

SPATIO-TEMPORAL RELATIVITIES IN ANTONIO TABUCCHI'S URBAN SPACE¹

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“Era il venticinque di luglio del millenovecentotrentotto, e Lisbona scintillava nell’azzurro di una brezza atlantica, sostiene Pereira”.² On this day, the protagonist of Antonio Tabucchi’s novel, *Sostiene Pereira. Una testimonianza* (1994), reads a journal containing the abstract of a thesis on the subject of death by a young man of Italian descent, Monteiro Rossi. The protagonist, Dr Pereira, is the editor of the arts section of a cautiously apolitical evening newspaper, *Lisboa*. On an impulse, he telephones Rossi and suggests they work together on writing commemorations of writers and *cocodrilli*, i.e., ready-to-run obituaries of writers who are not expected to live much longer. They meet, and Rossi agrees to work with Pereira and then disappears because of his involvement in the anti-Salazar underground. However, he continues to send in the commemorations which he is writing until, with the police in pursuit, he takes refuge in Pereira’s flat and is there killed before Pereira’s eyes. The story takes place in Salazar’s Portugal between the 25th of July and the end of August 1938, and the hot Lisbon summer mirrors the political situation in Europe at that time (the rise of Franco, Mussolini and Hitler’s growing power).

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² A. Tabucchi, *Sostiene Pereira* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1994: 10). All further references are to this edition, and page numbers will appear in brackets in the text.

'Sostiene Pereira' ('Pereira declares') are the opening words of the story, its *incipit*. For some time scholars have been filling their books with linguistic and semiotic analyses of the *incipit*, and, here, Tabucchi has exploited its potential to the fullest extent. The repetition of 'sostiene Pereira' about every twenty lines turns each paragraph into an incipit and each sentence into a portal, a promise that something will happen, that something will be revealed. It also contributes to the 'orality' of this text, and alludes to Tabucchi's need to be 'heard'. It seems that, as is the case with Walter Benjamin's storyteller,³ being listened to and making others listen is of greater importance to the writer of *Sostiene Pereira* than being read, like someone attempting to bring back voices that have faded in memory, or rousing voices that have never been heard. Pereira's is such a voice. He had already made his literary debut as a silent character in T.S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*, the opening line of which is 'How about Pereira?'. In 1924, Eliot decided to try something quite different from the *Waste Land*: a drama of modern life, about the sort of people who lived in furnished flats, but not realistic; it should be ritualistic, like the open air drama of Classical Greece. This in fact provided his ostensible form: *Sweeney Agonistes* was finally printed as 'Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama', and Aristophanes, of course, had been the representative comic dramatist of (that archetypal city-state — locus of power structures) Ancient Athens. Eliot only wrote two scenes, which are set in the flat of good-time girls Doris and Dusty, who, several times, mention their 'absent friend' (Pereira) without any enthusiasm. When the phone rings insistently they repeat anxiously 'That's Pereira', as they do when, cutting the cards for that evening's game, they uncover the King of Clubs ('That's Pereira'). All that is known about him is that 'He's no gentleman Pereira: You can't trust him!'. Tabucchi overturns this unflattering portrait presenting his Pereira as a harmless and disarming

³ W. Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov", *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969: 83-109).

gentleman and, for young anti-fascist revolutionaries, as completely trustworthy. By rescuing this character from oblivion, Tabucchi apparently wishes to compensate for the silence imposed upon it by Eliot, not only by making the story's specific character derive from what Pereira says, but also by titling after him a work in which he exists in order to speak. Tabucchi maintains Eliot's stylised idiom of the scenes by the repetition of the phrase 'sostiene Pereira', giving this work the same ritualistic tone, retaining both the dramatic quality of the work and the atmosphere of the banal quality of life implied by the 'furnished flat' in the city.

The voice, moreover, is that of an actual Portuguese journalist who died in Lisbon in the 1970s after an exile in France lasting several decades. He was responsible for a hoax similar to the one played by the protagonist of the novel on the censors of the regime, a journalist 'purtroppo dimenticato'. In the 'Author's Note', which appears in *Sostiene Pereira* from the tenth edition, we are told that he has been brought back to life by Tabucchi's pen with the Jewish surname Pereira, 'in omaggio a un popolo che ha lasciato una traccia nella civiltà portoghese e che ha subito le grandi ingiustizie della Storia' (213). The 'Author's Note' further explains that the journalist's soul comes to visit Tabucchi one evening in September 1992, a character in search of an author, with a great need to be narrated, to describe a choice, a torment, a life. Thus Eliot's character lends his name to the journalist, represented by Tabucchi as an old man living in the past in Lisbon in August 1938. While the events narrated in Tabucchi's story did not take place in that historical moment in that particular city, or not like that, their affect is real enough. Tabucchi's story narrates the emergence of a subjective identity and an objective reality through emotional conflict, and the narrative functions here as a 'potent speech act' (Hillis Miller, 1995:151); that is, in describing events taking place in the spaces of the city, it teaches us how to see it (the city). J. Hillis Miller suggests that imagined cityscapes have to do with 'doing rather than knowing' (8), a notion which is enacted in this novel when Pereira replaces his 'marginal' life with a subversive action that confirms his choice for

involvement in human existence. In fact, the central theme of Tabucchi's novel is the transformation Pereira undergoes as a man who lives with the dead (a dead wife, an unborn child, dead writers) into a man who 'frequents the future' (represented by the two young people, Monteiro Rossi and his girlfriend, Marta) and who starts to live a 'horizontal' dynamic (a confederation between various egos) instead of a vertical one (towards death/eternity). It is thus the existential aspect of the book (an already mature man able to renew himself) rather than the political which is privileged by the spaces in the narrative.

So Tabucchi's story, which describes political/historical events taking place in an urban topography, conjures up the space of the city through the projection of these narrative images. It is in this sense that the real to which they refer is what J. Hillis Miller calls the atypical:

This is a place that is everywhere and nowhere, a place you cannot get to from here. Sooner or later [...] the effort of mapping is interrupted by an encounter with the unmappable. The topography and the toponymy [...] hide an unplaceable place. It was the locus of an event that never 'took place' as a phenomenal happening located in some identifiable spot and therefore open to knowledge. This strange event that took place without taking place cannot be the object of a cognition because it was a unique performative event. (1995:7)

Miller suggests that we cannot imagine space as such, and that what we imagine is always an event or events taking place. Our imagination is inherently narrative. Space is less the already existing setting for such stories, than the production of space through that *taking place*, through the act of narration. What, then, is the nature of such space-producing events? Do they simply map space or represent events? Miller suggests that they project events onto space; they project a narrational space.

The spatial frame of Tabucchi's story is well defined: Pereira spends his time between his small office, his ('furnished') flat, the Café

Orquídea and the newspaper's head office. He leaves Lisbon only twice, to go to the Buçaco Spa, near Coimbra, and to the clinic in Parede. The protagonist's movements are carefully traced and the spatial and temporal sequence of events is always adhered to. For example, Pereira on a tram on his way home:

Dal finestrino, guardava sfilare lentamente la sua Lisbona, guardava l'Avenida da Liberdade, con i suoi bei palazzi, e poi la Praça do Rossio di stile inglese; e al Terreiro do Paço scese e prese il tram che saliva fino al Castello. Discese all'altezza della Cattedrale, perchè lui abitava lì vicino, in Rua da Saudade. (15)

Tabucchi knows that topographical considerations, the contours of places, cannot be separated from toponymical considerations, the naming of places: for example, the 'cultural office' of the *Lisboa* is located at "in Rua Rodrigo da Fonseca, numero sessantasei, vicino alla Alexandre Herculano, a due passi dalla macelleria ebraica" (31); and, the Café Orquídea where Pereira eats regularly is "Rua Alexandre Herculano, dopo la macelleria ebraica" (154). The 'kosher butcher' is the narrational space with which the reader can identify through the event which results in all of the shop's windows being broken.

The toponymy in the novel, its naming of places, is as detailed and precise as one would find in a nineteenth-century novel, but the references to locations and events are mediated through the subjective thoughts of the main character:

Pereira uscì per andare in tipografia, e si sentiva inquieto, sostiene. Pensò di rientrare in redazione e di aspettare l'ora di cena, ma capì che aveva bisogno di rientrare a casa sua e di fare un bagno fresco. Prese un taxi e lo obbligò a salire la rampa che portava fino al suo palazzo, di solito i taxi non volevano addentrarsi su per quella rampa perché era difficile fare manovra, così

che Pereira dovette promettere una mancia, perché si sentiva spossato, sostiene. (137)

Pereira's walks through Lisbon provoke thoughts not of the continuity of identity, but disquiet at the lack of subjective fixity:

Pereira uscì e si inerpicò a fatica su per la Rua da Imprensa Nacional. Quando arrivò davanti alla Chiesa di San Mamede si sedette su una panchina della piccola piazza. Davanti alla chiesa si fece il segno della croce, poi allungò le gambe e si mise a prendere un po' di fresco. [...] Poi si avviò a passo lento verso la redazione pensando ai suoi ricordi. Sostiene Pereira che pensò alla sua infanzia, un'infanzia passata a Póvoa do Varzim, con i suoi nonni, un'infanzia felice, o che lui almeno considerava felice, ma della sua infanzia non vuole parlare, perché sostiene che non ha niente a che vedere con questa storia e con quella giornata di fine agosto in cui l'estate stava declinando e lui si sentiva così confuso. (147-48)

Pereira moves in a sun-drenched Lisbon where police jeeps are stationed in front of local markets: the police have murdered a carter who was a Socialist. The protagonist does not have the courage to walk past 'quei militari sinistri' (19), and it seems to him that Lisbon gives off a stench of death. The city is the site in which the play of personal and cultural motives takes place. Not only is it Pereira's private situation to be alone, widowed and ill, but the external situation causes him distress. Pereira sweats, not because of the heat, but as a reaction to this world around him; his sweating is a symptom of psychological malaise which has its roots in the unconscious and which manifests itself in sweating and a feeling of weariness.

Like Benjamin's *flâneur*, the aimless wanderer who takes in the city from a distance, and goes out to be stimulated by the crowds, Pereira is

discontented because the city offers more experience than he can assimilate. He always feels he is missing out even in the process of experiencing: his state of mind is restless dissatisfaction, aimless desire. When this sense of potentiality becomes frightening, it threatens stability and leads to the kind of neurasthenia we find in Eliot's writing; when the threat becomes personal, it leads to the paranoia that informs Pynchon's novels. And paranoia takes us to the doorstep of the uncanny. In describing his characters' mundane spatial projection and introjection of desire and anxiety, Tabucchi hints at something uncanny in urban space. As Walter Benjamin noted, the uncanny — the mysterious and eerie — is born out of heterogeneous crowds, which is really to say that it is born out of the city: out of the stranger who steps from the crowd, out of the familiar becoming strange, out of the return of the repressed.

Both *Sostiene Pereira* and the earlier novel, *Requiem*, follow Georg Simmel in linking the *experience* of the metropolis to what might be called the psychic and spatial diseases of modernity as they are manifested in the excessive perspiration of the two protagonists. The narrator-protagonist of *Requiem* deviates from his original path towards Rua das Pedras Negras because of uncontrollable perspiration. 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. The narrator enters the cemetery (a 'city of the dead') and breaches the temporal barrier when he meets his (dead) friend, Tadeus. At this point, 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 perspiration, then, is a symptom of psychological unease, manifesting itself in crucial moments of his incongruous journey through physical places that at first appear 'normal' but on closer examination reveal that they are in fact 'zones' (McHale, 1989), i.e., a space in which traditional categories for the comprehension of the world are distorted, and the temporal experience assumes a paradoxical connotation. Tabucchi's protagonist, in *Requiem*, moves in a zone

where people live but where the boundaries are displaced: the city is empty, there are no customers at the restaurants, and the pier at Alcantara, the bar of the museum, the Casa do Alentejo and the train are all deserted. 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 centralizing mechanism with the power to discern and to unify. Both *Requiem* and *Sostiene Pereira* reflect an alternation of metanarrative levels that make the reader continuously aware that s/he is in on the border between real and unreal, and remind us of Hillis Miller's notion of the atypical space.

All Tabucchi's deviations from reality, whether they have to do with temporal distortions and time shifts or with dreams and surrealistic displacement of objects, contribute to the notion of narration as the foundation of the lived. Such a notion is not unlike a dream, which in Tabucchi's narrative is a recurrent device used to extend and multiply reality. The oneiric spaces, as well as some of the pleasure of the dream are reflected (mirrored) in the image of the famous university town, Coimbra, when Pereira decides to get out of the oppressive atmosphere of Lisbon and visits his friend, Professor Silva, at the Spa near Coimbra: 'Quando Pereira arrivò alla stazione di Coimbra sulla città c'era un tramonto magnifico, sostiene' (61). There is no other description of the city — just of the spa hotel, a splendid "edificio bianco, una villa immersa in un grande parco" (62) and its restaurant: "una sala ottocentesca, affrescata con festoni di fiori sul soffitto" (62). Spaces which are worlds apart from the dreary and mundane interior of the 'furnished flat'. These spaces are in direct contrast to 'what's out there', and reflect Silva's world view rather than that of Pereira, which is that they needn't worry because 'qui non siamo in Europa, siamo in Portogallo' (64), i.e. an idyllic space far removed from the political turmoil of the capital. It is clear that the spaces outside of the urban

reflect both a different reality and a different self — the ‘rovescio’⁴ as it were both of the protagonist and of the city.

The Lisbon cityscape is not simply there to connect Tabucchi’s stories to a specific geographical location at a specific historical time, nor is it merely the cultural setting in which the novels’ action can take place. For Tabucchi, the city becomes the symbolic space in which we act out our more or less imaginative answers to the question which defines our *ethos*: ‘how to be “at home” in a world where our identity is not given, our being-together in question, our destiny contingent or uncertain’ (Rajchman, 1991: 144). In Tabucchi’s narratives, the reader is constantly 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.

Every topography implies a narrative that unfolds through time, and the opacity of the atypical is also linked to a particular imagining of time. Tabucchi widens the narrative compass along the axes of space and time. The simultaneity of past, present and future in the life of the city tests the limits of novelistic narrative. The past is a projection as well as a determinant of the present; the future is less a playground for unconstrained speculation than a summons to inventiveness within an intrinsic framework of constraints. It is this temporal tangle that defines the ‘now’ that we inhabit. Pereira’s neighborhood is a palimpsest, textured and animated by layers of history and memory, e.g. the music of the ‘vecchie canzoni di Coimbra’ (158) contrasts with the vulgar propaganda songs of the Salazar regime which he hears during the *feita* in the Praça de Alegria. Pereira’s flashbacks to the past are both nostalgic and anxious, the recall of a lost self and a sense of multiplying possible selves. This narration is not only a record of images, but a projection of multiple selves — past, future, imaginable selves — onto the cityscape being recorded:

⁴ Tabucchi’s collection of short stories, *Il gioco del rovescio* (1981), “the backwards game”, is thematically centred on the frequent opposition between appearance and reality.

E poi, sostiene Pereira, a un certo punto vide alzarsi da un tavolino un giovane alto e snello con una camicia chiara che andò a mettersi fra i due vecchietti musicanti. E, chissà perché, sentí una fitta al cuore, forse perché gli sembrò di riconoscersi in quel giovanotto, gli sembrò di ritrovare il se stesso dei tempi di Coimbra [...] e tutto gli parve bello, la sua vita passata di cui non vuole parlare, Lisbona, la volta del cielo che si vedeva sopra le lampadine colorate [della Praça de Alegria] (21).

In the city dweller's psychic space of projection and introjection, the danger is that the boundaries between self and environment, like those between past and present, become uncertain and unreliable. Such disorientation produces a retreat into an interiority, either mental or physical, or both, and a disabling inability to admit feelings. In proposing contrastive versions of the world, Tabucchi's fiction conveys the impression of a permanent condition of uncertainty, and becomes representative of that postmodern 'attitude of suspensiveness' which, in the words of Alan Wilde, 'implies the tolerance of a fundamental uncertainty about the meanings and relations of things in the world and in the universe' (1981: 132).

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