

# SPATIO-TEMPORAL RELATIVITIES IN ANTONIO TABUCCHI'S URBAN SPACES

Rita Wilson

## Sommario

*Nei romanzi di Antonio Tabucchi, in particolare in Sostiene Pereira e Requiem, si nota un diffuso 'senso del relativo', soprattutto nella narrazione di spazi urbani. Spazi che vengono narrati sul 'filo della temporalità' e che rappresentano sia la 'proiezione' del desiderio sia il ritorno del rimosso. Percorrendo questi spazi i protagonisti dei due romanzi recuperano e fanno rivivere voci dimenticate.*

“Era il venticinque di luglio del millenovecentotrentotto, e Lisbona scintillava nell’azzurro di una brezza atlantica, sostiene Pereira”.<sup>1</sup> 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 *cocodrilli*, that is, 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

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Tabucchi, *Sostiene Pereira* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1994). All further references are to this edition.

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.

'Sostiene Pereira' are the opening words of the story, its *incipit*. Tabucchi exploits the linguistic and semiotic potential of this *incipit* 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, providing an opening for what, to paraphrase Umberto Eco (1994: 57), could be called a space of conjecture. It also contributes to the 'orality' of this text, and highlights Tabucchi's need to "dar risalto [...] alla voce narrante e alla dialogazione" (1995: 20). A need which is related to the author's desire to bring back voices that have faded in memory, or rouse 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 write 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, 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').<sup>2</sup> All that is

---

<sup>2</sup> He then appears as a three of clubs, which means 'news from an absent friend'. Their mockery is punished when they draw the two of spades and are scared by 'the coffin'/ death.

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 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. Moreover, the voice of Tabucchi’s character 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’ and 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”.<sup>3</sup>

In the ‘Author’s Note’, which appears in *Sostiene Pereira* from the tenth edition, we are told that the journalist’s soul comes to visit Tabucchi one evening in September 1992, a character in search of an author, a symbol/metaphor, with a great need to be narrated, to justify a choice, to describe a (tormented) life. Eliot’s character lends his name

---

<sup>3</sup> Author’s “Note” appearing in *Sostiene Pereira* from the tenth edition (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994: 213) in which, among other things, Tabucchi explains the name of the protagonist: “In portoghese Pereira significa albero del pero, e come tutti i nomi degli alberi da frutto, è un cognome di origine ebraica, così come in Italia i cognomi di origine ebraica sono nomi di città. Con questo volli rendere omaggio a un popolo che ha lasciato una grande traccia nella civiltà portoghese e che ha subito le grandi ingiustizie della Storia. Ma c’era un altro motivo, questo di origine letteraria, che mi spingeva verso questo nome: un piccolo intermezzo di Eliot intitolato *What about Pereira?* in cui due amiche evocano, nel loro dialogo, un misterioso portoghese chiamato Pereira, del quale non si saprà mai niente” (165-167).

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'<sup>4</sup>: that is, in describing events taking place in the spaces of the city, it teaches us how to see the city. J. Hillis Miller suggests that imagined cityscapes have to do with "doing rather than knowing" (1995: 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 in the past and converses with the dead (regularly with his dead wife, periodically with dead writers) into a man who 'frequents the future' (represented by the two young people, Monteiro Rossi and his girlfriend, Marta). 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.<sup>5</sup>

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:

Sooner or later [...] the effort of mapping is interrupted  
by an encounter with the unmappable. The topography

---

<sup>4</sup> "A speech act is a form of words that does not name something but makes something happen. [...] the usual grammatical form of a performative is a sentence in the first-person present indicative: 'I promise'; 'I bet'; [...] 'I accept'; 'I shall'" (Hillis Miller, 1995: 151).

<sup>5</sup> "Io credo che questo sia sostanzialmente un romanzo esistenziale, che parla di una crisi di coscienza molto vasta che riguarda il passato, il futuro, l'elaborazione del lutto, le scelte della vita; una macerazione esistenziale che in questo caso comprende anche una presa di coscienza politica" (Tabucchi, 1995: 18).

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 [a ‘speech act’]. (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,<sup>6</sup> for example, the ‘cultural office’ of the *Lisboa* is

---

<sup>6</sup> “‘Topography’: the word combines the Greek word *topos*, place, with the Greek word

located “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 in “Rua Alexandre Herculano, dopo la macelleria ebraica” (154). The ‘kosher butcher’ is the narrational space with which the reader can identify through an event which takes place there and which results in “la vetrina [...] in frantumi e [...] la facciata [...] imbrattata di scritte” (57).<sup>7</sup>

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 uscí per andare in tipografia, e si sentiva inquieto, sostiene. Pensò di rientrare in redazione e di aspettare l’ora di cena, ma capí cha 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:

---

*graphein*, to write. [...] Etymologically, it means the writing of a place. The English word ‘topography’ has today three meanings, one obsolete. The obsolete meaning is the most literal: ‘the description of a particular place’. Now the word means either ‘the art or practice of graphic and exact delineation in minute detail, usually on maps or charts, of the physical features of any place or region,’ or, by metonymy, ‘the configuration of a surface including its relief, the position of its streams, lakes, roads, cities, etc.’ [...] By a further sideways slippage ‘topography’ has come to be the name for what is mapped, apparently without any reference to writing or other means of representation” (Hillis Miller, 1995: 3).

<sup>7</sup> An event which echoes the notorious ‘Crystal Night’ (November 9, 1938) which effectively marked the implementation of the Nazi plan to make Germany *judenrein* (free of Jews).

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<sup>8</sup> where police jeeps are stationed in front of local markets: the police have murdered a carter who was a Socialist (19). It seems to the protagonist that Lisbon gives off a stench of death, and the city becomes 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.

### **Pereira's *malaise***

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

---

<sup>8</sup> Tabucchi often chooses to set his stories during those summer periods in which heat and blinding sunlight dominate, or during night to increase mystery. For example, in *Sostiene Pereira*, external sunlit scenes alternate with lugubrious dark scenes (e.g. chapters 22 and 23) when Rossi takes refuge in Pereira's house and is shortly thereafter assassinated.

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 Thomas 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 (1983), 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. The latter marks a critical turning point for the protagonist of *Sostiene Pereira* who begins to experience "un senso di rimorso senza sapere esattamente per che cosa: rimorso di un passato di cui non riesce ad elaborare il lutto, da cui non riesce a staccarsi e che continua a vivere anche nel suo presente" (Tabucchi, 1995: 19).

Both *Sostiene Pereira* and the earlier novel, *Requiem* (1992), follow Georg Simmel (1969) 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.<sup>9</sup> The perspiration, then, is a symptom of

---

<sup>9</sup> The protagonist suffers an anxiety attack while listening to the Copyist describe the 'herpes

psychological unease, here too related to an undefined sense of remorse, and 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: 43), 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 Miller’s notion of the atoptical 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.<sup>10</sup> The oneiric spaces, as well as some the pleasure of the dream

---

zoster virus’: “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” (*Requiem*: 66-67). The anxiety attack is triggered 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.

<sup>10</sup> Pereira maintains that the longest and most pleasant dreams are willed dreams: “Sogno spesso la Granja, confessò Pereira. È una donna?, chiese il dottor Cardoso. È una località, disse

are reflected 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., they are in an idyllic space far removed from the political turmoil of the times. It is clear that the spaces outside of the urban reflect both a different reality and a different self — the ‘rovescio’,<sup>11</sup> 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

---

Pereira, è una spiaggia vicino a Oporto, ci andavo da giovane quando ero studente a Coimbra, poi c’era Espinho, era una spiaggia elegante, con piscina e casinò, spesso facevo delle nuotate e giocavo a biliardo, perché c’era una bella sala da biliardo, è lì che veniva anche la mia fidanzata, che poi sposai [...] quello è stato un bel periodo della mia vita, e io lo sogno forse perché mi piace sognarlo” (114).

<sup>11</sup> 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.

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:

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. Life in the city becomes un-narratable, and so, in a more acute sense un-imaginable.

In proposing contrastive versions of the world, thus making it unknowable, Tabucchi's fiction gives expression to the ontological and epistemological doubt, which represents for Hans Bertens (1995) the fundamental feature of postmodern thinking. Conveying a permanent condition of uncertainty, Tabucchi's fiction 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). Furthermore, I would argue that Tabucchi descriptions of urban spaces as spaces of experience, spaces of projection and introjection, help to re-narrate and re-imagine the living symbolic city, that un-mappable place that Hillis Miller talks about: the "place that is everywhere and nowhere, a place you cannot get to from here" (1995: 7).

University of the Witwatersrand

#### **References:**

- Benjamin, W. 1983 *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Bertens, H. 1995 *The Idea of the Postmodern*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Eco, U. 1994 *Reflections on "The Name of the Rose"*. London: Minerva.
- Eliot, T.S. 1932 *Sweeney Agonistes*. London: Faber.
- Hillis Miller, J. 1995 *Topographies*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

- McHale, B. 1989 *Postmodernist Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rajchman, J. 1991 *Truth and Eros: Foucault, Lacan and the Question of Ethics*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Simmel, G. 1969 The Metropolis and Mental Life. In Sennett, R. (ed.) *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs.
- Tabucchi, A. 1992 *Requiem*, Milan: Feltrinelli.
- 1994 *Sostiene Pereira*, Milan: Feltrinelli.
- 1995 *Conversazione con Antonio Tabucchi. Dove va il romanzo?* Rome: Omicron
- Wilde, A. 1981 *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.