

Gesualdo Bufalino, *Tommaso e il fotografo cieco ovvero il Patatrac*,
Milano: Bompiani, 1996.

The narrator, Tommaso, informs the reader that he would have preferred to present a narrative in which "ogni pezzo andasse al suo posto come nei gialli eccelsi degli anni trenta" (26). He lists "sette incognite", of which only four have been resolved. While he merely wanted to construct "un labirinto cartaceo", as a form of therapy, "col solo impegno di far quadrare alla fine il bilancio" (166), the characters and events involved get out of control in the act of writing, because it is extremely problematic to reconcile the unpredictable and sometimes catastrophic nature of events in general with "la grammatica e il fosforo della Ragion Sufficiente" (166). Seemingly on the verge of solving the

central riddle of the story, he attempts a rational analysis of the options available to him, but it is interrupted by yet another unforeseen event: an earthquake which buries him alive in the sotterraneo where he lives. The story, and with it, the manuscript Tommaso has been composing, ends with the death of the narrator: a triple ending, where writing, narration and narrato coincide.

The narrator is a kind of factotum, whose main pastime is watching the legs of passersby on the pavement from the street-level window of his sotterraneo. His friend, the blind photographer, Tir, a different kind of spectator, is much in demand, because, or in spite of, his handicap, for producing nude photographs and photographing erotic activities. The photographer's secret vice is taking nude photographs of his sister, Matilde, while she sleeps, and he tries to use these to stimulate Tommaso's interest in her. When the sister disappears, the reader expects a narrative of the search for her, but the narrator decides otherwise.

Not interested in Matilde, Tommaso falls in love with the mysterious Lea, a tenant in the building where he lives. She seems utterly pure and virginal, until he discovers that the man she lives with may or may not be her father, and that she may or may not be having a relationship with him.

Worse is to follow. The blind photographer tells Tommaso that he had to photograph "una serata indecente" in which several important persons took part. Subsequently, a girl was found dead, killed by an overdose of drugs. She may have been one of the girls present at the serata to entertain the important persons. As Tommaso and his friend return from the cinema, the photographer is murdered, run over by a motorbike.

Tommaso, the innocent bystander and compulsive spectator, becomes involved in the investigation, at the request of a former colleague, who wants him to write a series of reports on the events surrounding the photographer's death.

As in the case of Matilde's disappearance, the reader's expectations are frustrated, in that the search for the photographer's killers never seems to get off the ground. The central riddle of the story is only presented more than halfway through the book, when Lea uncovers a second disconcerting secret: she was also present at the

serata. She offers to sleep with Tommaso if he gives her the film depicting her escapades. He refuses to buy her favours, and in any case, does not know where the film is. Later on, Lea explains the reasons for her involvement in the serata and mentions the complicity of some of the tenants and former tenants of the apartment building in arranging it. Her relationship with Tommaso is briefly consummated.

Continuing the investigation, Tommaso believes he has found the film in the dead man's Kodak, but this turns out to be a dead end. By accident, he discovers what he believes to be the right film. This is never confirmed. As his sexual relationships remain ephemeral and unsatisfactory, so the narrator fails to take either the story or the investigation to a conclusive ending. Perhaps the reader should have expected this, as he is informed quite early on that, "L'incompiutezza...è la mia musa del cuore (tutta la mia vita è stata un coito interrotto...)" (57). It hardly seems to matter that the mystery remains unsolved. The disappearance of the film has no dramatic consequences.

In the final chapter of the book, it transpires that the preceding chapters are the text of a novel, *Patatrac*, which Tommaso wrote and gave to his friend, the blind photographer Martino Alabiso, for his comments. The comments are unfavourable. The photographer notes, for instance, that "Non soltanto il come, ma non si capisce bene il dove, il quando, il perche" — the questions traditionally asked in the detective novel — to which Tommaso responds — in typical "postmodern" fashion? — "ho sempre pensato che spettasse al lettore inventarseli" (173): a reference to the idea, beloved by some theorists, of the reader as co-producer of the text.

The photographer also objects to the "inverosimiglianze", to the excess of "curiosi accidenti" in the story (175). Tommaso's response is that life itself is like that: implausible, full of random occurrences. In a way, he implies, the story is simply imitating life.

The friends break off their discussion to go to the cinema. To their surprise, the scheduled film has been replaced by Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac*, the same film the narrator, Tommaso, watched with the photographer in *Patatrac* on the evening of his death. Is it possible, asks Tommaso, that his "brutto romanzo" generated an impulse which can provoke real events? can fiction become reality?

The ending comes unexpectedly: like the photographer in Patatrac, Martino is killed outside the cinema, run over by a Kawasaki, the same kind of motorbike as that used to murder his fictional alter ego. A case of life imitating art?

Bufalino's novel toys with these questions, with self-reflexivity, with elements of the giallo, with texts within the text — several poems and stories are inserted in Tommaso's novel, which in turn is framed by his account of the discussion on the novel, all of which constitute Bufalino's text — without ever becoming self-consciously "clever". It takes complex issues or technical virtuosisimi, toys with them, and leaves them, without looking for "answers". Let the reader invent further questions and provide the answers, if he so wishes.

Gerhard van der Linde
(University of South Africa)