

Book review

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Carmelo Bene, *I Appeared to the Madonna*, translated and with a preface by Carole Viers-Andronico, Contra Mundum Press: New York, London, and Melbourne, 2020; 239 pp.: 9781940625355, US\$22 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Gianluca Rizzo, Colby College, USA

Carmelo Bene is a giant within the Italian tradition of experimental writing of the second half of the 20th century. It is difficult to exaggerate his importance, the impact he has had on his contemporaries, or how deeply influential a resource he has been for those of my generation, who have come to know him through his films, the recordings of his performances, as well as his numerous books. In the present climate of cultural restoration and conformism, it is not surprising that, a mere generation after his death, he has been almost completely forgotten. This is why the project of translating a significant portion of his oeuvre into English (this first volume, translator Carole Viers-Andronico's preface promises, is but the beginning) takes on heroic tinges, and merits our whole-hearted applause.

This new incarnation of *I Appeared to the Madonna* contains, in addition to the titular text, another work: *An Autographical Portrait*. In it, Bene clarifies how work (that is, writing and acting, but anything “productive” more generally) is an option of last resort, a consolation from the profound, existential injustice of not having been born a millionaire. The real aspiration of any reasonable human being, Bene argues, should be to become inorganic, and thus reactionary. However, when afflicted by a chronic lack of money, one must find something to do. When it comes to the arts, the only option is to undo, erase, un-write, un-speak. One must begin from the end, and then, as much as possible, try to go nowhere. This is nihilism only on the surface. Bene is advocating for a life that is cruelly deliberate, intensely antagonistic toward reality in all of its denominations (social, historical, linguistic), resolutely hostile to meaning. The foe he elected as his adversary, in a sparring exercise that lasted an entire lifetime, was language itself. In brief, and to use his own words, “it started off that it was already done,” that is “cominciò che era già finita,” and given that premise the only rational option that remained was obstruction, sabotage, radical and unmoving opposition. But what untold treasures can be unearthed while squandering language (tradition, the self, theater, literature, etc.)!

The book's half-title page aptly describes the main event, *I Appeared to the Madonna*, as “less factual autobiography & more autobiographical poem [...] this

incendiary testament of Bene's life includes tales of his combative encounters with critics, the public, and his iconoclastic views on theater, cinema, poetry & more . . ." The unusual title (which comes from one of its chapters, the re-telling of a most memorable, emotionally charged performance that took place in Bologna in 1981), merits a brief justification. C.B. doesn't offer any; or, rather, as is typical for him, he offers a collection of paradoxes. In trying to make sense of it, one cannot help but notice the inversion, the switching of roles, the parody, or perhaps the tragedy of the body of an actor turned into an astral projection and sent to visit the Holy Virgin. Yet, there is more: at the second, or third reading one begins to realize that "sono apparso" is not a simple past, that is to say, it is not equivalent to "I appeared." Like many other verbs in Bene's theoretical externalizations, it should be understood as given in the passive voice: "Dicevo. Sono apparso. È un indicibile – tutt'altro dal passato riflettente – verbo passivo. Sono detto. Son'io quella Signora." "I was saying. I appeared/I am appeared. It is something unspeakable – something completely different from a reflecting past – a verb in the passive voice. I am said. I am that Lady." It doesn't happen very often that a subject speaks; more often, it is spoken by language. This elementary, yet earth-shattering realization (from Rimbaud to Lacan, from Marinetti to Duchamp) is the most enduring legacy of the historical avant-gardes. And so, far from being the master of the sentence or the protagonist of his performance, Bene's body is the object of a projection: the nothingness, the absence that is Bene's actorial machine (one of the key concepts of his anthropology of the theater) is used as a canvas on which he is appeared, while the holy Virgin makes her absence known. Furthermore, that "alla," that "to" could be interpreted as carrying a more antagonistic meaning (that is, "in the face of," "against"), or perhaps it could be a misspelling of "à la," to indicate an apparition "in the fashion of," the Madonna.

This will serve as a sample of the linguistic complexities welcoming any translator and interpreter of C.B. and his textual devices. Wordplay like that is extremely common in this volume, and is one of the main vehicles for the propagation of a radically heretical artistic practice, founded on the "un-staging" of plays: "*Io* (il C.B. teatrale) *sono quanto mi manca*. È teatro inesistente stanco d'esserci. È l'eterna sdrammatizzazione come smontaggio," "*I* (the theatrical C.B.) *am what I lack*. It's a non-existing theater tired of being there. It's the eternal playing down understood as un-editing." And one can clearly see the practice of negation ("un-," "non-") elevated to philosophical praxis and aesthetics.

Another crucial tool deployed by Bene in this "incendiary testament" is the anecdote. His artistic reflection proceeds by accumulation: the aphorism follows and concludes the parable; the paradox introduces the apologue. The whole is constantly attempting to recreate that original epiphany that started the creative process. Here is an astonishing example of these short narratives. In the text titled "Palco di prosa (Giuseppe Di Stefano)," Bene describes his first encounter with "teatro di prosa," that is drama. As a boy, he went to see the opera quite often. Melodrama, to him, was synonymous with theater. This one time, however, his aunt takes him to see a play instead. "Why aren't they singing?" young Carmelo asks. "Why do they keep talking

about their business instead of singing?" he managed to articulate, before being shushed. To him, that performance was just an emptiness waiting to be filled by song. How can there be theater without music, drama without *melos*? What young Bene found incomprehensible, older Bene kept investigating, turning it into an artistic praxis. An event interrupted before it could even start: "cominciò che era già finita." A performance diminished, truncated, the expression of an absence, the assiduous sabotage of representation: this is the theater Bene has relentlessly practiced throughout his life.

He saw writing as the corpse of the voice, and in order to escape the stench of its decay, an actor must cast away the letter of the text he is performing, as he tries to revive its spirit. The obscurity was part of the process. Language was all-important, and when facing it, he assumed a hostile posture. To write was to fight; to live was to inhabit that battle. Bene's gnomic style exploits assonances, consonances, and all the assorted trickery of the signifier. It is evasive, puzzling, restless. How can one begin to translate all that? And yet it must be done, for the world needs Bene, even if it still doesn't know it. Dr Viers-Andronico puts up a vigorous fight, one that must be admired for its courage and persistence. Even under normal circumstances, the exercise of translating is but an attempt at failing ever more beautifully, ever more generously. Dr Viers-Andronico calls it "to stare into an empty mirror identical to the one Bene embodied." Indeed, when facing Bene's writing one has to remain on the defensive, assume a bellicose attitude, and finally pick a fight one aspires to lose. Footnotes, the translator's only true friend, would have helped in a number of situations where the polysemy of the original offered no quarter. Yet, it is understandable that Dr Viers-Andronico chose not to take that path: it could have led to the writing of a second, parallel book, one that C.B.'s notorious intolerance for all kinds of pedantry would not have suffered. The volume in front of us is a magnificent first step in the right direction, so that a new readership may begin to appreciate the absolute genius that was Carmelo Bene.