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Sight, Language, Time: To be Surrounded by the World

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Towards the River's Mouth
(*Verso la foce*),
by Gianni Celati

A Critical Edition

Edited, translated, and introduced by
Patrick Barron

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Chapter Two

Sight, Language, Time

To be Surrounded by the World

Monica Seger

At the start of his seminal 1972 essay collection, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger reminds readers that “seeing comes before words,” that a (sighted) child sees before gaining the ability to express herself through language. He explains further: “But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it” (7). Berger spent much of his prolific career, which involved multiple media and forms of expression, exploring the effects of a visual understanding of being “surrounded” by the world. Gianni Celati has spent much of his own career doing the same, occasionally, as addressed below, in conversation with Berger himself. Like Berger’s, Celati’s work embodies multiple forms: lyrical prose, documentary cinema, critical essay, translation, and more. And, like Berger’s, his point of focus inevitably returns to how the act of seeing helps us to make sense of the world and our place in it, as well as how language might then communicate that sense to others, albeit a beat behind.

I have long been intrigued by Celati’s attention to vision and language in *Verso la foce (Towards the River’s Mouth)*.¹ He is so profoundly attuned to what he describes as the external world’s need for “us to observe and recount it, in order to exist” (66). Reading once more the four gently meandering diaries collected in this volume, called by the author “stories of observation,” I remain struck by his ceaseless desire to capture the *immediacy* of visual observation through language—and how readily he admits to not quite making it (1). He confesses toward the end of the text’s first section, for example: “I walked for three days in order to observe something, but am already

confused about what I observed,” as though that “something” had become instantly blurred once active observation ceased (24). Then, in the book’s final section: “The pretense of words; they pretend to keep track of everything happening around us, to describe and define it. But everything in flux around us doesn’t occur in this or that way, and has little to do with what words say. The river here flows out into an endless expanse, colors bleed into each other everywhere: how to describe this?” (71). Words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by the world, but for Celati words cannot entirely recompose that world’s structure either. Despite the inevitable disconnect, a desire to describe through language, to at least attempt re-composition of the everyday, is precisely what motivates his creative production in *Verso la foce* and elsewhere.

In what follows, I consider Celati’s attention to the relationship between sight, language, and time in this text, as well as in the story collection *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze* (*Appearances*, 1997) and the film *Case sparse—Visioni di case che crollano* (*Scattered Houses—Visions of Collapsing Houses*, 2002). In each of the three Celati is attuned to both the beauty and the challenge inherent in the twin acts of observing and recounting, what we might also describe as bearing witness. He focuses, in particular, on the ways in which observing and recounting can never entirely line up due to the inevitable passage of time between the first act and the second. Deeply aware of time moving forward in the external world, Celati seeks to convey that movement in his texts. Simultaneously, he contemplates the additional time that it takes to do so, as well as the inevitable reshaping of that time through narrative representation.

Marina Spunta (2003) has written that *Verso la foce* represents Celati’s most acute attempt to make the “moments of perception, observation and reflection” coincide “with that of writing” (18, my translation). I agree, although I hold that the other texts addressed in the present essay are not so far behind. More importantly, I wish to emphasize here Spunta’s use of the word “moment.” It is the constancy of time’s passing, the never ceasing accumulation of moments that comprise the external world, that makes Celati’s longed for immediacy in language impossible. Between the moments of perception, observation, and reflection, and that (or those) of writing, the world has continued to advance. What was once perceived has somehow changed, and the written record will always be just slightly askew, especially for an author like Celati, who is prone to re-write his texts.² Whether in complement to this constant flow or in spite of it, the passing of time is one of Celati’s most beautifully wrought objects of attention in *Verso la foce*, as in *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze* and *Case sparse*. Just as time is a constant in the world all around us, it is also always at play in the human acts of writing or otherwise recounting, often in very different ways. Celati communicates time’s trajectory in the first text largely by tracing the subtle shifts of the

external world, made only hazier by the as-yet-unknown effects of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and widespread industrial pollution in the Po Valley.

Manifested in the physical movement of plants and sky, the forward progression of time in the nonhuman environment is one expression of what Anne Whiston Spirn (1998) calls the “language of landscape.” As she explains, this nonhuman grammar “reminds us that nothing stays the same,” alerting us to the memory of various pasts, while also allowing us to “anticipate the possible” (25–26). For Celati, the trick is to carefully read the signs of what has already come, while not letting such richly layered temporality allow him (or others) to overlook the present. In the final days of his post-Chernobyl wanderings, he pauses in an industrial zone covered in resurgent but chemically altered plants, rows of tidy little houses nearby. Later, he writes of the scene: “There was a battle among the clouds, then gusts of wind scattered them, leaving shreds of cirrus to float about over the tops of the poplars beyond the edge of the river” (*Towards the River’s Mouth*, 21). This description then spills seamlessly into a rumination on cultural tendencies toward a certain “amnesia,” which enables people “to put up levees, to be able to say ‘there’s a good side to everything,’ to put Walt Disney dwarves outside our front doors; in other words, to always say and show everywhere that something is completely different from what it is,” when what it actually *is* is steeped in what it has once been, as well as in what it might become (21). Here Celati offers a warning for our relationship to the more than human material world. We ought not to take the inevitable forward movement of our external surroundings—the transitions of the sky above—as an excuse to deny the lessons of history or, even more crucially, to look beyond uncomfortable present realities like the heavy industrial pollution just beyond those Walt Disney dwarves.

This lesson in informed observation and affect, in sight and behavior, extends to Celati’s own efforts to recount realities just as they are in a particular moment. His task is complicated not only by a lack of stasis in the external world, as discussed above, but also by the “multidimensional, multi-axis” temporality of nature (Adam 1998, 10). Although the world is endlessly advancing, the sky never truly still, the temporality of the nonhuman is largely unpredictable beyond the general outline of lunar cycles and seasonal changes. Such temporality often seems outside of our comprehension in its separateness from clock time, which Barbara Adam defines as “intimately tied to the conceptual principles of Newtonian physics and the linear perspective,” the understanding that forces act on matter in predictable ways, A leading steadily to B. As Adam writes, the time of nature, of the more than human world, can instead feel like an “invisible ‘other,’ that which works outside and beyond the reach of our senses” (*ibid.*). We are totally surrounded by it, and yet we can never fully know it.

This otherness of nonhuman time emerges in certain passages of *Verso la foce* when, rather than sweep things swiftly away, time does not move as fast as Celati or others might wish. Early in the book's second section, "Explorations Along the Levees," the author acknowledges the ways in which the autonomous temporality of the natural environment can not only obfuscate, but also impede, the process of recording or recounting what one has observed. His friend Luciano Capelli seeks to photograph the "landscape of levees" along the Po one morning but, as Celati explains, "It's still early, the sun is rising very slowly over these plains, and we need to wait for midday because the shadows are too long" (26). Rather than speed things forward, blurring the impression of what they have seen, here the daily progression of the sky overhead slows down the men's efforts to record and recount. And yet this occurrence bears similar results to a moment too quickly over, as it challenges Celati and Capelli to be simultaneously active in their observations and patient with themselves and the external world, recognizing yet again that the latter is ultimately beyond their control.

Just as in the previous example, the text smoothly transitions in this passage from a breezy comment on the sovereign pace of the nonhuman—the shifting of the sun, its impact on the fields—to a warning about the effects of human action. Immediately after describing the scene above, complete with reddish stream and rampant pollen, Celati writes: "Pointing out a wide blotch on the ground, a man riding a bike told us that a tank of herbicide spilled there, and that it will take years for anything to grow. All the same, on the far side of the Po it's only worse, he says, because the land there is sandy, and herbicides quickly filter into the aquifer, contaminating all the water" (26). In this instance, as in that of light moving across the plains, the timeline of environmental change (via recuperation, not contamination) is almost imperceptibly slow, "neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive," to use Rob Nixon's words (2011, 2). It is also, of course, unfamiliar. As the old man says in departing, "Well, who knows what'll happen to us next!" (26).

Published two years before *Verso la foce* but written during approximately the same period, the 1987 *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze* offers similarly detailed descriptions of the external world, tucked into a set of gently meandering meditations on words and images. Like *Verso la foce*, this earlier collection is divided into four sections focused on the acts of observation and communication, whether through speech, the written word, or visual art. Here, however, the sections are distinct and fictional stories, as indicated by the word *novella* in the original Italian title. The first story considers both sight and language through a protagonist who one day stops speaking, choosing instead to "[lose] himself as he wanders about looking at everything that meets his eyes" (19). The third and fourth instead explore the various powers we attribute to the written word. It is the second story, "Conditions of Light

on Via Emilia,” that most overtly addresses the effects of temporality in regards to sight and image, while still always engaging the question of language.

Written in Celati’s first-person voice, the story is primarily focused on a landscape painter called Emanuele Menini. Like Celati himself (as well as Capelli, or photographer Luigi Ghirri, or so many of Celati’s other collaborators) the figure of Menini seeks to record and convey his perceptions of the external world. Specifically, he strives to offer a painted record of how particular vistas look when they are still, and touched by light. Ever frustrated in his attempts, he comes to realize that each day bears the undercurrent of a subtle tremor: “a tremor in the air which made everything unstable, swaying around him as he himself swayed with the others” (42). This “everyday tremor” makes it nearly impossible for Menini to capture stillness, as it inspires a ceaseless cycle of motion all around and even within him, “something that transports you and that you cannot resist” (42). It reads as a physical manifestation of time itself, rather than the proof of its effects on sky or river, a form for something otherwise tangible only through association.

The tremor—time—is a subtle but powerful actor. As Menini explains, “one looks and thinks to have seen something, but the tremor in the air right away removes the thought of that which he saw. And so there is only the thought of moving in the brilliant light; we should move, and that’s all, through the hustle and bustle of every day” (43). The first half of the passage above recalls Celati’s previously cited rumination from *Toward the River’s Mouth*, when he is no longer sure what he has observed, while offering at least a partial explanation for that lack of clarity. Perhaps there too it is the tremor of every day, the effect of time’s passing, that has so easily blurred his vision. As Gilles Deleuze (1989) writes, “time is not the interior in us, but just the opposite, the interiority in which we are, in which we move, live and change” (82). Much like in Adam’s approach, time for Deleuze (and for Henri Bergson, on whom he is riffing) is the world by which we are surrounded—just as it challenges our vision of that world and our attempts to describe it.

It may be appropriate to underline once again that for Celati this challenge is a positive one. Time’s destabilizing effect serves as his motivational force but also, and even more importantly, it is one of the things he most seeks to communicate as he traces, in Patrick Barron’s words, “the shifting, subtle appearances of everything other than the self” (2007, 326). In an essay entitled “Narrating as a Practical Activity,” based on a lecture from early in his career, Celati declares an awareness of temporality to be fundamental to his process of narration. He explains:

I believe that narration consists in keeping oneself in line with temporality: in feeling and making felt how everything changes in every moment, and how in

every moment, one must use words differently, with different meanings; and in feeling and making felt that all of our expressions and gestures and tones depend on the variation of moments, in the fluidity of the stream, the impossibility of fixing one perpetual and definitive sense. (2011, 29–30, my translation)

Narration “kept in line” with temporality: Celati is not so much concerned with the linearity of a traditional narrative arc, respecting the progression of beginning to end. Rather, he believes that narration must communicate the lack of fixity inherent in (nonhuman) temporality, and thus the external world at large. It is this belief that informs a certain ephemeral quality to his work, what Rebecca West (2000) describes as a “poetics of the contingent” (127). He writes, further:

Narrative liveliness could be described like this: it is something that gives us the sense that moment by moment everything changes under our eyes and under our feet: and this perpetual changing of the thing around which we rotate is an experience like watching the clouds, where one person sees a lion and another an elephant . . . a narration is time in time, because it abides by the momentary: and so, I can say that something has one direction, and then a moment later that same thing has a different direction, that is, it changes meaning and it changes the sort of light that it sheds on the world. (31, my translation)

The last portion of the citation immediately above becomes particularly important when we consider the context in which Celati writes *Verso la foce*. While the final three sections are composed in the early 1980s, a time in which the Po Valley is suffering the environmental effects of poorly regulated industrial emissions, the first is written just weeks after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, in which the threat of nuclear radiation looms large and nebulous. As he travels from town to town, Celati explores the constantly shifting perceptions of that historic moment by recording the transitioning content of conversations heard along the way. His record shows that common understanding of the disaster continues to change direction and meaning. This is especially so regarding the “sort of light” that Chernobyl might “shed on the world,” as concerns for environmental and corporeal health wax and wane in its immediate aftermath.

As with so many iterations of environmental disaster, Chernobyl taps deeply into the multi-axial nature of nonhuman time by enacting both immediate effects and the slow environmental violence of which Nixon (2011) writes. In its continual unfolding, it forces human interlocutors to recognize that we are unable to speak with authority about, for example, the level of radiation in a cow’s milk on any given day. It also forces us to recognize the difficulty of *seeing* with authority. Much like time, radiation does not bear an immediately visible presence, but it does result in all manner of perceptible

and often continually mutable shifts in other things and beings. In this, the Chernobyl disaster serves as an extreme example of environmental change at large, whether resulting from radiation, pollution, or simply new relationships to old landscapes: a complicated merger between temporality and matter (both human and non) that we must continually observe if we want to comprehend.

The question of visibility brings us back to the function of sight with which this chapter began, and back to Berger's reminder that "seeing comes before words." In one of my favorite passages from *Verso la foce*, Celati notes: "Objects are out there floating in the light, emerging from the void to find a place in front of our eyes. We are always implicated in their appearing and disappearing, almost as if we were here just for this. The external world needs us to observe and recount it, in order to exist" (66). He believes in the role of the witness to make real, the power of testimony to make truth—note again the focus on eyes, appearance, observation—and yet he rejects any authority implicit in the role.³ Celati underlines this rejection of authority, in a conversation with Marianne Schneider from 2008, when he suggests that we think of literary narratives as a sort of wind, or "collective flows of words," rather than the work of particular authors (45). As underlined by the passive construction of the last two sentences cited at the start of this paragraph, he reads our agency as secondary to that of those objects floating about: they are what comprise the wind and the flow. And yet our observations are so necessary to their existence.

John Berger also dedicated much attention throughout his career to the importance of bearing witness. In an interview with a young Geoff Dyer, first published in 1984 then widely recirculated after Berger's death in 2017, he explains: "story tellers lose their identity and are open to the lives of other people . . . at any one moment it is difficult to see what the job of your life is because you are so aware of what you are lending yourself to. This is perhaps why I use the term 'being a witness'" (38). Writing, for Berger, was about fully opening himself to the lives of other people. It was also, however, about fully opening himself to landscapes, works of visual art, and the kinds of experiences that exist "at a level of perception and feeling which is probably preverbal," such as gazing with pleasure upon a field (1992, 200). His description of lending oneself so completely to the process, serving as a sort of vessel for existences and experiences to travel through on their way to language, once again hinges on the word "moment," with which this chapter began. To carefully observe and then recount, he suggests, involves immersing oneself entirely in a sliver of time soon to pass. This is the task of witnessing for Celati as well: capturing the world's individual passing moments, as best he can.

Present throughout *Verso la foce*, the role of witness, situated first in sight, then language, is further explored in a series of Celati's films often

discussed in conjunction with the book. The 2002 film *Case sparse—Visioni di case che crollano* is a particularly helpful interpretive guide when it comes to the author-director's approach to observation and time, or the act of bearing witness. *Case sparse* is the final installment of a trilogy of films shot, over a ten-year span, in many of the same locations explored in *Verso la foce*. It follows *Strada provinciale delle anime* (Provincial Road of the Souls, 1991) and *Il Mondo di Luigi Ghirri* (The World of Luigi Ghirri, 1999), both of which are discussed in the present volume. All three films focus on the appearance and what we might call the spirit of the Po Valley, while offering meandering meditations on representation and narration at large. In this light, Antonio Costa (2011) reads the films as an "audiovisual trilogy that prolongs and integrates the work of writing" (61, my translation). Following his lead, I argue that, of the three, *Case sparse* most directly offers a response to the sense of limitation in language conveyed in *Verso la foce*, especially as it relates to temporality.⁴ In true Celati fashion, this response is not so much a solution as an affirmation, akin to the collective part in call-and-response singing or speech.

Exploring multiple forms of representation—filmmaking, photography, theater, writing, and oral narration—*Case sparse* makes an argument for the value of a multi-medial account of the world, just as it confirms that true immediacy in representation is fleeting, no matter the form. The film follows multiple interwoven threads: an international group of researchers, filmmakers, and others who are travelling through the Po Valley to interview inhabitants about abandoned structures and shifting attitudes; a director and actress, Alberto Sironi and Bianca Maria D'Amato, who prepare a theatrical performance about the "sunset of the agrarian world," practicing monologues immersed in the very locations addressed within the piece; and finally, a series of lyrical landscape observations read *in loco* by John Berger. Marco Belpoliti and Gianni Canova both see Berger as a "Virgil" in this film for the way in which he offers sage explanation, much like Dante's guide in the *Divine Comedy*. While there is something Virgilian in Berger's calm knowing delivery, I read him instead as Celati's cinematic double, reinforced by the fact that Celati himself provides the Italian voiceover translation for Berger's narrations.⁵ This is not the only occasion on which the two men overlap on film: Berger serves as part of Celati's traveling entourage of friends and interlocutors in *Strada provinciale delle anime*. Furthermore, as West (2000) (who, for her part, declares Berger a sort of "brother" to Celati) notes, the two were united by a shared interest "in both appearance and existence," as well as their respective clear critical voices and unfettered narrative styles (170).

Case sparse is a self-reflexive patchwork of a film, as dedicated to earnestly representing the Po Valley as it is to critically reflecting on the act. In certain scenes we hear D'Amato's monologue tracked over images of her

sitting alongside the Po or gazing out of a car with Sironi, while in others her voice accompanies landscape shots, which serve as both a setting for the stories she tells and a reminder of how the land has changed since the time in which those stories occur. In yet other scenes D'Amato is filmed while actively reciting, at the edge of a city park or in a train station waiting room, the external world inserting itself in the form of passing traffic or curious passengers. Sironi grows frustrated, running his hand over his face, as the present jovially interjects into a time and space he had hoped could be dedicated to the past.

The team of traveling researchers, including Celati and Berger, are at least as focused on analyzing video they have recently shot as on they are on watching the land passing beyond their train windows. As they scrutinize footage on a laptop computer, discussing the results of their interviews with area residents, the camera homes in on the laptop's screen. For a moment we, the external audience, become part of the team as we watch the footage alongside them. A bit of the laptop's edge is still visible on screen, however: a frame within a frame to recall our actual distance from the featured landscape; the camera's role as intermediary; and the time that has inevitably passed between their present-tense discussion of events and the moments captured visually. In both of these threads Celati highlights different representational practices, drawing out their near-proximity to both immediacy and artifice, as well as their unique capacity to communicate different angles of the region's story.

Layered over one another, D'Amato's recitation and the on-train caucus are further intercut with shots of the collapsing houses featured in the film's title. In contrast to the highly verbal threads discussed thus far, these shots feature no sound except for a slow instrumental score heavy on creaky strings. They are marked instead by vibrant color, particularly the green of plants grown rampant throughout the long-abandoned structures. Occasionally the camera tracks forward, mimicking the gaze of Celati's team and again inviting us to join them, while at other times it remains still, allowing movement to be embodied by leaves, birds, vehicles, or human bodies in the distance. Lacking narration, the shots of the houses and surrounding land pause the film's other threads, providing viewers an opportunity to simply observe on our own within the bounds of the camera's movement, to recall that seeing does indeed come "before words," to refer again to Berger's 1972 text.

Citing their likeness to still photography, Marco Belpoliti (2011) reads such shots as fixed, noting that: "Celati's cinema is made of still moments" (50, my translation). While I agree that it is a cinema of moments, I argue that they are never actually still, that the tremor of time, however slow, is always at work. Gianni Canova (2011) has made a similar argument. He suggests that Celati's relationship to image in *Case sparse* is grounded expli-

city in the passing of time, and that the author-director is most interested in capturing duration in an image, the slow temporality of the houses' actual collapse. Canova writes: "The collapse is not the before or the after of our gaze, it is the during, the meanwhile. Even if we don't perceive it, there is a time of action (and of erosion, and of decay. . .) that works incessantly on things and on the images of things. This, according to Celati, is what cinema ought to know how to show: time working inside the image, the duration of vision" (56–57, my translation). Again we might think of the painter Menini, and how his desire to capture stillness is frustrated by the "everyday tremor." It is precisely this tremor that Celati seeks to convey—especially, perhaps, at its faintest.

Writing on the time image in cinema, Deleuze (1989) notes that "a purely optical and sound situation . . . makes us grasp, it is supposed to make us grasp. . . . It is a matter of something too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful" (18). This is bold language to borrow for Celati's subtle work, veering awfully close to the sublime, but Deleuze's suggestion of grasping or having suddenly lost a tight hold is applicable here. When Celati offers visual imagery unadorned by language, he allows viewers to experience the sensorial delight of being in place, to witness for ourselves the gentle beauty found in that land. Simultaneously, by allowing us to float adrift without narration, suddenly unanchored from the larger story being told, he underscores the sense-making function of language, its ability to explain the world, as Berger writes (1972, 7).

Ultimately, *Case sparse* is as committed to linguistic expression as it is to an exploration of vision. As such, the film could have no guide more fitting than Berger, who is explicitly introduced in the film's earliest minutes as both a narrator and writer. He is shown at a picnic bench by the Po's edge, gazing out onto the landscape, papers and pen spread before him as he speaks. His English speech becomes softer as Celati's Italian translation is soon tracked over, but the two voices continue to cross paths, much like the threads of the film to follow. Berger states that the film is about derelict houses along the Po River, as well as agricultural changes and the migration of residents to more urban areas. He says that we can find many historic motivations for these shifts, but that they matter little when we actually approach the ruins of the houses and, suddenly, no longer know what to think. We need, Berger explains, "new concepts and modes of thought" that "go along with what we are perceiving." This is what Celati seeks in all of his narratives, especially but not only *Verso la foce*: a new mode of thought in harmony with that which we first see and then express, confirm, and make real through words, one that recognizes the act of perception as ongoing and ever-changing, much like the surrounding world.

NOTES

1. See Monica Seger, *Landscapes in Between: Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

2. As the author discusses in an interview with translator Marianne Schneider, he has been prone throughout his career to rewrite his texts, viewing them as fluctuating rather than fixed, and noting that “to write means to re-write and you never reach the bottom” (2008, 45, my translation).

3. Barron opts for the term translator, rather than witness, describing Celati as a translator of the “voice of the spirit of place,” whose task is to “render this voice intelligible.” I suggest the two roles are the same in Celati’s work, and note that, like witnessing, the task of translation is an action in service to a primary agent. See Barron, “Gianni Celati’s Poetic Prose,” 326.

4. I should note that others, such as Rebecca West, instead read *Strada provinciale delle anime* as being in closest relationship to *Toward the River’s Mouth*, for the film’s attention to questions not only of seeing, but also of being seen. For more, see West (2000, 128–35).

5. This reading is admittedly complicated when the film’s threads increasingly blur together and the two men appear alongside each other, standing in close conversation in the open center of an abandoned house, the documentary crew circling quietly around them.

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