

Antonio Tabucchi, *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997.

Tabucchi's novel concerns the mystery surrounding the discovery of a decapitated corpse in the outskirts of Oporto. Firmino, a reporter at a sensationalist Lisbon newspaper, is sent to investigate the matter. Interviewing the gypsy who discovered the body, Firmino learns a detail suppressed by the police: the victim was wearing a "Stones of Portugal" top. He is baffled by this until an anonymous caller tells him to look in the "pagine gialle" (61). Firmino visits the relevant company, where he is informed, amongst others, that the "garzone delle consegne" has been inexplicably absent for five days (67). Through a contact, he is able to photograph the head of the victim, who, according to the anonymous caller, is one Damasceno Monteiro (85). Firmino persuades the caller, who turns out to be a certain Leonel Torres, to be interviewed for his paper, and to testify in front of the magistrate investigating the case. According to Torres, Monteiro was murdered because he discovered that the notorious Sergeant Silva of the local police was involved in illegal drug trafficking, and because he attempted to steal one of the consignments. Firmino obtains the services of a local advocate, Fernando de Mello Sequeira to investigate the case and prove Silva's guilt. At the hearing, Silva is acquitted for lack of conclusive evidence. Some time after the case, Mello discovers that one of his clients, a transvestite prostitute, "Wanda", arrested for prostitution, happened to witness how Silva murdered Damasceno. "Wanda" makes a statement "alle autorità competenti" (237), but Mello asks Firmino to interview "her" for his paper, "per una sorta di misura preventiva" (237).

As in a crime novel, the culprit's identity is discovered fairly soon, and the main interest of the plot lies in the question of how

and when he will be caught. Although Firmino is sent to investigate Monteiro's death, he does not make any discoveries through analysis and deduction, and does not formulate any substantial hypotheses, to be tested against the available evidence.

The most significant figure in the novel is the advocate, Mello. He guides Firmino through the later stages of his investigation, and it is he who makes the vital breakthrough. He is also the most interesting character: eccentric, erudite, a gastronome, member of an illustrious Oporto family.

The novel uses the murder story as a basis for presenting a number of themes. One of these is the role of the press in the promotion of justice. The press can bypass a corrupt and repressive system by disseminating information to a wide public and influencing the public opinion. In this instance, the press, in the form of Firmino's newspaper, does not perform this function out of noble motives. Firmino works for a sensationalist paper, and the primary reason for investigating the case is the fact that the public would be interested in the story. Nevertheless, Mello has no scruples in using the paper to further his investigation.

A second theme is the inadequacy of the judicial system to deal with corrupt individuals who deliberately suppress evidence. The court can only deal with the facts in front of it, and can only accept those facts which have been proven "beyond reasonable doubt". This is why Silva is, initially, acquitted of murder.

A third theme in the novel is the acknowledgement of the dignity of the outcasts and misfits and weaklings of society. Mello specializes in defending this kind of person, out of a strong sense of solidarity. The surprise witness who causes Silva's downfall, "Wanda", is a typical outcast: not only a prostitute, but a transvestite into the bargain. The corrupt Silva, who is also guilty of torture, considers himself above the law, or rather, outside the law, especially as he is in a position to suppress evidence, by

killing witnesses if required. As a torturer, he neither acknowledges the law nor the dignity of all citizens. That he is caught in the end, almost amounts to a kind of vengeance and confirmation of human dignity.

In summary, Tabucchi uses the crime novel subgenre as a framework for a narrative which both entertains and offers food for thought. It is a highly readable work, recommended to all readers with an interest in contemporary Italian fiction.

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