



# Portraits of Claudio: the butterfly, the dragon and the marmot

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Among the many memories I have of Claudio there is one I would like to tell. Many many years ago, probably in the mid-1980s, we were having dinner with other people at the house of a mutual friend in Milan. We were playing a game – one of those after-dinner psychological party games. Each of us was asked to write secretly on a piece of paper the answer to the following questions. Each answer was to be given in terms of animals, associating a specific animal to each answer, with each answer then confronted and cross-evaluated. It was basically an exercise in self-description and self-exposure:

- How do you think other people see you?
- What would you like to appear to other people?
- What do you feel you really are?

Claudio's answers to the three questions were the following:

- a butterfly
- a dragon
- a marmot

These answers by Claudio have always been imprinted in my mind. I believe they reflect an astonishingly accurate self-portrait of his multi-faceted character. They reveal a deep and perhaps unsuspected self-awareness of his own being and acting in the world. These animals, produced as metaphors to portray himself, are a sort of instant self-representation.

## The butterfly

Claudio thought others saw him as a butterfly. Butterflies fly randomly here and there, from flower to flower, apparently getting very little rest. They are mobile, fragile and light, and often brightly coloured. Since I met him in 1979, Claudio spent very little time resting in the same place. He was always 'on the move', as he used to say, never in one spot with his full being. Rather, his life was in movement, ubiquity and connectedness. Always arriving from somewhere else, often from far away, and reaching out to some other place. He was a network agent, bouncing from place to place, getting the good from one place and releasing it in other places and to other people. Not so different from a *clericus vagans* in the Middle Ages. By doing that, perhaps as a side effect of his own restless character, he became a carrier and medium of ideas for many people who happened to encounter him. Many of us have been connected *via* Claudio. However, he also gave people the feeling of being impermanent and uncatchable. And, as his butterfly metaphor tells us, he was perfectly aware of it. He knew that he was perceived as such by people and that he projected the image of a restless, ubiquitous human being, uncapable of sitting and dwelling for long. Forcing him to dwell would have been like catching him with a net, arresting his flight and killing his liveliness, turning his mobile lightness

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into inert heaviness. To some people the lightness of his being was literally unbearable. Sometimes he was perceived as an unreliable person, who could not really be harnessed into anything. Though his stays were short, his human and scientific impact was always significant. Very rapidly, in short and intense bursts of communication, he would tell you things that he had noticed and picked up around the world, produce and exchange ideas, sketch new projects, and all this often mixed with lively stories of his own life experiences and people he had met.

### The dragon

Claudio wished to be a dragon, amazing people and overcoming his natural shyness. In 1983, my wife Grazia was writing her thesis on Marianne Moore, the American poet, and with Claudio we would often read and talk about Moore's poetry when we were together. He loved that very short poem that says:

If I, like Solomon, ...  
Could have my wish –  
my wish... O to be a dragon,  
a symbol of the power of Heaven – of silkworm  
size and immense; at times invisible.  
Felicitous phenomenon!

The dragon evokes the idea of power, a force overwhelming and irresistible, going beyond human control and understanding. Claudio wished to impress and surprise with his physical appearance and by firing out words from his mouth. His care for his body, which he wanted physically powerful, and for his sporting performances, of which he was very proud, was a means to gain the respect and admiration of friends. He wanted to leave his mark wherever he went. But the dragon is also a strange and portentous creature, a prodigy, an imaginary being that upsets people and unsettles the ordinary cosmology of earthly life. So, one of his games was to shock people. His trespassing assumed playful ways, often with minimal acts of behavior, like leaving his office in a perfect cycling suit to go on a bicycle ride at noon, or arriving on the beach wearing earphones with a small in-built radio and an antenna sticking out of his head, which gave him a funny extra-terrestrial look, or by making a novel connection between ideas while swimming in the sea and quickly rushing back to the shore to fix it on a piece of paper.

Handling dragons is not easy. They can burn and kill with their firing mouths. Indeed, when Claudio manifested himself in his dragon-like behaviors, some people perceived him as a threat – as something that should be avoided or handled with care. That's why people often reacted by avoiding or opposing him, in ways that he could not quite understand and that offended him. He complained about it, and could not really bear such people. This was definitely a consequence of his willful, dragon-like character, which could be imposing at times.

To me, wishing to be a dragon reveals Claudio's wish to go beyond his own being, but also his aim at transcending the normal routine of ordinary life and going beyond what we take for granted in the surrounding reality. In fact, he had sometimes the power to transfigure events and situations, and himself too, as he did once when we were watching the sunset on a deserted beach in Sardinia: he said that in such beauty he felt like being a semi-god, a heavenly creature.

If being a dragon was Claudio's wish – well – I believe that – at least in part – he made that wish come true. Indeed, in his research work he trespassed disciplinary boundaries, linking concepts and theories, and storming the IT landscape with an impact that only a dragon-like creature, gifted with extraordinary powers, can produce.

### The marmot

Claudio felt like a marmot. This is quite puzzling. What does this short-legged, sturdy rodent of unusual size have to do with Claudio? How could he see a marmot in himself? What a contrast with the butterfly and the dragon! Marmots are shy and clumsy animals that hide away from human sight and presence. Those of you who have walked the high tracks of the Dolomites, as Claudio often used to do in the summer time, perhaps have had the chance to see marmots coming out of their burrows to keep watch of trekkers passing by. Claudio was a shy person, and his natural shyness gave him a touch of goofiness in human interaction. But there was a special gentleness, too, in his way of acting, listening and talking. Marmots are lazy: they hibernate in winter and like to lie in the sun in the summer season. Contrary to what people might have perceived of him, there was in Claudio's character a sort of vigilant idleness, which made his mind open to fantasies, novelties and dreams. Some of his best work took shape lying lazily on Mediterranean beaches, the island of Stromboli being his favourite spot.

At that time, in the mid-1980s, by evoking the marmot, in my perception of it, Claudio pointed at the fact that he felt out of place in the world – be it the Italian academic establishment or the social common places. He felt constrained by the surrounding environment and forced to hide underground for long periods, waiting to develop his full potential. But he felt he could reach out to higher grounds, which he did only later in his life and career, when his value and work were finally recognized after many years of tireless and patient rodent activity. As is not unusual, he was appreciated more around the world, especially in Scandinavia and in the United Kingdom, than in his own home country, which he nevertheless chose to be his last burrow and his final resting place.

For a long time Claudio's explorations of new research grounds and paths have been invisible most of the time, or perhaps only visible to a few, like the galleries marmots dig underground. Now lots of people around begin to see that those apparently random wanderings were not the idle reveries of a dreamer or the frenzies of a madman,

but had an underlying logic and an inner order. There was method in them. But there was more: there was passion and felicity. This is what has made Claudio

unique as a human being and a researcher and will make him unforgettable.

Ciao Claudio, felicitous phenomenon!

### About the author

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