

GIANNI CELATI

# Italo's Death

*Translated from Italian by Patrick Barron*

A FEW DAYS AFTER Italo Calvino's funeral I jotted down the notes that follow, in order to remind myself of the situation and the feelings of the moment. I had just returned from France, and that evening Calvino's wife (Chichita) called to tell me that Italo was dying. I left that night by car toward Siena together with Carlo Ginzburg's wife, Luisa, while Carlo arrived by train from Rome.

Luisa and I made it to Siena at half past midnight, just as Carlo was getting out of a taxi in front of the hospital. Chichita had gone to sleep at a hotel. Italo was in intensive care, where we were not allowed, being kept alive with drugs "as stipulated by the law." We called all the hotels in Siena without finding a place to sleep, and so ended up sitting in front of the hospital to wait. We were able to enter only at four, when Chichita arrived together with Giorgio Agamben, Giovanna, Aurora, François Wahl, and Italo's brother. They had already arranged Italo's body in the coffin, but in a ridiculous way, it seemed to me, putting lace around his head.

Later we all sat around a table in the hospital director's room. Chichita had to go to take care of the coffin and other things, then when she returned began to recount what had happened to Italo. While he was in a state of semiconsciousness the doctors had interrogated him at length, and Italo answered back, but always in a novelistic way. He pronounced phrases as if he were still mulling over something to write, and at a certain point said this: "The eyeglasses are the judge." Then a pataphysical joke, in French: "Je suis un abat-jour allumé" (this was due, according to Chichita, to the fact that the aneurism had caused a terrible burning in his head).

In another moment Italo woke up asking if he had had an accident. Then he told the doctors that he was thirty years old and lived on Boulevard Saint-Germain (where he would go for walks almost every evening, when I was in Paris). Before falling into the stupor that precedes a coma, he began to speak as if he were reading a book, pronouncing

these words very clearly: "Vanni di Marsio, phenomenologist . . . straight lines . . . parallel lines . . ." After this he stopped speaking.

Now his body in the coffin has been placed in the middle of a huge room in the hospital. In the coffin he seemed shrunken, his face disfigured by a large lump on his forehead, where they had opened it in order to operate. His hair was all cut off, and this too rendered him different. His lips still had a trace of his old smirk, and when I looked at him from the side opposite the lump it was easy to recognize him. The large room was full of frescoes, with velvet-upholstered chairs lining the walls, and a long narrow carpet that led to the marble table where the body had been laid out. There was a ridiculous strip of lace around the coffin that every so often was blown out of place by the wind and had to be readjusted. It was already six in the morning, and there was a beautiful light in the valley outside the window.

At seven the patients in the hospital began to file in to see the famous dead man, of whom all the newspapers had been speaking. Then many women carrying shopping bags arrived on their way to the stores. These women never wavered in their path, circling around all sides of the coffin with a humble and respectful air. Even the stores around the piazza were dominated by talk of Italo. It was a beautiful day and tourists began to appear on their way to visit the cathedral. Toward eight the town prefect arrived and greeted Chichita with a very stiff bow. Then the commander of the military police came to greet her in a very humane, almost apologetic way, then left looking upset. The prefect in contrast walked away as stiff as a piece of dried fish.

People of all sorts came, including the owner of a restaurant who greeted Chichita with affection. Military policemen, priests, nuns, patients, and nurses all came to see the body of the famous man. Children from an elementary school came accompanied by a nun, and while the nun said a prayer the children stood up on the tips of their toes in order to see the dead man. Then Natalia Ginzburg came, the person dearest to me in all that traffic. François Wahl seemed a tortured man: he muttered that a year ago his mother had died, then Foucault, and now Italo. *Sic transit gloria mundi*, I wanted to reply.

At eleven, Carlo, Luisa, and I went to a hotel. I slept until four and had a dream. In the dream there was a road under construction, and a sort of tractor was spreading gravel before laying down asphalt on the roadbed. Italo was sitting on the tractor, with his arms wrapped around himself in a habitual pose, and his lips in their old smirk. Then,

when Carlo came to wake me up, I had been dreaming that the road connected two distant cities, and Italo was involved with the construction, as if he had been a supervisor of some sort (I thought much about this dream, and of the road in it connecting two distant places).

When we returned to the hospital, the atmosphere of mourning still seemed pleasant to me. A delegation from the Communist Party had arrived, with many wreaths, many ordinary people. I liked that so many had come, everyone mixed up, priests, communists, nuns, pale provincial intellectuals who peeked timidly at his death. I liked that there was an unplanned yet still funerary procession, and that everyone little by little exited the room into the piazza to chat sadly in front of the cathedral. I also liked when the president of the Republic arrived, and all of the patients applauded him. I sat on the steps of the cathedral with Carlo; another character from the Communist Party arrived with a sympathetic air; a little rain began to fall but the sky was very calm.

Things went on in this pleasant way until seven-thirty in the evening, when they need to close the room of the hospital. Chichita said: "I can't bear to leave him here alone." Giorgio Agamben and I wanted to stay closed in the room all night to keep Italo company, but this wasn't allowed (rules!). And so we had to leave him there alone, after which perhaps Chichita told me other things. I don't remember for what reason she made me laugh, but it had to do with the fact that Italo didn't care very much for so-called social life.

We had an enjoyable dinner in a restaurant, Carlo and Luisa, Giorgio Agamben, Ginevra Bompiani. I thought about Italo's last words ("Vanni di Marsio, phenomenologist . . . straight lines . . . parallel lines . . ."). Geometry for him was an idea of clarity, and he had little love for the hole in our souls, the darkness that we have inside. He spurned these things, he rejected them. He was drawn to *l'esprit de géométrie*, like an inverted Pascal. He had recently taken to studying Husserl's phenomenology. Vanni di Marsio is a name that doesn't exist: his last words are a summary of all this.

Now, however, I realize that I have mixed up the time, because in reality the large hospital room didn't close at seven-thirty, but rather at midnight. And it was there that I began to feel uneasy. Precisely at midnight I saw emerge on the piazza four figures of high culture, with the air of bloated parasites who are ashamed to be there, who are ashamed by death. They seemed dogs with their tails between their legs, not out of sadness or mournfulness, but because grief embarrassed them. One

of them even said these exact words to me: “You know, death seems indecent to me, lacking dignity and unaesthetic.”

The next morning, at eight, everything took a turn for the worse. With every minute that passed the situation became less bearable. All the newspapers carried the front-page news of Italo’s death, but not one article was worth reading. Calvino was becoming the symbol of a sort of privilege, the symbol of literature as an elite privilege, a mirage that for the first time since D’Annunzio had begun to spread again. Italo, who had for many years derided the mania of “playing the writer,” who had resisted giving in to the comfort of a “famous name,” was now becoming a decoy. In a return to an industrial form of D’Annunzio-like mythology, literature officially joins the host of advertised consumer goods, turning into a montage of “famous names” flapped about by the newspapers, followed by aspirants to the privileged role of the “writer” who pop out like mice in search of cheese.

Toward eleven they had all arrived, one by one, to do what, I couldn’t tell, all embarrassed by grief. They came to look at Italo, slipping past as fast as possible, our men of culture, representatives from the upper classes, the bloated parasites. And then immediately after this they gathered to chat about fashionable topics in front of the hospital. It was clear that each one had an orbit to follow, each making an appearance to a series of notable personages. I saw that Italo was now completely in their hands, a death of the Upper Caste: he was their celebrated representative at whom they had come to peek out of duty, before returning to buzz about in their orbits.

I wandered here and there listening to the orbiters in the piazza. They were speaking about books, their books, their successes, their important acquaintances, their articles in newspapers, things that must be read, things that mustn’t be read. I heard someone say, speaking of a book he was about to publish: “It’s going to be a big success.” Then someone said: “And we’ll have it translated into French right away.” They were so absorbed in their dealings that grief didn’t even distantly occur to them. In a bar I met Umberto Eco, who, seeing me eat a pastry, greeted me with this joke: “Shall we hold a feast in honor of the dead?” He had to leave in a hurry—they were waiting for him in Bologna.

Around noon I too felt like leaving in a hurry, but I couldn’t because I was with Carlo and Luisa. There in the piazza I watched the orbiters circulating, all puffed up with the gas of culture, all carrying

on and feeding on judgments, all constantly trading judgements, this being their main incentive. The judgments echoed in their orbits, with those aspiring to make it compelled to imitate the others, in order to gain access to the orbits, this being their main incentive. Apart from the representatives of the cultural Upper Caste there weren't many other people in the piazza, strangely even empty of tourists.

I traveled by car with Carlo and Luisa to the cemetery near Roccamare, through a hilly landscape full of muted colors. On the road toward Grosseto, among freshly plowed fields and on a beautiful September day, we felt a strong desire to talk about Italo. We thought about when he had introduced us, sixteen years ago, with this compulsory order: "Become friends!" From that point on Carlo and I didn't stop arguing, until that moment in which we started to feel like true friends.

The Castiglione della Pescaia Cemetery, on a high promontory. Here there is a clear division between the classes. The Upper Caste is clustered around the tomb's hole that is being cemented shut, while the natives have climbed up on walls and are watching everything from afar. The mayor of Castiglione della Pescaia had flyers posted that paid tribute to Italo as a "local author," but nothing of the funeral seemed local. Everything stank of publicity and elitism. A photographer snapped a shot of Natalia Ginzburg crying. All around me I heard many people speaking a sophisticated French from the best circles of Parisian society. There was nothing left to do but escape in a hurry. Chichita could barely stay on her feet and didn't even recognize me when we embraced.

Luckily Carlo and Luisa were there, and as we left by car we felt very close. If I cried that evening it was because everything had gone, with nothing left to do but leave that cynical and deceptive place. All of so-called high culture had at last found a dead man who could lift it up from its baseness, and personally I felt my own misery no different than Italo's. What comes to mind of Italo are his quirky expressions of a young boy that often revealed how he never felt at ease in life, and how he could play the fool when he wanted, things that don't appear in newspapers and that lack interest for university professors: because our dark side, which at moments becomes our most radiant one, is not easily rendered in the language of high culture.