

# “Speech within speech”: The writing of Antonio Tabucchi<sup>1</sup>

Rita Wilson  
Department of Modern Languages and Literatures  
University of the Witwatersrand  
JOHANNESBURG

I feel multiple. I am like a room with innumerable fantastic mirrors that distort by false reflections one single pre-existing reality which is not there in any of them and is there in them all.

(Fernando Pessoa, “Toward Explaining Heteronymy”)

Memory is a strange thing / all by itself. Through which / words, incidents, people will / move like snow or like dust.

(Breyten Breytenbach, (1989) “A Kind of Telling”)

## Abstract

### “Speech within speech”: the writing of Antonio Tabucchi

*The narrator of Antonio Tabucchi's 1991 novel **Requiem** has an appointment with a dead poet. During the twenty-four hours which he spends in Lisbon waiting to keep his appointment, he undertakes a physical journey through the city, which turns out to be also a parallel journey of the anima through memory. The journey is initiated by a book, **Livro do Desassossego** (*The book of disquietude*), by Fernando Pessoa, the “great poet” who awaits the narrator in the city of this novel.*

*This paper examines Tabucchi's “dialogue with the dead”, both within this text and across other Tabucchi texts. It endeavours to show how Tabucchi's recuperation of Pessoa becomes the recognition of the Other's voices within one's own unconscious, enabling the exploration of repressed discourse.*

---

1 A version of this paper was presented at the SAVAL mini-congress, April 1995, University of Natal, Durban

## 1. Introduction

Antonio Tabucchi, in the introductory "Note" to his novel, *Requiem*<sup>2</sup> explains that this story is the "*Requiem* that the character I refer to as 'I' was called on to perform in this book" (5). It is clear from the outset that the traditional meaning of *requiem* is both subverted and expanded<sup>3</sup>. The writer, conscious of committing a transgressive act and with a generous dose of irony, tells us that he prefers Portuguese and the harmonica to Latin and the organ. This type of explicit authorial intervention, in which the reader is lured into accepting co-responsibility for the multiplicity of possible meanings in his writings, is common to Tabucchi's works of fiction. The intertextual, intercultural elements are evident from the pre-text, the Author's Note, in which he expresses his need to communicate with the reader *about* his own text, alerting the reader to the contrived nature of his story(ies) and in which one finds the first of many quotations. Indeed, quotation, in Jakobson's sense of "speech within speech", is a dominant narrative mode in this story and serves to divorce the various characters from their own discourse.

Quotation may also be seen as the appropriation of another's speech and, to the extent that a person is constituted by his/her discourse, such an appropriation implies, at least partly, an interpenetration of personalities. The most evident example of such interpenetration is shown by Tabucchi's choice of Portuguese as his medium of expression in *Requiem*. Tabucchi rejects his first language (Italian) in favour of another "mother-tongue" which, as the language of his mentor, "the great poet" Fernando Pessoa<sup>4</sup>, represents for him "a place of affection and reflection".

---

2 First published in Portugal with the title *Requiem uma aluçindão* (Lisbon : Quetzal Editores, 1991). Translated into Italian by Sergio Vecchio (Milan : Feltrinelli, 1992) and into English by Margaret Jull Costa (London : Harvill, 1994). All page references are from the English edition.

3 In Western culture a *requiem* is a special mass (usually sung) for the repose of the souls of the dead. The term is also used to refer to a musical setting for this (e.g. Verdi's *Requiem*). The Latin word (*requies*) also means rest, quiet, peace.

4 Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) is considered Portugal's greatest modern poet and one of the great figures of European literature this century. "Pessoa is famous for three poetic heteronyms – Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis – but there were at least seventy-two 'dramatis personae' in Pessoa's theatre of himself, which lives on [...] in the mass of hopelessly disconnected, interconnecting texts [27, 453 items] now housed in the National Library of

In this 1991 novel, that should be a requiem but could be many other things, the I-narrator has an appointment with the dead poet:

I THOUGHT: the bloke isn't going to turn up. And then I thought: I can't call him a 'bloke', he's a great poet, perhaps the greatest poet of the twentieth century, he died years ago, I should treat him with respect or, at least, with deference. Meanwhile, however, I was beginning to get fed up. The late July sun was blazing down and I thought: Here I am on holiday, I was having a really nice time at my friends' house in the country in Azeitão, so why did I agree to this meeting here on the quayside?, it's utterly absurd. And, at my feet, I glimpsed the silhouette of my shadow and that seemed absurd to me too, incongruous, senseless; it was a brief shadow, crushed by the midday sun, and it was then that I remembered: He said twelve o'clock, but perhaps he meant twelve o'clock at night, because that's when ghosts appear, at midnight. [...] I thought: What am I doing here in Lisbon on the last Sunday in July? (11; 1994 translation).

Tabucchi, much like his Anglophone counterparts, inscribes and subverts in the text literary conventions through the rewriting of modernist *topoi*, referring especially to the literary production of the Portuguese poet Pessoa.

## 2. Self-reflexivity and reversibility

In a 1978 essay, Tabucchi stated that the most notable characteristic of twentieth-century literature has been the "fracture" between art and life within the modernist antihero<sup>5</sup>.

Pessoa suggests to Tabucchi that a more productive relationship between self and other is possible. Pessoa objectifies subjective experience in order to propose his own torment as a "universal norm".

Tabucchi's collection of short stories, *Il gioco del rovescio* (1981), literally "the game of reversal", is thematically centred on the frequent opposition between appearance and reality and is a homage to the chameleon-like Pessoa. In the Preface, the author declares that the book was dictated by the discovery that "una certa cosa che era così, era invece anche in un altro modo" ("a certain

---

Lisbon" (Richard Zenith, "Introduction" to Pessoa, 1991:viii). Tabucchi has translated much of Pessoa's work and has written several critical studies on the poet.

- 5 "[I] fare poesia e il riflettere su fare poesia è l'unica 'azione' concessa all'uomo nullità, è una vita mentale che sostituisce la vita reale, è la letteratura che sostituisce la realtà fattuale" (Tabucchi, 1978:159).

thing that was like this, was instead also in another way"; Tabucchi, 1981:5) and for the reader the reversal becomes the possibility of multiple solutions because reality is as it appears but it is also different, surprising and ungraspable.

Tabucchi explores the manner in which narrative "structures how we see ourselves and how we construct our notion of self in the present and in the past" (Hutcheon, 1989:7). Thus, in Tabucchi's work the means by which we interpret reality are interrogated. It is precisely his questioning of individual and collective realities that distinguishes him from the majority of contemporary Italian writers.

For example, in a chapter of *I volatili del Beato Angelico* (1987), entitled "Storia di una storia che non c'è" ("Story of a story that doesn't exist"), the persona is an author who destroyed the only manuscript of his novel, *Oltre la fine* ("Beyond the end"). The annihilation of the manuscript, we are told, may have been "un tributo, un omaggio, un sacrificio o una penitenza" ("a tribute, a homage, a sacrifice or a penance"; Tabucchi, 1987:61). The writer, in any case, is left with the memory of his manuscript and with the phantasmal voices of potential literary creations that inhabit his nights of insomnia. Tabucchi's "oltre" (his "beyond") aims at intersubjective dialogue. Tabucchi's persona purposely acts as a "mirror of its own structuration" interacting "with its environment to change its own reflection" (Ragland-Sullivan, 1987:7).

The "dialogue with the dead", as Tabucchi has called the reading of texts, has been an important theme in his recent literary production. Tabucchi seems to have arrived at the conclusion that the active participation of the individual in the present not only determines the future, but rewrites the past. The writing of the present (and its preservation in texts) necessitates a re-interpretation of the past that identifies the determining factors operating in history. Of extreme importance, then, is the manner in which we live our "frattempo", as he calls the human lifespan. We must search for our own "poetry", a simple, but practicable *modus vivendi*.

### **3. A recuperation of the other voice(s)**

Tabucchi's "dialogue with the dead" is most evident in his recuperation of Pessoa. This intertextual, interior dialogue, becomes the recognition of the Other's voices within one's own unconscious, enabling the exploration of repressed discourse. Pessoa gives explicit voice to the repressed forces perceived operating in his unconscious through the creation of other poets, heteronyms, complete with their own biographies, somatic features, aesthetic preferences, world views, poetic styles and personalities. The self, having

purposely cast aside its monolithic façade, acknowledges the presence of the alien discourse within and is free to analyze its interactions with the Other.

Tabucchi chooses to engage with the voice(s) of the Other by employing various intertextual strategies. His metafiction is not an end unto itself, but serves as a point of departure, the basis for the development of a perspective that must conflict with that realised by the poet who represents Tabucchi's dialectic counterpart.

When, for example, the protagonist of *Requiem* speaks to the Young Junky<sup>6</sup>, who asks him for money for a fix, he states that he is a middle-class intellectual full of prejudices who favours drugs in principle but, in practice, is against them, and adds that he can only accept the use of drugs in certain moments, in private, "in the company of intelligent and cultivated friends, listening to Mozart or Erik Satie" (12). After which the 'I' embarks on a speech on Satie, explaining that he was a great avant-garde French musician from the Surrealist period, until the poor junky, experiencing withdrawal symptoms, renews his request for money, saying:

I could have been aggressive, I could have threatened you, I could have played the hardened addict, but no, I was friendly, pleasant, we even chatted about music and you still won't give me two hundred *escudos* [...] Besides, the one hundred *escudo* notes are cool, they've got a picture of Fernando Pessoa on them, [...] do you like Pessoa? (13).

The two discourses denote two incompatible realities arising from two divergent world visions, namely that of the "educated middle-class" and that of the "marginalised". The irony originates from the abyss that separates them and that is enjoyed by the reader only. But this dialogue also serves the purpose of drawing the reader away from the familiar, secure, known world into something more strange, more improbable, more unstable.

The confusion between dream and reality is maintained throughout the first chapter until the protagonist meets an old man whom he is certain he has met before and to whom he confesses not knowing what is happening:

My problem is that I don't know why I'm here, it's as if it were all an hallucination, I can't really explain it to you, I don't even know what I mean, let's just say I was in Azeitão, do you know Azeitão?, well, that's where I

---

6 All the names of the characters in *Requiem* are contingent upon that character's function in the text "not upon a familiar corpus of names in reality. This disconnects the text from any stable external referent, and calls attention to its artifice" (Peter Stoicheff in Hayles, 1991:87).

was, at a friend's house, in their garden, sitting under a big tree there, a mulberry tree I think, I was stretched out in a deckchair reading a book I particularly like and then I found myself suddenly here, ah, now I remember, it was in *The Book of Disquiet*, you're the Lame Lottery-Ticket Seller who was always bothering Bernardo Soares<sup>7</sup>, that's where I met you, in the book I was reading under the mulberry tree in the garden of a farmhouse in Azeitão (14).

The Lame Lottery-Ticket Seller acknowledges the narrator's sense of disquiet for he too often feels as if he had walked out of a book. He asks whether the narrator would prefer to speak English or French to avoid the confusion caused by the complicated forms of address in Portuguese. While admitting to his Italian identity/origin, the protagonist insists: "I'd rather speak Portuguese, this is a Portuguese adventure after all, and I don't want to step outside my adventure" (15).

On the one hand there is an affirmation of the possibility of exiting from the text, on the other, is the possibility of migrating from one text to another. In this way the reader's attention is drawn to the fictionality of the text as a linguistic construction and a dialogue is established between the world of the page and the outside world as well as between one written text and another for, as Umberto Eco would say, "books often speak of books".

In addition, a meta-philosophical/psychological dialogue is initiated by the Lame Lottery-Ticket Seller who claims to believe "in the soul in the vital, collective sense, perhaps even in a Spinozist sense" (16). When the "I" responds that he does not know whether his soul or his unconscious brought him to the garden where they are now talking, the Lame Lottery-Ticket Seller reacts by affirming that the "unconscious is something found in the Viennese bourgeoisie at the turn of the century, we're in Portugal here and you yourself are Italian, we belong to the South, to the Graeco-Roman civilisation, we have nothing to do with Central Europe, no, we have soul" (16).

This conversation does nothing to dispel the sense of confusion experienced by the narrator who is not sure whether he is dreaming or not: "I'm dreaming, but

---

7 The *Livro do Desassossego*, first published in 1982, is the "factless autobiography" of Bernardo Soares, one of the 72 literary personae created by Pessoa. There are three English versions of this text, all published in 1991: *The book of disquietitude* (translated by Richard Zenith, Manchester : Carcanet, cited in bibliography); *The book of disquiet* (translated by Alfred MacAdam, New York : Pantheon Books) and *The book of disquiet. A selection* (translated by Iain Watson, London : Quartet Books).

what I dream seems to me to be real, and I have to meet certain people who exist only in my memory” (17). The Lame Lottery-Ticket Seller replies quite matter of factly that this last Sunday of July, when the city is deserted and it is 40 degrees in the shade, is the right moment for encountering people that only live in memories.

In both the conversations with the Young Junky and the Lame Lottery-Ticket Seller the reader is aware of the presence of a referent that takes its meaning from the real world, yet the dividing line between fiction and reality is continuously crossed and meaning is produced by a relativising process which originates in the play upon ambivalences.

The ambiguity stems from the fact that what is happening could be an hallucination, a dream, a product of the protagonist’s imagination but it could also be something else. The protagonist appears to have lost himself in the labyrinth of the unconscious/of the soul/of memory and, thus, in the past, while simultaneously living in the present of that day. The reader is faced with two different coexisting dimensions which are continuously superimposed making it impossible to decide whether the narrated events belong to a real or an imaginary dimension<sup>8</sup>.

While *Requiem* conforms to the parameters of the fantastic in that it keeps the reader in a state of uncertainty, it transcends the category of the fantastic laid out by Todorov<sup>9</sup> by questioning itself on the nature of truth and reality. At a textual level, this is done through a subversion of traditional literary norms and,

---

8 In this respect, Rosemary Jackson (1981:13-60) points out that the fantastic is always based on the dichotomy possible/real vis-a-vis impossible/unreal. These two categories must undoubtedly coexist in fantasy literature in that the possible cannot exist without the impossible, that is, the fantastic cannot exist independently of the real world. The fantastic thus violates the real but cannot escape it. If the fantastic is a violation of the real without which it cannot exist and with which it lives in a symbiotic relation to the real, what emerges is that the fantastic is a literary mode that because of its border-line existence between two worlds, traces the boundaries of the possible and the impossible, and consequently questions itself on the nature of the real and the unreal, and in return, undermines the idea that reality presents a single coherent unity.

9 Todorov (1987:25) states that the “fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event”.

at a thematic level, through passing from epistemological to ontological issues<sup>10</sup>.

At the end of the first chapter, the reader must already conclude that "it is necessary to engage in dialogue the discourse of the Other in order to end the individual's isolation through an enhanced understanding of the dialectical nature of intersubjectivity" (Francesse, 1991:193). In other words, the subject must seek out his/her identity in another.

#### **4. Walking in no man's land**

Some of the difficulties in fostering such a dialogue are exemplified by the spatial and temporal gaps in the narration. For example, the second chapter ends with the narrator in a cemetery where, in front of the tomb of his friend Tadeus, he loudly proclaims that he has come to visit him. The third chapter opens with Tadeus begging him to enter his home, a home that, according to his friend, is well known to him seeing that he spent most of his childhood there. The reader is forced to ask how the protagonist could have moved from the cemetery, at the end of chapter two, to Tadeus's home, at the beginning of chapter three, from the dead to the living. This displacement is continuously underlined in the story, giving the reader the impression that the narration is situated exactly in the intermediate space between the two shifts, from and towards Azeitão. Time and space are not construed as autonomous, objective data, but are represented as part of a social process by which all human knowledge is objectified.

We know that the story begins at twelve o'clock on the last Sunday of July and finishes precisely twelve hours later, at midnight. The apparently precise time references are, however, of no help in determining the "when" of the events. The story takes place in the past, that is, it has already taken place, but the "I thought", with which the book begins, is ambiguous. The "at the time", to which the verb refers, points to an indefinite past. Furthermore, the protagonist often refers to the garden of Azeitão, where he was, before ending up on the

---

10 Brian McHale in *Postmodernist fiction* (1989:10) states that the dominant concern from modernism to postmodernism moves from "problems of 'knowing' to problems of 'modes of being'". On this see also S. Connor, *Postmodernist culture* (1987), L. McCaffery (ed.), *Postmodern fiction* (1986), F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism* (1984), D.B. Dowling and S. Bazargan (eds.), *Image and ideology in modern/postmodern discourse* (1991), G. Vattimo, *La società trasparente* (1989), N. Wakefield, *The twilight of the real* (1990), R. Boyne and A. Rattasi (eds.), *Postmodernism and society* (1990).

pier in Lisbon (1). Two phases of the past thus exist, a remote one and a closer one that, however, descends to a more remote past when the protagonist returns to the streets known to him during his childhood. He speaks to his father, as a young man, who appears before him dressed as a sailor because “it’s 1932” (48), he visits the lighthouse where he lived before 1971 or he remembers taking the picture on Tadeus’s tomb in 1965. There are many dates in the story but together they do not help the reader give an exact temporal dimension to the narrated events. Furthermore, the protagonist breaches the temporal barrier when he meets the dead. One might think that the dead belong to his memories only and, because everything that belongs to memories is atemporal, the reader should not be surprised by the movement from past to present and vice versa seeing that what is in the mind “is”. Nevertheless, the problem is further complicated by the dead re-emerging from point “x” in their past life and passing to the narratorial present, and as they walk, dine and talk, it becomes impossible to dismiss them as simple hallucinations or ghosts. Therefore, we can infer that the use of space and time by Tabucchi in *Requiem*, corresponds to what McHale (1989:43-94) defines as “zone”.

The zone is a physical place that at first appears normal but on closer examination presents areas whose location cannot be established, as in the case of Tadeus’s home or the restaurant of Casimiro. Even time undergoes a strange process in the zone. The story, as we know, takes place in a span of twelve hours, from midday to midnight, but within this temporal lapse, the clock hands go wild, the past re-emerges into the present breaking chronology and, thus, entering a dimension where everything is possible, namely, the zone. The Lisbon in which the protagonist moves is inhabited but the people never have direct contact with him. If we examine the places he visits, we discover that they are all deserted; the city is empty, there are no customers at Casimiro’s restaurant, the pier of Alcântara, the bar of the museum, the Casa do Alentejo and the train are all deserted. The protagonist moves in a zone where people live but whose boundaries are displaced. Therefore, this zone cannot be considered an unreal space but rather a border-line between the real and the unreal.

The wanderings of the protagonist in this zone are guided by chance. At the onset of this story he begins to perspire heavily due to the heat. It being Sunday, all the shops are closed and as he is in need of a change of shirt, he is taken to the cemetery of Prazeres by the taxidriver where there is a small gypsy market. Here he buys two shirts from an old gypsy who warns:

[T]his can’t go on, you can’t live in two worlds at once, in the world of reality and in the world of dreams, that kind of thing leads to hallucinations, you’re like a sleepwalker walking through a landscape with your arms outstretched,

and everything you touch becomes a part of your dream [...] What should I do?, I asked, tell me. Right now you can't do anything, she replied, [...] you can't escape your fate, it will be a day of tribulations but also a day of purification, afterwards, my dear, you may perhaps be able to feel at peace with yourself [...] I see you have to visit someone, she said, but the house you're looking for exists only in your memory or in your dream, you can tell the taxi not to wait for you, the person you're looking for is right here, on the other side of that gate. She pointed in the direction of the cemetery and said, off you go, my love, you have an appointment to keep (25-26).

Without doubt, the protagonist deviates from his original path towards Rua das Pedras Negras because of uncontrollable perspiration. However, as the story progresses, we discover that the cause of his excessive perspiration may be ascribed to an acute state of anxiety rather than to the heat. When he enters the cemetery to meet Tadeus we realise that he is no longer bathed in perspiration and does not perspire for the remainder of the story except in two other instances, both preceding important encounters related to unresolved past issues: the meaning of the cryptic phrase written by Tadeus as he was dying, "Blame it all on herpes zoster" (34) and the reason for Isabel's suicide. The perspiration, then, is a symptom of psychological unease, manifesting itself in crucial moments of his incongruous journey, a journey which by now we can deduce is guided not by chance but by the Unconscious.

The anxiety attacks are partially caused by the subject continuously questioning the reality of the situation in which he finds himself: all certainty falls away and he ceases to feel as if his mind is a centralising mechanism with the power to discern and to unify.

Because the transition from this world to the world of the dead occurs, as we have seen, without warning, it becomes evident that the author is not concerned with making the transition credible, that is, in concealing the rift between real and unreal, but rather in activating the transition in an abrupt manner to draw the reader's attention to the fictitious nature of the text. The boundaries between fiction and reality are further blurred during the visit to the lighthouse, when the protagonist tells the guard that the last time he stayed there, he was writing a "strange story, a story without a solution" (76) that later changed his life because

[t]hat same year someone imitated my story, or rather, the story became flesh, was transubstantiated, and I had to live that crazy story all over again, but this time for real, this time the characters inhabiting the story weren't made of paper, they were flesh and blood, this time the development, the sequence

of events in my story unravelled day by day, I followed its progress on the calendar, to the point that I knew what would happen (76).

The relationship between reality and fiction is here openly subverted.

## 5. “Art is a science ...”

Literature no longer imitates life, life imitates literature<sup>11</sup>. As is the case when the “I” visits a work of art which functions as a *mise-en-abyme* in the novel<sup>12</sup>. The painting, “The temptations of Saint Anthony” by Hieronymus Bosch, is housed in the Museum of Ancient Art where the protagonist meets a Copyist who defines the picture as “strange as life”, and, therefore, able to produce strange things. Here, it becomes evident that the hallucinatory, oneiric and delirious nature of the painting is a “portrayal of a portrayal” of what will happen in the novel<sup>13</sup>. The analogy between the painting and life goes beyond the text, underlining the relationship between art and reality, and between fiction and truth. On discovering that the painting was once exhibited at the hospital run by the order of St. Anthony in Lisbon because it was believed that

- 
- 11 In the last pages of the novel, the protagonist, dining with the great poet, is served a literary menu and, when a certain plate is mentioned, the I exclaims “But Gafeira doesn’t exist [...] it’s an imaginary place, a literary place”. The waiter replies “Portugal’s full of lakes, you can always find a Gafeira” (103). The text reflects an alternation of metanarrative levels that make the reader continuously aware that s/he is on the border between real and unreal. Each time the distinction between real and fictitious is broken, the reader experiences a shock and is forced to question the nature of truth.
- 12 Bosch’s painting is not the only *mise-en-abyme* in this novel: the four types of stories presented to the protagonist by the seller are also mirrors of what happens in the story. The seller proposes a sentimental, enjoyable, oneiric and fantastic story to the “I”. He rejects the first three in favour of the last. Sentimental, delirious, fun and fantastic are adjectives which perfectly define the story related in *Requiem*. The love for the people of Portugal, both dead and living, the humour arising from the strange situations we come across, the delirious desire which pushes the protagonist to speak with the dead and the fantastic atmosphere that comes from this, embody those meanings, which according to the author, are present in the title.
- 13 “The vertiginous *mise-en-abyme* of metafiction is sustained by its perpetual dialectic of interpretation and deconstruction. It creates a pattern that stretches, not toward revelation, but around it. [...] Metafiction [...] reveals as much about consciousness as it does about fiction and language” (Stoicheff, 1991:90, 97).

it possessed miraculous powers and could heal those infected with herpes zoster, the protagonist begins to perspire. The truth that the dead were unable to reveal is given to him, accidentally, by the Copyist, who explains:

It's a very strange virus [...] it seems that we all harbour it inside us in its larval state, but it only manifests itself when the organism's defences are low, then it attacks with a vengeance, only to go into a dormant state again until the next attack, its cyclical, you see, [...] I think herpes is a bit like remorse, it lies dormant within us and then, one fine day, it wakes up and attacks us, then goes to sleep again, only because we've managed to suppress it, but it's always there inside us, there's no cure for remorse (66-67).

The anxiety attack is brought on by the word "herpes" which helps him to resolve the enigma posed by Tadeus's last words ("Blame it on herpes zoster"). The allusion is clearly to the remorse felt by Tadeus for having secretly loved Isabel and for not having told his friend and, in Isabel's case, for having killed herself, tormented by the abortion she underwent. The text has, once more, provided a partial solution to the enigma: but ambiguity remains in the unresolved issue of paternity.

It becomes clear that the author is aiming at destabilizing the reader and convincing her/him that reality is ambiguous, fleeting and labyrinthical. In this regard, the conversation between the protagonist and the great poet serves as a definitive example. In this conversation the latter maintains that "the supreme truth is to pretend" (104) and that the duty of literature is to unsettle rather than calm the conscience (99). Real truth is only in art because it confronts us with questions, hypotheses and, finally, with interpretations. Thus art, in this case, the novel, acquires a thaumaturgical value: it is capable of disturbing the reader's conscience, undermining certainty and stripping it of its securities, proving that truth is not monolithic but that the border between real and unreal is questionable and that we do not know the world as well as we think<sup>14</sup>.

Art's disturbing as well as healing power is stressed at the end of the story. The protagonist does not find answers, but, after his meeting with the great poet, he feels "calmer", "lighter" (104), and we find him sitting under a tree back in the garden of Azeitão saying "good-bye and good-night to everyone" (107) in a sort of final greeting devoid of unease. At this point the question arises as to how the protagonist could have attained peace even though his questions remain

---

14 "Art is a substitute for acting or living. Art is the intellectual expression of emotion, whereas life is the wilful expression of emotion. What we don't have, or don't attempt, or don't obtain, can be possessed through dreams, and these are what we use to make art" (Pessoa, 1991:135).

unanswered. The protagonist's peace of mind could only arise from the acceptance of the unsurmountable ontological gap that exists between him and reality, understood only after his troubled quest and his "dialogue with the dead". In this way the connection between the incongruous path of the protagonist and the title becomes clear. Thanks to his wandering, the I has carried out his "requiem", which turns out to be not for the dead after all but for a living being, so that he could finally live in peace.

The novel thus questions the ontological gap existing between reality and the subject. Tabucchi attempts "to denaturalize objectified codes of signification through diverse forms of multiple perspectivism that share a renewed dialectical relationship with history" (Francesse, 1991:183). For Tabucchi an understanding of the manner in which the past determines the present is fundamental for the contextualisation of the individual within society.

At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist finds himself on the pier of Alcântara waiting, in vain, for a great poet, long dead and whom he will meet at the end of the story. The name of the poet is never revealed but we know that he lived at the beginning of this century, was part of the avant-garde, was an admirer of Kafka, likes to speak English because it reminds him of his childhood in South Africa (97). We can thus safely assume that we are dealing with Pessoa. Who but a Modernist would state that this was his century because he was happy in it and who else would propose a toast to the new century considering that the "men of the end of the century" do not seem to be comfortable in it?

In his dialogue(s) with Pessoa, Tabucchi's subject is relativised: deliberately not a source of meaning but part of a network of subjects. The subject becomes a self-displacing identity within a field of ideological contestation involving Self and Other and all temporal dimensions.

Tabucchi deconstructs the myth of the extra-historical self (i.e., the concept of individual identity prior to and independent of social hominization [...]) to demonstrate that the subject is truly the synthesis not only of existing relations but the history of those relations (Francesse, 1991:195).

A symbiotic relationship between Self and Other is set up, so that the atomised individual may be re-integrated into a social context. Narrative, then, is for Tabucchi a bridge between individuals and between past, present and future. Writing (communication) is a strengthening of social bonds, a catalyst "tra le storie" (between (his)stories), for socio-cultural dialectic, directed towards the future diminution of alienation.

## Bibliography

- Boyne, R. & Rattasi, A. (eds.) *Postmodernism and society*. London : Macmillan.
- Breytenbach, B. 1989. *Memory of snow and of dust*. Johannesburg : Taurus.
- Connor, S. 1987. *Postmodernist culture*. London : Pluto.
- Dowing, D.B. & Bazargan, S. (eds.) 1991. *Image and ideology in modern/postmodern discourse*. Albany : State University of New York Press.
- Francese, J. 1991. The postmodern discourses of Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate* and Tabucchi's *I dialoghi mancati*. *Annali d'italianistica*, 9:182-197.
- Hayles, N.K. (ed.) 1991. *Chaos and order. Complex dynamics in literature and science*. Chicago and London : The University of Chicago Press.
- Hutcheon, L. 1989. *The politics of postmodernism*. London : Routledge.
- Jackson, R. 1981. *Fantasy. The literature of subversion*. London and New York : Methuen.
- Jameson, F. 1984. Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism. *New Left Review*, 146:53-92.
- McCaffery, L. (ed.) 1986. *Postmodern fiction*. New York : Greenwood.
- McHale, B. 1989. *Postmodernist fiction*. New York : Routledge.
- Pessoa, F. 1991. *The book of disquietude*. Manchester : Carcanet.
- Ragland-Sullivan, E. 1987. *Jacques Lacan and the philosophy of psychoanalysis*. Urbana : University of Illinois Press.
- Stoicheff, P. 1991. The chaos of metafiction. In: Hayles, N.K. (ed.) *Chaos and order. Complex dynamics in literature and science*. Chicago and London : The University of Chicago Press. p. 85-99.
- Tabucchi, A. 1978. Alvaro de Campos e Zeno Cosini: due coscienze parallele. *Studi filologici e letterari dell'Istituto di filologia romanza e ispanistica dell'Università di Genova*. Genova : Bozzi. p. 151-162.
- Tabucchi, A. 1981. *Il gioco del rovescio*. Milano : Il Saggiatore.
- Tabucchi, A. 1987. *I volatili del Beato Angelico*. Palermo : Sellerio.
- Tabucchi, A. 1994. *Requiem. A hallucination*. London : Harvill.
- Todorov, T. 1987. *The fantastic. A structural approach to a literary genre*. Ithaca, New York : Cornell University Press.
- Vattimo, G. 1990. *La società trasparente*. Milano : Garzanti.
- Wakefield, N. 1990. *The twilight of the real*. London : Pluto.