieno di super* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993), she publishes *Mai sentita così bene* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995), *L'attore americano* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997), *Il matrimonio di Maria* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998), and *Mentre la mia bella dorme* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999). Campo's success continues in the 2000s, when she publishes several other works: *Sono pazza di te* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001), *L'uomo che non ho sposato* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003), *Duro come l'amore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005), *Più forte di me* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2007), *Lezioni di arabo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010), *Felice per quello che sei – Confessioni di una buddista emotiva* (Rome: Giulio Perrone Editore, 2012), *Il posto delle donne* (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 2013), *Fare l'amore* (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 2014), *Dove troverete un altro padre come il mio* (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 2015), *Difficoltà per le ragazze* (Rome: Giulio Perrone Editore, 2016), *La figlia del re Drago* (Milan: Piemme, 2017) and *Cati. Una favola di potere* (Milan: Bompiani, 2017).

> orientato all'inizio degli anni Sessanta è stato *Capriccio italiano*. Sanguineti adottava procedimenti compositivi simili a quelli della musica moderna (Luciano Berio ad esempio), per ricostruire un sistema tonale lavorando su pochi accordi o tonalità ricorrenti. Il che impone un ascolto particolare, una specie di ipnosi su poche tonalità minime, che mi ha sempre ricordato il famoso 'abaissement du niveau mental' di cui parla Jung (autore del resto molto usato da Sanguineti). E mentre questo fa sì che molti si irrigidiscano disorientati, il libro di Sanguineti è un vero scatenamento immaginativo che apre la scrittura a possibilità fabulatorie in disuso nella narrativa ufficiale.[238]

Besides this, Celati identifies already in his introduction two of the main features of Campo's works in the years to come: the comic tone as specific to Campo's writings, and a sense of rhythm that could appear easy-going or informal to the reader, while it is, in fact, the result of a specific idea of literature. Although one could consider Celati's reference to the Neapolitan origins of Campo as stereotypical, here Celati wants to underline how the aspects of rhythm and comic attitude are combined in Campo's writings and possibly linked to the traditions of his place of birth:

> Non voglio dire che Rossana Campo imiti Sanguineti. Ma aprendo quella rivista ho ritrovato a colpo d'occhio il senso e l'importanza di *Capriccio italiano*, la sua rivelazione di possibilità fabulatorie normalmente evitate. A parte ciò la vena comica di Rossana Campo mi sembra proprio napoletana, e il suo senso ritmico così scaltrito da sembrare una cosa da nulla.[239]

Campo's *impegno* thus has particular strength in its linguistic elements. The mixture of swear words, jargon, dialect and spoken language and the use of punctuation that does not follow standard grammar rules clearly calls to mind the subversive dimension of Celati's language in his works of the 1970s. As an example, I will quote the first lines of Campo's debut book *In principio erano le mutande*,

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[238] *Narratori delle riserve*, p. 66. See also Gianni Celati's 1966 introduction to the first published version of *Comiche*, where he refers to Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano* as one example of the use of extra-literary language ('Materiali di lettura da verificare', p. 40).
[239] *Narratori delle riserve*, p. 66.

where the attempt to recreate the effects of the 'parlato' undermines standard syntax:

> Dunque, la storia comincerebbe così. Che io sono lì che sto per tornarmene a casa con le mie borse della spesa non pesanti e poi fa caldo e c'è tutta la puzza del vicolo che sale si espande e si diffonde, poi vedo una con qualcosa attaccato alla schiena che si sbraccia e essendo lei molto scura e essendo io abituata alle donne africane mie vicine di casa qui nel vicolo mi pare di riconoscere Akofa e la saluto e tiro dritta perché nessuna voglia di parlare e poi devo correre a casa e pensare subito a chi chiedere prestito per restituire i soldi all'amico Luca che ormai mi telefona tre volte al giorno per avere le sue trecentomila lire.[240]

Campo's specificity lies in the use of language as the way her women protagonists create their own spaces of freedom and solidarity. The female perspective of that language distinguishes Campo's writing from that of her masters, Celati and Sanguineti. The following quotation, again taken from *In principio erano le mutande*, shows the protagonist talking about sex with her friend Giovanna and well illustrates their freedom in dealing with that topic. Their shared slang also helps in creating an all-feminine environment:

> Però ci sono tante di quelle cose che ci fanno andare sempre d'accordo, per esempio i discorsi sul sesso. Lei mi dice, Ieri sera guardavo una foto di Davis. Come mi manca. Tutta la sera ditalini!
>
> Allora io mi allungo con le mani dietro la testa e mi metto bella comoda perché lo so che sta arrivando il grande racconto delle notti d'amore con Davis. Dice: Ti ho già raccontato di come mi ha preso subito la prima volta e io già bagnata come il lago di Como e di Garda messi insieme? (25)

Marina Spunta has examined Campo's use of language and has underlined the connection between Celati's orality and vocality and Campo's spoken language. Spunta observes that 'Campo's originality is to shift Celati's discourse to a feminine

[240] *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 11. On Rossana Campo's language, see Marina Spunta, 'Tra linguaggio giovanile e dialetto: stili di oralità nella narrativa di Rossana Campo e Silvia Ballestra', in *Lingue e letterature in contatto*, ed. by Bart van den Bossche, Michel Bastiaensen and Corinna Salvadori Lonergan (Florence: Cesati, 2004), 357-68.

perspective and free it of a marked anti-literary agenda, while retaining the joyful and comical experimentation with slang/youth language'.[241] As Spunta points out, the influence of Celati, Sanguineti and Balestrini is more evident in Campo's first three novels, where the author portrays the life of young women in their own words, and in which the main characteristic is a strong sense of group 'created by shared sex/love adventures and by a common language, whose starting point is Celati's low register and narrative skill' (244). I agree with Spunta's observations, and I would extend her analysis to the topic of political commitment. Rephrasing Spunta's statements I would thus argue that Campo's originality is precisely her shifting of Celati's *impegno* to a feminist perspective, through language.

In the opening part of his essay on Campo, Tullio Pagano refers to Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka. Pour une littérateure mineure*. In Chapter One, I have shown how Deleuze and Guattari's text had a key role in Celati's seminar on Carroll and nonsense literature in 1977. Celati's *Alice disambientata* quotes Deleuze and Guattari's text several times for its political importance, exactly in the same way Pagano uses it when it comes to analysing Campo's works. In Deleuze and Guattari's view, language is indeed a means of liberation from homogenization of thought and dominant ideology:

> Per quanto riguarda la lingua vorrei ricordare un importante saggio di Deleuze e Guattari, 'What is a Minor Literature?', in cui si sostiene che la letteratura cosiddetta minore non è necessariamente espressione di una 'lingua minore' ma è invece il risultato di un processo di 'deterritorializzazione' del linguaggio egemone. Lo studio di Deleuze e Guattari si basa soprattutto su Kafka, ma una simile operazione fu portata in avanti in Italia dalla neoavanguardia negli anni sessanta e settanta: scrittori come Sanguineti, Celati, Malerba ed Arbasino tentarono di strappare il linguaggio all'omologazione incombente, attraverso la contaminazione della lingua letteraria con linguaggi bassi […]. Vorrei ricordare ancora che

[241] Marina Spunta, *Voicing the Word. Writing Orality in Contemporary Italian Fiction* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 244.

> Deleuze e Guattari nel saggio citato affermano che ogni elemento in una letteratura minore è politico. Il comportamento del personaggio riassume ed esemplifica una condizione sociale, assumendo così un valore di denuncia nei confronti dell'ideologia dominante.[242]

Campo not only uses orality and youth slang in order to contaminate literature with other languages and thereby produce a deterritorialization of hegemonic language precisely in the sense that Pagano underlines, by recreating the language of women in groups of all ages and in different situations, Campo expresses a women's realm that is in itself a critique of patriarchal society as it deconstructs its language. This is particularly evident in Campo's third book *Mai sentita così bene*, written in the form of a long conversation that involves all the women protagonists. The following dialogue between the narrator protagonist and her friend Monica illustrates how Campo uses allusions to sex and slang to express the complicity between the two and recreate an all-feminine situation where women are totally independent and free from any male imposition. Campo's protagonists play with stereotypical representations of women and overturn them through comical conversations:

> Quella paracula della mia amica, la Monica, ne ha combinata un'altra delle sue. Ore nove e trequarti mattutine e quella tutta isterica e schizzata c'ha già una parlantina da stenderti secca. Io ancora in coma per il risveglio pessimo, bocca impastata, pensieri allucinati, e lei a urlare nella cornetta: Oè, testona, che fine hai fatto? Che stavi facendo, porcate?
> Io dico, Niente, due esercizi di danza del dragone…CHEEEEE??!
> Ripeto: Danza del dragone.
> E lei: Danza del dragone? Adesso si chiama così?[243]

The feminist dimension of Campo's writings consists of the feminine perspective that she adopts in all of her books, recreating spaces of freedom and

[242] Tullio Pagano, 'Per una lettura diasporica della narrativa di Rossana Campo', *Italica*, vol. 84, 2/3 (2007), 274-289, p. 274.

[243] Rossana Campo, *Mai sentita così bene* (Milan: Feltrinelli), p. 9.

liberation and doing so through language. Campo's work is a cultural feminist intervention as she gives voice to different female characters who act as absolute protagonists of their own lives. Campo's characters destroy all forms of stereotypical versions of women and question the relationship between men and women through comic situations in which irony and disenchantment are dominant.[244]

Campo's critique mainly occurs within language, but it also finds a correspondence in content, not only with the representation of women but also with a true commitment to depicting marginality, such as immigrants or madwomen, and violent institutions, such as the school and the asylum. All of this occurs from a clear feminist perspective that is also a critique of love and family relationships in contemporary society.

Campo's *impegno* seems to share some of the features that I have highlighted in Celati also on the side of content, for example with anti-authoritarianism, which emerges most clearly in the description of school as a highly oppressive environment. The rather comical description of the racist, anti-southern teacher Pescecane in *Il pieno di super* calls to mind the repressive image of school that Celati gives in his books of the 1970s. Even the use of such a nickname recalls Celati's 'maestro pelatone' in *La banda dei sospiri*, and has the same function of a satirical depiction of school authorities from the perspective of children. Exactly like *La banda*, *Il pieno di super* also represents a rebellion of children against the authoritarianism of education. Pagano reads it using the same theoretical background

[244] Stefania Lucamante has already explored the feminist dimension of Campo's writings, see Stefania Lucamante, ''Una laudevole fine': femminismo e identificazione delle donne nella narrativa di Rossana Campo', *Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana*, vol. 31, 2/3 (2002), 295-306 (p. 296).

(Foucault's critique of institutions) that I have used to examine Celati's works of the 1970s:

> La resistenza che le bambine oppongono a queste sedute confessionali va letta, a mio parere, alla luce di quanto scrive Foucault nei suoi studi sulla sessualità e sul sistema carcerario, intesi come pratiche sociali di cui il potere si serve per disciplinare i soggetti.[245]

I would thus argue that Celati's legacy is also evident in the way Campo expresses her opposition to institutions of power. What differentiates Campo from her model is that in her production this happens in an all-feminine world: as Pagano mentions, in *Il pieno di super,* Campo's girls talk about sex in reaction to the imposition of the Catholic religion, and they express in that way a radical refusal of an oppressive system of power. The parties and meetings at Silvia Padella's house, where boys are excluded, are the setting in which those discourses take place, and themselves represent a reaction to the violence of the institutions of education and religion:

> La Padella abita su per la salita vicino alla chiesa e per questo noi abbiamo la comodità di andarci ogni volta che saltiamo le lezioni di dottrina cattolica dove sia le suore che la maestra ci obbligano a essere presenti promettendoci che moriamo giovani e anche con la possibilità di marcire all'inferno nel caso che disubbidiamo.[246]

Another element in common between Celati's *La banda* and Campo's *Il pieno di super* is the depiction of the division between social classes that school perpetuates. The social division is particularly evident through the character of Natascia and especially when she speaks in class in the name of the other classmates to denounce the teacher Pescecane's tyranny. Again the character of Natascia is reminiscent of Celati's Veleno in *La banda dei sospiri* as the leader of the children's

[245] Tullio Pagano, 'Per una lettura diasporica della narrativa di Rossana Campo', p. 276.
[246] Il pieno di super, p. 9. Note the irony that Campo expresses through the use of names like 'La Padella' which in Italian has the meaning of 'frying pan'.

revolt. Natascia will then guide the escape of all the girls towards England in the final part of the book. In one of the last chapters, significantly entitled 'A scuola scoppia la rivoluzione', Natascia avenges her classmates accusing the teacher for her repressive behaviour: 'CHE È STA COSA CHE TIENI I BAMBINI IN UN ANGOLO COME ANIMALI?! BRUTTA MIGNOTTA MARCIA, IO TI CAVO GLI OCCHI, IO TI AMMAZZO' (115). Even if the language that Natascia uses might be considered sexist for the words that she chooses to offend the teacher, it nevertheless has a liberating effect in relation to the injustice imposed by school and perpetrated by the teacher. In the final part of the chapter, Natascia literally overthrows the teacher (who faints) by jumping on her desk:

> Intanto Natascia ha conquistato la pedana della cattedra e ci è saltata su fregandosene della maestra svenuta per terra. Poi tiene un comizio dove denuncia tutte le malefatte della puttana fetusa sostenendo che oltre che malvagia bigotta e crudele non ha mai avuto un uomo in vita sua che l'ha guardata una volta.[247]

The children's revolution can thus start in class, with the discriminated schoolgirls and schoolboys – both children from the south and the poorest among the northern – are united in taking their revenge. The only one who is on the side of order is the wealthy girl Rapetti:

> Nel frattempo la Dani e Crocco saltano felici e si divertono a cantare a squarciagola grandi parolacce alla maestra che non può sentire niente. Anche Marco Gallo con la Gabri e altri settentrionali poveri se la spassano e strappano quaderni e sussidiari facendone aeroplani da lanciare addosso alla maestra e alla Rapetti.[248]

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[247] Rossana Campo, *Il pieno di super* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993), p. 116.

[248] 116. The topic of school as a repressive and racist institution is something that returns in *L'uomo che non ho sposato*, where Campo narrates stories from her childhood in Albisola and mentions again her anti-southern and classist teacher - this time with the nickname of Polverona - and a headmaster who shares with the teacher a highly stereotyped vision of southern people. See Rossana Campo, *L'uomo che non ho sposato* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003).

The 2001 novel *Sono pazza di te* introduces new elements: above all the asylum and a consideration of mental illness that Campo describes from the perspective of madwomen comparable to the madmen in Celati's *Comiche*. The other central topic of Campo's book is the relationship between father and daughter (the nomadic existence of Campo's protagonist finds its origins in the gypsy ancestors of her father, Renato, who visits his daughter after 17 years of absence). The unnamed protagonist of *Sono pazza di te* has passed several years in a mental institution, as did her flatmate Goli, half-Sicilian and half-Iranian. Once again, Campo finds her originality in tackling the issue of mental health from an all-feminine perspective. Her consideration of mental health has a lot in common with the debate on madness in the 1960s and 1970s, which was fundamental in Celati's debut, but in a women-centered way. The book also shows another aspect in common between Campo and Celati, such as the preference for people on the margins. The narrator-protagonist of *Sono pazza di te* has a preference for marginalized people, as does Campo in her choice of protagonists. Emarginated people are, in fact, indicated as the ones who fight in the front line: 'Io mi trovavo bene fra quelle persone che sono arrivate al capolinea dell'umanità (…) per me quegli sbandati si battono in prima linea. Sono i guerrieri dell'umanità'.[249]

Campo rethinks Celati's *impegno*, following her own specificity, using language to give a representation of liberated women of all ages in an all-feminine perspective. She re-elaborates many different aspects of Celati's works, both in terms of style and content, such as the critique of institutions, the use of irony, and the preference for marginal subjects, using a non-standard Italian that undermines grammatical rules and recalls Celati's subversive language of the 1970s. The

[249] Rossana Campo, *Sono pazza di te* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001), p. 21.

political dimension of Celati's use of language becomes in Campo the main aspect of her *impegno*, shaping her feminist narrative.

### 3.3 Franco Arminio's 'Placeology': A Poetic and Political Struggle towards a New Community

Franco Arminio contributed to the newspaper version of *Narratori delle riserve*, with the three short stories *Tre racconti di ovvia ipocondria*, published in *Il manifesto* on 10 September 1989. Arminio's collection of extremely short tales, *Miniature*, opens the anthology in the Feltrinelli version and Celati presents the author as follows:

> Franco Arminio è di Bisaccia, in provincia di Avellino, nell'alta Irpinia. È prevalentemente poeta, con un paio di libri alle spalle. Tra quel centinaio e passa di autori che abbiamo pubblicato su *Il manifesto* nella rubrica col titolo del nostro libro, è tra i due o tre che mi hanno colpito in modo insolito.
>
> A quel tempo scriveva *Storie dell'ipocondria*, piccoli ritratti in cui la malattia era l'emblema d'un modo di guardare il mondo esterno. C'è un bellissimo brano di Nietzsche in cui si parla della malattia e della convalescenza come un modo per abbandonare il bellicoso antagonismo nei confronti del mondo.
>
> Con queste *Miniature*, che mi ha spedito recentemente, la cosa diventa più netta. Leggendo il suo 'Ritratto di Saverio Sivizia', che io trovo un testo esemplare, si vede uno sguardo che è appunto quello della convalescenza, senza più le pretese di chi vuol regolare i conti col mondo. Questo tra l'altro è un modo del tutto inedito di guardare alle cose del Sud.[250]

By focusing on Arminio's origins in Bisaccia, in the province of Avellino, and on his obsession with illness, Celati mentions already two of the main aspects of Arminio's works, which he considers among the most valuable in the newspaper version of the anthology. I will show how the awareness of human mortality leads Arminio to a new consideration of the external world, and in particular, of the marginal locations in southern Italy. The connection between Arminio's writings and Celati's works of

[250] *Narratori delle riserve*, p. 14. On Arminio and Celati, see Luca Pocci, 'Alla ricerca dell'ordinario: Celati, Arminio e la prosa del paesaggio', *Contemporanea*, 10 (2012), 45-56, and Franco Arminio, 'Lettera a Gianni Celati', *Riga 28. Gianni Celati* (2008), p. 10.

the 1980s is clear: Celati's legacy in the case of Arminio is in the way the author looks at the external world, giving attention to what is normally not noticed. Their common *impegno* derives from this attitude to a different relationship with the environment and a critique of contemporary consumerist society. In terms of style, the model of Celati is evident in the forms of writing that Arminio chooses, using a method (the diary-reportage and the 'racconto d'osservazione') that Celati adopted for the first time in *Verso la foce*. Arminio's specificity lies mainly in his focus on southern Italy, which is very infrequently investigated by Celati, and in a more direct form of *impegno*, as I will seek to demonstrate in this section.[251]

*Miniature* will subsequently form part of Arminio's book *Nevica e ho le prove* in 2009, seventeen years after their first appearance.[252] The texts included in *Narratori delle riserve* are brief portraits of different people and their relationship with life, death, and the passing of time. The first of them, 'Ritratto di Saverio Sivizia', praised by Celati in his introduction, is also a condemnation of politicians who speculate over natural catastrophes, such as the earthquake that hit Irpinia (the region where Arminio lives and sets most of his production) in 1980. The narrator directly accuses Sivizia of misappropriating government aid for the victims of the earthquake. Indignation and ethical resentment are the basis of the civic engagement that characterizes all of Arminio's works:

> Questo è il ritratto di un uomo che si è realizzato sulle nostre rovine. Non è nostra intenzione ricondurre la sgomentevole e pestifera politica di Saverio Sivizia ad un malcostume cinico e premeditato. Non pensate ad un solitario profittatore della sciagura, ad uno sciacallo in scrivania. Piuttosto, siamo di fronte ad uno spirito di second'ordine, un ruminante della politica, in cui solo la furbizia è ispirazione, regola di vita.

[251] Southern Italy appears in passages of *Sonetti del Badalucco*, and in Gianni Celati, 'Diario del Sud', *Riga 28. Gianni Celati*, 138-156.
[252] Franco Arminio, *Nevica e ho le prove. Cronache dal paese della cicuta* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2009).

> Senza il terremoto, che gli ha indicato la via dei grandi affari, sarebbe rimasto un oscuro senatore e il sindaco dei piccoli imbrogli e dei piccoli favori. Tutto quello che è accaduto in questi anni è un mirabile esempio di fruttificazione prolungata della tragedia […]. Egli è riuscito a compiere il miracolo di distruggere una comunità facendo straripare in mille punti il cieco fiume dei contributi statali […]. Ulteriore impresa è l'aver reso, senza fare ricorso a purghe ed epurazioni, mugugnanti e indecisi i suoi oppositori, incapaci di esprimere il loro dissenso in maniera ardita e senza veli.[253]

The following passage, which is the ending of the same short prose, is particularly telling as it already shows the form that Arminio's political commitment will take in the years to come: a form of fragmented *impegno*, that is outside an overall ideological view and that deals instead with singular struggles in the fragmented reality of Arminio's life.[254] Arminio will shape his own style by considering the writing of fragments as the only possible way to describe that reality. For this reason, he shares Celati's preference for short forms of expression rather than the novel and choses instead miniatures, aphorisms, poems or short descriptions. Arminio dedicates his entire work, both poetry and prose, to the 'fragmented identity' of his homeland devastated by the earthquake and, as I will show later in this paragraph, by the consequences of contemporary economic inequality, that caused isolation and emigration from Southern Italy. Arminio mentions that 'fragmented identity' earlier in the first piece that Celati chooses to open the anthology *Narratori delle riserve*:

> Come è potuto accadere che tanti cittadini hanno mancato di mostrarsi refrattari alle scelte di Sivizia, dispondendosi verso di esse infilati nelle forche dell'opportunismo o della rassegnazione? Non commetteremo l'errore di farci un'opinione a questo riguardo. Ciò che sappiamo è che d'ora in poi la vita in questo paese dovrà procedere da un'identità frantumata, da una

[253] *Narratori delle riserve*, p. 15.
[254] For a full definition of this idea of *impegno*, see Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of impegno*.

> lacerazione prolungata. Noi vorremmo renderci felici anche di questa afflizione. Per il resto, Sivizia e i suoi seguaci faranno ciò che sanno fare.[255]

At the moment of his participation in *Narratori delle riserve*, Franco Arminio had published two books of poetry, *Cimelio dei profili* (1985) and *Atleti, Avellino* (1987). His narrative debut thus happens through Celati's anthology and Arminio continues alternating poetry and fiction in his following books, most of them published in the 2000s.[256]

Arminio has also worked as a film-maker: after the collaboration with Paolo Muran and Ermanno Cavazzoni for *Viaggio in Irpinia d'Oriente* (2000). He has directed four documentaries (*La terra dei paesi*, 2003, *Un giorno in edicola*, 2009, *Giobbe a Teora*, 2010 and *Terramossa*, 2012) and he is the protagonist of Andrea D'Ambrosio's film *Di mestiere faccio il paesologo* (2009).

In her book *Ecocriticism and Italy*, Serenella Iovino mentions Arminio's works and activism as one main example of political and ecological resistance in Italy.[257] Arminio focuses in his writings on marginal, rather deserted places that are usually abandoned in the aftermath of natural catastrophes. This is the case with respect to Irpinia, and to L'Aquila, which were both devastated by earthquakes, the

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[255] *Narratori delle riserve*, p. 16. After *Narratori delle riserve*, Arminio gave his contribution to *Il semplice* with other *Miniature*, (*Il semplice*, 3, 1996, pp. 149-151). In 2008, Arminio's letter to Gianni Celati opens the special issue of the journal *Riga* dedicated to Celati's works.

[256] Franco Arminio, *Cimelio dei profili* (Catania: Lunario Nuovo, 1985), *Atleti, Avellino* (Avellino: Associazione Librai di Avellino, 1987). Arminio's books of the 2000s are: *L'universo alle undici del mattino* (Naples: Edizioni d'If, 2002); *Viaggio nel cratere* (Milan: Sironi, 2003), *Circo dell'Ipocondria* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2006); *Vento forte tra Lacedonia e Candela. Esercizi di paesologia* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2008); *Siamo esseri antichi* (Avellino: Sellino, 2008); *Poeta con famiglia* (Naples: Edizioni d'If, 2009); *Nevica e ho le prove. Cronache dal paese della cicuta* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2009); *Cartoline dai morti*, (Rome: Nottetempo, 2010); *Oratorio bizantino* (Rome: Ediesse (collana Carta, 2011); *Le vacche erano vacche e gli uomini farfalle* (Rome, Deriveapprodi, 2011); *Terracarne* (Milan: Mondadori, 2011); *Stato in luogo* (Massa: Transeuropa, 2012); *Geografia commossa dell'Italia interna* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2013); *Il topo sognatore e altri animali di paese* (Macerata: Rrose Sélavy, 2013); *La punta del cuore* (Avellino: Mephite Edizioni, 2013); *Nuove cartoline dai morti*, (Cosenza: Pellegrini Editore, 2016); *Cedi la strada agli alberi*. *Poesie d'amore e di terra* (Milan: Chiarelettere, 2017).

[257] Serenella Iovino, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). On Arminio's 'paesologia', see Giulio Iacoli, 'L'invenzione della 'paesologia'', *Compar(a)ison*, 28 (2008), 75-89.

former in 1980 and the latter in 2009. Already in the opening story of *Narratori delle riserve*, 'Ritratto di Saverio Sivizia', Arminio shows both his interest in depicting the effects of natural events on people, and his political sensitivity. Nevertheless, it is in his later works that he develops a poetry and philosophy of marginal places, which he calls 'paesologia' (Iovino translates the word as placeology). Iovino summarizes Arminio's attempt as follows:

> The syllogism is simple: the tie connecting people and places was, in Irpinia and elsewhere, a vital one. If these places are turned into non-places, then these people become non-people, paradoxical organism without a bio-cultural memory of their environment. A 'placeological' poetry is nothing more than the attempt to reconstruct all these loosened ties. (109)

Arminio continues Celati-Ghirri's work on the observation of the external world, but he extends it to a more evident political dimension, that has to do with the recovery of the villages he analyses through what he considers the science of places, placeology. Celati's legacy is explicit in works like *Viaggio nel cratere* and *Vento forte tra Lacedonia e Candela*. The first contains a letter by Celati in which he attaches his translation of Friedrich Nietzsche's poem *Der Freigeist* as *Lo spirito libero* and uses Celati's diary-reportage, *Verso la foce,* as a clear model. The second example shows a map of the villages Arminio crosses and describes in the book, as in *Narratori delle pianure*. Celati is constantly quoted in the acknowledgements as being the first to believe in Arminio's writings and is mentioned as a main source of inspiration (for example in *Viaggio nel cratere*: 'Un ringraziamento particolare a Gianni Celati, che è stato il primo a credere alle mie storie').[258]

Following Celati's example, Arminio is thus totally committed to a description of places that derives from his physical immersion and inspection of the

[258] Franco Arminio, *Viaggio nel cratere*, p. 184.

small villages in Italy's interior. These are places of desolation, where the sense of community is lost: abandoned places, where 'nothing happens' and entire generations of young people are forced to leave in order to find better working conditions elsewhere. Arminio depicts rural depopulation and the economic decline of places that are far from urban activity and that are not even tourist attractions. The writer underlines how daily life in these places continues despite desolation. This fascinates and frightens the 'paesologo' at the same time and creates a sense of melancholy in all of his writings. The book of thoughts, *Circo dell'ipocondria*, helps to reconnect all the different elements of Arminio's poetry and prose: his obsession with the passing of time that is a constant relationship with death, and the political projects that arise from an awareness of the human condition of mortality. *Circo dell'ipocondria* is a poetical self-portrait in which Arminio describes his anxiety over the imminence of death, his inability to enjoy life and his hypochondria. The poet Valerio Magrelli, also strongly linked to Celati, having participated in both versions of *Narratori delle riserve* with the short texts 'Illenomix', 'Rivelarmi al gelo' and 'Alle lagrime, rovi', uses the term psychopolitical in his endnote to *Circo dell'ipocondria* in order to describe the link between interior and external worlds that characterize Arminio's works.[259]

There are passages in *Vento forte tra Lacedonia e Candela* that clearly promote a regeneration of the small villages that Arminio describes, a new life which could be possible with a repopulation of those areas: 'Forse un giorno non lontano sarà evidente che l'irrealtà con cui abbiamo svuotato il mondo e noi stessi può essere sconfitta tornando a vivere in luoghi dimessi e appartati'.[260] Arminio has promoted a

[259] Valerio Magrelli, *Tre volte Arminio*, in Franco Arminio, *Circo dell'ipocondria* (Florence: Le lettere, 2006), 106-112, p. 110. For another example of the presence of the theme of mortality in Franco Arminio, see *Cartoline dai morti* and *Nuove cartoline dai morti*.
[260] Franco Arminio, *Vento forte tra Lacedonia e Candela*, p. 117.

revolutionary project since 2008 with the blog *Comunità provvisorie* and the homonymous association, founded in 2014 with the aim of encouraging new forms of community in small, sparsely inhabited places, which have suffered a substantial reduction in population. Arminio's candidacy for a left-wing political alliance, *L'altra Europa con Tsipras*, founded in 2014 by Italian intellectuals such as Andrea Camilleri, Paolo Flores D'Arcais, Barbara Spinelli, Guido Viale, confirms Arminio's *impegno*, which consists of a direct political involvement and activism as well as literature. This is evident in the ecological struggles that Arminio has championed, especially against waste dumping sites and unregulated building works which have highly negative effects on the landscape and environment.[261]

Arminio's *impegno* is a struggle for the recovery and rebirth of what he calls inland Italy (almost deserted villages, far from tourist attractions and industrial areas) through promotional initiatives and activities, such as the 'Casa della paesologia' in Trevico, Irpinia (Campania) and the 'Festival della paesologia' in Aliano (Basilicata) – not by coincidence the same place in which Carlo Levi was interned during the Fascist regime and which he described in his masterpiece, *Cristo si è fermato ad Eboli* (1945). All of this is closely linked to the poetic dimension in Arminio's writing: his commitment to the environment and to landscape takes force from his works and gives an impetus to a series of political battles that go beyond literature. Arminio is convinced that these places could be the future of mankind, rather than big cities or metropolises: 'Per un perverso ribaltamento la gente abita luoghi (le metropoli) che dovrebbero essere solo usati per fare commissioni e vacanze e va in vacanza in luoghi che invece dovrebbero essere usati per abitare tutti i giorni'.[262] In Arminio's view, small villages could become the centre of a new way of living and a

[261] The blog is <https://comunitaprovvisorie.wordpress.com>. The association's statute is available here: <https://casadellapaesologia.wordpress.com/associazione-comunita-provvisorie>.
[262] Franco Arminio, *Vento forte tra Lacedonia e Candela*, p. 89.

reborn community. Rather than being doomed to disappear, small villages are the ideal places from which to understand contemporary society, and to foster its regeneration: 'Adopero il paese in cui vivo e quelli vicini per tentare di capire il mondo, perché qui il mondo portando i suoi rimasugli, i suoi dettagli in apparenza più infimi, in realtà si svela meglio, svela l'agonia morale che lo sta consumando'.[263] The critique of contemporary society that Arminio shares with Celati, goes further in the former's works and becomes a project of transformation of society based on clear poetic and philosophical thought. Arminio uses Celati's method – intense observation of the external world, attention to normally unseen places – to foster a different idea of contemporary society, one he promotes through his activism. Even though there is sometimes in Arminio's works a sense of nostalgia for the loss of old ways of living in the countryside, nonetheless Arminio demonstrates with his political actions that he is much more interested in the future of those areas, rather than stuck in the past. In his prose, Arminio visits the villages periodically, as if he were a doctor, to see their state of health. He observes that each village is different but they all share some characteristics, such as desolation and solitude, that are consequences of a persistent emigration. Nevertheless, it is in these places that a new potential relationship between humanity and environment could develop. This needs to be based on respect for other beings and a strong sense of mortality and the passing of time, which contemporary society seems to forget:

[263] 89. This approach recalls the notion of microhistory for the intention of explaining large issues in small places. Microhistory is an intensive method of historical analysis, originally developed in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, in reaction to existing historiographical approaches. See Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del Cinquecento* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976) and Giovanni Levi, 'On Microhistory', in Peter Burke, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 93-94. Ginzburg is a constant presence in Celati's career, from *Alì Babà* to *Narratori delle riserve* and his notion of microhistory certainly fascinates Celati and has a lot to do with his idea of literature.

> I paesi come luogo di riabilitazione degli umani, cliniche in cui si impari il compito fondamentale di passare il tempo, compito che è stato sostituito da una miriade di surrogati.
>
> Riparare le statue, riportare alla luce i tratturi, potare gli alberi con cura, salutare con lietezza ogni persona, ecco alcuni gesti che ci possono far bene, possono farci ritrovare un filo di eleganza nella bolgia di cafoneria consumistica in cui siamo caduti. (117)

Arminio appears still to have faith in writers and intellectuals, who have a fundamental role in this process of transformation of society through marginal places:

> Forse è il tempo che gli scrittori lascino le città e prendano la via delle montagne e dei posti sperduti. Da questo volontario esilio rispetto alle città-garage potrebbe nascere un nuovo umanesimo in cui l'uomo capisca di essere un animale tra gli altri animali e non l'ingorda creatura che si sta mangiando il pianeta. (96)

Arminio's utopian view of rural life in these passages reveals a vehement anti-consumerism, which he shares with Celati, but it also shows how his position goes beyond that of the latter. *Verso la foce* and other works of Celati's that are focused on the observation of abandoned places, such as the documentaries *Strada provinciale delle anime*, *Il mondo di Luigi Ghirri*, and *Case sparse*, are in fact limited to a consideration of the external world, with all the ethical consequences that I have previously examined in Chapter Two. Arminio expands Celati's view and expresses a direct *impegno* that consists of a political project for those areas, as it appears evident, for example, in *Vento forte tra Lacedonia e Candela*.

A more detailed analysis of Arminio's 2017 collection of poems *Cedi la strada agli alberi* could serve as an example of what I have observed so far. The title suggests an invocation of a novel relationship between humanity and the environment. It can be argued that Celati's legacy is clearly behind both the plain language that Arminio uses and the recurrence of the theme of death which is

essential, both in Celati's and Arminio's production. In order to observe the connection with Celati on the aspect of the attention to death which permits a new relationship with the environment, let us consider what Arminio writes in *Circo dell'ipocondria*, while talking about the dizziness caused by the thought of death. The writer refers to himself in the third person and states:

> Ora Arminio si chiede: e agli altri è capitata, o non è capitata mai? Sicuramente è capitata al suo amico Gianni Celati, altrimenti non poteva scrivere una cosa del genere: «Voi non ci pensate alla morte? Io ci penso sempre e non riesco a dormire per quello. Penso che quando si è morti si resta morti per tanto di quel tempo, così infinito che mi fa girar la testa e mi vengono le vertigini».[264]

This awareness of mortality leads to a powerful attention to the external world and the other, as the first poem of Arminio's collection *Cedi la strada agli alberi* shows. The opening verse is in fact 'Pensa che si muore' and Arminio invites the reader to consider their destiny of mortality and to care about the other, including all other species and the environment. The repeated use of the imperative makes the poem sound like a decalogue. This technique is often used by Arminio in order to communicate a sense of the ethical urgency of his statements. Arminio's poem thus encourages the reader to fight apathy and indifference, in a similar manner to what Celati did in *Verso la foce*. The poem attitude may appear rather patronizing and condescending, if we do not consider that the poet is speaking to himself too:

> Pensa che si muore
> e che prima di morire tutti hanno diritto
> a un attimo di bene.
> Guarda con ammirazione le volpi,
> le poiane, il vento, il grano.
> Impara a chinarti su un mendicante,
> coltiva il tuo rigore e lotta
> fino a rimanere senza fiato.

[264] *Circo dell'ipocondria*, pp. 59-60.

> Non limitarti a galleggiare,
> scendi verso il fondo
> anche a rischio di annegare.
> Sorridi di questa umanità
> che si aggroviglia su se stessa.
> Cedi la strada agli alberi.[265]

One of the very first poems (*Abbiamo bisogno di contadini*) acts as a programmatic statement. While in the first part it insists on the common destiny of humanity and the environment and the need to care for others, the conclusion explains directly what Arminio believes revolution to consist of in contemporary times:

> Oggi essere rivoluzionari significa togliere
> più che aggiungere, rallentare più che accelerare,
> significa dare valore al silenzio, alla luce,
> alla fragilità, alla dolcezza.[266]

The poem *Lettera ai ragazzi del Sud* invites the younger generations (especially from Southern Italy) to be revolutionary in such a way:

> Uscite, contestate con durezza
> i ladri del vostro futuro:
> sono qui e a Milano e a Francoforte,
> guardateli bene e fategli sentire il vostro disprezzo.[267]

The poem *Lettera a Pasolini* establishes a significant connection between Pier Paolo Pasolini and Arminio. The poem focuses on their shared rebellion against what Arminio calls 'socialdemocrazia dello spirito', a sort of mediocrity of thought and incapacity to choose one side to support. The affinity with Pasolini is particularly telling from the perspective of *impegno*, due to the role Pasolini has in the imaginary as 'intellettuale impegnato', especially as it ends with a critique of present-day Italy, which also shows a form of nostaglia for an idealized past:

[265] *Cedi la strada agli alberi*, p. 7.
[266] *Cedi la strada agli alberi*, p. 12.
[267] *Cedi la strada agli alberi*, p. 9.

Ora che tu sei morto e io sono quasi già vecchio
posso dire che siamo due bestie
e che nulla abbiamo da spartire
con la socialdemocrazia dello spirito
che si è diffusa nei poveri e nei ricchi.
[…]
L'Italia di oggi
ha perso miseria e garbo,
ha perso l'altezza e la bassezza,
è tutto un viavai di pensieri
a mezz'aria[268]

Another poem, 'Lettera a Rocco Scotellaro' is addressed significantly to the socialist writer and trade unionist, active in the 1940s and 1950s, in the name of their common political commitment for the development of rural areas in Southern Italy, especially Basilicata. Arminio uses the ancient name of the region, Lucania, which was also the official name of the region during the Fascist period, from 1932 to 1945. Arminio uses it despite the risk of its fascist links, but rather referring to a precise geographical area, which includes also part of other regions (like the Cilento and part of the Irpinia in Campania and northern Calabria) with similar traditions and dialects: 'Ora la tua Lucania è un altare | per i devoti della terra, | è la pietra che fiorisce nell'aria'.[269] Scotellaro's works were far from nostalgic in their view of the peasant life they depicted, while some form of affection for the Italy of the past seems to be there in Arminio's poems, but what is interesting for my analysis is Arminio's appropriation of two clear models of *impegno*, those of Scotellaro and Pasolini, even if distant from his own forms of political commitment. I believe that these texts permit us to see how Arminio consider himself to be successor of Scotellaro's and Pasolini's struggles, even using forms of *impegno* that strongly

[268] *Cedi la strada agli alberi*, p. 13.
[269] *Cedi la strada agli alberi*, p. 33. Rocco Scotellaro (1923-1953) was a poet and a socialist politician whose activism was dedicated to fight the condition of extreme poverty and injustice of farmers in Southern Italy.

differ from those models of the 1950s. Arminio's *impegno* follows the line traced by Celati: while Scotellaro and Pasolini were still linked to political parties and ideologies, Arminio's *impegno* is not integrated into the policies of a party. Nevertheless, his condemnation of various aspects of contemporary society, such as consumerism, corruption, inequality, social injustice, and exploitation of people and the environment is evident in his writings. His proposal for an alternative follows in Celati's direction, indicating a new relationship between the human and the environment that centres on attention and care for the other and that opposes consumerism, thus creating a new sense of community in areas that are now abandoned or isolated. Therefore Arminio's nostalgia contrasts with his activism, which illustrates that his focus is on a project for a new development of the small places of Southern Italy, rather than in the longing for past conditions of idealized poverty and purity which he praises in his works. I believe that his nostalgic view of rural life needs to be seen as part of his critique of contemporary life, rather than as the proper desire to revert to the past. This is demonstrated by Arminio's projects of promotion, relaunch, and repopulation of marginal places that aims at recreating new life in those places and has little to do with nostalgia for past conditions.[270]

To sum up, Arminio's *impegno* derives from his interest in 'paesologia' and consists in proposing a new relationship between humanity and the environment. The link between literature and politics is extremely close in his works. Arminio's poetry is, in fact, itself an effort to form a new political community: 'Sono tutti scoperti i miei passaggi, sono offerte intimamente politiche perché contengono sempre un richiamo alla costruzione di una nuova comunità' (29). Celati's legacy, such as the observation that foregrounds what is normally unseen, becomes a

[270] See for example the *Festival della paesologia* in Aliano, of which Arminio is the director. The website is < https://www.lalunaeicalanchi.it/>.

blueprint for an alternative way to think about marginal places, creating a new community that Arminio encourages and shapes both through his activism and his works.

### 3.4 The Legacy Refused. Grazia Verasani's Debut and her Socio-Political Commitment through Fiction

Grazia Verasani made her debut as a writer in 1987 thanks to the poet Roberto Roversi. One year later, Celati included her three short stories, 'Tre racconti acerbi' in the newspaper version of *Narratori delle riserve*, but Verasani is not among the authors in the Feltrinelli edition of the anthology.[271] This happened more than ten years before the publication of Verasani's first novel *L'amore è un bar sempre aperto* (1999). Verasani also appears in Celati's first documentary *Strada provinciale delle anime*.

A short time after her debut, Verasani published her second novel *Fuck me mon amour* (2001) as well as a collection of short stories entitled *Tracce del tuo passaggio* (2002). Her success as a noir writer was confirmed in 2004 with the publication of *Quo vadis, baby*. She published the play *From Medea* in the same year. *Quo vadis, baby* launched a series of detective novels that focus on the character of the private detective Giorgia Cantini. The Cantini series comprises four other books: *Velocemente da nessuna parte* (2006), *Di tutti e di nessuno* (2009), *Cosa sai della notte* (2012), and *Senza ragione apparente* (2015). In addition, Verasani has published other texts that are not linked to the series, such as the novels *Tutto il freddo che ho preso* (2008), *Mare d'inverno* (2013) and *Lettera a Dina*

[271] Grazia Verasani, 'Tre racconti acerbi', *il Manifesto*, 27-28 november 1988, p. 13.

(2016), as well as the collection of stories on various pop and rock stars, *Accordi minori* (2013), and the play *Vuoto d'aria* (2010).[272]

The poet and screenwriter Tonino Guerra, whom Celati mentions already in his article, *L'angelo del racconto* and in the first pages of *Verso la foce,* is the connection between Verasani and Celati. Celati often expresses his admiration for Guerra's works. In *Verso la foce*, he makes direct reference to the collaboration between the poet and the director Michelangelo Antonioni, who was a source of inspiration for Celati at the time of the collaboration with Ghirri and his debut as a film-maker, as I have shown in Chapter Two. In his presentation of Verasani's short stories, Celati introduces the author by saying that she is Tonino Guerra's discovery:

> Grazia Verasani è una scoperta di Tonino Guerra, il quale è rimasto sorpreso dalla franchezza e immediatezza giocosa dei suoi primi racconti. Bolognese, dopo aver studiato filosofia Grazia Verasani ha fatto l'attrice in compagnie di giro e adesso si occupa di music rock. Ma è ancora molto giovane, e dei suoi racconti dice che sono 'acerbi'.

Celati highlights frankness and playful spontaneity as the main features of Verasani's short stories *Tre racconti acerbi*, included in the newspaper version of *Narratori delle riserve*. I believe that those two traits aptly describe the writing style that Verasani adopts in her later works as well. It is significant for my analysis that those short texts already present aspects of Verasani's future production as these show how the link to her debut with Celati is tight, and have direct consequences on what Verasani will write in the following years. The three tales included in the *Manifesto* version of *Narratori delle riserve* are 'Raptus', 'Questione di ore' and 'George B. e la prostituta'. All three short stories focus on women characters, another element that characterizes Verasani's later production. 'Raptus' relates the

[272] *Quo vadis, baby* became a film in 2005, directed by Gabriele Salvatores and a tv-series, directed by Guido Chiesa and broadcast by Sky Italia in six episodes in 2008.

story of Clelia, a girl who unintentionally kills herself because of her love of falling from heights. Another young girl called Zita is the narrator of 'Questione di ore', which is the nickname of Zita's grandfather. He is a man who tries to enjoy his life until the very end as he knows that death is just a matter of time ('questione di ore') due to serious illness. The third tells the encounter between the trombonist George B. and the prostitute Marilinda and insists on the contrast between the idea Marilinda has about their meeting (having sex and being paid) and George's melancholic desire to listen to a voice and just watching the woman, in order to escape his own solitude. The 'Tre racconti acebi' contain many elements that return in Verasani's later novels. Prostitutes are key figures in novels like *Velocemente da nessuna parte* (2006) and *Di tutti e di nessuno* (2009), while there is an extraordinary similarity between Dina, in Verasani's *Lettera a Dina*, and Clelia in 'Raptus'. Suicide by falling from a height reoccurs in *Senza ragione apparente*, with the teenager Valerio Britti who kills himself in such manner at school. The similarity between the first tales and Verasani's 2016 *Lettera a Dina* continues in the description of the woman narrator's grandfather, whose death is almost identical. In 'Questione di ore' Verasani describes the protagonist, Zita watching her grandfather's last moments: 'Un giorno Questione di ore scese dalla lambretta, si avvicinò a un salice piangente, […]. Zita lo guardava da lontano […]. Il vecchio si adagiò sull'erba, a morire con la cerniera aperta'[273] while in *Lettera a Dina* the narrator tells her psychologist about herself at the age of thirteen watching the same scene: '«Mio nonno, dottore. Me lo ricordo pisciare contro un salice piangente dicendo 'Il medico sostiene che è questione di ore' […]. Avevo tredici anni e lo guardavo tirare giù la cerniera»'.[274]

[273] Grazia Verasani, 'Tre racconti acerbi', *il Manifesto*, 27-28 november 1988, p. 13.
[274] Grazia Verasani, *Lettera a Dina* (Florence: Giunti, 2016), p. 129.

In her 2017 book *La vita com'è*, Verasani describes, for the first time in her production, her debut with Celati, thirty years after they first met. The book - which the author defines as a 'novel' even though it contains several elements of autobiography - alternates the story of the encounter between the narrator protagonist – a well-stablished women writer where the reader clearly recognizes Verasani herself – and a young debuting writer, with the account of the narrator's own debut. In this second story, on which I will focus, the narrator protagonist recalls her relationship with her three masters: 'lo Scrittore', 'lo Sceneggiatore' and 'il Poeta'. Behind these three antonomasias are easy recognizable the three key figures of Verasani's debut: Celati, Guerra, and the poet Roberto Roversi. The young writer ('giovane scrittore') asks the protagonist to read the book he wants to publish and this permits the narrator protagonist to remember the moment in which she started her own activity as a writer. Verasani includes in the book a detailed account of her meetings with Celati, Guerra and Roversi, direct references to her short stories published on *Il manifesto* ('nonostante considerasse acerbi i miei racconti, lo Scrittore ne scelse tre da pubblicare su un noto quotidiano')[275] and passages from the letters Celati used to address her. Even though the book is to be considered a novel, those parts related to the narrator protagonist's debut need to be considered as an accurate account of those days and are very telling of the way Celati's legacy transmitted to the next generation in general and to Verasani in particular. Celati proposes himself as a 'diseducatore', meaning that he finds something interesting in Verasani's writings, but he also wants to disincentivise what he sees as a style similar to recent trends in contemporary novels, especially coming form the American market, and a too emphatic language. The two meet in Bologna, and

[275] Grazia Verasani, *La vita com'è. Storia di bar, piccioni, cimiteri e giovani scrittori* (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2017). In his 1988 introduction quoted above, Celati says that Verasani herself described her stories as 'acerbi': here Verasani gives a different version.

Celati's first piece of advice is to read classics: 'lo Scrittore, in un bar di via Guerrazzi, mi aveva detto che non avevo letto abbastanza classici e che la mia scrittura grondava di americanismi e batticuori' (37). He then gives to Verasani a volume of Italian *novelle*, from thirteenth to sixteenth century, and suggests the reading of Petrarca's *Canzoniere*, Ippolito Nievo's *Confessioni di un italiano*, Rabelais' *The life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel*. It is probably for this reason that Celati considers not ready, 'acerbi', the three short stories that he decides anyway to publish on *il Manifesto*: '«È troppo attuale quello che scrivi» […], «troppo rumoroso»' (119); 'mi mancava la «parola antica»' (84). Verasani describes the moment in which Celati brings her as a present a copy of newspaper with her debuting short stories. The narrator adds that Celati suggested to send her writings to the Feltrinelli publishing house. Celati, at the end of the 1980s, was very influential in the Milanese publishing house, but specifies that her style needed to improve, if she wants to be published: 'Spedisci le tue cose alla Feltrinelli, per un primo approccio. Non farti illusioni, però. Forse tra qualche anno pubblicherai qualcosa, sempre che il tuo stile migliori…' (85). Verasani sends seven short stories to Feltrinelli and their response is encouraging: they ask for more texts, in order to form a collection to be published. What Verasani states in *La vita com'è* is that it was Celati himself who suggested to Feltrinelli not to publish Verasani's short stories as a book ('ho consigliato loro di non pubblicarli. Non sei ancora pronta', 177). This is clearly the reason why Verasani's texts are not included in the Feltrinelli edition of *Narratori delle riserve*. In the letters between Verasani and Celati mentioned in *La vita com'è* there is evidence of the distance between the two, but also traces of the clear interest Celati had in Verasani's writings ('Non sopporto il perbenismo apatico che affligge la narrativa contemporanea. Tu non sei così. I tuoi racconti si salvano

perché non hanno spocchia', 177). Celati observes how Verasani's short stories have the 'natural' narrative ability he was looking for while working at *Narratori delle riserve*, and praises her capacity for imagining rather than explaining, together with the absence in her texts of the cumbersome subjectivity, or interiority, of the author, which Celati criticizes all along his career. In one of his first letters to Verasani, dated 1985, Celati's anti-literary attitude clearly emerges, as he mentions the diversity that he sees between Verasani's works and the 'veri scrittori': 'Ho letto con piacere i suoi racconti, e credo abbiano dei pregi che spesso mancano ai «veri scrittori». Le sue parole non spiegano, lasciano immaginare ma… i suoi scritti sono ancora immaturi' (98). Celati constantly considers Verasani's writings not ready and keeps suggesting other readings which should foster imaginative thinking, rather than realism, such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Robert Walser's *Geschwister Tanner*. The second letter, in which Celati passes from the 'lei' to the more informal 'tu' form, presents all the elements of Celati's idea of literature in the 1980s, as discussed in Chapter Two:

> Le pratiche narrative sono cose artigianali, e si compongono di ritmi, trame, figurazioni, allegorie. Ci sono procedure tradizionali che non possiamo trascurare… Pensiamo alle parole come "nostre" parole, ai sentimenti come "nostri" sentimenti. Ma se le parole fossero invece una voce anonima che parla attraverso di noi? Io avverto il sollievo delle parole quando sono come acqua, un mare che ascolto e in cui finalmente il soggetto è annegato. Le parole ci servono per riposarci, calmarci, andare via da noi stessi. (96)[276]

The narrator protagonist's reply to one of Celati's last letters, dated 1991, immediately shows the opposite view of literature that Verasani has. The reference

[276] See also Verasani's resume of the two main periods of Celati's career: 'non capivo la sua tendenza a rinnegare i suoi primi romanzi, comici, stralunati, preso com'era dai racconti di viaggi, paesaggi, su cui stava lavorando in quel periodo […], e si metteva a osservare la realtà, le cose, tutte quelle cose che avrebbe voluto descrivere *esattamente* com'erano, con l'obiettivo di un fotografo che capta momenti, acchiappa scorci, espressioni, da un angolo di osservazione neutro, senza artifici' (117).

to Bret Easton Ellis' best-seller *American Psycho* (1991), a book characterized by extreme violence and realism, as one of her favourites, well represents this contrast:

> Mi hai detto che non ho la "spocchia giovanile dei giovani autori promettenti" ma che temi ugualmente che io stia girando a vuoto. Ti ho detto che mi era piaciuto American Psycho di Bret Easton Ellis e ti sei grattato il naso. Io non ho mai pensato ai romanzi come a cose che dovrebbero riposarmi o calmarmi. Anzi, quelli che mi piacciono di più mi fanno venire la febbre […]. Ma io non assumo un libro come valeriana. Per me, un bel libro è come un rovescio d'acqua sulla testa, una martellata, un risveglio, uno squillo di tromba…(97)

Despite this evident contrast between two opposite views of literature, Verasani expresses several times in the novel her admiration for Celati and connects their opposite attitudes to their different age and to Celati's refusal of present Italy (and the world), which is exactly what generates admiration in the young Verasani:

> C'erano le nostre firme, su quella carta giallina, le nostre voci: la sua severa, perentoria, la mia incerta e presuntuosa. C'erano i miei entusiasmi, e c'era la sua stanchezza. Verso un Paese, o un mondo, che si stava trasformando in peggio, e dove aver ricevuto un premio importante dalle mani di un presentatore della tivù lo aveva costretto a salire sul primo aereo per l'Inghilterra. Si era sentito un impostore, mi aveva detto. E io l'avevo ammirato come una rockstar ribelle. (98)

In *La vita com'è*, Verasani also reports the elements of Celati's critique of contemporary society that I have examined in Chapter Two. During one of their last meetings, in fact, Celati 'Iniziò un monologo sulla pubblicità, la mentalità bottegaia, il cinema e la letteratura di massa, la volgarità, il consumismo, l'ossessione del denaro, le meschinerie, l'incurabile conformismo dei libri di successo' (176).

I find particularly interesting the case of Celati's legacy in Verasani because, despite the tight link between the two in the starting phase of Verasani's career, and the fact that she acknowledges Celati as one of her masters, Verasani seems from the beginning to refuse that same legacy and looks for her own path in terms of style and

language.[277] Probably the only piece of Celati's advice she really follows is his call to find her own voice ('Io auspicherei che tu cercassi di trovare una tua voce', 97). Although the two writers follow completely different patterns, I believe that Celati's legacy in the case of Verasani consists exactly of this: the use of literature as a means of engaging with society, which is realized in different ways but shows in both cases a radical critique of contemporary Italy.

While Verasani refuses Celati's legacy on the side of style, deciding to pursue her own idea of literature in a more evident manner than Campo and Arminio, Celati's *impegno* as a critical attitude towards the present condition of contemporary society to be expressed through literature left its traces in Verasani's works. Verasani's *impegno*, in fact, lies in the way her works, and particularly her noir novels, are connected to 'cronaca' and current events. This is clearly opposite to Celati's *impegno* through imagination. Nevertheless, the two seem to share a radical critique of aspects of contemporary Italy and express their *impegno* through literature.

I will show how Verasani's *impegno* is particularly visible in her women characters, some of them already present in the short stories in Celati's newspaper version of the anthology. Another recurring feature, from the debut tales to the most successful novels, lies in Verasani's choice to set her novels in provincial villages. The Cantini series is set in Bologna, but several episodes occur in the suburbs or in liminal villages like Ozzano, San Lazzaro or San Giorgio di Piano. This appears to be influenced by Celati, not least because the settings in Verasani's works are often the same as those used by Celati in the 1980s. In fact, he was the first who openly gave literary dignity to those marginal places along the Po valley. In order to

[277] See her interview with Samuele Govoni, where, talking about Roversi, Guerra and Celati, Verasani states: 'sono stati i miei maestri, in anni dove di maestri ce n'erano ancora' (Samuele Govoni, 'Tanti sacrifici, ma oggi mi sento una privilegiata', *La Nuova Ferrara*, 20 February 2018, p. 27).

strengthen this point I will mention some examples: Verasani refers to the Po Valley villages around the city of Ferrara, such as Lido di Volano and Porto Garibaldi in *Lettera a Dina*, and others in the Cantini book *Cosa sai della notte*, such as Porto Garibaldi, Lagosanto, Masi Torello. The places that I have mentioned are the same as those described by Celati and are also the locations where he set his *Strada provinciale delle anime*, in which Verasani participated. Other places which do not appear in Celati's book, such as San Giorgio di Piano and other villages in the bolognese countryside like Funo di Argelato were already in *Tre racconti acerbi* and will be key places in Verasani's novels. I believe that this is more than a mere coincidence: it is instead a precise narrative choice, directly deriving from what I have analysed in Chapter Two: Celati's interest in marginal places is one main legacy for many writers, including Verasani who, not by chance, chooses provincial, marginal places as the setting for all her novels. This is a key aspect of her production, but it does not have the same function as in Celati's works. Verasani uses marginal, ordinary places as the noir setting to his books simoly because they belong to his personal experience. In this sense, she does not see marginal places as a anti-hegemonic choice, challenging the 'monumental' of the city (in fact, she alternates those places to that of the city). Even though Celati's legacy might be less visible in Verasani than in authors like Campo and Arminio, especially with respect to the use of language and style, I believe that some elements still come from Celati's example: starting from Celatian premises, especially from his works of the 1980s, like the focus on marginal places and stories from the province, she proposes a form of *impegno* that is distant to Celati's, but also continues a critique of contemporary Italy which shares some aspects with that of Celati, especially if we think about works like *Recita* and *Sonetti*, where this is most explicit. Verasani

makes her debut within Celati's projects but then takes an opposite direction in terms of style and content, directly tackling social and political issues taken from current events. She also uses the noir and its realism to express her political commitment, and this clearly conflicts with Celati's rejection of realism that I have analysed so far. Celati's legacy thus becomes weak, as it stands only in a shared indignation for aspects of contemporary Italy. I believe, however, that it is interesting to note how Celati's legacy can produce authors that develop their own forms of *impegno* which could be distant from the model but still use literature and language as a tool to address socio-political or ethical issues. This is evident in an author like Verasani, whose connection to Celati is clear, but who develops her own idea of literature. I will now analyse the main lines of Verasani's *impegno*, in order to highlight that the stylistic distance from his mentor does not imply the end of *impegno* through fiction.

Stories of women are the cornerstone of all of Verasani's books, from the first novel *L'amore è un bar sempre aperto* to the latest *La vita com'è* (2017). The Giorgia Cantini series is an example of noir from a female perspective: Giorgia is both the narrator and the protagonist and several other female characters have important roles in the series, from the detective assistant Genzianella Serafini to the lesbian couple Lucia and Lucilla or Piera Sambri in *Cosa sai della notte*, to the young teacher Silvia Augelli and the teenagers Adi and Celeste in *Senza ragione apparente*, just to mention a few examples. *Mare d'inverno* and *Lettera a Dina*, are stories of female friendship and Verasani's most important play, *From Medea*, is a dialogue in a psychiatric prison between four women who committed infanticide. It is through her women characters that Verasani's *impegno* becomes evident, and particularly through Giorgia Cantini, as I will demonstrate. Scholars have already pointed out how her novels offer a multifaceted portrait of a wide range of women,

whose complexity contrasts stereotypes. This happens with particular strength in the character of Giorgia Cantini, a 40-year old, overweight, female detective who does not use guns, whose charm is not blurred by her appearence which may not correspond to the canon of stereotypical female beauty. As Alessia Risi has underlined, Verasani's Cantini series shows some sort of political commitment in the idea of noir as social narration: the crime is set in a specific time and space and acts as a pretext to discuss social events and their political consequences. The character of Giorgia is fundamental in giving a political dimension to the books as Verasani undermines social (and gender) sterotypes through the narrative voice of her protagonist. As Risi has observed:

> Quest'azione-reazione della protagonista, e il suo sguardo ora ironico, ora cinico, ora apparentemente rassegnato e perplesso su ciò che accade creano sempre uno scarto tra lei e gli altri personaggi […]. È in quello spazio che si genera una sorta di ponte critico ideale che permette al lettore di esercitare la sua partecipazione al testo e di prendere posizione […] rispetto a una caratterizzazione del sociale […] altamente stereotipizzata.[278]

Verasani's books have their main focus on issues of contemporary life and society, such as violence against women (*Quo vadis baby?*, *Velocemente da nessuna parte*, *Di tutti e di nessuno*) or homophobia (*Cosa sai della notte*). A different presence of politics is also evident in other novels and not merely limited to the Cantini series. This does not necessarily represent an example of *impegno* but shows the social and political background of most of Verasani's books. Verasani uses a woman's perspective to narrate fragments of Italian collective history, such as the

[278] Alessia Risi, 'Dalle microstorie di Grazia Verasani alla costruzione del sociale. Analisi delle trame secondarie in *Quo vadis baby?* e *Velocemente da nessuna parte*, in *Memoria in* Noir. *Un'indagine pluridisciplinare*, ed. by Monica Jansen and Yasmina Khamal (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2010), 193-202, p. 195. See also Alessia Risi, 'Approaches to Gender: Grazia Verasani's Cantini Series', in *Out of Deadlock. Female emancipation in Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski Novels, and her influence on Contemporary Crime Fiction*, ed. by Enrico Minardi and Jennifer Byron (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

partisan war or the social demonstrations of 1977. In *Lettera a Dina*, for example, Verasani makes abundant references to politics: while the narrator is a communist, Dina is a fascist, and important political events and personalities are mentioned, especially regarding 1977, which significantly is the most politically committed time both for the first person narrator in *Lettera a Dina* and for Giorgia Cantini (and for Celati too, as demonstrated in Chapter One, with regard to *Alice disambientata*). *Lettera a Dina* also touches social issues such as AIDS and the consequences of the spread of heroin use in the 1980s. This shows Verasani's attention to a variety of issues in contemporary Italy and its political history: Verasani's works deal with social concerns that are current in contemporary Italy and take materials from recent news, showing a way of engaging with society through literature that is very distant from that of Celati. *Cosa sai della notte* and *Senza ragione apparente* are particularly telling in this sense. The first is an investigation into the death of a young man (Oliviero Sambri, known as Oliver) whose homosexuality leads the police to dismiss the case rapidly without finding those responsible for his death. The police version is that Oliver's murder was probably a hate crime. The book underlines how homophobia thus became an excuse for a superficial investigation. Cantini works on this case three years later, following a request by Oliver's sister Piera Sambri, and finds that several people were involved. Ultimately, Cantini discovers that homophobia was not the reason why Oliver was killed. Nevertheless, *Cosa sai della notte* denounces the presence in society of prejudice against homosexual people. Cantini's voice allows us to see how Verasani takes a position on such an issue, condemning those prejudices and showing the ignorance and superficiality behind homophobic behaviours.

Verasani's political commitment emerges with clarity through the character of Giorgia Cantini. This happens for example in *Cosa sai della notte*, with regards to another central issue in contemporary society, namely racism and relations with immigrants. When a man on the bus attacks an eastern European woman using stereotypical insults by accusing her of being a criminal, Giorgia is the only person on the bus who intervenes to defend her. This scene shows the indifference and apathy of most of the people who remain seated in the face of such a violent attack against an immigrant and it well illustrates prejudices that are widespread in contemporary society:

> 'Qui non ce la vogliamo gentaglia come te, dovete tornarvene al vostro paese di merda, albanesi, rumeni, russi, tutti delinquenti. Hai capito? Capisci la mia lingua? Alzati e fai sedere qualcun altro!'. La donna lascia immediatamente libero il posto, guarda a terra stringendosi la borsa al petto, mentre nessuno accenna minimamente a intervenire in sua difesa: chi parla al telefonino, chi guarda fuori. L'uomo non è soddisfatto la spintona verso l'uscita: un vecchio si scosta e due ragazzini con gli zaini ridacchiano dandosi di gomito.[279]

Giorgia Cantini's action and comments provide the reader with an example of a clear anti-racist stance. The words that Cantini uses are a warning for those people who are not standing on the side of the immigrant woman who has been attacked. This is not a private matter, Cantini states, but a public and political one. Cantini's words show her effort against indifference in the face of hostility to immigrants:

> D'impulso afferro l'uomo per il bavero della giacca a vento; sono a un centimetro dalla sua bocca.
> 'Senta un po'', dico senza mollare la presa, 'vuole prendersela anche con me? O le donne italiane le fanno meno schifo?'.
> Lui scalcia, respingendomi con il braccio. 'Si faccia i fatti suoi'.

[279] *Cosa sai della notte*, p. 165.

> ‘Ma questi *sono* fatti miei’, ribatto, ‘perché io *sono* su questo autobus esattamente come lei e come quella signora, e tutti e tre ne abbiamo uguale diritto. Se non le va bene, è lei che deve scendere. Ha capito?’ (166)

Giorgia’s final reply shows the contradiction of the man in his prejudices and underlines the contributions of immigrants in Italian society, in this case the social support that women from Eastern Europe, like the one who has been assaulted in the bus, often give as cleaning ladies and caregiver:‘«Lei è solo una testa di cazzo e un razzista, e a casa ha di sicuro una madre anziana che si piscia e si caga addosso, accudita da una donna come *quella*»’ (166).

The latest book in the Cantini series, *Senza ragione apparente*, focuses on the world of teenagers: Giorgia Cantini investigates the cases of two adolescent suicides, one of them falling from a height at school. Even if the book touches other issues, like bullying in school, and describes several aspects of contemporary society and especially teenage society (such as the role of social media), the central aspect of the novel seems to be the relationship between men and women in its violent aspects: sexual violence, stalking and femicide. Once again it is through Giorgia’s reactions against sexist behaviours that we have evidence of Verasani’s *impegno*. The teenager Mattia, son of the police chief Luca Bruni, who is also Cantini’s lover, tells Giorgia about a violent argument between two other adolescents involved in the case, Pietro Speranza and Valerio Britti (who then commit suicide). Mattia reports that Pietro used the word ‘troia’ during the fight, referring to a woman. Pietro’s girlfriend Celeste unintentionally arrives close to the bathroom where the two were arguing and eavesdrops on them:

> ‘Nei bagni, durante una lezione. Lei stava cercando Pietro per farsi dare un po’ di fumo… Non è entrata, ma li ha sentiti alzare la voce e Pietro si è messo a gridare ‘Tutta colpa di quella troia’…’
> ‘A chi si riferiva?’

> 'Ah, non lo so. Celeste ha aperto la porta e l'ha subito richiusa, ma ha sentito Pietro che urlava 'Quella troia, quella troia, quella troia…''.[280]

This goes beyond a comment on *costume*, when Giorgia, even if these are details which are extremely useful for her investigation, abruptly interrupts Mattia ('Basta!') and reprimands him for the use of the word 'troia' with reference to a woman. In the final part of their dialogue she explains that the use of that word indicates how men see women: '«Mattia, non voglio farti nessuna morale, non ne avrei comunque il diritto. Ma se ti sentirò ancora dire la parola troia in mia presenza, aspettati una sberla. […] Chiamare troia una ragazza è una cosa da poveretti»'. Giorgia ends her protest with a social remark that significantly links the situation in Italy with respect to sexist attitudes: '«Se questo paese sta andando alla malora è anche perché ci sono troppi uomini che danno della troia a una donna»' (130).

Another passage describes Giorgia being distracted by television while having lunch. She sees a woman who is defending her son, who has been accused of patricipating in the gang rape of a fifteen-year old girl. All of the members of the gang are confessed criminals, but the woman attempts to exonerate her son morally, invoking sexist reasonings that are supposed to justify his behaviour. Giorgia's comment is, once again, extremely telling, as in a few words she expresses all the disgust for a still strong male chauvinism, in this case promoted by a woman, who has also the support of her small village: 'Sta dicendo che il paese le si è stretto intorno, emarginando quell'adolescente bugiarda. «Chiedetelo alle sue amiche», grida nel microfono, «quella ci stava con tutti!»'. Cantini's comment express her revulsion in front of such a sexist behaviour: '«Mi va via la voglia di finire il panino»' (28). All of these comments illustrate Verasani's attempt to tackle pressing

[280] *Senza ragione apparente*, p. 129.

issues in contemporary society, like widespread sexist or racist behaviours, and condemning them by showing the bias on which they are based through her protagonist Cantini's interventions.

The still patriarchal Italian society that causes episodes of violence against women is the central focus of the novel. Verasani's *impegno* on this topic emerges several times in the novel as a critique of that model. During her investigation, Giorgia attempts to immerse herself in the culture of teenagers by listening to singers and rappers popular with that generation. Her comments underline the sexist dimension of their music videos and lyrics:

> Sul video è apparsa la sagoma robusta di un tizio calvo circondato da stuoli di ragazze appariscenti e seminude con un'aria più da spogliarelliste che da ballerine, e sono passata oltre; cercando di mettere da parte i miei pregiudizi, mi sono concentrata sui testi. Virilità da bar, epica da strada alla bulli e pupe, sprezzo per zoccole travestite da ragazze che ti vogliono incastrare, un po' di gangsterismo vecchio stampo e un po' di rabbia da centro sociale. Ho pensato che Bambolina e barracuda di Ligabue era solo la versione buonista di un maschilismo italico di fondo.[281]

Despite her repulsion in the face of sexist images and texts, Cantini forces herself to see the reason behind the popularity of these singers among teenagers:

> Poi mi sono sforzata di essere un po' meno prevenuta e mi sono domandata se dentro quei testi ci fosse una volontà, più o meno genuina, di comunicare una legittima confusione. La didascalia di fondo era del tipo: se il mondo ti fotte non fargliela passare, resistigli e mostragli che lo sai, che ti sta fottendo, e prendi le tue contromisure. (131)

Cantini states that teenagers find in those lyrics a possible response to the ethical confusion that involves everyone. Another passage in the book shows a connection

[281] 131. 'Bambolina e barracuda' is a song by the Italian songwriter Luciano Ligabue, released in 1990. The lyrics are about the encounter between a man and a woman. The man who speaks refers to the woman as a doll with whom he wants to play: 'Ba ba ba, bambolina | Ba ba, fammi giocare | Ba ba ba ba regalami | Un po' di calore'.

between that lack of clarity and an absence of solidarity and indifference that the text also indicates as one of the causes of femicides:

> La fiducia sembra bandita […], il prossimo è soltanto qualcuno che ti vuole fregare […]. Imbocco via Ferrarese e penso che un anno fa, qua vicino, nel cortile di un palazzo, una studentessa è stata violentata […]. Un uomo l'aveva trascinata davanti alle macchine che sfrecciavano, con lei che urlava, scalciava, cercando di attirare l'attenzione. Ma nessuno si era fermato, nessuno era intervenuto. Un passante aveva detto a un giornalista: 'Credevo si trattasse di un bisticcio amoroso'. Quel passante non era riuscito a distinguere la violenza da una banale lite tra innamorati… Cos'è diventato l'amore?, mi chiedo. Perché non siamo più in grado di interessarci alle vite degli altri e di soccorrerli? In quale confusione ci stiamo dibattendo? Passiamo il tempo a farci i fatti nostri, chiusi in casa davanti alla televisione, incapaci di muovere un passo verso un pianerottolo dove un marito sta prendendo a pugni una moglie o un ladro sta forzando un'altra serratura. (152)

In another passage, Cantini speaks with Pietro's mother Simonetta Speranza. She is totally devoted to her husband Toni, who betrays her and exhibits sexist behaviours that he has passed down to his son. The character of Simonetta illustrates a traditional view of women and an incapacity to rebel against a still patriarchal division of roles which she cannot even recognize. Giorgia's comments highlight Simonetta's subjugation: despite her teaching diploma, Simonetta works only three days a week, as a housekeeper, and does not have a driving licence. Giorgia wants to provoke a reaction in Simonetta and reminds her of her husband's playboy attitude. Her response shows her resignation. She accepts her subordination without complaining, for the fear of solitude:

> 'Toni è ancora un bell'uomo', sorride lievemente, 'si tiene in forma, a differenza di me'. È evidente che giudica il marito meglio di quanto giudichi se stessa.
> 'Immagino che quando esce con gli amici faccia lo spiritoso con qualcuna…' Scuote la testa. 'Cosa vuole che ne sappia… In ventisette anni di matrimonio qualcuna ci sarà stata, ma io non ci penso a queste cose, non hanno importanza… Toni non se ne andrebbe mai di casa'[…]. 'Insomma, suo marito mantiene la famiglia, manda avanti la baracca, e questo basta a

> lasciarlo libero di fare ciò che vuole senza discussioni? Ogni tanto alza le mani signora? Non sarebbe il primo…'[282]

Verasani's novel gives a representation of different social and cultural aspects, not limited to men, which contributes to the diffusion of sexist stereotypes and leads, as extreme consequence, to violence against women in its various forms. Giorgia Cantini's comments have the key role of rendering explicit the nature of sterotypes and revealing the bias behind considerations that deeply permeate present-day Italian society, as Verasani's novels clearly reflect. It is thus through the character of Cantini that we can talk about a form of *impegno* in Verasani's production: the investigator's interventions show a direct political stand against issues like racism, misogyny and homophobia, which are dominant in the political debate at the time in which Verasani writes her novels.

Even though Verasani's *impegno* is closely linked to current events, and is clearly opposite to that of Celati, so that I would speak of a legacy refused, Celati's legacy can nonetheless be found in the way Verasani uses fiction to express her opposition to central aspects of contemporary Italian society, which is also the main focus of Celati's critique, especially in his works on Berlusconian Italy which I have examined in the final part of Chapter Two, when its own forms of *impegno* become more explicitly linked to specific events in present days. The distance from Celati is, instead, clear in the fact that Verasani builds and shapes her novels following issues that are at the centre of public debate (homophobia, violence against women, racist episodes, bullying, teenage suicide, infanticide) and her stories trace cases in the

[282] 171. Simonetta is quite similar to other characters in Verasani's works. Piera Sambri in *Cosa sai della notte*, for example, passively tolerates her husband's lovers and is interested only in him not abandoning their shared house. Giusy, Luca Bruni's wife, is somehow similar, but she betrays herself and reacts to the failure of her marriage.

news and re-elaborate them through fiction. What emerges is a form of *impegno* which is more explicitly linked to current events than Celati's, where reality is more recognizable and characters are directly involved in events taken from *cronaca*.

Celati's legacy has thus contributed to the development of very different examples of commitment, which usually take one or more elements from his narrative, in terms of style or content, such as language for Campo, 'racconti d'osservazione' for Arminio and the setting in the marginal places of the province for Verasani. Each of the authors creates his/her own forms of *impegno*, sometimes with many elements in common with Celati (Arminio, and, in part, Campo), others on the opposite side (Verasani). Each author has thus followed his/her own way, and I have chosen three examples which immediately show both their close connection with Celati and their distance from that model, both in terms of style and in terms of their forms of *impegno*. Nevertheless, all of these forms of political commitment confirm Celati's role as pivotal in the development of the notion of *impegno*: the works of these authors, in fact, are examples of very different ways of engaging with society, but have, at the same time, many elements in common with Celati. First, like their mentor's works, the writings of Campo, Arminio and Verasani all contain forms of *impegno* outside an overall ideological view, not linked to a political party. Second, they are all looking for fictional and linguistic ways to be politically engaged, rather than simply expressing a condemnation of specific social and political events. Even in the case of Verasani, whose novels are closely linked to current news and who uses realistic representations of characters and stories, her works reveal their *impegno* in the fictional actions of her protagonist Cantini and their consequence for the reader. In the case of Arminio and Campo, political commitment arises from stylistic and theoretical features that clearly derive from

Celati's production, such as Campo's subversive use of language and irony, similar to that of Celati in the 1970s, or Arminio's 'tales of observation' and his attention for the 'paesi', which are clearly influenced by Celati's ideas of the 1980s and particularly *Verso la foce*. Verasani takes the idea of setting stories in the province of the Po valley from Celati, following the example of Celati's film in which she took part, *Strada provinciale delle anime*, but using them with a different aim. At the same time these authors show a certain dissatisfaction with Celati's *impegno* and a need to be more directly politically committed than Celati. This is particularly evident in Verasani, who totally rejects the model of Celati's detachment from realism: her attention to current news topics and her use of journalistic language lead her to forms of writing that oppose that model. In Arminio's case, Celati's ethical considerations on humanity and the environment become a direct political struggle, the 'paesologia', with concrete forms of activism that are absent in Celati. In Campo too, even if *impegno* is on the side of language, the stylistic proximity to Celati's attempt does not correspond to an imagination comparable to that of Celati, and all her novels are set inside realistic plots. This shows once more how Celati's works can be regarded as one origin of postmodern *impegno*, which can take forms which are extremely close to his works or even opposite, even when they are a direct derivation of Celati's projects and share with his work a common tendency to commitment through literature. Celati's legacy is necessarily anti-hegemonic. Similarly to what happened in class at the time of the seminar on *Alice disambientata*, Celati's scholarship produces a number of different and sometimes even contradictory approaches, rather then a homogeneity of cultural responses derived from view imposed top-down on his pupils. This happens also with regard to Celati's *impegno*, with a variety of results which still demonstrate, however, Celati's

pivotal role in the passage between post-war forms of political commitment and the new ways that intellectuals engage with society in the postmodern era.

# Conclusion

In this thesis, a systematic analysis of Celati's entire work has demonstrated that his idea of literature is not separable from that of *impegno*. Ethical premises and political consequences are always present in Celati's works, from his debut to the very end. As the most recent critical contributions on Celati have shown, his work is a restless attempt to 'go beyond literature', as he is interested in writing (as storytelling) for its relations with practical life. With this thesis, I add that Celati's works have always had an ethical and political dimension and need to be considered for the forms of *impegno* that they contain. Celati, in fact, engages with society in a variety of ways, particularly through linguistic and stylistic choices and for the theoretical background he refers to. Celati's ethical and political commitment is thus necessarily a non-hegemonic *impegno* that uses tools like imagination, irony and language and distances itself from realism.

This confirms that Celati's work is a turning point in the development of new forms of *impegno*, due to his bridging role between the post-war generation of writers (Calvino, Vittorini, Pasolini) and Italian literature in the 1990s and 2000s. In this sense, I have spoken of the legacy of Celati for his ethical approach and of his ensemble of stylistic, theoretical and linguistic practices which have had a strong influence on contemporary Italian culture, not limited to the sphere of literature. I have thus examined the legacy of Celati's *impegno* in three case studies. By analyzing the works of Rossana Campo, Franco Arminio and Grazia Verasani, I have demonstrated that Celati's legacy is necessarily anti-hegemonic, meaning that his idea of literature automatically refuses any form of top-down imposed scholarship. It rather offers very fertile ways of thinking about the role of intellectual and literature and therefore produces a number of different artistic works which are directly linked

to Celati, but which develop their own forms of *impegno*, sometimes using elements that clearly derive from Celati's works, some others openly distancing themselves from that model. I have also observed that in the three writers examined, what emerges is a need to be more directly politically engaged, through forms of concrete action or with a more clear reference to current events and news, often with a return to some forms of realism.

Following what I have said in the introduction, with this thesis I argue that Celati's works need to be seen as one possible origin of what criticism has called 'postmodern *impegno*', meaning a number of different forms of *impegno* outside an overall ideological framework which have had place in contemporary Italian culture and often go together with postmodern theoretical and stylistic features. It is possible to see this in Celati too, especially considering his style and thought – irony, skepticism, relativism, critique of universalist notions, such as truth or reality – and the tight connection between his writing, translations and films, besides his constant activity of critical and theoretical elaboration. The scope of this thesis was not to analyse the possible 'postmodern' features of Celati's works. Nevertheless, by focusing on the forms of *impegno* that are present in his works, which happens in a so-called postmodern era or phase, this research has shown how Celati represents an example of what Antonello-Mussgnug have called postmodern *impegno*. His case is particularly significant, in this sense, for the bridging role that Celati has had between the postwar generation of writers and the 1980s-2000s. These considerations permit us to situate Celati at the origins of 'postmodern impegno'. Celati's work itself demonstrates the presence of ethical and political commitment in an era or phase which sometimes has been and continues to be marked by traditional criticism as the era of disengagement. At the same time, it shows forms of *impegno*

that are set outside realism, especially in the years 1990s and 2000s, challenging the idea that only a 'return to realism' permits literature to be committed.

Celati makes his debut at the end of the 1960s within an environment which was deeply connected to the neo-avant-garde of the *Gruppo '63*. In this moment, he often makes reference in his writings to the masterpieces of structuralism, such as Vladimir Propp, Claude Lévi Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Northop Frye. He will then distance himself from the neo-avant-garde, which he criticizes already in the materials for the journal *Alì Babà* at the end of the 1960s. Similarly, he is one of the first intellectuals in Italy to see the limits of structuralism, thanks to the enthusiastic reading of the keystones of post-structuralist thought and authors like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. The common ground between Celati and those thinkers is the tendency to cross disciplinary boundaries and to reveal the constructed nature of taken-for-granted objects and concepts. This will have deep influence both in Celati's literature and in the forms that *impegno* takes in his works.

Celati is an active part of many of the key moments of transformation of contemporary Western society and thought. Celati starts elaborating his debut work while directly referring to the social revolts and changes carried on by the 1968 protest movement and thinking about literature as a political tool for the students in protest. The first novel, *Comiche* (1971), could be easily defined as Celati's contribution to anti-psychiatric thought which lead to the closure and dismantling of asylums in Italy. Celati, in fact, writes his debut novel in the same years of Basaglia's revolution and there is evidence of his awareness of a variety of contributions on the topic, such as Ronald David Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960), Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (1961), Michel Foucalt's *Histoire de la folie à l'âge*

*classique* (1964) and Derrida's critique to it in *L'écriture et la différence* (1967). Celati's works of the 1970s anticipates the critique of the violent institutions contained in Foucault's *Surveiller et punir* (1975), which will be a key text for Celati's university seminar on Carroll's *Alice* and on nonsense literature in 1977 Bologna. Once again, Celati is involved in a watershed of history of Italy and gives his particular contributions to it, always through his idea of literature. At the end of the 1970s, the rupture with Einaudi coincides with the moment in which Celati temporarily abandons fiction and redefines his language and style, thanks to contact with American sociolinguistics such as Harvey Sacks, William Labov and Livia Polany, and for his collaboration and friendship with the photographer Luigi Ghirri. In his critique of the publishing policies of Einaudi, Celati anticipates further transformations of the publishing market in Italy, with a preference for mass culture rather than quality, from which Celati will radically distance himself in the future years. In the discussion with the Einaudi editors around *Letteratura, esotismo, colonialismo*, it is also possible to see that Celati makes explicit the political dimension of his understanding of literature, also touching issues that Celati shares with Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, the same year of *Letteratura, esotismo, colonialismo*.

Through Ghirri's theories, Celati develops new considerations on the relationship between humanity and the landscape showing a critique of the effect of pollution on the environment, especially in *Verso la foce* (1989). This coincides with a period of diffusion of ecologist ideas in Italy, the 1980s, also following a deep transformation of Italian society as a result of the influence of American business practices, media, technology, popular culture, and political techniques. Celati opposes this Americanization of costumes, with his idea of literature as a 'reserve'

and an open contrast to consumerism and other aspects of contemporary culture, such as corruption and the use of women's bodies for marketing. The same happens throughout his cinema and theatre, which also paves the way to a direct critique of Berlusconi's Italy, visible in texts like *Recita dell'attore Vecchiatto nel teatro di Rio Saliceto* (1996) and *Sonetti del Badalucco nell'Italia odierna* (2010). Celati promotes a political role of imagination, which emerges in interviews in which he directly links it to the Western wars against terrorism and the situation of migrants (in a text like *Ma come dicono di vivere così*, 2010).

I would thus argue in this conclusion that Celati's *impegno* acts at a deeper level than simple condemnation or disapproval of events, as it has to do with the relationship between people and between people and the environment. As his literature aspires to go beyond its self-referential rituals and ceremonies, his *impegno* has consequences that go beyond literature, dealing with the ways people stay together and form a community. Celati promotes with his literature new ways of perceiving our relationship with others and with the environment and diffuses with his linguistic and stylistic choices a precise ethical approach, which also has political consequences. For this reason Celati's legacy has produced such an heterogeneity of results. The three authors that I have analysed in Chapter Three take what they need from Celati's legacy and go in different directions, sometimes close to Celati (Arminio and, for linguistic experimentation, Campo), sometimes radically distancing themselves from him (Verasani). I have examined only three examples, particularly significant for the reasons that I have proposed in Chapter Three, but this could be stated more widely, given the great number of authors who collaborated with Celati or debuted within his collective projects. For his anti-hegemonic nature, Celati's scholarship is the one of a master who refuses the role of the master. It is

like in Bakhtin's description of the medieval carnival, which Celati often refers to, where the subversion of the normal social order does not culminate with a new order, but with the decrowning of the madmen who has just been crowned. From this derives Celati's interest for the *bagarre*, which he sees as never-ending process of elimination and deconstruction of all-hierarchies and values. The same happens for Celati's *impegno*, which can not preach a new order, a new hegemony, but which realizes within literature the change it wishes to see in the world, as at the time of *Alice disambientata*, and through this it actively promotes a transformation of society.

While constantly escaping the role of the 'intellectual impegnato' in a strict sense, Celati has always engaged with society, expressing his critique in a great number of different forms in terms of style and content, crossing disciplines (literature, anthropology, linguistics, etc.) and media (photography, documentary). The idea he expresses already in *Alì Babà* that 'ogni discorso è guardabile come discorso letterario' and Celati's focus on the purposes of literature beyond literature and on language and the art of storytelling (according to which there is no difference between a novel and the 'scritte nei cessi' he wanted to include in *Alì Babà*) are all elements which return repeatedly in the works of Celati and through which he expresses his *impegno*. This shows the internal coherence of Celati's works throughout his entire career. While he endlessly adds new readings and influences to his thought and seems to change his mind with regards to a number of things, with a highly self-critical approach, at the same time he remains totally devoted to a recognizable idea of literature that is to include what is not normally considered literature. Celati often changes his way of writing, his style, his role (writer, translator, director) and the media he uses, but this does not affect the coherence of

his works. This is also true for Celati's i*mpegno*, as all of his works originate from a sort of personal indignation that generates a strong opposition to some of the main tendencies of contemporary society and literature. Each of Celati's projects, from his debut to the very end, shows a critical effort against those tendencies. His works itself represents a proposal for an alternative. Not just a proposal for an alternative literature, but for different behaviours that Celati's idea of literature promotes.

As mentioned in the introduction, when talking about Celati's work, it is hard to use the word *impegno*, if we limit the notion to some form of journalistic condemnation or we see it only in a return to realism. On the contrary, Celati's *oeuvre* shows a constant critical engagement with society within an imaginative mind-set and imaginary tales. His *impegno* relies on this: a never-ending opposition to the institutions of power (especially in the first part of his career) and to the bad effects of capitalism, such as consumerism, pollution and the corruption of human relationships (more visible from 1980s onwards), that Celati realizes always within literature and outside the path of realism.

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