Developing a Poetics of Ordinariness: Language, Literature and Communication in Gianni Celati's *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, *La banda dei sospiri* and *Lunario del paradiso*

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Abstract

During the 1970s, Gianni Celati uses his novels as a workshop for his investigation into language, literature and communication. *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, *La banda dei sospiri* and *Lunario del paradiso* are crucial works in which Celati develops a style based on oral language as a way of bringing life closer to art and escaping the self-referentiality of the literary vanguard. Celati also experiments with a poetics of "ordinariness," both in style and content, as a means of broadening his audience and the reach of his social commentary.

An examination of Celati's novels of this period reveal an intellectual that is critical of the ways that society uses literature and language to further disenfranchise its weakest members. He invites intellectuals to re-examine of the value of language and literature, but also ordinary people to become writers themselves so that new voices may be heard.

Résumé

Pendant les années 1970, Gianni Celati utilise ses romans comme un atelier pour sa recherche sur le langage, la littérature et la communication. *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, *La banda dei sospiri* et *Lunario del paradiso* sont des romans fondamentaux dans lesquels Celati développe un style axé sur le langage oral afin de rapprocher l'art à la vie ordinaire et d'échapper aux tendances auto-référentielles de l'avant-garde littéraire.

Celati est également à la recherche d'un poétique de "l'ordinaire," dans le style aussi bien que dans le contenu, poétique qui lui permetterait d'atteindre un plus vaste public et de donner plus d'envergure à sa critique sociale.

Un examen des romans de Celati de cette période découvre un intellectuel qui critique la façon de laquelle, dans notre société, la littérature et le langage sont utilisés pour exclure les plus faibles et démunis. Il invite les intellectuels à questionner la valeur du langage et de la littérature, et les gens ordinaires à faire entendre leur voix en devenant eux-mêmes écrivains.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Gianni Celati's position in 1970s Italy

In later years, awash with the heady sincerity and relative calm of the late 1980s and 90s, Gianni Celati judges his work from the 1970s rather harshly. He condemns himself as getting caught up in a pompous intellectual quagmire, remarking of his earlier critical work: "Quello che mi colpisce è l'astruseria del linguaggio che usavo allora, e il disastroso intelletualismo di tutte le mie frasi" (qtd. in Pedullà 366). He also dismisses his novels of the period as mannerist and "wasted breath," claiming that he was writing for the sake of writing with little real substance (Lausten 108). In fact, he goes so far as to revise and republish his main novels of the 1970s, *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, *La banda dei sospriri* and *Lunario di paradiso*, under the title *Parlamenti buffi* in 1989. In this new edition, Celati adds an introduction and explanatory subtitles to the three novels, which re-emphasize their autobiographical and familial elements.[1] More importantly, however, he makes extensive textual changes, substantially rewriting *Lunario del paradiso*. The intended effect of these interventions is to turn the three novels into a trilogy well after the fact, and Celati goes so far as to claim that they follow a Dantesque structure, as Pia Schwartz Lausten explains: "i romanzi illusterebbero quindi un viaggio dantesco che inizia nell'inferno (*Le avventure di Guizzardi*), per spostarsi nel purgatorio (*La banda dei sospiri*) e finire nel paradiso (*Lunario del paradiso*)" (Lausten 108). Celati seems to do all that he can to recontextualize his 1970s novels into a late 1980s cultural

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[1] The new titles read as follows: *Le avventure di Guizzardi (storia di un senza famiglia)*, *La banda dei sospiri (romanzo d'infanzia)* and *Lunario del paradiso (esperienze d'un ragazzo all'estero)*. The book also includes a new preface, "Congedo dell'autore dal suo libro."

milieu, discounting the original novels and making them more like his later work, particularly in the case of *Lunario del paradiso*. This recontextualization constitutes in fact a sustained reinterpretation by the author of his own work. Such a reinterpretation is undoubtedly interesting but it does not "erase" the original works; on the contrary it makes it even more apparent that Celati's 1970s fiction, including the characteristics that he later regrets, were a serious response on the part of the author to contemporary intellectual, social and political situations.

In the 1970's, Celati looks to emergent literary theory for possible ways of "saving" literature at a time when many were announcing its imminent demise. As Pia Schwartz Lausten explains, the original novels are an intentional and thoughtful product of the anti-institutional and anti-authoritarian climate of the 1970s, reflecting Celati's serious investigations of language and literature, especially in consideration of the fact their themes and ideas can often be read in conjunction with his critical work:

> E' difficile non considerare quei romanzi come l'espressione artistica di una serie di riflessioni di Celati sulla letteratura, il linguaggio, il comico e il soggetto; riflessioni che vengono formulate tra l'altro nella raccolta di saggi *Finzioni occidentali* pubblicata nel 1975 (e anch'essa ristampata, nel 1986) [....] Il suo "fiato perso" ha una chiara funzione polemica, di protesta contro il pensiero razionale e borghese, e contro un certo tipo di letteratura. Questa prospettiva "rivoluzionaria" e "carnevalesca," non viene ribadita nel "congedo." (108)

In fact, Celati's enthusiasm for literary theory and the social implications of literature, are precisely the characteristics that make these novels so representative of their time period.

However, because of his intelligent and often convincing way of discussing his own work, from the late sixties onward, as Robert Lumley notes, many critics have tended to "read him on his own terms" ("Gianni Celati" 44). However, focusing too much on Celati's later perspective on his early novels can also fog our ability to adequately analyze them in context.

Like many intellectuals in the 1970s, Celati was very interested in foreign literatures and, as an academic, was exceptionally aware of developments in literary theory that were arriving in Italy from abroad. In recent times Celati has stressed the importance of almost exclusively Italian literary models and fellow Italian writers to his development. However, in the 1970s, at least, he clearly looked outside Italy for literary models, with a special enthusiasm for the English tradition. He taught Anglo-American literature at the University of Bologna after writing a thesis on James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The authors he has either translated or written about over the years, such as Jonathan Swift, Céline, Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, and even Joyce, clearly share many of the fundamental characteristics of Celati's own fiction; like him, they all tend towards the comic, the satirical and the fantastic. Furthermore, while they are all considered part of the literary establishment, at the same time, they also tend to openly challenge the status quo with their experiments in form and in content. This transgressive element attracted Celati to literary traditions, such as the British and American ones, that have had more tolerance for anti-establishment authors and works than the Italian tradition, which has been marked by a greater elitism, and consequentially, greater conformism.

Beyond Celati's interest in other literary traditions, in the late sixties and seventies he also partakes in a general trend to open literary studies to other disciplines and new forms of criticism, particularly after the rediscovery of Mikhail Bakhtin and the success of the writings of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and the French post-structuralists. In fact, as Francesco Muzzioli points out, Celati was among the first in Italy to write on the subject of carnivalesque laughter:

> It should be said that first of all that Celati is one of the first Italian commentators of Bahktin's ideas on carnivalesque laughter...from [these ideas] he derives a faith in the comic, as an alternative tradition and force [capable of] eroding "high Western culture," which is [instead] based on the 'dramatic model' of tragedy. (Muzzioli 237, quoted in West, *GC* 186)

Celati uses these investigations of language and literature as a foundation for his critical and fictional writings, leading Robert Lumley to remark that: "a systematic play on and subversion of dichotomies and dualisms (mind/body, inner/outer, high/low) runs through all his writings" ("Gianni Celati" 45). Although Celati particularly embraces Bakhtin's theories on comedy and the carnivalesque, he also read extensively in a wide range of disciplines and in many languages. As noted by Marco Belpoliti, Celati looked to open up Italian literary discourse not only to foreign literatures, but also to subjects beyond traditional academic and aesthetic categories:

> Gli articoli che compaiano sulle riviste dell'epoca ci presentano un autore dalle vaste letture, compiute negli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta, che spaziano delle teorie letterarie all'antropologia, dalla filosofia ai temi estetici: Butor, Barthes, Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, Propp, Jakobson, N. O. Brown,

> Roussell, Northrop Frye, Queneau, Gadda, oltre a Blake, Swift, Carroll, Joyce, i surrealisti, Céline. Celati è attentissimo a quanto sta avvenendo nel paesaggio letterario europeo e agli esiti dell'antropologia e dell'etnologia (nel 1969 tradurrà *Il linguaggio silenzioso* di Edward T. Hall, studioso di prossemica e cinesica). Insomma, è tutto teso al superamento di un'idea di letteratura compresa dentro le categorie estetiche tradizionali. (Belpoliti 122)

Rather than viewing literature as a hermetic and closed art form, Celati wants to open literary studies and literature, viewing them as extensions of all different types of human activities. What seems to be particularly interesting about Celati in this period is his enthusiasm for what he sees as the new narrative opportunities gleaned from his research as well as a propensity for seeing continuity with past traditions.

At the same time, the precise position Celati's work of this period within Italian literary history is a complex issue. Born in 1937, Celati belongs to an in-between generation of authors who come of age in the sixties and begin their writing careers in the seventies. He was too young to have participated in neorealism; he played only a marginal role in the neoavant-garde movement in the late sixties; and yet, he was too old to have taken part in the student movements of '68 and '77. In fact, during the seventies there is a notable lack of fiction in Italy, particularly by people of Celati's age. It is not until the 1980s that we begin to see a revival of narrative in Italy and, following Umberto Eco's example, that we see novels published by academics, perhaps a symptom of the academicization of intellectual life in Italy. Until that time, intellectual discourse seems to be dominated by the militant left, who were arguably too committed to direct political

praxis to write much fiction. In fact, many of the most important writers of Celati's generation, such as Vassalli, Moresco, etc., all published their best work much later on. Like many of his peers, Celati's earliest writings are theoretical and critical articles, which in large part were designed to bring into discussion theories that were being developed abroad. This has lead to Celati sometimes being seen as a faithful disciple of the neoavant-garde, as Rebecca West notes:

> Celati came of age in this [neoavant-garde] period, and subsequently published his first critical essays in the late sixties and early seventies in journals such as *Quindici* and *Il Verri*, aligning himself in this way with a neoavant-garde preference for open theorizing and self-explication, both of which continue to mark his work. (West *GC* 35)

However, it is worth noting that Celati only began to write fiction in the more disenchanted years of the 1970s, in the aftermath of the social upheaval of the 1960s and several years after the dissolution of the historic neoavant-garde. Moreover, by that time period, many of the participants of the neoavant-garde had easily been absorbed into the literary establishment as university professors and actually had been challenged by their students during the revolts of '68. Thus many of their more radical arguments were beginning to sound rather hollow.

Part of the difficulty in categorizing Celati's work is due to an imprecision of terms regarding leftist intellectuals in Italy during the sixties and seventies. It is true that Celati's early work was experimental in nature and heavily influenced by literary theory, and this reflects the tendencies of some members of the neoavant-garde movement. However, this interest in theory does not in itself make his work (neo)avant-gardist. As

Peter Bürger explains in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, criticizing the way that art functions in society is arguably the defining activity of avant-garde movements:

> The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style), but art as an institution that is not associated with the life praxis of man... The demand is not raised at the level of individual works. Rather it directs itself to the way art functions in society. (49)

Thus the purpose behind avant-garde activity is primarily social revolution, to change the way that art is used in society, to bring it out of institutions and back into life. The most radical of the Italian neoavant-garde, such as Sanguineti and Balestrini, proposed not a new style, but a destruction of the "museum" of art and its institutions. For true avant-gardists, stylistic experimentation is a "secondary" issue, i.e., it matters only insofar as it furthers the "revolution." However, the most radical left should perhaps be distinguished from the rest of the Italian neoavant-garde movement. Many writers in Italy were primarily interested in creating a new style and working on language as a polemical reaction to neorealism and its emphasis on intellectual engagement and social causes. This second part of the Italian "neoavant-garde" are perhaps better defined as "sperimentalisti," following to Umberto Eco's differentiation between "avant-garde" and "experimentalists":

> Lo sperimentalismo tende a una provocazione interna alla storia di una data istituzione letteraria (romanzo come anti-romanzo, poesia come non poesia), mentre l'avanguardia tende a una provocazione esterna, vuole cioè che la società nel proprio complesso riconosca la sua proposta come

> un metodo oltraggioso di intendere le istituzioni culturali artistiche e letterarie. (Eco 98)

In fact, the interest in style over content puts the "sperimentalisti" in philosophical opposition to the more radical avant-garde, despite both being labelled as part of the same Italian neoavant-garde movement. Rather than a radical, avantgardist rupture with tradition, experimentalists work in dialectical opposition to the current literary establishment, trying to create an alternative tradition as a challenge to the canon. Further complicating the discussion is the fact that by 1968, the Italian neoavant-garde, meaning the historical avant-garde beginning with Gruppo 63, was no longer a unified group, not even really a movement. Therefore it is somewhat anachronistic and misleading to use the term (neo)avant-gardist to describe the work of Celati in the 1970s.

So where does this leave us in relation to Celati? As we shall see, according to Bürger's definition, Celati's work of the '70s could be labelled avant-gardist, since he has a strong interest in society and particularly in changing the way that language and literature are used in society, wanting to bring art into daily life. At the same time, he demonstrates many of the qualities of a "sperimentalista," since he suggests that this can be accomplished through language. Thus, Celati seems to occupy a delicate, and often conflicted, middle zone between the two positions. Furthermore, the designation "avant-garde" seems to require a heightened degree of radicalism that may not be compatible with Celati's more moderate position on literature and society. He does not advocate a complete rupture with tradition or use an iconoclastic rhetoric, but rather, he asks for a renegotiation of the way that language and literature are used in society, as well as opening up the literary establishment to different types of people and their stories. At the

same time, he rather methodically experiments with literary language in an attempt to find a voice that is compatible with his philosophical and social interests. In fact, it may be his more moderate sensibility that allows him to write fiction during this period, in contrast to more radical and more militant intellectuals, whose attempts to wage a cultural revolution naturally left them little time to write novels. In fact, Celati can be seen as representing a type of younger intellectual of a transitional, post-neoavant-garde period. He shares many of the social ideals of the left, yet finds himself ever more disillusioned with the possibility of affecting real change in the world around him. At the same time, his life as an academic is increasingly a determining factor in the way he approaches intellectual discourse.

As we have already seen, academia clearly plays a large role in Celati's development as an intellectual and as a writer. In *The Last Intellectuals*, Russell Jacoby argues that intellectuals in academia become less able to write for a wide public because they have to do it so infrequently, a problem that is only compounded as their professional idiom becomes narrower and more specialised. In the case of Celati, it is worth keeping in mind that an academic environment requires literary criticism and encourages the type of self-conscious intellectual writing that marks his 1970s work. Celati tries to overcome what he sees as the insular narcissism of parts of the neoavant-garde movement, i.e. the experimentalists, by developing a style that draws on oral language. Furthermore, preoccupation with academic careers and the drudgery of academic scheduling also keep intellectuals from other writing, something that Celati himself clearly resents (his frustration is evident in the setting of his first novel *Comiche*, where it never becomes clear whether the main character is institutionalized in an insane

asylum or a university). Even in the 1970s, Celati seems to find himself in a rather conflicted position, he manages to saturate himself in the type of studied intellectualism, literariness and theoretical abstraction typical of the literary vanguard, and yet, even at that time, he actively tries to distance himself from it by questioning its value and professing desire for a more visceral experience in literature. As we shall see, this tendency is particularly evident in his use of a body-centric narrator in *La banda dei sospiri*. Although he clearly always takes a strongly anti-institutional stance, and his anti-academic sentiments continue to grow throughout his career, in the 1970s he looks to emerging literary theory as something that can possibly "save" literature and literary studies.

While there are strong similarities between Celati's main fictional works of the 1970s, there are also strong differences. In this study, I will examine *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, *La banda dei sospiri* and *Lunario di paradiso* with particular attention to Celati's discourse about language, literature and communication. I will argue that, in these novels, Celati progressively examines different aspects of these same language-based issues. Each chapter is divided into two main parts. First I address Celati's use of language: its style, structure and the underlying principles behind those choices. His earliest work involves more radical formal experimentation; for example, his use of invented words and grammar in *Comiche* and *Le avventure di Guizzardi*. The later *Banda dei sospiri* and *Lunario di paradiso* are strikingly close to spoken Italian. He also consistently uses more complex narrative forms. As I plan to show, this shift in Celati's writing style reflects his constant search for a way of using language that coincides with his theoretical and philosophical positions. In the second part of each chapter, I will

examine language, literature and communication as thematic issues. In these three novels, problems traditionally recognized as apart or in opposition to language, such as the body, become an integral part of his investigation of language. In *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, Celati creates a narrator with an inability to use language or to communicate at all. He shows how Guizzardi's subsequent marginalization and mistreatment by society as a whole leads to a worsening of his mental condition. In contrast, *La banda dei sospiri* is concerned with the inadequacy of literary language and the language of the upper classes that ignores the body and bodily experience. Celati suggests that in order for language and literature to be meaningful, it must reflect lived experience and bodily reality. *Lunario di paradiso* traces the protagonist's adventures abroad and his maturation as he comes to realize that his judgment has been clouded by fantasy. Using a highly self-conscious narrator, Celati illustrates some of the inherent problems of writing and creating a narrative as one's perspective constantly changes over time and in the telling of the story itself. He ultimately suggests that the search for subjective truth in fiction, by both reader and writer, enriches their understandings of themselves and the world around them.

As we shall see, Celati's fiction, and his criticism, for that matter, consistently reveal a strong interest in language, literature and communication, particularly in their relationship to reality. Like most Italian intellectual writers of the seventies (and earlier), Celati constantly questions the role of literature in society, as well as his own role as an author. Despite his own privileged position as a professor of literature and a literary theorist, or even perhaps because of it, Celati questions the effects of literature, the possibility of meaningful communication between people through language, and thus, the

role of high culture itself. Throughout Celati's fiction, communication often breaks down, and this often leads to disastrous misunderstandings and confusion, but if anything, this only illustrates and reaffirms the central role of language in our lives. Celati does not try to undermine the value of literature and storytelling as activities, but rather he criticises the institutions that limit the ability of people on the margins of society to express themselves. His novels condemn the way in which literature and language are used in society. They also poke fun at intellectuals, including himself, and their pretensions. At the same time, Celati refuses to take a simplistic view of popular or working class culture as representing a somehow better or more authentic experience than "high" culture. Some of his characters are often brutally violent or corrupt, alienating themselves from each other and from the rest of their communities, and the protagonists are almost always trying to break away from their unhappy situations. As I mentioned earlier, there is a gradual normalization of language, but the same is true of the narrative structures; the chaotic, picaresque quality of *Le avventure di Guizzardi* becomes less prominent, as Celati moves towards more complex and structured literary forms. A similar assessment can be made in his choice of content, as Celati uses increasingly accessible characters with more universal stories. I intend to show that, over the course of these three novels, Celati shows a consistent revision of the formal qualities of his work, as well as a continuous re-examination of his own views.

Chapter 2

Deciphering the language of madness in *Le avventure di Guizzardi*

In *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, Gianni Celati plays with language by reproducing the garbled voice of Guizzardi, a character who is plagued by paranoia and has only a minimal understanding of the world around him. Celati's use of language in *Le avventure di Guizzardi* has a mimetic function, since it reflects Guizzardi's inability to express himself, use language properly and properly understand his surroundings. The novel is narrated in the first person from Guizzardi's perspective, and thus exhibits a picaresque structure that underscores Guizzardi's limited grasp of the world around him. As the narrator, Guizzardi cannot explain the machinations of a world he does not understand. The centrality of language to this novel is readily apparent: from its first quasi-nonsensical, ungrammatical sentences the novel constantly draws attention to language as a subject of discourse, rather than just the means of narration. In fact, it is language itself that becomes the object of discussion, and it is through this discussion that eventually the social ills that produced this language emerge.

The experimental language of *Le avventure de Guizzardi* has a precise theoretical basis. On the one hand, it is strongly influenced by Celati's studies of Bahktin and Céline, and on the other hand it is the product of Celati's dissatisfaction with the self-referentiality of the neoavant-garde. *Le avventure di Guizzardi* marks the beginning of Celati's development of a style based on oral language, as well as part of his movement towards a poetics based on "ordinariness" and creating increasingly readable texts.

Guizzardi's use of language is intrinsically linked to his madness, his incomplete and warped understanding of the world around him. His language is symptomatic of deep-rooted mental problems that are exacerbated by society's unwillingness to try to find any other ways (i.e., other than standard, "acceptable" discourse) to communicate with him. Rather, the protagonist's difficulties with linguistic communication expose him to mistreatment and eventually institutionalization. In fact, Guizzardi is capable of communicating and has a particular affinity for physical forms of communication, such as his use of the "language of flowers" and body language. He constantly tries to express himself, only to be thwarted by his inarticulateness and the incomprehension of those around him. However, because of the other characters' impatience with him and their willingness to simply dismiss him as mad, Guizzardi's attempts at communication almost invariably lead to a worsening of his situation. In this novel, Celati examines the centrality of language to one's experience in society. Without language, Guizzardi cannot function, and because he cannot learn language, does not seem to have any hope of bettering his situation. His abuse and mistreatment by an oppressive society only makes his condition worse and actually makes him a threat to the safety of those around him.

1. Guizzardi's mad raving and Celati's development of an "oralized" style

The episodic structure of *Le avventure di Guizzardi* has received much attention in Celati criticism. He chaotically darts from place to place, a characteristic that, as several critics have pointed out, is also implied by his name, since "guizzare" means "to dart" (for example, West 23). Guizzardi's problems with self-expression prevent him

from communicating his needs and desires to others within the story, as well as from reporting the abuse and mistreatment that he receives. Over the course of the novel, Guizzardi is constantly running away, being pushed from one place to another, being captured, institutionalized or abused, apparently without much rhyme or reason, as Pia Schwartz Lausten explains:

> La narrazione di *Le avventure di Guizzardi* consiste di una serie di scene grottesche in cui egli viene confrontato con un mondo repressivo. Il romanzo è una corsa sfrenata da una scena comica e violenta all'altra. Tutti trattano male Guizzardi che viene sempre coinvolto in lotte, e che fugge da un posto all'altro per nascondersi o cercare protezione. (109)

The novel is very much an action-based narrative with very little description. Guizzardi has little control over any aspect of his life, mainly because he has little understanding of the world around him. Because he does not have the ability to see the logical links between his actions and the consequences that befall him, he cannot give a complex narration of his life. Thus, the novel's structure seems to be a direct result of the inability of the narrator to see the causal relationships between events or to understand how the world works. He cannot very well narrate what he does not comprehend.

In the same way that the motivation for the various episodes do not seem to have to have their basis in a structured plot, Guizzardi's language is not rooted in the normal rules of grammar or syntax; both the novel's plot and style are characterized by a conspicuous and persistent lack of structure and order. Celati's style in *Le avventure di Guizzardi* can perhaps be best described as hysterical, paranoid rambling. As Almansi

points out, Celati seems to take great pleasure in reproducing this kind of language and its effect on his reader:

> L'analfabetismo, l'inarticolatezza, gli *speech impediments*, [...] la balbuzie di Guizzardi, il protagonista che scrive in prima persona il romanzo, rappresentano per Celati un pretesto per fare capire poco anche a noi lettori, in una austera adesione a una quasi sgrammatica, in un culto perverso della scrittura stravolta e terremotata. ("Il letamaio di babele," 48)

Although Celati seems to revel in using outlandish language, the reader generally can figure out what Guizzardi means and what is happening to him, despite his linguistic mishaps, although most of the other characters in the novel cannot. Celati's protagonist apparently also suffers from a distorted pronunciation that, compounded by his inability to form a grammatically correct sentence with proper words, renders him virtually incomprehensible to other characters. This can be seen as a reversal of the situation of *Comiche*, Celati's first novel, in which the characters seem to be able to understand each other, but the reader does not always know what it is that they are referring to or what is actually happening[2]. In *Comiche*, Celati attempts to reproduce a mysteriously institutionalized professor's journal, which has "missing" or "torn out" pages and

[2] In fact, *Le avventure di Guizzardi* appeared in 1973, only two years after the publication of *Comiche*, and until its inclusion in *Parlamenti buffi* in 1989, it was most often compared to *Comiche* and read in conjunction with it, since it is in many ways much closer to the earlier than to the two subsequent works; as Pia Schwartz Lausten notes: "a livello stilistico-linguistico *Le avventure di Guizzardi* è più simile agli esperimenti di *Comiche* che agli altri due libri, in cui si svolge una graduale normalizzazione della lingua" (108). I would add that while it is true that there is a gradual normalization of language and of the narrative structure in the two later novels, the same could also be said of *Le avventure di Guizzardi* in comparison with the earlier *Comiche*. *Le avventure di Guizzardi* is narrated in the first person from some future period of the protagonist's life; however, it is worth noting, unlike Celati's other novels, we don't really know when, how or why the story is being written down. In the novel, Guizzardi never figures out how to make himself understood to others nor does it seem likely from his story that he will learn how to communicate better sometime in the future. This tendency to have missing information and purposeful inconsistency is precisely what makes the novel frustrating and also aligns it with his earlier novel.

emendations by other characters, often rendering the novel itself truly incomprehensible. *Comiche* is purposely illegible, whereas *Le avvventure di Guizzardi* is merely meant to be frustrating (Almansi, "Il letamaio di babele" 48). This kind of reversal exemplifies the methodical experimentation with theoretical concepts that characterises Celati's fiction and the seriousness that underlines his literary endeavours. Furthermore, the consistency of his progression towards more reader-friendly writing throughout his entire career shows that he is analysing his work and actively trying to develop a set of principles for writing fiction.

Guizzardi's grammar mistakes, misuse of words, created words and tendency to repeat himself all come together to give him an idiosyncratic voice and his monologue a distinctly "oral" quality. In this and in his subsequent 1970s novels, Celati uses an increasingly "oralized" style that attempts to replicate the qualities of a story told aloud. Celati's use of "oralized" language has been linked to his interest in Céline and Bahktin that began well before he started writing fiction, and as Rebecca West explains:

> Celati sees Céline as on of the very few '*highbrow* writers of our time who have taken note of the decline of the participatory function of the literature of the *élite*' (*Gruppo 63* 228); instead of exasperating the self-referential, non-participatory essence of the purely *written* word, as many modern writers have done to the point of illegibility, Céline and some others have adopted expressive forms that reactivate the spoken and gestural aspects of written literary language. (187)

She goes on to note that this type of "oralized" literary language implies the tones of voice, the gestures and the physical beings of the characters, and that this technique is

evident in all Celati's early fictions, including *Le avventure di Guizzardi*. Notably, perhaps due to his attempt to utilize this technique, all of Celati's 1970s novels are actually first person monologues. The significance of Guizzardi's particular type of delirious speech and of its connection to madness emerges clearly in the light of Celati's discussion of *humour noir* in *Finzioni occidentali*. In this essay, Celati claims that a type of carnivalesque laughter can be found in the ramblings of the insane, describing Céline as a kind of modern rendition of Rabelais[3], as Rebecca West explains:

> Celati will in fact later designate Céline as the modern "heir" of Rabelais in his 1975 *Finzioni Occidentali*, in which he argues that the original Rabelaisian laugh, that of "good humors," purgative and diuretic, could no longer find today the ties that it had with the community and with the earth, so that the early modern "gigantesque clowns," described by Bakhtin return, but "in the excessive delirium, [which is] psychotic and schizophrenic, [and] in the body of the persecuted and hounded *fool*", such as seen in Céline. (186)

Although Celati wrote *Finzioni Occidentali* several years after *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, this "insane voice" and dark humour that Celati finds in Céline, are clearly anticipated in his own early writings, especially in the mad ranting of Guizzardi. Like Céline, Celati depicts the senseless brutality of society from the perspective of a "persecuted and hounded *fool*." Therefore he seems to have a specific theoretical framework in mind with his conception of Guizzardi, drawn from his readings of Bahktin and Céline, as well as a clear intention that Guizzardi's ravings are to act as a type of critique of contemporary

[3] Further strengthening Celati relationship to Céline and his admiration of him as a literary model (although clearly not a political one, of course) is the fact that he also translated several of his novels into Italian in the 1970s.

Italian society and literature. The style and the structure of the novel are supposed to be representative of the deep-seated problems of a society that has not only alienated, but also mercilessly persecuted its weakest members, and the comedic effect of Giuzzardi's antics, as in Céline, is bitter.

Celati's admiration and adoption of these techniques inspired by Céline and Bahktin underscore his general dissatisfaction with the cold, obscure and closed language of the literary elite, the case in point being the Italian neoavant-garde movement whose experimental language did not involve its audience, or even really had much of an audience at all. Celati sees the lack of a participatory function in the "literature of the elite" as revealing an unacceptable degree of self-absorption in the literary vanguard. And yet, one could easily argue that both *Comiche* and *Le avventure di Guizzardi* could be subject to those very complaints, since they can be so opaque, particularly due to the way they use language. However, for Celati, the opaqueness of language is determined not so much by the logic of constant experimentation but rather by the effort to give a voice to a world that our familiar language represses into silence. Furthermore, Celati shows a consistent movement away from the self-referential tendencies that he critiques in the avant-garde by adopting a style based on oral language, more specifically, on increasingly ordinary oral language. There is a clear difference in the way that language is used in this novel and the one that directly follows it; *Le avventure di Guizzardi* is markedly strange, consisting of a seemingly invented language that is supposed to represent the mad ravings of an unstable mind, whereas the language of *La banda dei sospiri* is remarkable in its ordinariness, in its closeness to spoken Italian. In his future novels, Celati clearly moves away from the "mad raving" of *Le avventure di Guizzardi*,

towards a more ordinary and universal type of "oralized" language, and thus one that also has an ever-greater "participatory function." As in Celati's other novels, the language of *Le avventure di Guizzardi* is mimetically related to the ability of the narrator to use language in a proper way, and this helps to explain the difference between the earlier and later narrative. As relatively normal boy, Garibaldi, the protagonist of *La banda dei sospiri*, has a comparatively better grasp on language than does the deeply troubled Guizzardi. However, this "diegetic" observation does not detract from the fact that Celati shows a consistent movement towards creating more readable texts that are based in increasingly ordinary, and more universal, situations. Thus the focus of the writing also shifts from the strangeness of the language to the strangeness of the situation represented. This move reflects his dissatisfaction with the fact that language itself had become a distraction to many of his more central concerns about language and society[4].

2. Assigning blame for Guizzardi's madness

For all his difficulty with oral language, the opening episode of *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, shows the protagonist easily communicating with the language of flowers, a symbolic language in which objects represent abstract ideas. He explains how he

[4] This becomes especially clear in light of the critical responses to Celati's novels. Although I argue that there is a distinct critique of contemporary society in *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, Guizzardi's apparent singularity can often seem to restrict him from being representative of specific social ills in the real world. For example, Almansi dismisses the issue of social class in *Le avventure di Guizzardi*: "Forse noi lettori non abbiamo capito niente, e dovremo cercare di ripescare la dimensione classe-media del protagonista (oh cielo, che Guizzardi sia un simbolo dell'uomo-massa alienato? Dio ce ne scampi!)" ("Il letamaio di babele" 48). In contrast, *La banda dei sospiri* as well as Celati's later novels, addressing social issues often seems unavoidable. Returning to the issue of social class, Pia Schwartz Lausten feels she has to restrain herself from her urge to attribute Garibaldi's "magic leap" onto a tram at the end of *La banda dei sospiri* to a symbolic escape to bourgeois security, although she does so because it seems too straightforward an answer in light of her research: "ciò potrebbe finalmente indicare una vera fuga e un tentativo di sollevarsi al di sopra della propria classe sociale [....] Invece di essere emblema di rivoluzione, il salto di Garibaldi è una sorta di distrarsi dal mondo o un emblema di leggerezza sia morale che stilistica" (110).

routinely gives Signorina Frizzi different combinations of flowers to express how he feels about her:

> Né passava giorno o due che non giungessi io al luogo dove sapevo trovarla ossia giardino pubblico ma non troppo frequentato recandole tra le mani un mazzo di fiori. Vuoi primule con reseda vuoi rose con altri contorni significanti cioè rispettivamente gioventù con dolcezza e beltà con altri pregi. (*AG* 9)

Guizzardi and Frizzi even use flowers for more complex communication, jokingly exchanging violets, "E lei replicava a me spesso con offerte d'edera significante amicizia quando non con mammole significanti ma per scherzo s'intende pudore di modestia" (*AG* 9). Guizzardi's ability to communicate with flowers sharply contrasts with all of his attempts to use verbal or other means of communication. In fact, this opening scene establishes several fundamental elements to understanding Guizzardi's relationship to language and to the world around him that will return in various forms throughout the novel. The physicality of the language of flowers seems key in understanding Guizzardi's approach to communication: his understanding is connected to tangible experience. It indicates that Guizzardi has the capacity to learn to communicate, just not through language. The inability of others to recognize his strengths, to be sensitive to him and try alternative means of communication with him, instead of dismissing him, contributes to his downfall.

The issue of naming and names is a returning motif in Celati's 1970s fiction, and are of particular importance in *Le avventure di Guizzardi*. In fact, the names and titles in *Le avventure di Guizzardi* appear to be purposefully misleading. Noting that the attempt

to rationalize the meanings of names in *Le avventure di Guizzardi* only leads to frustration, Almansi writes "il titolo del secondo libro di Gianni Celati, *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, è già un deliberato inganno, una truffa pianificata" ("Il letamaio di babele" 47). Then Almansi goes on to claim that this is a deliberate attempt to aggravate readers, a tactic that inspires him not to play along with Celati's game in protest, "il protestare contro il suddetto titolo è già fare il gioco del perfido autore; quindi, per vendicarmi, non me ne occuperò più" (48). At the same time, while Almansi's complaints are justified and I am in sympathy with them, it should also be noted that on a different level, names and naming play a central role in the novel's development. In fact, the very number of Guizzardi's names indicates their importance. His repeated declaration, "mi chiamo Guizzardi detto Danci," gives him at least two names to start with, and later he also claims to have the same name as his hometown (*AG* 156), which possibly even gives him a third name. Guizzardi's names and his eventual inability to remember his names are a key issue in the novel, as Michael Caesar points out, "l'incertezza del proprio nome, benché l'uso del cliché 'Guizzardi detto Danci' o le allusioni ad esso la facciano apparire qualcosa di strutturale, emerge in particolare nell'incontro con la 'bella signorina' verso la fine del libro e si rivela una progressiva *perdita* di identità" (39). In fact, the issue of names is more than merely one of the many idiosyncratic attributes of the protagonist, but rather, it relates to the larger topic of his identity loss and its causes.

At the end of the novel, Guizzardi's identity crisis and his forgetting of his name are not only brought on by some of his innate problems with language, but also by how society has mistreated him. Guizzardi suffers a memory lapse and claims that he cannot remember his name or his origins, saying "il nome della mia antica città come del pari il

mio nome personale non volevano a nessun costo uscire dal buco della memoria" (*AG* 156). He seems to have lost some of the defining aspects of his identity, unable to recall not only where he comes from, but also what he is called. In the following episode, even after hearing another character, the unnamed "bella signorina," call his name, he still does not recognize it as his own:

> 'Ciao Danci!' Susseguente a questo è accaduto uno scompiglio nella mia gola per via vai di saliva su e giù assieme alla domanda: 'È il mio nome? è il mio nome?' E dopo simile incontro per vario tempo mi restava la spina nel cervello che spesso volentieri da solo mi chiamavo: 'Danci? Danci?' Un po' con la sua voce. Rispondendomi con la mia: 'Cosa c'è? cosa c'è?' In apparenza che dunque ero io. Ma la certezza non potevo agguantarla. (*AG* 157)

This new development clearly disturbs him, so he tries to say his name to himself in different voices to jog his memory. Even after that rather odd exercise, he remains uncertain and unconvinced that it really is his name. In fact, hearing his name has become so rare that he cannot even be sure whether it really is his name or not. In an unusual moment of lucidity, Guizzardi blames his inability to recognize his name on his mistreatment from society, declaring that no one has called him by it besides Piccioli: "non ho più trovato alcun altro che chiamassemi giusto del mio vero nome. Ossia invece di: 'Mammalucco deficiente faccia da matto.' Allora cosí è andata di avermi io tutto dimenticato vuoi le mie origini compreso pure il nome della mia città natale" (*AG* 157). He claims that he has forgotten himself, his origins and his name through lack of use,

since others refuse him the common human dignity of calling him by his name[5]. Celati attributes Guizzardi's identity crisis to a dehumanizing public that will not acknowledge him by anything other than by insults, underscoring the mistreatment of Guizzardi by society at large. Despite having at least two or possibly three names to choose from, the characters that he meets wilfully choose to insult and degrade him even further, making him nameless as well as voiceless in society.

Although at the end of the novel Celati clearly puts the blame of Guizzardi's deterioration on society's treatment of him, his worsening condition is also partly the result of his defective way of conceptualizing the world around him. This is most evident during the episode immediately after he "forgets" his name and personal history. In this episode, Guizzardi has a "strana visione" that he finds a photograph of himself in a chicken coop. He depersonalizes the image of himself by talking about it in the third person, saying that "era precisamente di Danci giovanotto" (*AG* 159). His identity as a young man was certain; he knows "precisely" how to identify himself. There is a distinct disparity between his certainty of the identity of the person in the picture, and the uncertainty of his current identity. He recognizes the image in the photograph as "Danci," but now that he has changed, he does not seem to think that he can be called by the same name. He tries to use this photograph to prove his identity to others, to prove that there is still some resemblance to how he used to be, but in fact, he has grown so

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[5] At the same time that Guizzardi vilifies society for taking away his name, the poignancy of his statements are somewhat undercut by his hypocrisy, since earlier in the novel he too resorts to name-calling, such as his statement that he *had* to call Ida's dead husband "foureyes": "bisogna sapere a causa degli occhiali scuri con cui si mostra sono costretto a chiamarlo Quattrocchi invece di Martino Coniglio che sarebbe il suo vero nome" (*AG* 33). Giuzzardi never rises above the logic of his own world nor does he have the mental capacity to do so on his own. As a kind of by-product of this insensitive society, he is its victim also insofar as he embodies many of its worse characteristics.

different from his youthful self that he inspires pity in others. To his dismay, they mistake him for a beggar and give him alms:

> Mostravo bene in vista questa foto di Danci onde poi si riuscisse a notare la somiglianza di come ero in effetti. Ma in conseguenza invece è successo una di quelle belle passanti ha deposto nella mia mano una elemonsina. Prendendomi per mendicante ohibò. (*AG* 159)

Part of the reason that Guizzardi can no longer recognise himself seems to be because he has aged over the course of the novel. The mistreatment and abuse that he has received during his "adventures" has changed him in "corpo e spirito" (*AG* 159); the object that he used to call "Guizzardi" or "Danci" no longer appears the way that it did before. In other words, he has trouble reconciling his mental image of himself, of "Danci", with his current physical state.

In fact, Guizzardi's ability to identify the other characters also functions in a similar way; it depends on their identities and names remaining static. When other characters change or lose their names, Guizzardi can no longer distinguish them as the same character, most notably in the case of Signorina Frizzi/Signora Tofanetto. He spends the entire novel searching for his beloved Signorina Frizzi, the language instructor who seems to have the patience of a saint. He believes that he sees her again working as a nurse in the hospital, although she has changed her name to Signora Tofanetto after getting married (*AG* 76). He cannot process the change in her name or her profession to the very end of the novel, never quite able to understand that she could be the same person whom he knew before and who has simply changed over time. This becomes particularly evident as he tries to explain his quest to Piccioli:

> Io gli ho fatto il discorso: 'La ritrova la signorina Frizzi sí o no?' Lui: 'Sicuro che si chiama Frizzi?' Io: 'Frizzi o Tofanetto non so'. Lui: 'Bisognerebbe saperlo non ti pare?' Ho concordato che sí mi pare ma però in quanto insegnante di lingue estere bravissima doveva essere non confondibile. Benché infermiera ma questo non come professione fissa. (*AG* 163)

In fact, he has little cause to believe that her current occupation as a nurse would be anything but permanent, however much he may have liked her as a teacher. Earlier, while institutionalized in the hospital, he recognizes his nurse as his beloved Signorina Frizzi. When he tries to get her attention, he calls her by her previous name, and notes that "lei mi mandava un saluto e la replica: 'Mi chiamo Tofanetto!" (*AG* 78); she actually refuses to go by anything but her new (married) name. For Guizzardi, accepting her new name would imply also accepting her new identity and the fact that their relationship is not what he imagines it to be or what he would like it to be. He wants to return to the way he thought it was before, a beloved teacher and her dutiful, albeit inept, student. This desire to return to their former relationship is understandable since she is the only character besides Piccioli that shows him any respect, but, it does not reflect reality. He cannot or will not reconcile how she appears at the end of the novel, as a nurse, with how he remembers her as his language instructor. Going beyond his psychological dependence on Signorina Frizzi, the root of Giuzzardi's problem seems to be that he is unable to grasp the mutability of language, the kind of fluidity meaning that allows a different name to refer to the same person, as well as accommodate any outward changes in their appearance or lifestyle.

Because his mother tongue seems like a foreign language to him and he takes language lessons, Guizzardi identifies himself as a language student. He says his instructor, Signorina Frizzi, "per ore curava il ripasso delle mie cognizioni grammaticali" (*AG* 9), evidently showing untiring patience with his attempts to learn to speak properly. He describes the lessons as "tanto pesanti" (*AG* 9), and in fact, over the course of the novel, his linguistic competency never improves. His inability to use proper grammar is readily apparent, and he also speaks with a nearly incomprehensible pronunciation that leads other characters to believe he is not even Italian (*AG* 36-7). Furthermore, Guizzardi's idea of cleverness and witty banter leaves much to be desired for those of us who are no longer adolescents. Reading his verbal exchanges with his friend Piccoli seem simple-minded or juvenile at best; for example, in this exchange, their adolescent joking about women consists of crude trivialities:

> Poi inoltre nel corso di simili scappate a me sempre faceva ridere a strippapelle Piccioli il quale lui quando docchiava una signora subito mi interroga: 'Sai dove glielo metterei a quella?' Ed io: 'Dove?' E lui: 'Nelle tette!' Oppure vogliasi: 'Nel culo!' Facendomi molto spanciare dalla spiritosaggine. (*AG* 19)

In fact, this is one of the few conversations that Guizzardi manages to have, since most attempts at verbal communication are less effective and often consist of him yelling the same phrases or nonsense syllables over and over again.

Beyond having little aptitude for language, in another way, he actually seems overly sensitive to the spoken word. Guizzardi perceives language as a constant barrage of sounds that is a kind of assault to his inner peace. His dealings with Ida Coniglio

reveal that he finds language and words invasive, actually damaging to his mental state, particularly her habit of continually asking him what he is doing:

> [E]ra suo vero e proprio diletto interrompermi i pensieri e gli atti a qualunque occasione senza tanti riguardi con l'abitudine presto contratto chiedermi in continuo: 'Cosa fai Danci?' Dunque ferirmi nel intimo con la curiosità indiscreta delle parole. Alle quali poi dovrei io rispondere con voce calma nella sua idea. (*AG* 30)

The powerful image of her words wounding his intimate self, the privacy of his own mind, indicates the severity of his aversion to language. He claims that he finds her relatively normal question downright painful and even suspects that she asks it purposely to harm him. For Giuzzardi, language is more than an issue regarding his incomprehension of mere words, he also has to struggle to maintain his composure in the face of what he perceives as a merciless and overbearing onslaught of noise that undermines the sanctity of his own mind.

Many critics have pointed out Guizzardi's fundamentally physical way of understanding the world around him, as well in the way he tries to express himself. Pia Schwarz Lausten notes that Celati's fiction can be conceived as a documentation of the characters' physical experiences and their movements through space:

> [I]nvece di interpretare la realtà intellettualmente, i personaggi fanno esperienza attraverso le sensazioni fisiche: provano dolore fisico dalle botte che prendono dagli altri; i loro corpi emanano puzze e rumori...la narrazione segue il loro movimento fisico nello spazio e i loro gesti. (113)

Guizzardi cannot differentiate much between his physical and intellectual self. The traditional schism between the body and mind has little purchase in a character who often uses his body to communicate his frustrations, fully expecting that his intentions will be understood by those around him. For example, instead of responding orally to a question, he stamps his feet and literally beats his head against the wall:

> E rispondendo io con battimento per terra di piedi a protestare la mia verità concludevano loro a modo di sbrigo: 'È demente!' Per il che ho subito dato una grossa testata al muro nella speranza convincerli su ciò dell'opposto se non proprio accattivarmi una benevolenza che pochi concedono. (*AG* 43)

The other characters' conclusion that he is mad seems entirely justified; the real issue is their attitude. They dismiss him rather than trying to help him, and this leads him to act out more, which makes matters worse. At the same time, Guizzardi does not realize that his actions are out of line, rather, he thinks that banging his head against the wall will make them like him better. Seeing the negative affect of stamping his feet, Guizzardi should have realized that banging his head against the wall would also be negatively received, but according to his logic, they simply did not understand his message the first time. He does the physical equivalent of saying something louder and more emphatically.

Despite his attempts to change his position in society, or more accurately, because of the misguided nature of his attempts, Guizzardi's condition becomes consistently worse as the story continues. The underlying pessimism of the novel is summed up by Guizzardi himself: "Come si dimostra ancora una volta vero l'antico detto che tutto

cambia nel mondo infame ma sempre in peggio mai in meglio e chi sa perché" (*AG* 152). In fact, he desperately wants to be understood by society, which is why he spends so much time searching for Signorina Frizzi. Not only does he remember her fondly because she was patient with him, but he also hopes that she will be able to teach him to use language properly. His desire to see her again often resurfaces directly after an unsuccessful attempt at communication; for example, shortly after being shouted at to speak Italian, he claims that "soprattutto la cosa è che appena assunto mi era sorto immediato il desiderio di riprendere le antiche lezioni di lingue estere con la mia insegnante" (*AG* 86). This comments suggests that, perhaps, if Guizzardi had experienced understanding and compassion, his situation may have improved, rather than worsened. Although many critics note Guizzardi's innocence, he is actually a maniacal product of a diseased society. Rather than addressing his problems, the other characters abuse and mistreat him, which causes him to become more dangerous. For example, towards the end of the novel, he robs, beats and possibly murders Piccioli's mother:

> [E] ripetutamente battevo fino che non andava in pezzi la sedia e il suo capo con quella. Anche lei crollava in guisa del marito a terra da finta morta. Così noi due dopo sempre ridendo contenti della vittoria ottenuta sui sozzi merciai tutto pigliavamo e fuori correvamo dalla stanza. Pieno di gioielli il mio amico nelle mani e nelle tasche che non sapeva neanche come reggerli. (*AG* 154-5)

He ignores her cries and glibly says that she is pretending to be dead, when in fact, after a severe beating, she may well actually be dead. Together with Piccioli, he runs away in a fit of maniacal laughter, pleased with their stolen goods and oblivious to any moral

implications of their actions. Guizzardi can be called innocent only in that he completely lacks normal human understanding.

3. Conclusion

At first, *Le avventure di Guizzardi* seems to share characteristics that Celati criticises in some neoavant-guarde literature: it relies on unique language, characters and situations that initially appear to preclude it from seeming to be anything other than an anomaly, self-referential and autotelic. In fact, however, Celati's interest in new theories of literature and, especially, his study of Bakhtin and Céline reveal his intellectual engagement with social issues, most specifically his preoccupation with in the way in which language determines one's treatment in society. In this work, Celati begins to employ a style based on the "oralized" written word, which evokes the physical voices and presence of the characters. He continues to develop this technique in his later work of the seventies, and deploys it consistently to create narratives that are easier to read texts, because they rely on more "ordinary" language and situations.

Guizzardi's madness manifests itself in his delirious rambling. He has little aptitude or ability to speak properly, using language in an idiosyncratic way that severely limits his ability to communicate linguistically. He does not completely lack the ability to communicate, as illustrated by his mastery of the language of flowers at the beginning of the novel, but he does need extra patience and understanding from those around him. However, he has trouble grasping some of the basic precepts of language, particularly its flexibility, as can be seen in his difficulty with names. Guizzardi constantly tries to communicate with other characters, as demonstrated by his desperate attempts to find his language instructor, Signorina Frizzi, so that he can learn to use language properly. He

attributes his eventual identity loss on not being called by his name, which highlights the disrespect with which he is treated during the majority of his social interactions. Much of the blame for Guizzardi's deterioration, it seems, lies with the callous and violent society whose disregard for Guizzardi exacerbates his madness. There is no justification for believing Guizzardi's howls at the end of the novel that he will no longer allow himself to be mistreated, since he has not gained any new skills over the course of the novel. If anything, he has been brutalized and become less able to deal with the world around him. Likewise, there is no question that Guizzardi is mad, but Celati seems to reiterate that society does a disservice by institutionalizing him and great wrong in not treating him with dignity and kindness. At the same time, the novel is, in the end, extremely ambiguous, in that it seems to offer no solutions towards escaping the oppressive world it presents or changing the society that produced Guizzardi in the first place.

Chapter 3

Negotiating body and language in *La banda dei sospiri*

Gianni Celati's novels from the 1970s reveal a constant tension between the visceral reactions of the characters and their attempts to use language. This tension is particularly evident in the 1976 novel *La banda dei sospiri*. In this work, Celati examines how language in general and literary language in particular can adequately and truthfully address our experience as beings whose lives are in many ways determined by our bodies. In an attempt to open up literary language, which he sees as having grown increasingly narrow and self-referential, he uses a complex, open narrative structure and further develops an "oralized" style influenced by his studies of Céline and Bahktin. Celati also uses comedy in order to create a more "participatory" type of literature that has a direct and tangible effect on its readers, in this case, getting them to laugh out loud. And finally, Celati strategically chooses to narrate the story from the perspective of a pubescent boy. Drawing on an understanding of adolescence gained during his years as a middle school teacher, Celati emphasizes his young narrator's body, his physical attributes, reactions, and the changes which he undergoes a this crucial stage of development.

Garibaldi, the narrator of *La banda dei sospiri*, struggles to cope with the changes to his body as he matures, and this struggle also determines his experiences of and his attitude toward language. Indeed, Celati's protagonist exhibits a distinct aversion and mistrust of language, preferring the more concrete reality of the body. He finds most oral and written communication counterproductive; and he often tries to express himself

physically. He must learn to control his body, rather than being controlled by it. And at the same time, he is trying to come to terms with language.

Celati contrasts Garibaldi's relationship with language to that of the other characters, his brother in particular. The latter romanticizes literature and wants to use language and cultural knowledge as a way of gaining social acceptance. Through the juxtaposition of the two brothers, Celati illustrates the falsity that underpins the traditional division of mental and physical life. Using Garibaldi's example, Celati's novel suggests that we can meaningfully and truthfully use language to discuss our experience and our perception of the world around us only if we adopt a body-centred perspective, an approach that recognizes the physical and bodily realities which are the foundation of our lives.

In the end, Celati's critique of literary language becomes the basis for a larger evaluation of the use of culture and education in society. Although his main focus is on language and literature, he also systematically addresses other forms of artistic expression, such as music and painting. Celati implies that without a basic education, upward mobility is not possible, but at the same time, the cultural knowledge that is valued by the bourgeoisie, such as the traditional "high-brow" arts, has little relevance to the life experience of the working class and is consequently of little interest to its members. People like Garibaldi and his family are alienated from the rest of society, their social position marked not only by their physical appearance but also by their speech and their cultural knowledge. He further suggests that the discourse surrounding the arts and, especially, contemporary developments in art, has become so removed from ordinary life, that it is in fact inaccessible to and meaningless for most ordinary people.

1. Stranger than (most) fiction: Celati's ordinary tale

La banda dei sospiri is the story of a working class family narrated in the first person from the perspective of Garibaldi, the younger son. Although it is much more easy to read than *Le avventure di Guizzardi* and uses a more sophisticated narrative structure, the later work is still far from being a traditional novel. It also uses a far from traditional literary style since it replicates the spoken language of a young boy. As Pia Schwartz Lausten points out, "[a]nche se la lingua è più controllata e il testo più facile da leggere, rimane un linguaggio sgrammaticato, gergale, visivo e corporeo" (115).

The novel has an open structure, made up of a series of more or less independent vignettes that build upon one another. There is a kind of mosaic effect, in that the bits and pieces of the different stories all fit together to form the whole picture. Although the individual episodes are not necessarily in chronological order and can generally stand on their own as self-contained stories, there is a general progression in time from the beginning to the end of the novel: Garibaldi is clearly older at the end than he is at the beginning, and has matured and grown as a character.

Garibaldi's style of narration mimics oral, informal storytelling. He constantly reminds the reader of past events and alludes to future ones. For example, when introducing his older brother, he qualifies his description on the basis of the knowledge of how their lives will be as adults:

> Io dico la verità che a questo fratello gli ho sempre scusato tutto perché lui è stato molto disgraziato nella vita, anche negli anni che seguono. Ma a

> quell'epoca il fratello credeva in cuor suo che sarei stato io nella vita ad essere disgraziato, mentre lui sarebbe stato celebre e fortunato. (*BS* 5)

Garibaldi also tends to get ahead of himself, giving away bits of information about future events at the end of some of the stories, saying things such as, "Questo però circa un anno dopo, non si confonda. Adesso bisogna raccontare quello che succedeva un po' prima" (*BS* 28). This constant reiteration of information, as well as a distinctive narrative voice that recalls spoken Italian, contribute to the novel's markedly "oral" quality.

The "oralized" language in *La banda dei sospiri* can be seen as an example of what Celati calls "spoken written word," which we first encountered in *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, and which has its roots in his study of Bahktin and Céline. This type of language requires the involvement of its reader. Rebecca West describes "oralized" language as language that is:

> spetacularized in the sense that our understanding of it requires an actual or imagined 'spectacle' made up of gestures, emotional intonations, pauses, emphases, and other nuances. This [...] kind of writing solicits a 'participatory' response akin to that which is stimulated by a theatrical representation. (187)

The goal of an author, then, is to get the readers to participate in the story on a higher cognitive level by depending less on description and more on tone, causing them actively to recreate and to imagine the "spectacle" that the author orchestrates. In fact, Celati's novel has an especially strong "participatory" dimension, because the use of "oralized" language is often designed to achieve an irrepressible comedic effect. By laughing aloud, the reader becomes physically involved and a more active participant in the spectacle, as

well as arguably more receptive to the story. The use of comedy also has a rhetorical function: it anticipates and tries to ensure a certain reaction to the situation. The reader is encouraged to reject or accept the character's opinions, but because the reaction is spontaneous and "natural," it represents a bodily "participation" which may appear more authentic than a "detached" rational judgment based on discursive, logical evaluation.

However, Celati constantly pushes his reader into an uncomfortable position as his comedy transgresses the bounds not only of taste but also of basic morality. For example, halfway through the novel Garibaldi is molested by the midwife, who is his upstairs neighbour. The narrator introduces the episode slowly and hesitantly, indicating that it was a traumatic experience, and, in fact, he later directly says that he found the situation frightening. However, the episode itself is narrated in the same humorous way he narrates all of the episodes. The emphasis is on his adolescent bewilderment, while the seriousness of the situation is completely glossed over. The description of the magical disappearance of the woman's underwear elucidates this point: "io mi mando la mia mano in cerca di giarrettiere su per le sottane, si è fatta sparire le mutande con un colpo di magia" (*BS* 137). In fact, he is much more interested in the garters than he is in sex. The ending of the episode is quite funny, as he steals the garters to show them to his friends:

> Appena è tornata la luce lei voleva fare ancore delle altre moine con me, però io ne avevo già avuto abbastanza di questi pericoli incorsi. Ho guardato in giro con gli occhi, scoprendo finalmente su una sedia appoggiate delle giarrettiere. Il predone nomade con un gesto svelto se le è intascate, poi è partito al galoppo via giù per le scale. (*BS* 138)

This episode can be seen as part of a larger dedication to a type of truthfulness or realism that is not willing to omit parts of human experience or shy away from bodily reality because they may be aesthetically or morally questionable. However, as a reader, I found myself in a difficult position. The humorous elements made me laugh, but I didn't want to condone the molestation of young boys by laughing. In fact, Celati can be seen as engaging his readers in a "real" way, on a physical level, and then asking them to re-evaluate their own response to the situation, and even the state of society. The comedic element allows Celati to open the discussion on otherwise unpalatable societal problems.

Instead of using markedly strange situations, characters and language as he does in his earlier novels, Celati emphasises the ordinary in *La banda dei sospiri*, and encourages the reader to see the problems that his characters encounter as part of everyday life. This strategy is designed to turn the novel into a more effective critique of contemporary Italian society. Celati himself describes the novel's structure as a kind of mimesis of daily reality, which acts as a counterpoint to traditional "monumental" fiction:

> C'è una grossa differenza rispetto ai romanzi monumentali che i grandi scrittori continuano a proporci, con le loro trame prestabilite, le loro acute interpretazioni della Storia. È che il racconto comune nasce dalla casualità e dalla ripetitività quotidiana, perciò non può essere portatore di grandi visioni tragiche o consolatorie. (from the back cover of 1972 version of *BS*)

Celati's opposition to traditional monumental novels is consistent with his ambition to empower the reader who cannot remain indifferent to the text and whose participation in the storytelling experience is elicited both at a visceral and at an intellectual level. The

reader laughs, but must also interpret. In the end, then, Celati's stance can be related to Umberto Eco's theory of the "open" work. Eco sees the contrast between the "open work" and traditional artistic forms as fundamentally subversive; the sense of estrangement from experiencing an "open" work can act as a catalyst for positive social and political change. In his study, Eco

> opposes this concept [of the open work] to the traditional closed work, which allows the reader or viewer far less choice in interpretation [....] adopting the proper attitude toward an open work has political and social ramifications: the open work denies conventional views of the world, replacing them with a sense of its discontinuity, disorder, and dissonance. Eco considers the alienation attendant on this realization as beneficial, since from this feeling of crisis, one may derive a new way of seeing, feeling, and understanding a social order in which traditional relationships have been shattered. (Parker)

Celati is clearly interested in emarginated characters and there is a transgressive aspect to his fiction. However, his attitude also indicates a distinct movement away from the neoavant-gardist goal of creating uncomfortable dissonance in order to generate radical societal change. In many ways Celati's position seems distinctly anti-radical. Rather than trying to create an overwhelming sense of alienation and existential crisis by denying conventional literary norms, Celati claims that he seeks to recreate the "racconto commune," in other words, the stories that people tell every day, ones that anyone can instantly recognize, understand and also see oneself in: "è proprio il racconto comune che conta, quello che potrebbero fare tutti, avendone voglia" (*BS* cover). Celati clearly shares

Eco's belief in the positive social change that can come from subversive literature. However, while for Eco the "open" work's main function is to perform and thus reveal the overwhelming alienation produced by modern bourgeois society, Celati hopes that his "open work" will evoke a sense of familiarity with and affinity for the story in his readers. This would then lead them to see the strangeness in what they normally take for granted. Celati asks us to re-evaluate what already exists, to value and to take seriously the kind of stories told everyday by ordinary people. Radical experimentalism removes a work from reality, creating a self-contained and self-referential world, and this, in turn, makes it easier to dismiss such "aesthetic" experience as having little to do with reality and social problems. In contrast, the very ordinariness of Celati's "racconto commune" makes it harder to dismiss the story as irrelevant and relegate the painful absurdities that the story reveals to the realm of "aesthetic" fantasies. Celati's novel proposes a subtler, but perhaps ultimately more effective, mode of subversion than works that are ostentatiously "alienating" or "transgressive."

2. Telling the truth about bodily reality

As in *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, names have a particular significance in *La banda dei sospiri*, albeit in a different way. In *La banda dei sospiri*, there is a direct correlation between the characters' names and their physical appearance or attributes. Thus, in a way, the body can be seen as acting as a kind of signifier, as Almansi points out, "l'operazione è ovviamente pop. L'arte pop livella lo scibile sociale e culturale, riducendo il sapere ad etichette, marchi di fabbrica, stereotipi coniati altrove ed usati tra virgolette" ("Letamaio di Babele" 58). Garibaldi explains that his name comes from his

constant movement, his tendency of erratically running from one place to another often without rhyme or reason. All the characters' names are derived from how they appear to Garibaldi. For example, he secretly calls his father Federico Barbarossa,

> per la furia scatenata di tutto distruggere e saccheggiare quando gli venivano i cinque minuti. A me faceva questa impressione, che lui era matto e poteva anche per esempio distruggere un armadio con la testa oppure correre giù per le scale e strozzare tutti gli inquilini del casamento (*BS* 8).

Of course, for all of his yelling and violent behaviour, Federico does not actually plunder their apartment building, but what matters is that the young narrator considers this within the realm of possibilities. Garibaldi's names for the other characters are also exaggerations and generalizations of their personal qualities, based on what he sees as their potential actions. And here a key difference between *Le avventure di Guizzardi* and *La banda dei sospiri* begins to emerge: while Guizzardi is entirely passive, Garibaldi takes an active role in naming, making his language correspond to his perception of the world around him. In *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, naming clearly seems to be an integral part of identity; however, the names do not necessarily have any meaning in and of themselves. In contrast, Garibaldi picks nicknames for people, and thus, he has immediate control over their characterization[6]. The names also have real significance, as they allude to more or less easily recognizable historical figures, film stars, authors, etc. Garibaldi relies on his understanding of popular culture and its models to make sense of

[6] An exception seems to be Garibaldi's brother, the only character that picks his own nicknames. His names come from different protagonists of Jules Verne novels that he reads, first "Michele Strogoff" from the homonymous novel, and later on "Captaino Nemo" from *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, depending on ~~how he wants to see himself. This power to dictate his own nickname to Garibaldi also corresponds to his~~ higher position in the family hierarchy.

his own situations. By using well-known cultural figures and types to label and categorize people, Garibaldi attempts to make the behaviour of others more knowable and predictable.

This use of cultural icons also can add glamour to Garibaldi's otherwise rather dreary daily life. Popular culture is not only accessible and available to Garibaldi and his peers, but also exciting and interesting. For example, he calls one of the seamstresses that work for his mother Veronica Lake because of her resemblance to the film noir actress, both physically and in her personality. She even acts like the characters portrayed on film by the real Veronica Lake, eventually becoming an accomplice to her brother's crimes and running off with a gambling friend of Garibaldi's father. Garibaldi makes it clear that he wants to hug the seamstress because of her similarity to the actress, "La mia bionda Veronica Lake mi sembrava la vera attrice di cinema e per questo volevo spesso abbraciarla in segno di riconoscenza" (*BS* 27). If she were just another pretty blonde seamstress, it would not be as exciting to see her. Garibaldi adds drama and significance to his all too prosaic world by populating it with celebrities.

Garibaldi's "passion" for the visual stimulation of Hollywood movies and for comic books (at the expense of literature) underscores his focus on the physical and bodily aspects of his existence over the mental ones. From the beginning, Garibaldi is essentially a small pubescent boy that has a pragmatic approach to his body and its functions, as well as to his personal hygiene. He often speaks about his body as if he were somehow detached from it and he had little control over it. For example, one of the characteristics that he mentions repeatedly is the fact that his feet smell—this causes some problems between him and his brother since they share a bedroom. As he explains,

"Io dovevo annusarmi i piedi certe volte e convenire che puzzano, ma non convengo però il resto che lui si inventa. E poi questi piedi mi puzzavano non per colpa loro ma per colpa delle scarpe di gomma che li facevano puzzare" (BS 4). Unlike his elder brother, Garibaldi sees certain bodily issues, like smells, as simply part of life and not something to worry about or give any attention to.

Despite this general nonchalant attitude towards his body, Garibaldi does feel ashamed of any changes that he sees in his body as he grows up, particularly those that indicate his sexual maturity. He finds theses changes startlingly rapid, as well as frightening, since they open up new possibilities to him. For example, he wakes up one day to find his mouth has changed, suddenly larger and somehow licentious:

> Una mattina svegliatomi mi guardo allo specchio e cosa vedo? Vedo che mi è spuntata una bocca larga come un forno, se la aprivo o ridevo. Io l'ho aperta e mi sono preso spavento, chiudendola in fretta. Tornavo a guardarmi allo specchio in punta di piedi per vedere se c'è un errore. Ma sempre giungendo davanti allo specchio mi prendo lo spavento, perché non c'è l'errore. [....] Cioè una faccia che prima era bella e seria, e una mattina è diventata scandalosa per via di quella bocca che si apre. (BS 139-40)

His mouth seems to have changed overnight, no longer even seeming to belong to his face. He thinks that these changes to his mouth make it seem indecent and something that needs to be hidden; in fact, he goes to school with a scarf pulled up over his mouth, pretending to have a toothache so that no one will see it. He is horrified and frightened to discover signs of his sexual maturity, and thinks that his newly sexualized mouth

resembles that of "certe signore molto pitturate e poco decenti, che si vede subito a cosa gli serve quella bocca" (*BS* 140). Sex is particularly threatening because he has these kinds of negative associations with it. He now sees in his face a new possibility, a way of connecting to other people that seems highly unwelcome and downright shameful. He thinks his mouth will be a physical signal to other people that he is ready to be thought of in a sexual way when he is still mentally a child. Thus it is not only that his body grows of its own accord, but also to some degree he has lost control of how his body appears to others.

We can now see that there is a clear contrast between the way Garibaldi deals with his smelly feet and his big mouth. His feet seem to have always smelled bad, it is not his fault, and he does not feel ashamed of them. Furthermore, they do not in any way make him part of a larger social world. If anything, his stinky feet drive people away, often literally, as with his brother. The difference between how Garibaldi feels about his feet versus how he feels about his mouth seems is due to the sexual connotation given to the later body part but not the former. It is also related to his sense of estrangement from his body and its uncontrolled change as he undergoes puberty. His mouth has not just grown larger, as his entire body has over the course of his childhood, but also acquired a new function. Notably, Garibaldi decides to stop speaking for a while because of his "obscene" mouth, which is actually kind of a literalization of something that previously was only metaphorically true, since the only verbal communication that Garibaldi prides himself on his ability to swear like is father. He excels in saying expletives, notably one of the least informative and least communicative forms of speech, which generally

function as a way of distancing other people. When he sees that his mouth could possibly bring him closer to others through sex, he tries to stop using it entirely.

Garibaldi's physical reactions to the world are not always under his control, particularly at the beginning of the novel. At times, his body seems to control him more than he controls it. He often has a physical response to his environment and situations, rather than a contained, discursive one. For example, his father's shouting and arguments send him running to the toilet, as he explains: "Io che non c'entro niente ed ero piccolino, sempre capitare in mezzo a queste sarabande di urli. Urlava tanto questo mio padre che io dovevo scappare al gabinetto per il bisogno urgente di corpo che mi faceva venire con le sue sgridate" (*BS* 7). His bodily response is not only overwhelmingly negative, but it also anticipates any intellectual response he may have; it is as if he thinks and feels with his body rather than with his mind. This type of bodily response not only occurs in situations of emotional distress, but also when he encounters elements of higher culture, such as classical music. Listening to a rich friend's classical music record affects him so negatively that he has diarrhoea for three days, and when the same friend tries to speak to him in a refined way, it also gives him a stomach-ache, as he explains: "pretendeva di stare a far conversazione con me come fanno i grandi, dicendosi tante cose. Anche questo mi fa venire il mal di pancia, ma un po' di meno"(*BS* 67).

It seems that Garibaldi's initial aversion to discourse, and to anything beyond of his physical world, comes directly from his body. Celati can be seen as reversing a normal process: Garibaldi's mind tends to agree with his body, rather than his body agreeing with his mind. In fact, Garibaldi's physical reactions can also be seen as

another literalization or physical manifestation of a metaphor: when Garibaldi says that classical music makes him sick, he literally means that it gives him diarrhoea.

Moreover, Garibaldi also purposefully shows his disapproval of others though his body, using it as a form of communication, or at least as a way of stopping others from communicating. When the police are questioning his parents about the illegal activities of Veronica Lake and her brother Alan Ladd, Garibaldi tries to use his body to make them stop talking, rather than asserting his voice:

> [S]econdo me questa era una menzogna di quei due portatori di disgrazie per spaventare la povera gente, e non c'è da crederci. Dunque io mi sono messo a fare scoregge per la casa, per smentirli delle loro menzogne....Il padre e la madre qui mi hanno sentito restando un po' confusi a quei botti nell'altra stanza. (*BS* 198-9)

Garibaldi has good reason for wanting the police to get out of his house, but he cannot effectively do anything about it. In Garibaldi's mind, if he can get them to just stop talking, the problem is mostly solved. He recognizes that others do not necessarily understand his purpose for doing what he is doing, and in fact, he notices that his parents are understandably confused, but it is the best he can do to change the situation. As a young boy, he has little recourse and no real voice, and so he tries a different course of action. Garibaldi instinctively recognizes that despite all the importance given to language, people cannot really ignore their physical reality and discomfort.

The contrast between the body and action, on the one hand, and the intellect and verbalization, on the other hand, is most clearly dramatized in the characterization of Garibaldi and his elder brother. The siblings are essentially two sides of the same coin.

While Garibaldi is active, mostly silent and quasi-illiterate, his brother is constantly lounging around in the attic, intellectualizing, talking and reading. In the simplest sense, Garibaldi represents the physical side, while his brother represents the contemplative. However, this distinction is based on a type of fiction, since his brother has a body as well; he just wants to be able to ignore it. The older "intellectual" brother wants to pretend his body doesn't exist, or at least believes that it should not be noticeable in any way. Yet at the same time, he seems almost obsessed with sex, constantly trying to get his hands on the sexy Veronica Lake. Garibaldi clearly has little patience or use for his brother's way of thinking, since it can be so easily disturbed by physical reality, as he notes: "Ecco come sono questi pensatori con tante idee nel cervello, che non riescono neanche a sopportare una piccola puzza" (*BS* 5). Ignoring bodily reality does not in any way make it go away, but only means acting out a kind of hypocritical pretence.

The falsity of this traditional contraposition of intellect and the body is further underscored by the fact that Garibaldi's brother is not even really an intellectual; the novels he seems truly interested in are all pop fiction adventure novels, such as the ones authored by Jules Verne. The family sends him to high school so he can have more opportunities in life, "il padre Federico l'aveva mandato a studiare al liceo perché cosí pensava che un giorno suo figlio non doveva più patire tutte le sue sofferenze come servo dei padroni, avendo avuto l'istruzione neccessaria dei figli dei ricchi per far fortuna" (*BS* 36). This passage establishes a clear link between education and material success, as well as between intellectualism and social promotion. When Garibaldi's brother develops, as a result of his schooling, an appreciation for the Romantic poets and proceeds to imagine that his attic is a club for English lords, Garibaldi shows very little patience for his

brother's affected melancholic pining. While his brother embraces literature, whether high or low, as a form of escape, Garibaldi rejects literature as the representation of an unobtainable and unrealistic fantasy that has nothing to do with contemporary life.

In fact, for most of the novel, Garibaldi refuses to read and often refuses to speak. His elder brother tries to take on the role of instructing Garibaldi, to cure him of his ignorance, as he calls it, despite his adamant refusals. For example, while Garibaldi recovers from an illness: "durante la mia malattia lui si era messo in testa di farmi leggere i suoi libri impossibili mentre sto a letto, ma io li rifiutavo tirandoli per terra" (*BS* 150). Eventually, in an attempt to get him to read anything at all, his brother brings him comic books, which he enjoys looking through, although he still obstinately refuses to read: "allora il fratello per farmi leggere qualcosa e diventare meno ignorante ha cominciato a portarmi qualche albo di fumetti. Io guardavo di gusto senza leggere lo scritto" (*BS* 150). In fact, it is only after his brother leaves him alone that Garibaldi decides to read at all, instead of only looking at the pictures, since, as he explains, "io lo mando a quel paese quel fratello, perché leggo se mi pare" (*BS* 150), but he will not do it to please his brother or anybody else. In essence, Garibaldi only wants to use language on his own terms. After only looking at the pictures for quite some time his curiosity does eventually get the better of him and he begins to read the words, which seem to him closer to reality than the words in his brother's books, "dopo mi veniva la curiosità di leggerlo il fumetto che esce dalla bocca di un eroe di avventure fantastiche, e mi sembravano parole meno inverosimili di quelle dette nei libri" (*BS* 150). Garibaldi's comment makes it clear that his dislike of most written language, and in particular literary language, is based on the observation that such discourse bears no resemblance to the way in which he himself and

everyone he knows speak, and thus seems fundamentally "unlikely" and unrealistic. High-brow literature, especially the poetry studied in school, is so utterly incomprehensible and seems to have so little relationship to reality that Garibaldi finds it funny. His teacher and his lessons seem arcane and ridiculous:

> [Il maestro] ci impartiva lezioni scolastiche volendo farci leggere tante poesie che a noi non ci interessano. Il pelatone aveva quella mania, pretendeva che noi studiamo a memoria poesie che non si capiva un'acca cosa dicevano, cioé cose inverosimili dette con parole anche più inverosimili. Al pelatone gli piacevano tanto queste cose che andava in sollucchero a leggerle forte in classe, facendo gesti delle braccia come se volesse acchiappare una mosca. E ci spiegava che erano cose scritte da grandi poeti riconosciuti come celebrità della nazione. Secondo noi questi poeti dovevano essere mezzi scemi a parlare in quel modo che non si capisce niente e fa ridere moltissimo a sentirli. (*BS* 54)

Celati repeatedly points to the absurdity of literature and literary tropes through Garibaldi's perspective. Conversely, the comic books begin to reconcile him with written language, since he sees that it can, in fact, be used in a way that reflects his interests and his understanding of the world. The pictures in the comic books also can be seen as a bridge between word and the physical world. In a way, this is not unlike his earlier enthusiasm for Hollywood movies, in that they occupy a liminal medium zone in which the body and language are both crucial to communication.

Garibaldi is inherently suspicious of language not only because it is something forced upon him in school, via the "incomprehensible" poems of Carducci and Leopardi,

and at home by his brother, but also because of its malleability. Garibaldi's fundamental problem with language and the reason he often prefers the tangible reality of the body is that language can be manipulated and people do not necessarily always tell the truth. This is why Garibaldi feels it necessary to state unequivocally that the reason he is telling his story is to say the whole truth, to narrate what really happened, not what he would have liked to have happened:

> queste cose me le ricordo abbastanza bene siccome vicine e non lontane nella memoria, e le voglio descrivere come sono successe. Sono successe come dico io e non come dicono gli altri meno propensi alla verità dei fatti e più propensi alle fantasie dei romanzi. (*BS* 199)

At last, then, the protagonist of *La banda dei sospiri* manages to overcome his aversion to language, and even narrate the novel we are reading, while his "intellectual" brother proves himself incapable not only of dealing with reality but also of writing an authentic novel. Garibaldi's brother spends hours upon hours writing pages that he eventually tears up out of a despondent self-consciousness, which he believes to be consonant to his impersonation of a depressive English lord. The inauthenticity of Garibaldi's brother contrasts sharply with his own position; Garibaldi stresses that the truth cannot be told by ignoring the aspects of life you may find unpleasant or aesthetically distasteful, such as the problems that come with having a body. He shows that in order to use language properly, it has to be done truthfully and meaningfully, without eliminating or ignoring the most fundamental parts of existence. However, at the end of the novel, Garibaldi and his brother reconcile after all the fighting. They escape on a tram and go out into the world together:

> Io non so dove volesse correre ma gli andavo dietro chiedendo: dove andiamo? Lui correndo rispondeva: vieni e vedrai. Chi lo sa cosa c'era da vedere ed ero curioso di saperlo. Così quando lui salta su quel tram, ci sono saltato anch'io con un balzo acrobatico. (*BS* 222)

The resolution of the fight between Garibaldi and his brother, and his subsequent "magic leap" onto the tram, symbolizes the increased possibilities that open up when the two different perspectives, bodily and intellectual, are no longer pitted against one another. Garibaldi not only manages to come to terms with his brother, with language and intellect, but this allows him more opportunities than he had alone.

Although Garibaldi finds a possible solution to his issues with language, the novel seems less optimistic about the possibility of collective solutions. Celati insists on the impediments that all the members of Garibaldi's family encounter as they try to improve their social condition without an adequate education. They find themselves in a bind: in many ways, high culture does not seem relevant to their lives, yet at the same time, upper mobility is not possible if they cannot master that kind of cultural knowledge. Although Garibaldi, his family and friends seem to have an extensive knowledge of popular culture, Celati often depicts high culture (the fine arts, music, poetry and literature), as something foreign and inaccessible to them. Culture, in the narrow and more traditional sense, seems to be mostly the realm of the "rich," that is, anyone in a higher social position than Garibaldi, his family and his community. The rich children at school are academically much more advanced than Garibaldi and his friends; they speak differently and cultural knowledge comes more easily to them because they have advantages that the other children do not have. As Garibaldi explains, "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 presto da piccolo, cosí appena si allungano un po' sanno già parlare come dei professori" (*BS* 67). They even understand poetry, without seeming to find it absurd and laughable as Garibaldi and his friends do: "i ricchi studiavano a memoria senza ridere le poesie inverosimili del maestro" (*BS* 65). Garibaldi recognises that the differences are a result of training, rather than any kind of innate superiority, although these clear differences between rich and poor have a real effect on social interaction. Socio-economic lines are clearly demarcated by the ability to properly interpret cultural artefacts and the way one interacts with other people. Garibaldi and his friends, at best, treat their rich classmates with suspicion. He notes: "secondo me c'era poco da fidarsi di loro, perché ti sorridono davanti e poi ti fregano di dietro" (*BS* 67).

While Garibaldi has clearly internalized and is capable of replaying popular cultural narratives (for example, how the story of Veronica Lake and Alan Ladd becomes like one of their film noir thrillers), a fundamental lack of understanding of high culture and bourgeois social conventions constantly causes problems for him and his family. For example, Garibaldi's father befriends an "artist" that has moved into the family's apartment building by pretending to know about art, a subject which baffles the rest of the family:

> Nell'appartamento lasciato libero da questi inquilini è venuto ad abitarci un artista pittore. Il quale a differenza degli altri inquilini ha accettato di fare amicizia col padre Federico. Questo perché Federico ha fatto con lui le finte di conoscere di preciso cos'è l'arte, e il pittore è rimasto contento. Il pittore era uno con la barbetta e aveva una moglie sua concubina, come

> si usava tra i pittori. Lui dipingeva sempre lei nuda, poi vendendo questi quadri scandalosi con la moglie spogliata. Io mi stupivo di questo fatto. Però non sapevo mica a quei tempi cos'è l'arte, che non ne avevo mai sentito parlare. (*BS* 40-1)

By pretending to know "cos'è l'arte," Federico establishes himself as an insider with a kind of special understanding and sensitivity, thus the apparently pornographic nature of the paintings can be neatly sidestepped by labelling them "art." He goes on to buy a pair of the artist's paintings of his naked wife, and hangs them on the wall, to the family's shame. His conviction that he has found the work of a great artist leads him to try to go into business selling his neighbour's paintings. Federico's inability to realize that the artist's paintings are not, in fact, Art, but simply "quadri scandalosi" is due to a misunderstanding of what causes something to be art in the contemporary world. It should be noted that Federico professes a traditional, basically Aristotelian and therefore mimetic understanding of art and beauty, which entails that the artistic value of a representation depends on the nobility of its subject. Federico is convinced that naked women are the most beautiful things on earth, so paintings of naked women are therefore the best art, as he tries to explain to the art dealer, "si è messo a dire che i suoi quadri erano sí belli, ma non belli come i nostri perché l'arte che c'è nella donna nuda è insuperabile" (*BS* 44). Although simplified, his argument is legitimate according to straightforward traditional principles. However, he is not capable of making his argument in a sophisticated and "learned" manner, which allows the art dealer to simply dismiss him as ignorant. His lack of sophistication actually hurts his entire family, since it gets back to his office that he tried to sell dirty pictures to one of their clients and they

fine him. This is not an isolated instance. Federico rarely manages to behave properly in society, and because of this, he is always unsuccessful; as Garibaldi sums it up, "Il padre nostro è sempre stato molto sfortunato in affari" (*BS* 45). Through the misfortunes of the family, Celati seems to be underlining the difficulties in trying to succeed and to improve one's situation in life when there has not truly been an opportunity to learn how people behave in higher social spheres.

Conclusions

In *La banda dei sospiri*, Celati seems to suggest that progress is possible, so long as it is based on compromise, mutual understanding and inclusiveness. Unlike *Le avventure di* Guizzardi, in which the protagonist's situation only worsens, Garibaldi has learned to overcome his aversion to language and to intellectual matters, and because of that, there is the promise of new possibilities in his future. The open structure and the "oralized" language of the novel can be seen as an experiment in how to open up literature without patronizing the lower classes or forgetting about them entirely. Through the dynamic between Garibaldi and his brother, Celati indicates that authentic, truthful and meaningful literature cannot be written without an approach that recognizes the importance of the body to human experience. The body changes and reacts of its own volition, and although we can deny or ignore our bodies in words, in reality we have little choice but to deal with what we are presented. For Garibaldi, the question of fiction and lies can be resolved if the discussion is based firmly in the concrete reality of the body and bodily experience. Despite the fact that one's perception and understanding may be incomplete, as is Garibaldi's, a body-centered story still manages to be true, since it is

grounded in an authentic experience that does not purposefully and hypocritically cancel out the distasteful elements of human existence. By agreeing to follow his brother onto the tram, Garibaldi symbolically opens himself up to opportunity; body and mind are no longer pitted against one another, and then he can make a "magic" leap into a future rich with possibility.

At the same time, Celati suggests that there cannot be any social justice without mutual understanding, and more specifically, as long as the lower classes cannot participate in social discourse because of the way in which they express themselves, as in the case of Garibaldi's father. The upper classes, and particularly intellectuals, have a responsibility to question the value of "their" culture. Education seems to be a viable way to loosen the barriers between social classes and increase social mobility, although the process is not simple or easy because it involves not simply acquiring a culture from which one has been excluded, but also, and somewhat paradoxically, to free oneself from it, i.e., holding on to the little that is useful and discarding the rest. The arts initially seem foreign and incomprehensible to Garibaldi, but he does eventually come to terms with these forms of expression, as he learns to read and goes to school, even if it is often against his will. Upper mobility is actually impossible without learning certain ways of looking at the world, and in fact, like Garibaldi's father, one can be punished for not knowing any better. Celati seems to be asking for a re-evaluation of how culture is used to disenfranchise the lower classes; much in the same way that he asks that ordinary stories be valued, he asks that their way of looking at the world and their culture be respected. In fact, one is not possible without the other. And such recognition is not only

the basis for social mobility but, more importantly, provides the foundations for a more just world.

Chapter 4

Lunario del paradiso and the value of storytelling

In his final novel of the 1970s, *Lunario del paradiso*[7], Celati seems to shift his interest from the problems of literary representation and the perspective of the reader, towards the problems of narration and the perspective of the writer. At first, he seems to question the very conclusions he draws in his previous novel, *La banda dei sospiri.* As we have seen, in the earlier work Celati suggests that the falsity of literary representation can be overcome by writing "truthful" fiction that includes all the "low" aspects of life, such as the body and its functions, aspects normally excluded in high literary culture (especially within the Italian literary tradition). In *La banda dei sospiri,* Garibaldi overcomes his aversion to language, learning to appreciate certain types of writing, discovering his ability to use language in a truthful way and narrate his own story. In seeming contrast to the hopeful conclusion, Celati casts doubt, in *Lunario del paradiso,* on the very possibility of truthful literary representation and focuses on the artifice of writing. He draws attention to the fact that one's perception of events or people shifts with time and with the actual act of writing, thus suggesting that any type of structured narrative is itself fundamentally artificial and inherently subjective. In the end, however, it becomes clear that Celati is not contradicting his earlier stance, but actually expanding it. He suggests that "truth" in fiction can be found in the search for subjective truthfulness and an underlying principle of honesty that drives creation. In this way Garibaldi's solution in *La banda dei sospiri* can be seen as an example of the subjective truthfulness that in Celati's view can and ought to be the foundation of literature.

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[7] As mentioned previously, Celati substantially rewrote this novel for the 1989 edition in *Parlamenti Buffi.*

One of the most striking differences between *Lunario del paradiso* and the two earlier novels examined in this study is that the protagonist's difficulty with language has evolved. Unlike Guizzardi in *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, Giovanni, the narrator of *Lunario del paradiso*, has a firm grasp of his own language, and unlike Garibaldi in *La banda dei sospiri*, he is not fundamentally distrustful of language. Giovanni's communication problems derive from "external" circumstances, namely, the struggle to learn foreign languages and the difficulties inherent in all the languages he uses (for example, as we shall see, Italian is indicted as a "false" language). Language affects not only Giovanni's perceptions but also his ability to interpret what he sees, and this dynamic provides us with the vehicle for Celati's exploration of the ways in which language shapes culture.

The apparent disillusionment which characterizes the original version of *Lunario del paradiso* can be seen as reflecting a larger shift in attitudes across Italy between the mid to late 1970s, when civil and political unrest intensified and the Red Brigades began their terrorist activities. The enthusiasm and belief in the possibility of progress and change evident in the earlier part of the decade had given way to frustration at the slowness of reforms, anger at the inertia of traditional parties and eventually despair at the resilience of a corrupt system. However, despite his more negative overall attitude and his difficulties in telling his story, the narrator of *Lunario del paradiso* suggests in the end that, through writing, one can gain a new and positive perspective on one's own life. Despite its shortcomings, narrative still enriches Giovanni's experience and his understanding of the world around him. In fact, the narrator, and, through him, Celati,

ultimately suggest that writing can provide the individual with a certain privileged position of understanding that is denied to those who do not write.

1. Community and truthfulness: the principles behind Celati's meta-narrative

On one level, *Lunario del paradiso* represents a "normalization" of the experimental thrust of the previous two novels. The narrative style remains colloquial, but is less idiosyncratic. Giovanni, the protagonist of *Lunario del paradiso*, seems to be an older and better-socialized version of Garibaldi, the protagonist of *La banda dei sospiri*. The structure of the main plot in *Lunario del paradiso* is relatively traditional and easily recognizable. Events are presented in chronological order; they are narrated retrospectively in the first person from a clearly defined time and place. The narrator jokes about the "sentimental" nature of his story and seems to be overtly aware of its traditional structure. The novel is identifiable as a *Bildungsroman*, a classic story of formation, albeit a parodic and self-conscious one[8]. The narrator, Giovanni, wants to tell the story of his youthful adventures in Germany during the 1960s, a formative period in his life that he is still struggling to put into perspective. For most of the novel, the adult voice disappears and the story is narrated through the perspective of the young student, replicating the type of exuberant, but intellectually imprecise, student discourse of the time (the narrator refers to himself as having had "idee poco chiare," and for good reason). The young student matures and changes over the course of the novel, which culminates in a kind of loss of innocence. Initially, he goes to Germany as part of a grand romantic project to see more of the world and find Antje, a girl that he met while she was

[8] Pia Schwartz Lausten in her article "L'abbandono del soggetto: un'analisi del soggetto narrato e quello narrante nell'opera di Gianni Celati" briefly discusses all three of these novels as parodies of the *Bildungsroman*.

on vacation in Italy. He not only hopes that Antje will be his "grande amore," but also that he will find a better life in Germany, a modern and more advanced country than Italy. Falling for a popular myth of the time, he imagines that everything abroad will be different and better, that he will find a place where dreams come true. Young Giovanni does not take into consideration the more practical problems, such as the fact that he does not speak a word of German. By the end of the novel, however, he learns to recognize his misconceptions and his fantasies for what they are, and to develop a more mature outlook on the world, no longer allowing himself to be blinded by the romantic ideals and expectations that brought him to Germany in the first place.

This "normalization," however, affects the surface more than the essence of the narrative. One of the elements which lend to *Lunario del paradiso* a distinctive flavour is Celati's extensive use of meta-narrative techniques, a strategy facilitated by his creation of a highly self-conscious narrator[9]. Although Garibaldi in *La banda dei sospiri* does openly discuss his problems with language and literature, he does not address specifically the act of writing itself, as Giovanni does. Indeed, the narrator of *Lunario del paradiso* talks incessantly about the difficulties he encounters in writing the very novel which we

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[9] First published in 1978, *Lunario del paradiso* is generally considered the last work of Celati's "early" period, which is characterized by experimentalism and a strong emphasis on the role of literature, and, particularly by their rather self-conscious attention to language. After this novel, Celati actually stops writing fiction for several years. He re-wrote *Lunario del paradiso* in the early nineties, claiming to never have felt entirely satisfied with his 1970's version of the text:

> Alcune figure e fantasie di quel viaggio [in Germania] sono tornate a me moltissimi anni dopo, come un sogno a puntate durato un mese [....] Non bisognava buttare via i sogni solo perché non si è riusciti a raccontarli bene; altrimenti si diventano dei frustrati che disprezzano tutto. Bisogna curarli finché trovano le loro parole adatte, la loro aureola. (Celati *LP* 1996, back cover)

The nineties version of the novel is, unsurprisingly, closer to his other works of that period than to his 1970's novels. One of the most striking differences between the two texts is that Celati removes a large part of the original novel's meta-narrative, which he now finds pretentious and meaningless "manierismo," a judgement that many critics seem to have shared. My goal in drawing attention to this fact, is not to compare or judge the respective merits of either novel, or to decide whether this type of self-conscious ~~writing is pretentious or narcissistic, as Celati himself later claims, but rather to point out that it does have a~~ serious objective within the original novel's discourse on language, literature and narrative.

are reading: he describes his typewriter, the specific details given about the time and space of narration in the novel's frame, etc. One of the functions of the meta-narrative of *Lunario del paradiso* is to create a stronger rapport between the narrator and his public. This goal manifests an underlying philosophy of openness and community, which is underscored by the second chapter of the novel. In this chapter, the narrator thanks all those that made the novel possible, as can be seen in this excerpt:

> Ringraziamenti a mio fratello Gabriele che mi ha mantenuto per un bel po', e mai fatto una grinza, un muso. Ringraziamenti a quelli che hanno voluto sentirla raccontata questa storia, ed è così che mi è tornata in mente; tra gli altri, Roberto Freak Antoni, [...] Leonardo Giuliano, altri. Ringraziamenti a Lino Gabellone, [...]Roberta Maccagni, altri che hanno capito che è una storia intima poetica alla grande. Ringraziamenti ad Anita che è mia moglie e non sopporta le storie intime poetiche... (*LP* 9)

The long list of dedications, inserted in the middle of a chapter, creates a strong link between the narrator and his imagined public, a rather, his professed audience. In this context, the narrator seems to speak as the author, and the novel seems addressed to a small group of Celati's own friends. There is a sense of community, real and intellectual, that contributed to its creation. Evidence in support of Celati's growing interest in fostering an open and collaborative intellectual community can be found in the author's biography. As he was writing *Lunario del paradiso*, Celati also worked on a communal project with his students from DAMS at Bologna, which resulted in the 1978 publication of a series of essays entitled *Alice disambientata: materiali collettivi (su Alice per sopravvivenza)*.

Furthermore, this odd diegetic dedication allows Celati to remind us of the material and practical context within which the act of writing can take place, and to point out that a book can only be written if someone supports the author and helps him to meet basic needs. More broadly, Celati asserts that literature itself can thus be seen as a product of collective labour, drawing on the works that came before it and made possible through the support of others. As the narrator notes later on, *Lunario del paradiso* is a fundamentally intimate novel. It is intended for a small community of readers who will receive entertainment in compensation: "loro hanno detto: va bene, ma dopo ci racconti tutte le tue avventure così godiamo anche noi. Ho accettato" (*LP* 8). Thus Celati presents literature as a fundamentally social activity. In his view, far from being a transcendental or romantic activity carried out by the individual literary artist illuminated by genius, literature is storytelling, an activity based on community, both a communal effort and a collectively shared pleasure.

Metanarrative discourse draws attention to the writing process and in this way establishes an ironic distance between the text and the literary conventions that underlie its composition. This ironic distance shatters the mimetic illusion and exposes the "artificial" nature of the creative process, as well as its inherent incompleteness. A narrative is a highly constructed object which has no "natural" ending but only a constructed, artificial, and arbitrary closure. In *Lunario del paradiso*, when the narrator explains repeatedly exactly where and when he is writing, he emphasizes the changes the texts undergoes, the editing and rewriting, and the difficulties he has as he tries to properly narrate the story. He begins the second chapter by announcing that it originally

was the beginning of the novel, but that he had to change it because of events in his life that altered not only the story, but also himself:

> Ah, vi avverto che questo è l'inizio che avevo scritto l'anno scorso, prima di mettermi a raccontarla in giro a tutti questa storia; poi sono successe tante cose che hanno cambiato parecchio l'anda del racconto e anche del raccontatore; e vedrete come cambia, se succedono delle storie nella di lui o di lei vita! (*LP* 7)

Thus, the narrative process depends on the perspective and the condition of the storyteller, both of which change over the course of narrating the story. Therefore there is never a "perfect" version; everything is always in a state of flux. Giovanni says that he would have to let his typewriter tell the stories in order for it to be a "true" novel, that is, one in the realist tradition that values "objectivity": "ci vuole un po' di tempo per cominciare sul serio e lasciar andare avanti da sola questa macchina da scrivere; che lei sa le storie e può dirvi tutto fedelmente come in un vero romanzo" (*LP* 16). While statements like this one highlight that emotional ties to the story inhibit the ability to render it objectively, they also question the value of objectivity, suggesting that such "objectivity" would eliminate any actual human involvement in the narrative.

In the end, "truth" perhaps lies more in subjective truthfulness, and the ethical imperative of honesty that underpins the notion of truthfulness, than in blank objectivity. That is why the narrator obsessively documents when he started, reviewed and re-edited his novel. As Giovanni explains, he began to write parts of the story in 1977, "in casa di Carlo Gijani, via Farini 29, Bologna" (*LP* 31), he rewrote it in 1978, "adesso che la ribatto siamo in marzo, anno 1978" (184) and he finishes it "a Bologna, piazza Pace 8,

casa dei miei genitori morti da un pezzo" (184). The rewrite takes him a month, from March to April 1978. This suggests a neat organic, natural cycle that seems to lie in stark contrast with the falsity of artificial literary construction. Indeed, the title *Lunario del paradiso* actually alludes to the lunar month that it takes to rewrite his story. During this period, Giovanni seems to fall under the influence of the moon, which is traditionally linked to madness and irrationality, and, as a matter of fact, the novel relates a period in the narrator's life in which he felt strange and unable to perceive life in a normal way. There is, then, an "atmospheric" symmetry between the time of the tale and the time of the telling, which is conducive to the proper writing of the story. The narrator draws attention to this "natural" consonance and suggests that his ability to write the story depends on the sky and particularly on the moon. Moreover, perhaps this consonance must also extend to the readers and their activity, since the narrator repeatedly warns his reader to pay attention to the signs he gives of the sky's condition: "Attenti ai segni del cielo che sono tanti e vengono giù con le lune; avrete occasione di imparare a riconoscerli, se leggerete quel che segue con moderata umiltà. Se siete dei miscredenti, andate pure a farvi fottere e diamoci un taglio" (*LP* 31). The story is open, then, not only to the flux of the narrator's subjective time, but also to the flux of the reader's subjectivity—successful communication seems more and more dependent on a miracle! Both the narrator and the reader need to have an attitude of reciprocal openness in order for it to take place, and while this is not impossible, it also depends on a number of factors that are often beyond our control. The narrator wants to be understood by his reader, but can do nothing to ensure the success of their dialogue, beyond warning his reader of the fragility of the process. Celati seems to have accepted the irreducible

uncertainty that accompanies the literary experience. Successful communication between narrator and reader can never be wholly predetermined, and yet, like life itself, the delicate nature of storytelling makes it all the more precious.

2. Giovanni's quest: growing up to find obtainable desires

Giovanni has trouble communicating with other characters because he does not speak German well, nor does he understand German customs. While he is trying to learn German, Giovanni (or "Ciofanni" as Sgt. Schumacher calls him) must always find a lingua franca (Italian, English, or French) in order to communicate, which is not always possible. The linguistic situation almost always becomes extremely complicated, even for what should be the simplest of communication. While in both *Le avventure di Guizzardi* and *La banda dei sospiri*, the protagonists distrust language as somehow inherently misleading, Giovanni's struggle to communicate in *Lunario del paradiso* seems at first a more practical problem. For example, in the first scene, the "mysterious bicyclist" attacks him for not responding properly to whatever it is that he says to him. As he explains, since he does not understand the local language and customs, he has no idea what the cyclist could possibly want from him: "Non mi faceva mica paura questo qui, solo che non capisco. Appena arrivato, lingua estera, le parole ostrogote, ma che cazzo vuole da me? Già, che cosa voleva?" (*LP* 3). Without a common language, he finds the entire exchange mystifying and the cyclist's actions inexplicable. Giovanni has no way to know why the cyclist hits him or how to avoid a similar situation in the future. The situation is reminiscent of the problems that arise from Guizzardi's linguistic incompetence in *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, since without a way to communicate, the

other characters do whatever they please to him, even resorting to physical assault to get their point across. However, in *Lunario del paradiso* the emphasis is less on the protagonist's eccentricities and more on the incomprehensibility of a "normal," prosaic, everyday world.

As the novel progresses, Giovanni's understanding of language and of the nuances of language acquisition evolves. Upon arrival, the protagonist already has a relatively high degree of linguistic competence: he says he speaks English well and knows a little French, although he has never before spent time abroad. However, as Giovanni spends more time in Germany, he notices that his attitude toward language is changing and becoming more complex. Little by little, he begins to identify himself as a language student. He spends his time learning German from a grammar book written for Germans trying to learn Italian ("cioè al contrario," as he puts it) and keeps asking questions to his love-interest Antje, who "sapeva le parole più interessanti d'ogni lingua" (*LP* 20). Eventually, he gains an appreciation of language in general and an insatiable desire to learn more, as he explains, "volevo imparare, io volevo imparare molte parole, anzi tutte" (*LP* 22), whereas before coming abroad, language was never a subject to which he gave much thought, "mai pensato prima di partire che dovevo venire qui a studiare come si parla" (*LP* 20).

Still, Giovanni's interest in language is bound to his affections for Antje and his eagerness to learn German waxes and wanes depending on how he feels about the progress of his relationship with her. When he tries to make the transition from learning words to having meaningful conversation with his beloved, Giovanni finds it very difficult and realizes that it is only once they get beyond the words themselves that they

actually communicate. But then he discovers that they have nothing to talk about. Not only can she not talk about politics, but also she likes American rock music that he does not recognize and films that he has never heard of. Conversely, she has never heard of his favorite actor, the famous Hollywood Western star, Gary Cooper. As he puts it: "Parlare di politica, guai! Parlare di film? Lei mi diceva dei film mai sentiti, e non ha mai sentito il nome di Gary Cooper. È un po' troppo, l'ignoranza" (*LP* 24). In fact, they never seem to have much in common, which was not really a problem until they actually could have real conversations.

It is telling that Giovanni finds it particularly difficult to use German in emotional situations, as he explains: "quando mi viene la malinconia io non parlo, mugugno; ma mugugnare in lingua estera, qui sta il dificile. Questa Gisela gentile con la faccia da attrice non ci capiva niente del mio mugugno; credeva che parlo una lingua sconosciuta" (*LP* 53). The problem is not so much a lack of vocabulary, but rather expression, i.e., the organization of meaning. As in his relationship with Antje, Giovanni slowly comes to realize that the obstacle is not what he originally thought. With Antje, the issue was less the less the lack of a shared idiom than the absence of a real affinity. With Gisela, the obstacle is not the words, but rather, a lack of shared cultural practices. Giovanni finally begins to understand that fluency in language does not merely involve the accumulation of an interesting vocabulary, but rather, it is a much more complex phenomenon encompassing a wide range of communicative practices and indeed a familiarity with a whole culture.

While Giovanni struggles to learn German to communicate, Antje's polyglot family chooses to speak different languages according to personal preference, as they

find certain languages more or less suitable for various topics of conversation. For example, in one episode, Antje's father tries to speak to Giovanni using both Dutch and English: "Mi chiedeva se capsico la parola cane; me la urla nell'orecchio. Poi mi parlava in olandese e mi traduceva in inglese perché afferri bene la sostanza del discorso" (*LP* 27). Sergeant Schumacher uses Dutch whenever possible, even giving his children Dutch names, because he has fond memories of his time in Holland during the war (*LP* 17-8). Giovanni notes that he finds it particularly useful for philosophical discussion, "non c'è che l'olandese secondo lui per parlare di queste cose. In Olanda tutti amano moltissimo sia le lampadine che la verità; questo non lo sapevo" (*LP* 28). In fact, all of Antje's family is multilingual, speaking a montage of various languages without really having to think about it, as Giovanni points out: "qui nella casa di questo rappresentante di lampadine [cioé sergente Schumacher] tutti parlavano diverse lingue; francese inglese olandese e altre sconosciute; nessuno ci faceva caso in che lingua si parla" (*LP* 21). At first, Antje's father does not accept Giovanni because he does not have the same language skills that they do. He simply looks at him with suspicion and tries to speak more loudly. When Giovanni looks up how to tell him, "non sono sordo, ma non capisco" (*LP* 21), the father asks him to leave. As he does so, Giovanni quotes in German a passage from Goethe, which reveals him to be a person of culture and thus acceptable as one of them:

> Il padre a sentirmi dire quelle parole interessanti si è stupito; proprio stupito che le pronuncio esatte, che ho la lingua per parlare come loro. La sorpresa lieta! E dopo non si parlava più di mandarmi via, ma della mia bravura a imparare le lingue come gli olandesi. (*LP* 21)

The ability to speak a foreign language properly, and to use literary quotations, signals a kind of cultural refinement and superiority that allows Schumacher to accept Giovanni as one of his own. The ability to use multiple languages is a kind of cultural capital, a way of establishing class superiority and privilege. The ability to move easily from one language to another that the Schumacher family exhibits, is contrasted to the wary "monolinguism" of Giovanni's working-class Italian family. Giovanni's father warns him against spending time in a country where people speak different languages, telling Giovanni about a relative's negative experience in France that resulted because he didn't take language into consideration:

> Mio zio credeva che lui non capiva quello che gli dicevano i francesi perché tanto non capiva mai cosa gli dicono neanche in italiano; allora non ci faceva caso e pensava a lavorare. Invece i francesi si offendevano che lui non capiva la loro lingua; così si era preso tante botte in Francia e anche la galera. (*LP* 18)

In fact, Giovanni's experience repeats that of his uncle's in several ways. He too finds himself physically attacked before he understands German, by the "mysterious bicyclist" the first time he gets off the underground. Later on in the novel, finding himself in financial straits, he works for Tino, who takes advantage of immigrants by not paying them proper wages and housing them in barracks (*LP* 161). Furthermore, like his uncle, he also finds himself in police custody without being able to defend himself adequately. The police arrest him for wandering around the city at night after he gets lost, basing their assessment of the situation on the generalization that all Italians in Germany at the time were immigrant manual laborers. The officer explains to him, "qui italiani vengono

per lavorare, non per andare in giro nella notte" (*LP* 58). As non-native speaking immigrants, Italians (and others) do not effectively enjoy full civil rights. Such blatant discrimination prompts Giovanni to view the German police as still being like the Gestapo, even though "secondo loro la Gestapo non esisteva più da un bel pezzo" (*LP* 41). If Giovanni were, in fact, an immigrant worker, not a student with people to vouch for him and get him out of jail, his experience would have been even more similar to that of his uncle in France. This illustration of the role of language in class segmentation projects the concerns already expressed in Celati's previous novels, and particularly in *La banda dei sospiri*, from a national onto an international plane. Celati is making fun of the provincialism of Italian culture, while at the same time, showing how such provincialism is the by-product of its contemporary geopolitical configuration. From this perspective, Giovanni (indeed one of the most common traditional names in Italy) can be seen as a synecdoche for the whole country.

Giovanni's evolving relationship to language manifests not only through the narration of his struggle to learn German and other foreign languages, but also through his (re)encounter with Italian in a foreign context. Celati uses this (re)encounter to question a tradition that values the language of the Italian literary elite while despising or at least ignoring the language spoken by ordinary people. When Giovanni is taken to visit the Italian department at the university, he is treated as a kind of novelty: "Loro saputo che ero studente italiano mi portano dove si studia italiano; e tanta gente mi veniva a chiedere se davvero io italiano, come se ne avessero mai visto uno" (*LP* 127). At first, Giovanni finds the excitement surrounding him confusing, since, as he points out, there are many Italians in Germany, but quickly he realizes that it is a question of

class and education, "Ma qui pieno di italienisch, dico io. Si, ma altri italienisch, non tipi come me. Ah, capisco, capisco"(*LP* 127). The language department discounts the language of the average working Italian, even admonishing Giovanni not to use dialect. The university professors want to discuss only an Italian legitimized by cultural institutions, which may be contemporary but not much more egalitarian that the older "authorities":

> Il professore mi invita a dire qualcosa nella mia lingua; non in dialetto si raccomanda. Ma che dialetto, scherziamo? Io italiano purissimo, vuole che parlo come Dante Alighieri Petrarca Mazzini?
>
> No, vuole italiano di oggi. Ah, bene, italiano dopoguerra, mezzo e mezzo, italiano da autobus, italiano di quelli che leggono il giornale e ci fanno il commento politico intanto che mangiano la minestra; una roba così. So anche quello. Mi metto a parlare come un ministero, va bene? (*LP* 128)

As Giovanni points out, only a very narrow register of Italian is allowed to be taught and "la questione della lingua" is far from being resolved in Italian letters. Giovanni's subsequent tongue-in-cheek summary of Italian history, which ends "è così che si sono inventati l'Italia, terra che esiste solo nelle poesie, lingua del nulla, comprendido? (*LP* 130), reflects a genuine frustration on the part of Celati at the inertia of the Italian literary and cultural establishment.

There is an exception to Giovanni's chronic communicative discomforts, an interlocutor to whom he is able to speak without problems: the twins. We should note that while Giovanni always specifies what language he speaks with all of the other

characters in the novel, he makes no mention of the idiom he uses to communicate with the twins. When in their company, Giovanni leaves normal reality and regresses into a kind of fantasy world where childlike desires can run free. He meets the twins immediately after his relationship with Antje sours and she begins spending more time with the Turkish boy. In contrast to the more adult complications of his romantic relationships with Antje and Giselda, Giovanni feels at ease in the presence of the twin girls, free to do what he wants without fear and insecurity. The twins are innocent and, when Giovanni is with them, he too escapes into a fantasy world that seems inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* Particularly evocative are the descriptions of the bizarre tea parties, which Giovanni and the twins share: "mi hanno invitato a prendere il tè; e poi facevano le torte. Delle torte complicate a due strati; lo strato di sotto rosa, quello sopra verde o bianco o azzurro, con le ciliegine tutt'intorno" (*LP* 43). However, in contrast with Alice, who finds the "nonsense" of Wonderland extremely annoying, Giovanni enjoys escaping into a fantasy world with the twins, finding a happy refuge from the problems of adult reality. He repeats again and again how happy the girls seem, how easily they can enjoy themselves without the restrictive presence of their parents (who are, rather significantly, vacationing in Italy). With them anything seems possible.

One of the most evident freedoms Giovanni enjoys with the twins is the ability to talk without worrying about language or any repercussions that might result from his opinions. Giovanni finds Germany an environment in which certain topics are so sensitive and anxiety causing that they cannot be discussed. Although politics are a welcome topic with the twins, Giovanni has particular difficulty with other characters

when he decides to discuss political issues. This is in part due to the fact that he espouses a rather confused and superficial brand of communism. He falls out of favor with the Schumachers and with his Danish friend after shouting nonsensical political slogans at dinner party. As his friend explains to him, his position is far from well thought out: "prima di tutto non capiva se ero comunista o anarchico, ho le idee un po' confuse, bisogna specificare bene le cose quando si parla. Secondo: non capiva se ero per la pace nel mondo o uno che vuol risolvere tutto con le bombe" (*LP* 121). Keeping in mind the socio-historical context, one is tempted to read these passages about politics as a wily allusion by Celati to both Neofascism and Stalinism and the "unspeakable" political unconscious haunting the 1970s. Giovanni's hosts cannot discuss the former (although their language contains many involuntary references to it), while Giovanni's communism amounts to a series of incomprehensible (because they are ultimately hollow and inauthentic) catchphrases. Tellingly, when Giovanni claims that the twins talk with ease about any topic, he singles out politics, but a politics marked by violence, as in late 1970s Italy: "parlavano come dei grandi, del più o del meno, di quello che c'è scritto nel giornale; politica, sapevano del tutto, soprattutto i delitti; erano impassionatissime dei delitti, quando c'era uno nuovo c'era una festa" (*LP* 42).

The fantastic dimension of the relationship between the twins and Giovanni disappears in the presence of adults, especially after the return of the twin's parents and the visit to the twin's grandmother's house: "Tornati i genitori delle due bambine; conosciuti una sera, persone gentili, mi trattano bene. Un venerdí pomeriggio siamo andati io e le due bambine a passare venderdí sabato domenica da questa nonna, che curava l'orto e suonava il piano" (*LP* 112). The tone of the description, its brevity and

simplicity are almost banal, and strikingly different from the earlier exuberant and surreal descriptions of their tea parties. Adult reality has effectively put an end to their childish fantasies and Giovanni can no longer use them as an escape.

While certain episodes in *Lunario del paradiso* seem surreal and bizarre, the novel is fundamentally realistic. The fantastic elements are essentially the result of Giovanni's inability to understand and to process properly the world around him. His perception is colored by childish emotions and desires, which keeps him from grasping the reality of the situation. Giovanni thinks of the rest of the world outside Italy as a kind of paradise, where anything can happen and fantasies come true, but over the course of the novel he learns that he has deceived himself, particularly in regards to his relationship with Antje. At first, after discovering that Antje was unfaithful to him, he feels misunderstood and disillusioned, ironically and aptly describing himself as a failed hero, using old literary tropes in a parody of a Chivalric romance or fairytale:

> Volevo dirglielo però e gliel'ho detto nella mia testa: cara Antje, forse non ti sono mai piaciuto granché, ma tu non hai capito la mia irruenza, la mia passione da avventuroso intrepido che va alla conquista della principessa lontana.
>
> Senza però riuscire a salvarla: lei chiusa nella torre inaccessibile, nel bosco incantato dei misteri, con la maledizione della settima fata che fa addormentare la principessa per cent'anni. Tutto è contro l'eroe, che per forza allora lo prende nel culo. (*LP*, 182)

It is as if he thought that he could just show up in Germany and they would fall in love and live happily ever after. Real relationships rarely work out in reality as they do in

fantasy, and Giovanni eventually realizes that their entire relationship was only in his imagination: "Ho cercato il grandissimo amore; me lo sono immaginato tutto da solo; mi ero anche deciso di sposarmi; ma i segreti e misteri di queste cose, davvero troppo difficili, come vanno e finiscono, per una testa stappazzata come la mia" (*LP* 184). This sudden insight into his feelings for Antje leads him to have a kind of epiphany about the rest of his life in Germany as well, as he begins to understand that he has been misled by his desires. He decides not to go to America or Denmark, and gives up his quest for Antje. Rather, Giovanni returns to Italy and his decision is narrated in an exceptionally understated way: "ho fatto il biglietto per l'Italia e sono salito in treno...Non sono mai stato in Danimarca" (*LP* 184). Finally, he is able to recognize that it was his desire for a fairytale life that has caused him to imagine things that were not truly there.

Similarly, at the end the novel, the narrator realizes that the story will always be an imperfect representation of reality, colored by his ability to perceive and process what has happened to him. As the novel progresses, Giovanni comments more and more on the trajectory of his story, and his own (in)ability to tell it: "se c'è da segnalare è che non l'ho capito bene neanche io questo viaggio che sto a raccontarvi di qua e di là, tra Bologna, Piacenza, Londra, Milano e Venezia. Navigo navigo con i miei fogli, li ribatto e voglio arrivarci in fondo" (*LP* 159). He implies that he is still searching for the meaning of his story; at this point he is just trying to finish it. In fact, at the end of the novel, Giovanni rejects the demand for "truth" which certain "deep thinkers" (admittedly a rather bizarre company) would still attempt to impose:

> Sento una vocina nell'altra stanza, deve aver mandato qualcuno a sorvegliare anche me; un pensatore con la barba, tipo Carl Marx, Silverio

> Pifferi, Socrate o Peter Ustinov; un satiro insomma. La vocina del pensatore adesso la sento bene che mi fa: ma questa è tutta una falsificazione! [....È] ora di piantarla con questi pensatori che non ti lasciano mai farti una storia senza rompere le balle. (*LP* 185)

The narrator expresses his frustration at the kind of analysis to which his story will eventually be subjected by those who want him to have a complete philosophy at his command. He comes to the conclusion that despite being an imperfect story, with loose ends and uncertainties, it still has its own truth and validity:

> Ma ho sonno, vado a letto; gli lascio scritto qua in fondo, perché legga si convinca:
>
> Caro pensatore, dacci un taglio di fare il cretino, però va anche tu a farti delle storie e vedrai che questa è la sputtanata verità. (*LP* 185)

The narrator refuses the judgment of the "thinkers," those who want seriousness and deeper meaning. In fact, their demands for a clear and unambiguous meaning runs counter to the way that storytelling functions and the inherent uncertainties of the communicative process. As his last lines suggest, he recognizes that his story will inevitably be misunderstood by some of his readers, but at the same time, he defiantly challenges them to live and write their own stories, because that way they will be better able to understand the truth in his. By becoming storytellers themselves, instead of mere spectators, they too can gain an appreciation of the nature of storytelling: its frustrations, its discomforts, and also its joys. Celati reiterates that words that remain mere words are useless and meaningless unto themselves, but that literature can open language to life and to experience.

Conclusions

Lunario del paradiso tackles a number of new issues on language, literature and writing, especially questioning his earlier confidence in the power of experience and perception. Celati seems particularly invested in fostering an open intellectual community, but at the same time, he has lost hope in many of the answers that intellectuals like himself have provided in the past. The novel expresses a bittersweet realization on the part of Celati that the solutions proposed by new theories of language and literature, which emerged in the sixties and seventies, are not the panacea that they first appeared to be.

In the main story, Giovanni's struggle to learn foreign languages teaches him to be more aware of the world around him and to deal with his emotions in a more complex and mature way. In his relationship with Antje, he slowly comes to realize that despite his attraction to her, they cannot have a meaningful conversation. Likewise, he can speak to Gisela, but they do not truly understand one another's intentions. He learns that language is not merely a new set of vocabulary words, but a whole culture and a set of values. Furthermore, this set of values challenges him and his previous belief system, so he has to reevaluate his political position and develop a more mature way of expressing his opinions. He must undergo a similar maturation in his love life, by coming to realize that the dreams and expectations he placed on his relationship with Antje had little to do with the way that they actually felt about each other, and much more to do with his preconceptions about romantic love. In Germany, Giovanni learns to recognize that reality does not always reflect his desires, nor does life necessarily work out the way that

it does in fairytales. He has to learn to approach the world in a more mature and more thoughtful way defining and pursuing more obtainable desires.

Through his use of a self-conscious narrator and meta-narrative techniques, Celati draws attention to the artifice of writing and the artificiality of literary construction. He questions not only the possibility, but also the value of objectivity, implying that only through mutual openness and honesty, on the part of the author and the reader, can meaningful communication take place. In the end, the narrator's difficulties with writing his story result in him rejecting the call for objective truth issued by the serious "thinkers." He suggests that what one learns along the way from the experience of storytelling is perhaps greater than what can be gained from analysis. He encourages his readers to take up the pen and write, so that they too can enrich their understanding of the nature of stories and storytelling.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In his works from the 1970s, Gianni Celati shows a careful attention to contemporary developments in literary studies and a particular enthusiasm for the positive changes that these developments could bring to established literary practice. He explores these new ideas and methods in his fiction, using his novels as a kind of workshop for his continuing investigations into language, literature and society. Rather than viewing literature as primarily the creation and appreciation of aesthetic objects, he comes to see it as part of the fundamental and ubiquitous human activity of storytelling, based on community, communication and enjoyment. As in any communication between people, in literature there is always a possibility for failure and frustration, but also for enriching our understanding of each other. For Celati, in order for successful literary communication to occur, it must be undertaken with honesty, truthfulness and openness on the part of the writer as well as the reader.

Over the course of his three novels of the 1970's, Celati strives to develop a literary style that also reflects his social and philosophical positions. An examination of these texts reveals that Celati consistently moves towards creating a more reader-friendly style based on oral language. Beginning with *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, Celati decides to narrate the novel in the voice and perspective of the insane Guizzardi, a choice that seems to grow out of his study and admiration of Céline. In this novel, we see Celati's initial creation of a literary style with markedly "oral" characteristics as an alternative to what he sees as the often cold and esoteric language of the literary elite. Although the

novel is meant to illustrate the failure of society from the perspective of its most marginal members, Celati's use of a patently bizarre language in *Le avventure di Guizzardi* often overshadows his social commentary. In his two following works, *La banda dei sospiri* and *Lunario del paradiso*, Celati further experiments with the concept of using an "oralized" style, but he refocuses his attention onto the prosaic speech of ordinary Italians and is more heavily influenced by oral storytelling. In fact, Celati's interest in "ordinariness" allows him to deliver a more pointed and often more overtly political critique of contemporary Italian society in these two later novels. His use of an "oralized" style reveals his desire to open up literary language to different types of experiences and possible ways of viewing reality. Furthermore, it emphasizes the role of the readers, requiring their active engagement with the story and, particularly in *Lunario del paradiso*, re-imagining literature as an explicit dialogue between reader and narrator.

Beyond being interested in issues of literary style and content, Celati sharply condemns the way that society uses language to further marginalize those people who are most in need of help. We find this message reiterated in all three novels, albeit in different forms. In *Le avventure di Guizzardi*, despite his attempts to communicate with others, Guizzardi's inability to learn to use language exacerbates his persecution, marginalization and oppression by society. The secondary characters' unwillingness to try to communicate with him and their dehumanizing treatment of him lead to the deterioration of his already fragile mental state. *La banda dei sospiri* examines the issue of language and social class as it depicts the struggle of Garibaldi and his working-class family to make ends meet in a society that uses language as a way of maintaining class divisions. Celati demonstrates that a lack of understanding of bourgeois social

conventions, particularly in regards to the arts, complicates and severely restricts the family's ability to successfully interact with people of higher social status, as they need to do in order to improve their situation. At the same time, higher culture seems irrelevant and extraneous to their daily lives, since its discourse is entirely dominated by the bourgeoisie. While Celati suggests that education determines upper mobility, he also questions the legitimacy of a system that privileges only certain types of cultural knowledge. In *Lunario del paradiso*, Celati expands his critique to an international level by illustrating the discrimination that Giovanni (like other Italian immigrants) encounters while abroad, and the way in which this discrimination nourishes the provincialism of Italian culture.

Reading and literature are intrinsically linked to Celati's views on language, and they emerge a primary thematic issue in his novels, particularly in *La banda dei sospiri* and *Lunario del paradiso*. In *La banda dei sospiri*, Garibaldi has a fundamentally body-centric way of understanding the world around him. He sees literature as being irrelevant to his life and highly suspect, particularly since it glosses over or ignores the more florid aspects of human existence. However, he learns to overcome his wariness of written language as he discovers that it can be used in a manner that reflects his understanding the world around him. Thus Celati suggests that an approach to literature that takes into account the concrete reality of bodily existence may be able to overcome the falsity of literary conventions. For Celati, literature must be firmly dedicated to principles of honesty and truthfulness in order to be a valid and worthwhile enterprise, and this position is further elaborated in *Lunario del paradiso*. Through his use of a highly self-conscious narrator in the frame of *Lunario del paradiso*, Celati questions the possibility,

as well as the value, of objective truth in literature, suggesting that the very humanity of literature is to be found in its multifaceted nature and in its struggle for subjective truthfulness. He also re-emphasizes the role of the reader, suggesting that literature functions like a dialogue, and that, as in all types of communication, success depends of the cooperation of both parties. He recognizes that there will always be elements beyond the control of both the narrator and the reader, but also posits that the processes of writing and of reading are mutually enriching experiences that can add to our knowledge of others and ourselves. As such, Celati urges his readers to write their own stories so that they will gain a deeper understanding of the difficulties and the pleasures of literature.

Celati's appeal to his readers to take up the pen can be seen as being answered with the re-emergence of narrative during the eighties and the nineties in Italy. In the same period, he begins to dismiss his 1970s novels as mannerist, seeing its substance as having been lost in intellectual posturing. While the fiction of the 80s and 90s can be seen as a positive response to his invitation to others to write their own stories, he judges that work harshly, for many of the same reasons that he criticizes his own early work. In fact, after *Lunario del paradiso*, he does not write fiction again himself for quite some time, publishing his next work, *Narratori delle pianure*, in 1985. In his works of the late eighties and nineties, Celati undoubtedly use a markedly different narrative voice than his earlier works, adopting a "minimalist" style then much in fashion. And yet, many concepts present in the earlier works persist. In fact, the clarity of its style can be seen as an extension of Celati's consistent tendency to create over the course of his career narratives that are more approachable on the surface and easier to read. As well, in his later works, he clearly maintains his view of himself as a cultural critic, continuing to

discuss many of the same social issues as he does in his earlier works. The preoccupation with language is constant and Celati also expands his social commentary to include new themes, such as the environment. His seven year hiatus from fiction writing can be considered as time of reflection that allowed him to refocus his interests, but at the same time, we should recognise that there is a great deal of continuity in all of Celati's works. To examine such continuity in detail, however, is beyond the scope of this study, although it is now open as an avenue for future research.

For Celati, literature is a very special activity, but not necessarily for the reasons that many people have traditionally thought. He asks for a reevaluation of language and literature, particularly of the way in which they can be used in society to further disenfranchise marginal people, who are also the most likely to have interesting stories to tell and also can tell us the most about the problems that plague the society we share. In his works from the 1970's, Celati develops and reaffirms his belief in the power of narrative and the value of storytelling as a positive activity for all. Although there is often a degree of pessimism in his work, in the seventies and beyond, it revolves more around the fact that we still live in a world where literature is understood in a way that excludes people, rather than includes them, in social discourse. Even in the face of this realization and of the limitations of intellectuals like him, in his last lines of *Lunario del paradiso*, Citati issues a defiant challenge and initiation to his readers to become writers, to take up language, struggle with it, and through this struggle achieve better understanding and greater freedom.

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