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**QUEST(ION) OF SENSE. TABUCCHI'S POETICS OF THE UNCANNY**

by

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## Abstract

This research project originally contributes to the analysis of Antonio Tabucchi's oeuvre by proposing an interpretation of his poetics through the perspective of the uncanny. Existing literature, despite having detected a presence of the Freudian *unheimliche* in the writer, has not developed this observation into a wider reading and problematisation of Tabucchi's poetics. It has been my aim in this thesis to fill this gap, through a comprehensive analysis of Tabucchi's works and a descriptive interpretation of his poetics. The present research takes its cue from the observation of two undisputable, interrelated facts. First, there is a threefold presence by the uncanny in the works of Tabucchi: diegetic (the uncanny *in* Tabucchi), narrative (the uncanny *through* Tabucchi) and theoretical (Tabucchi *and* the uncanny). Second, this uncanny is not necessarily and solely equivalent to Freud's *unheimliche* – and this is where/why Agamben comes in. Using Agamben in reading Tabucchi lets surface a philosophical enquiry within his works that would remain otherwise overlooked. Tabucchi's philosophical enquiry is precisely the uncanny emergence of signification itself in literature (the uncanny as poetics), in relation to the ontological (or metaphysical) view of men as creators of sense. Thus, drawing on Agamben's theorisation of the concept, the uncanny is defined, throughout this study, as a signifying function and a process of semiosis, which, far from being reducible to a catalogue of themes and motifs, occurs as the structuring of sense in and through the literary text.

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A particular thank goes to my son, Marcello Andrea, indeed the extimate co-author of a major part of the work. Having him gave a whole new meaning and substance to the term uncanny.

Finally, my husband. Trying to find the proper way to thank him gave me the worst insomnia ever during my doctoral life. For I would end up writing a million reasons, and this wouldn't be enough.

You are my very own question and answer. So, just thank you. I love you. This is for you.

*La vita è l'esitazione fra un'esclamazione e un'interrogazione.*

*Nel dubbio c'è un punto finale.*

(Fernando Pessoa, *Il libro dell'inquietudine*. Di Bernardo Soares)

*... Then another abyss opens  
between this body and the body  
that was inside it: the abyss that  
separates mother and child. What  
relationship is there between me  
or, more modestly, between my  
body and this internal graft, this  
crease inside, which with the  
cutting of the umbilical cord  
becomes another person, inaccessible?*

*My body and ... him.*

(Julia Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*)

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## Introduction

### Quest(ion) of Sense. Antonio Tabucchi's Poetics of the Uncanny

This research project questions what it means to talk about a poetics of the uncanny within the oeuvre of Antonio Tabucchi, and to what extent, on what conditions and in what ways it is possible to do so. Answering such questions entails an analysis of the main theoretical and conceptual premises that underpin the critical perspective embraced in the study: What is the uncanny? In particular, how does Tabucchi define and understand it? And how can it be made intelligible in terms of poetics? This will also require a close examination and interpretation of the styles and strategies the writer adopts in his writings. How and on what levels does the uncanny function? And what do Tabucchi's texts reveal about his poetics?

This study is intended as a work of literary criticism, understood as 'the pursuit of signs [...] incited by the prospect of grasping, comprehending, capturing [...] evasive signifying structures'.<sup>1</sup> It is aimed at describing the manner in which specific 'meanings or effects [...] are achieved'<sup>2</sup> in a literary text, not solely by examining *what* it signifies, what meanings it advances to the reader, but also by considering *how* it signifies, how Tabucchi's opus composes a signifying structure articulated and performed within and by his works (poetics). Accordingly, the term poetics is used to define how Tabucchi creates his literary discourse, how he understands the role of literature and his personal literary experience in relation to the cultural and historical context he inhabits. As Benedetti affirms, '[l]a poetica, nel senso tutto particolare che la parola ha acquisito nel Novecento, è il programma che guida il fare artistico individuale', which is to say 'quel complesso di ragioni che spingono un autore a scegliere una certa forma d'espressione [...] e] che toccano spesso i massimi problemi: il rapporto tra linguaggio e realtà, tra arte e società, tra arte e istituzioni artistiche'.<sup>3</sup> Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny is socially and historically

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, revised edition (London: Routledge, 2001), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Carla Benedetti, *L'ombra lunga dell'autore: indagine su una figura cancellata* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999), p. 35. As Benedetti specifies, 'la nozione di poetica [...] fu riportata in auge da Walter Binni' (ibid.), according to whom 'con la parola "poetica" si vogliono essenzialmente indicare la consapevolezza critica che il poeta

situated. This implies that his oeuvre should be understood as an individual, aesthetic reflection of and reaction to the actual social and historical forces that condition it and from which it arises. In this regard, the challenge to the possibility of a discourse of truth and the crisis of sense making inaugurated by modernity and radicalized by postmodernity can be understood as the historical and cultural roots from which the uncanny within Tabucchi's opus originates and develops as a kind of poetics.

Significantly, in his main theoretical discussion of the concept,<sup>4</sup> Tabucchi adopts the term 'inquietudine' (often capitalised), rather than the properly Freudian 'perturbante'.<sup>5</sup> Choosing a noun instead of the adjective immediately suggests that the writer intends to engage with and conceptualise the uncanny on an ontological: Tabucchi's 'Inquietudine' is a condition, before and beyond being an affective property.<sup>6</sup> In effect, a crucial motif of Tabucchi's literary output is the idea of man's openness to meaning as uncannily articulated: what distinguishes a human being is a need for significance and an incessant creation of structures of meaning through which to make sense of one's being in the world (ontological or metaphysical uncanny). Man is unique in his potential to endow every experience he undergoes with sense, including that of his own existence. In Tabucchi, this task is uncanny for two main reasons: first because it calls into question and exposes the gaps existing inside any pre-given, meaningful totality and familiar practice of

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ha della propria natura artistica, il suo ideale estetico, il suo programma, i modi secondo i quali si propone di costruire. Si distinguono di solito una poetica programmatica e una poetica in atto, ma la parola ha il suo vero valore nella fusione dei due significati, come intenzione che si fa modo di costruzione'. As Binni remarks, an author's poetics needs to be historicised, that is analysed in relation to the historical context within which it originates, since it expresses 'il gusto di un'epoca, le tendenze di un periodo letterario'. See: Walter Binni, 'La poetica del decadentismo', in *Opere complete di Walter Binni* (Florence: Il Ponte Editore, 2014), pp. 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> See: 'Dal desassossego di Fernando Pessoa fino all'assurdo beckettiano', in *Parole per Antonio Tabucchi. Con quattro inediti*, ed. by Roberto Francavilla (Rome: Artemide, 2012), pp. 65-75.

<sup>5</sup> All the occurrences of the term *unheimliche* in Freud's writings have usually been translated with the adjective 'perturbante' since Silvano Daniele's first translation in: *Opere di Sigmund Freud* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1966-80). As Tabucchi acknowledges, '[i]l termine freudiano è *das Unheimliche*, che in italiano è stato tradotto da Cesare Musatti con il termine "perturbante" ed è il termine con il quale poi è entrato nel comune linguaggio psicanalitico italiano'. See: 'Dal desassossego', p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> As Tabucchi explains, this linguistic choice comes from the fact that 'inquietudine' is the term he and his wife Maria José de Lancastre have used in their first Italian translation (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986) of Pessoa's *Livro do Desassossego*. For Tabucchi, *desassossego* and *unheimliche* belong to the same 'blocco semiologico' ('Dal desassossego', p. 67). However, in chapter 2 I will outline the differences between the two.

signification; second because it constitutes an interrogation of sense that cannot – and does not want to – be exhausted or utterly answered, which is capable of sustaining and inhabiting semantic limits and voids. Disturbing and collapsing familiar processes of sense making, the *unheimliche* reveals how human beings are inherently producers of sense and how this takes place in a discontinuous, interrogative and unsaturated manner.

This impression of a search for meaning underlying Tabucchi's oeuvre is cognate with my decision to read his texts through and alongside Agamben's account of the uncanny. Indeed, for both authors the *unheimliche* provides a privileged vantage point from which to meditate upon the essence of human being as creators of sense,<sup>7</sup> questioning the way in which it is possible to dwell within a meaningful existence.

At present, it is not possible to document a direct influence of Agamben's texts on Tabucchi, nor the fact that the writer knew or directly read the philosopher. However, referring to Agamben's treatment of the uncanny in reading Tabucchi allows one to identify and examine a type of philosophical enquiry within the latter's works that would otherwise remain (and has indeed remained thus far) overlooked. Tabucchi's philosophical enquiry addresses and at the same time embodies precisely the uncanny emergence of signification itself in literature (the uncanny as poetics), in relation to the ontological (or metaphysical) view of men as creators of sense. In other words, it is an investigation of the different ways in which literature (and his own literary practice) can be a discontinuous, interrogative, unsaturated experience of sense making – an exploration of how literature addresses what Tabucchi calls 'desiderio metafisico'<sup>8</sup> or 'interrogazione metafisica',<sup>9</sup> namely the idea that '[l]a letteratura è una forma laica [...] di risposta alle necessità religiose dell'uomo'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Tabucchi observes,

Da quando abbiamo perso la convinzione che qualcuno ci osservi, la nostra vita manca di finalità. [...] Adesso che non c'è più nessuno che ci osserva, la nostra vita si è convertita in un qualcosa privo di senso [...].<sup>11</sup>

On this point he then adds how

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<sup>7</sup> Agamben defines it as 'lo statuto poetico dell'uomo'. Giorgio Agamben, *L'uomo senza contenuto* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1970), p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> Carlos Gumpert, 'La letteratura come enigma e inquietudine. Una conversazione con Antonio Tabucchi', in *Dedica a Antonio Tabucchi*, ed. by Claudio Cattaruzza (Pordenone: Associazione Provinciale per la Prosa, 2001), pp. 17-105 (p. 92).

<sup>9</sup> Tabucchi, 'L'irreversibile e la nostalgia', *L'indice dei libri del mese*, 5 June 1985.

<sup>10</sup> Gumpert, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

[N]ella letteratura, come forse anche nella vita, la cosa fondamentale non è trovare ma cercare. I ritrovamenti mi sembrano secondari, l'essenziale è l'ansia della ricerca, è questo che deve animare l'uomo [...]. La letteratura è una specie di sfinge [...] perché, data la sua ambizione di rispondere ai grandi interrogativi dell'esistenza e dell'uomo, ci attrae irresistibilmente dandoci l'illusione che interrogandola troveremmo le risposte che cerchiamo.<sup>12</sup>

If human beings inevitably find themselves facing the uncanny in their search for meaning, literature is uncanny insofar as it offers means, modes and spaces for this interrogation by virtue of its problematisation of how sense is constructed, experienced and shared.

Drawing on Agamben's philosophy of language and more specifically on his theorisation of the notion of uncanny – which, as will be shown, is fundamentally consistent with the one offered by Tabucchi – the uncanny will be defined throughout this study as a signifying function and a process of semiosis. Far from being reducible to a catalogue of themes and motifs, this is rather understood as a meaning-making process that occurs in and through the literary text.<sup>13</sup> Like literature, the uncanny takes place within language or, rather, it problematises the experience we undergo (with)in language.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, speaking of a 'poetics of the uncanny' ultimately implies analysing the ways in which Tabucchi explores the conditions of possibility and the limits of literature as a process of sense making, and thus addresses the question of how it is possible – for and through literature – to make sense of our being in the world (Tabucchi's 'necessità religiose dell'uomo'). For, Tabucchi observes, there is a strong nexus between the uncanny and the very idea of poetics, namely of a 'letteratura [che], riflettendosi su se stessa, possiede la coscienza di farsi': this comes from the fact that 'una scrittura che si interroga non è una

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 82-83.

<sup>13</sup> 'Even if the uncanny is not conceived as an irreducibly subjective sentiment its objective structure cannot be determined solely in thematic terms, independent of their completely structured context. If, as Freud's conclusion suggests, das Unheimliche has a privileged relation to literary 'fiction', it is surely not to the merely contexts represented 'in' or 'by' texts, but to their 'formal', textual structure itself'. Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 218.

<sup>14</sup> 'Above all, the uncanny is intimately entwined in language, with how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to ourselves, to the world, when uncanny strangeness is at issue'. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) p. 2. Similarly, Bernstein comments that '[t]he uncanny calls not for a definition, a collection of thematic terms, but rather, as a formal, textual structure, demands *reading*. [...] It has tended to become a fixed psychoanalytic concept whose descriptive potential overshadows the fact that the uncanny puts in question the possibility of definition itself'. Susan Bernstein, 'It Walks: The Ambulatory Uncanny', *Experimenting: Essays With Samuel Weber*, ed. by Simon Morgan Wortham and Gary Hall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp. 183-208 (p. 184).

letteratura che si ripiega su se stessa, bensì una letteratura che presenta più interrogativi, che inquisisce [*e perciò inquieta*] con maggior profondità' (my italics).<sup>15</sup>

The title of this study aims to simultaneously describe and perform Tabucchi's uncanny exploration. The conceptual oscillation between and intermingling of 'quest' and 'questioning' alludes to the fact that Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny is grounded in a search for sense, constituting a problematisation of literary signification itself. Incorporating a parenthesis to suggest this twofold value, the title offers a sort of disjointed and estranging linguistic and reading experience that visualises the uncanny. A similar process takes place with Tabucchi's works, where the uncanny is both thematised and performed. The question(ing) and the quest for sense, at once a re-grounding and a pursuit of 'metaphysical' significance,<sup>16</sup> is what defines and legitimates, for Tabucchi, the role of literature, and which also constitutes the pivotal principle underpinning his own poetics:

Un romanzo non è grande se non ha in sé almeno *un'interrogazione metafisica*. Interrogazione che non è incompatibile col realismo, come a volte si tende a credere, perché realismo e metafisica possono andare perfettamente d'accordo; anzi, più che il fantastico, che è la negazione della metafisica, è spesso il reale che postula interrogativi metafisici, o che *fa scattare quella metafisica del reale* che il nostro secolo, a partire da Kafka e da Pirandello, ha visitato con i suoi autori maggiori.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gumpert, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> The use of the adjective 'metaphysical' is consistent with Tabucchi's idiosyncratic employment of the same term. However, it defines a sort of post-metaphysics, an approach that undoes and transcends the Western metaphysics of presence, what Derrida calls 'the historical determination of the meaning of being as presence', as well as the negativity that, as it will be seen in chapter 1, Agamben identifies at its core. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 12. Metaphysical is the writer's 'intention' to explore and describe man's mode of being: nonetheless, this exploration and description is post-metaphysical in its form – a literary questioning – and in its content – the uncanny. This in fact entails a topological understanding of being, of reality as a 'folding together of multiple dimensions of meaningfulness', which is no longer founded upon (the search for) a unifying principle or origin. Jussi Backman, *Complicated Presence: Heidegger and the Postmetaphysical Unity of Being* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), p. 8. For Tabucchi, any attempt – including his own – to understand and make sense of man's ultimate essence, and the fact that individuals exist in the form of creators of meaning is metaphysical in nature. But man's mode of being is uncanny and the uncanny is (post)metaphysical because it occurs as a production of sense rather than as the grounding of a unique signified. This means rejecting any pre-given plenitude of sense as what detaches men from their true being.

<sup>17</sup> 'L'irreversibile e la nostalgia', italicised.

What is the meaning of and in what ways is it possible to articulate a metaphysical investigation of the real? While Tabucchi posits a typically modern question – what forms the basis of (human) being? Who are we? Is there a purpose in our being alive? Where do we come from? Where are we going? –, the answer he advances is inherently postmodern: facing an apparently meaningless universe ruled by randomness and chaos and that deactivates any foundational justification and claim, he nonetheless tries to circumscribe and inhabit potential enclaves of sense. As Surdich affirms:

In un reale deprivato della fermezza logica e della legittimità consequenziale dei nessi, il narratore si muove tra le cicatrici dei nessi che sono saltati e cerca non di riordinare l'universo, ma di sondarne i vuoti, di abitarne le inadeguatezze, di rasentare quanto è assente.<sup>18</sup>

In the end, Tabucchi offers no proper answer but only a place and an effort to keep those interrogatives open. Tabucchi's uncanny is a process of negotiation, interrupting reassuring readings and opening up to ambiguity, which seeks the reader's participation. It is the othering of language that makes it possible to dwell within an unsaturated symbolic.<sup>19</sup> In particular, I will pursue the idea that Tabucchi's work constitutes an attempt to signify *otherwise* what is *other* and *for the other*. Signifying *otherwise* defines the writer's effort to problematise, question and re-negotiate familiar spaces and modalities of signification. Signifying *the other* focuses on the potentiality to articulate, in terms of narrative structures, that which reverses accustomed meanings and eschews rational mastery, and that will be understood both as the individual and the collective (sociocultural) unconscious. By collective unconscious I mean Tabucchi's representation of what has been excluded from the dominant narratives of the past – as well as of the present –, what might have taken place differently and what actually occurred but was then silenced.<sup>20</sup> Signifying

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<sup>18</sup> Luigi Surdich, 'Il principio della letteratura, raccontare il sogno di un altro. Forma e sostanza dei sogni nella narrativa di Tabucchi', in *I 'notturni' di Antonio Tabucchi. Atti di seminario. Firenze, 12-13 maggio 2008*, ed. by Anna Dolfi (Rome: Bulzoni, 2008), pp. 25-63 (p. 44).

<sup>19</sup> The distinction between saturated and unsaturated elements is derived from the works of the psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion. The former define 'situations or states that remain completely impregnated with something', whereas the latter are 'entirely free or empty' of rigidly assigned meaning. Rafael E. Lopez-Corvo, *Wild Thoughts Searching for a Thinker: A Clinical Application of W.R. Bion's Theories* (London: Karnac Books, 2006), p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the two dimensions of individual and collective unconscious are strictly intertwined for, as Francese contends, '[w]hen writers [like Tabucchi] examine and express their own internal reality, they restore to our present the forgotten and/or repressed past so that it might serve as a model for collective analysis of the disquietude of contemporary society.' Joseph Francese, 'Tabucchi's Fragments of Lovers Discourses', *Italica*, 80.3 (Autumn 2003), 389-402 (p. 394).

*for the other* describes the author's practice of literary discourse as a modality of ethical commitment that tries to make sense in the place of and on behalf of he who has been denied the possibility to formulate his own narrative of sense.

### Critical Approaches to the Uncanny: Modes and Problems

This study aims to offer a contribution to the conceptualisation of the uncanny in relation to literature and to use this as a basis to achieve a deeper understanding of Tabucchi's oeuvre and its critical reception.

Concerning the former, I will try to formulate an original interpretation of the uncanny that has its roots in the overlapping areas of Agamben's philosophical and Tabucchi's literary discourse, and will gradually emerge in my argument as a potential modality of literary criticism.<sup>21</sup> As a matter of fact, the demand to scrutinise the intermingling of the *unheimliche* and literature has constituted a recurrent and pivotal argument throughout the theoretical development of this concept: for instance, Weber argues that 'the problem of the *narrative* context of the uncanny [...] emerges as crucial for further investigation';<sup>22</sup> and Prawer claims that 'the uncanny in literature does speak of something true and important [...] its investigation, therefore, is worth our while'.<sup>23</sup> This is due to the fact that, as Lacoue-Labarthe points out, '[t]he *Unheimliche*, as estrangement, is the estrangement of the human [...]. It follows that the *Unheimliche* is essentially a matter of language, or that language is the site of the *Unheimliche* – if the latter can be said to have a site'.<sup>24</sup>

It is significant that already in Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', the text that inaugurates the discourse about the concept, the analysis takes its cue from a linguistic investigation

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<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that Agamben lacks a consistent theory of the uncanny, since only a limited number of passages in his texts explicitly address the concept, this does not affect the validity and usefulness of approaching it from and through his theory of language. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to observe that, although non-systematic and under-researched, Agamben's theorisation has already been recognised as an important contribution to the debate on the concept: significantly, Berto includes Agamben's work *Stanze* in her suggested bibliography on the *unheimliche*. Graziella Berto, *Freud, Heidegger, lo spaesamento* (Milan: Bompiani, 1999), p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Weber, p. 234, italicised.

<sup>23</sup> Siegbert S. Prawer, *The Uncanny in Literature. An Apology for its investigation* (London: Westfield College, 1965), p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Catastrophe: A Reading of Celan's *The Meridian*', trans. by Timothy Clark and Sylvia Gautheron, *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 15 (1993), 3-41 (12).

into the etymology of the word *unheimliche* and a survey of its literary manifestations.<sup>25</sup> The importance of the uncanny, however, remains equally crucial and incontrovertible for contemporary literary theory too. This can be seen, specifically, in the most important contributions that engage with this concept, published during what Masschelein defines as its most prominent ‘period of conceptualization’:

It was Freud who raised the phenomenon and the word ‘*unheimlich*’ to the status of a concept [...]. Freud remains the founder of the discourse in the Foucauldian sense of the term because subsequent theorists have not superseded his centrality in the debate. [...] The concept of the uncanny has only really been picked up in the last three decades of the twentieth century, when Freud’s 1919 essay was widely discovered primarily in French and in Anglo-Saxon literary theory and criticism. [...] *The Freudian uncanny is a late-twentieth century theoretical concept.*<sup>26</sup>

During the 1970s, the analyses formulated by Todorov, Derrida, Cixous and Weber were key in positioning the uncanny at ‘the heart of poetics and of a theory of literature itself’.<sup>27</sup> For, to them, the *unheimliche* ‘incorporates and reveals the essence of literature’,<sup>28</sup> namely that narratives are based upon an endless deferral of meaning. Although I agree with the idea that ‘the uncanny is literature, literature in itself, the literary in its essence’,<sup>29</sup> since they both expose the fact that language is not transparent or neutral, I would dispute the deconstructionist foundation of such statement, and the identification of a shared ‘uncontrollable semantic proliferation’<sup>30</sup> at the linguistic level. The literary uncanny is not (necessarily) semantic undecidability or deferral. On the contrary, what my intertwined study of Agamben’s and Tabucchi’s oeuvre tries to clarify is that literature is inherently

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*’. Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth, 1955), pp. 219-52 (p. 226). In the essay, Freud scrutinises the uncanny elements in Hoffman’s short story ‘The Sandman’ (1817).

<sup>26</sup> Annaleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept. The Freudian Uncanny in the Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (Albany: State University of New York, 2011), pp. 3-4, italics in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 94. Specifically, one may consider: Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970); Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972); Hélène Cixous, ‘Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* (The ‘Uncanny’)’, trans. by Robert Denome, *New Literary History*, 7.3 (1976), 525-48; Samuel Weber, ‘The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment’, *MLN*, 88 (1973), 1102–33.

<sup>28</sup> Masschelein, p. 123.

<sup>29</sup> David Ellison, *Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature. From the Sublime to the Uncanny* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



uncanny to the extent to which it produces a non-conceptual experience of truth and sense making, owing to the fact that the *unheimliche* allows for a particular *linguistic experience*. The uncanny is a crisis of the Saussurean model of the sign and a modification thereof.<sup>31</sup> The uncanny, in fact, reveals the functioning of language as non-propositional semiosis that challenges the conditions of possibility and the limits of signification itself:

The concept of the uncanny arises throughout the various attempts to reconcile symbol and symbolised, i.e. signifier and signified. The tension between the two makes symbolization a highly ambivalent endeavour, for the symbol can never fully coincide with the content of what should be symbolised. The meaning of the concept of the uncanny is a process, an infinite semiosis.<sup>32</sup>

Consequently, as chapter 1 intends to demonstrate, this differentiation opens a gap between Agamben and the deconstructionist position, for which the uncanny is tantamount to negative undecidability.

On the contrary, far from being a locus of negativity, the *unheimliche* constitutes an enabling mechanism of signification. This is also implicated in Freud's linguistic assessment of the term: what the prefix un- of the German word marks is a counter-turning movement of exclusive inclusion and, reciprocally, of inclusive exclusion.

### Freud's *Unheimliche*

The critical discourse about the uncanny begins with Freud's 1919 seminal essay 'Das Unheimliche'.<sup>33</sup> This text is divided into three parts, as Freud develops his arguments: from a linguistic perspective, examining the etymology of the German term and the difficulties of its translation into other languages; by collecting and analysing a repertoire of themes and experiences that provoke an uncanny feeling of anxiety, such as those of the double or involuntary repetitions or those associated with seemingly animate objects like automatons; finally, by reading and interpreting the uncanny in E.T.A. Hoffman's 1817 short story *The Sandman*.

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<sup>31</sup> In his *Cours de linguistique générale* (Lausanne: Libraire Payot, 1916) Ferdinand de Saussure develops a dyadic model of the linguistic sign, as composed of the signifier (its form) and the signified (its conceptual content), which are arbitrarily linked (as graphically represented by the bar).

<sup>32</sup> Masschelein, p. 116.

<sup>33</sup> As Freud explicitly admits, the subject of the uncanny had been discussed by Ernst Jentsch in his 1906 essay 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny', where it is equated with a condition of uncertainty provoked by what is novel and unfamiliar.

Likewise, Freud's enquiry into and definition of the uncanny follows three main conceptual steps. First, he argues that: 'this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind'.<sup>34</sup> This means that something unfamiliar is uncanny not by virtue of being new, uncertain or unknown, but because it is tied up with a previous familiarity. This initial element, which is also the most complete definition of the Freudian *unheimliche*, is framed through the interplay of two (apparent) conceptual polarities: the familiar and the unfamiliar, and the concealed and the unconcealed. Freud discovers the first of these oppositions by investigating the etymology of the term *unheimliche* and observing how, although 'the German word *unheimliche* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning "familiar," [...] and we are tempted to conclude that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar', ultimately '*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite'.<sup>35</sup> The subsequent conceptual pair is grounded in the fact that *heimlich*, alongside notions of the familiar and the homely, also retains the meaning of something hidden, and comes from Schelling's suggestion that 'everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light'.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, if *heimlich* signifies 'familiar', *unheimliche* takes on the meaning of 'unfamiliar'. But, when *heimlich* means 'hidden', then *unheimliche* indicates 'unconcealment, uncovering'. Tellingly, these two sets of meanings are mutually inclusive: what is uncovered and thus seems unfamiliar is something that was once familiar and then, at a later point in time, was covered up.

In the Freudian uncanny:

- i. There is something familiar.
- ii. This is then concealed and estranged.
- iii. And it is finally unconcealed as being both unfamiliar and familiar.

But what is it that was once familiar? And how does it undergo the dual process of defamiliarisation and unconcealment?

Freud answers these interrogatives formulating the second conceptual step in his reasoning. In effect, Freud observes how what is originally familiar and then hidden might take two forms: allegedly overcome childhood complexes or ancient, yet surmounted

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<sup>34</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 240.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 220-26.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

beliefs.<sup>37</sup> Freud finds a paradigmatic example of each form in Hoffman's short story *The Sandman*.

On the one hand, Freud identifies the real uncanny motif of the story in the recurring element of the eyes and the fear of blindness. The Sandman, who threatens loss of the children's eyes, symbolises the castration complex. As Freud comments, there is

[N]o doubt that the feeling of something uncanny is directly attached to the figure of the Sand-Man, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one's eyes [...]. We know from psychoanalytic experience, however, that this fear of damaging or losing one's eyes is a terrible fear of childhood. Many adults still retain their apprehensiveness in this respect, and no bodily injury is so much dreaded by them as an injury to the eye. We are accustomed to say, too, that we will treasure a thing as the apple of our eye. A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that a morbid anxiety connected with the eyes and with going blind is often enough a substitute for the dread of castration.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, the figure of the doll Olympia, regarding which the protagonist and the reader cannot tell whether she is animate or inanimate, is uncanny because the possibility of her being alive seems to reactivate and actualise an old, primitive or childhood belief in animism. As Freud affirms, although we now hold non-animistic beliefs,

[W]e do not feel quite sure of our new set of beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to support the old, discarded beliefs, we get a feeling of the uncanny [...].<sup>39</sup>

Thus, answering the second question, Freud explains how the dual process of estrangement and unconcealment, regardless of what actually undergoes it, is structured in the form of the return of the repressed: 'the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it'.<sup>40</sup>

In the final part of his essay, which marks the third conceptual point in Freud's arguments, he states that it is possible to distinguish the uncanny experienced in life from the one encountered in fictional works, since 'there are many more means of creating uncanny

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<sup>37</sup> 'An uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed' (ibid., p. 249).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 231-34.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 247-48.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

effects in fiction than there are in real life'.<sup>41</sup> What does this imply for a literary uncanny? And for Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny?

On the one hand, it might seem that Freud recognises the strict nexus existing between literature and the uncanny, understood as a reading (or formal) effect:

[T]he story-teller has a peculiarly directive influence over us; by means of the states of mind into which he can put us and the expectations he can rouse in us, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another, and he often obtains a great variety of effects from the same material.<sup>42</sup>

Meaningfully, this affects also Freud's own writing. As Farrell Krell suggests, 'all [Freud's] sources for the uncanny are literary' since 'even what he claims to be autobiographical lived experiences are of course marvellously narrated and beautifully crafted pieces of writing'.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, however, as his analysis of Hoffman's story evidences, Freud admittedly confines the literary uncanny solely to a thematic reading. Consequently, he overlooks the fact that 'it is really the form of the narrative and not the theme in itself which plays the decisive role in the production of [uncanny] effects'.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, Freud's understanding of the uncanny and of the literary uncanny is consistent with his wider view on art. Regarding the latter, '[a] full and complete presentation of his psychoanalytic observations on art and artists is not to be found as such in Freud's works'.<sup>45</sup> Still, as Sterba contends, the central assumption underlying Freud's investigation of the aesthetic field is that:

The work of art is [...] the product of psychic forces which are in opposition to each other, such as desire and inner prohibition. It represents a reconciliation between these conflicting forces and has therefore the character of a compromise, as have also those psychopathological formations - errors, dreams and neurotic symptoms - which are well known. The fundamental dynamic force at the root

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 251

<sup>43</sup> David Farrell Krell, 'Das Unheimliche: Architectural Sections of Heidegger and Freud', *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 22 (1992), 43-61 (60).

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Kofman, *Freud and Fiction*, trans. by Sarah Wykes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 137.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Sterba, 'The Problem of Art in Freud's Writings', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* (1940), 9: 256-268 (256).

of a work of art is an unfulfilled wish of the artist; just as in dreams and fantasies, the work of art represents this wish as fulfilled.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, for Freud, the artist ‘is able through the creation of a work of art to obtain sufficient gratification of his intense childhood wishes which he represents as fulfilled in his creation’.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, art is a ‘*social* act of wish fulfilment’ which collapses the binary opposition between individual and society.<sup>48</sup> The social relevance of art as an act of wish fulfilment needs to be understood in a dual sense. On the one hand, by creating a work of art, the artist dialogues with an external audience that identifies with those same wishes captured in cultural products: as a matter of fact, ‘[t]he practice of art is an activity whose aim is to assuage unappeased wishes’ and ‘[t]his aim is achieved not only from the standpoint of the creator but also from that of the person enjoying the creation’.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, however, the view of art as a social phenomenon pertains to the fact that it allows for an imaginary satisfaction of unconscious wishes in a socially acceptable way. For not only are these wishes expressed by artists ‘the same wishes which mankind combats by means of its great institutions, the most important of which are religion and the moral laws’ and which are therefore ‘banned by culture, suppressed and repudiated by education’.<sup>50</sup> But, also, conversely, through artistic production such wishes are satisfied within socially valuable products.

This view of art links to the Freudian uncanny, to the extent to which the latter, as seen, designates the return of the repressed. Indeed, adopting the Freudian perspective, the artistic artefact can occasionally make room precisely for the emergence and representation of unconscious, repressed content. Yet, on a deeper level, the strongest nexus between Freud’s understanding of art and the Freudian *unheimliche* lies in the fact that

The magic creation of a pseudo reality [namely the creation of a work of art], in which not the laws of the outside world but conscious and unconscious wishes are the determining factors, signifies a regression to this phase of the omnipotence of thought. The early childhood tendencies of this period

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 257. For a more contemporary psychoanalytic view on Freud’s approach to art and the implicit significance of its formal and performative elements, see Gaburri’s and Ambrosiano’s (2003) remarks on his work on Michelangelo’s Moses.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 262, italicised.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 257.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 262.

of omnipotence of thought are preserved in all of us and the pseudo reality of the work of art brings them a profound satisfaction.<sup>51</sup>

And, as indicated, surmounted beliefs such as the one in the omnipotence of thought are one of the two main sources of the *unheimliche*, the other being overcome childhood complexes.

However, Freud's conceptualisation of artistic practice, though necessary in relation to Freudian uncanny, is not relevant, if not partially – namely, solely as far as the idea of art as social phenomenon is concerned –, to my analysis of Tabucchi's poetics. To begin with, methodologically speaking, I do not believe that

[W]orks of literature can or should be read as manifestations of the return of the repressed of the empirical author. Readers may not apply the psychoanalytic method to writers about whom there is always much we cannot know with certainty, and who are refractory to the crucial element of psychoanalytic process, transference.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, as anticipated, Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny designates a need for sense and a problematisation of sense making experiences that: first, originates within and can only be made intelligible as a reflection of and response to a precise historical period; second, dialogues with and partakes in a collective and social dimension. As for the first point, already in this introduction I will interrogate the ways in which Tabucchi's works have been and might be historically contextualised, particularly assessing the modern and postmodern facet of his poetics. Regarding the second element, the social relevance of the uncanny will be both theoretically addressed in chapter 1 – specifically in relation to Orlando and Agamben – as well as scrutinised throughout the study.

As a matter of fact, Tabucchi's three main narrative modes and motifs of the uncanny (those of play, reversal and testimony) have a clear social dimension: play is how the author exposes, estranges and questions familiar and socially accepted practices and mechanisms of sense making (such as law or mass media); through reversal, Tabucchi gives voice to what I call collective unconscious, namely to alternative and unofficial representations of historical events; finally, testimony is how the writer tries to dialogue with the external, individual and collective, other, illuminating social tensions and political conflicts. Clearly, however, on this point Tabucchi's opus reverses the Freudian idea of art

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 264-65.

<sup>52</sup> Joseph Francese, *Socially Symbolic Acts: The Historicizing Fictions of Umberto Eco, Vincenzo Consolo, and Antonio Tabucchi* (Madison, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 2006), p. 106.

as a social act of wish fulfillment. This follows from the fact that, while for Freud works of art are socially acceptable and valuable insofar as and to the point to which they conform to social values, Tabucchi's commitment precisely occurs as a questioning and critique of familiar and shared truths.

In this section I have argued that Freud formulates a sort of temporal understanding of the uncanny, as an experience of temporal disruption that originates from, is structured around and occurs as the return of the repressed. Yet, concluding that 'un- is the token of repression',<sup>53</sup> Freud conflates the two different operations and levels on which the uncanny works: negation and uncovering.<sup>54</sup>

When 'heimlich' means the familiar, the un- negates it by producing its lack. When 'heimlich' means the secret, the un- removes, undoes or reverses it. [...] So there are two kinds of negation that might be attributed to the un- of 'uncanniness'. One is privative and produces a lack, absence or imperfection (negating un-). The other is a reversal or turn which is often a return (reversing-releasing un-). [...] Basically, the story of the return of the repressed links the two ways of producing the *unheimliche* in a chain of psychic events: something familiar becomes unfamiliar and hidden, only to return to the familiar as unfamiliar.<sup>55</sup>

This is a crucial point insofar as, also for Agamben, the uncanny, although articulated in topological rather than temporal terms, designates a way to produce the positive out of the negative. Similarly, Weber maintains that the uncanny occurs as 'a certain indecidability which affects and infects representations, motifs, themes and situation'.<sup>56</sup> However, he adds that 'the uncanny is not merely identical with this indecidability: it involves and implies a second moment or movement, namely the defence against this crisis of perception'.<sup>57</sup> And this gesturing beyond undecidability 'implies a denial (*Verneinung* is the Freudian term) [...] that in turn involves a certain structure of narration, in which this denial repeats and articulates itself'.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> 'The Uncanny', p. 245.

<sup>54</sup> Masschelein explains this by commenting that 'the uncanny is marked by the unconscious' where 'denying something at the same time conjures it up' (p. 8).

<sup>55</sup> Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 215-18.

<sup>56</sup> Weber, p. 233.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

As is already evident in Freud's essay, any attempt to theorise the uncanny faces one main problem. Indeed, since the *unheimliche* elicits and moves critical responses towards metalinguistic thinking, this (un)concept cannot effectively be pinned down to nor contained by any rigorous, steady definition, since, in a sense, it always overflows its own reception. The uncanny at once belongs to language while seemingly trying to observe it as from an external viewpoint.<sup>59</sup> This follows from the fact that: first, the uncanny is inherently linguistic since the word *unheimliche* is uncannily constructed in a sort of abysmal 'conceptual mimesis'<sup>60</sup> of the phenomenon to which it refers; and second, the uncanny problematises and seeks to modify our familiar experience with language.

However, it is precisely with the role and impossibility of this 'meta' that the speculation about the uncanny reaches a seeming dead-end or looping deferral, for no linguistic meditation outside of language appears to be feasible. Approaching this concept through Agamben means changing the perspective from which we look at the problem, since, with the Italian philosopher, it becomes clear that metalinguistic thinking does not occur from an impossible standpoint outside language. On the contrary: meta-language is nothing but the topological experience of the taking place of language itself, of its signifying function, before and beyond any semantic content:

Il pensiero contemporaneo ha preso risolutamente coscienza del fatto che un metalinguaggio ultimo e assoluto non esiste e che ogni costruzione di un metalinguaggio resta presa in un regresso all'infinito. Il paradosso della pura intenzione filosofica è, tuttavia, proprio quello di un discorso che deve parlare del linguaggio ed esporne i limiti senza disporre di un metalinguaggio. In questo modo essa si urta proprio a ciò che costituiva il contenuto essenziale della rivelazione: *logos en arché*, la parola è assolutamente nel principio [...].<sup>61</sup>

Interpreting the metalinguistic nature of the uncanny through Agamben also involves reading this impossible 'metalanguage'-outside-language as being informed by and replicating another pre-suppositional structure: that of (nihilist) meta-physics, which

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<sup>59</sup> 'Every allegedly uncanny text is always a text *about* the uncanny. The uncanny is always 'meta-uncanny'. And at the same time there can be no 'meta-uncanny', since we can never fix the place or borders of where the alleged discourse of the uncanny ends and the putatively 'meta' discourse begins' (Royle, pp. 18-19).

<sup>60</sup> 'For Freud, the metalanguage of etymology is a neat tool for the psychoanalysis of a word [...] as though the synchronic lexicon had a (diachronic) unconscious. But when Freud's method of defamiliarization is brought to bear on the topic of defamiliarization, the metalanguage and the so-called object language fold back into each other'. Davis Schur, 'Jocasta's Eye and Freud's Uncanny', in *Bound by the City: Greek Tragedy, Sexual Difference, and the Formation of the Polis*, ed. by Denise McCoskey and Emily Zakin (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), pp. 103-118 (p. 106).

<sup>61</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *La potenza del pensiero. Saggi e conferenze* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005), p. 30.



locates the foundation of man's being outside of him. This is why, for him, '[a]ny overcoming of nihilism [...] will therefore entail an entirely new model of signification'.<sup>62</sup> In the end, Agamben's philosophical speculation occasions an innovative reconfiguration of the relationship between the uncanny and language, as well as a reformulation of language itself, as an excess over metaphysical constraints. This constitutes one of the main findings of chapter 1.

### Reading Tabucchi: Difficulties, Misappropriations and New Directions

Addressing the second purpose of this research project, reading Tabucchi's works through Agamben's uncanny appears to be not only possible, but also legitimate and necessary. It is legitimate in relation to the writer's texts, since my interpretation stems from and builds upon the fact that, as chapters 2 to 5 will demonstrate, there is a presence of the uncanny in Tabucchi, both as narrative theme and form and as critical concept, that is transversal to his fictional and theoretical writings, and which does not solely and necessarily overlap with the Freudian *unheimliche*.

Additionally, this critical approach seems necessary in relation to his understanding, insofar as it produces an innovative and in-depth reading of the author and of his entire literary output. Pointing towards a general reassessment of Tabucchi's oeuvre, the main effort of this study is, in fact, to shed light upon hitherto unexplored or overlooked potentialities of his work. On the one hand, the study engages with and draws upon some readings already advanced by Tabucchi's scholars, but which have not thus far been understood in the broader terms of a poetics, that is to say as a discursive strategy, a modality of signification that underpins the writer's approach to literature and reality. On the other hand, this thesis endeavours to disentangle the author from those critical categorisations that have proven inaccurate or not adequately problematised. For example, in this introduction I will address, question and/or confute what I consider to be the two main weaknesses in the author's reception. The first is the idea of a chronological fracture dividing Tabucchi's texts into metafictional and political works – which, despite having already been contested, is still hold valuable in any discussion concerning the writer. The second, and more radical, of such weaknesses is his classification as a postmodern writer: in this regard, I will make the case for an original interpretation of Tabucchi that is no

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<sup>62</sup> Shane Weller, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism. The Uncanniest of Guests* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), pp. 138-40.

longer based on the historical labels of ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’, but on the topological<sup>63</sup> one of ‘contemporary’.<sup>64</sup>

Antonio Tabucchi died on 25 March 2012. Since then, critical literature relating to his oeuvre has rapidly increased, leading to a number of retrospective publications that could be gathered into three groups: those paying posthumous homage to the individual, those praising the committed intellectual, and lastly those celebrating the significance of the writer’s literary legacy.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, leaving aside the risk of an ‘inevitabile mitizzazione, seguendo quel noto adagio secondo cui lo scrittore, lo scrittore *bravo*, inizia a vivere soltanto dopo che è morto’,<sup>66</sup> despite the increased attention to the author and the substantial publication, along critical contributions, of Tabucchi’s own unpublished writings, including both commentaries and fictions – such as the novel *Per Isabel. Un Mandala* –<sup>67</sup> his literary experience still creates ‘un problema di poetica’.<sup>68</sup> In effect,

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<sup>63</sup> In this study, ‘topological’ designates both the place and the taking place itself of a mutual relationship, a sort of negotiation of sense between two entangled elements.

<sup>64</sup> I borrow the concept of ‘contemporaneo’ from Agamben for whom, as I will argue, it defines a certain temporal disjointedness, a spatial distance from one’s own historical time.

<sup>65</sup> Among the most substantial publications dedicated to the private Tabucchi one should mention: *Sosteneva Tabucchi*, ed. by Luca Ricci (Pisa: Felici Editore, 2013); and *Parole per Antonio Tabucchi. Con quattro inediti*, ed. by Roberto Francavilla (Rome: Artemide, 2012), specifically in relation to the commemorative essays collected in the first half of the book, while the second part offers unpublished notes by Tabucchi on the subject of literature and his own poetics. The same hybrid structure, divided between personal memories and a critical reading of his oeuvre, also characterises *Una giornata con Tabucchi*, ed. by Paolo Di Paolo, Carlos Gumpert and others (Rome: Cavallo di ferro, 2012) and *Adamastor e dintorni. In ricordo di Antonio Tabucchi, con un frammento inedito*, ed. by Valeria Tocco (Pisa: ETS, 2013). Posthumous homages to the committed, civic dimension of Tabucchi appeared mostly in journals and newspapers in the aftermath of his death. See, for instance: Paolo Di Stefano, ‘Tabucchi tra romanzi e passione civile. Furori e fantasmi di uno scrittore civile’, *Il Corriere della Sera*, 26 March 2012; Carlo Grande, ‘Addio Tabucchi. Passione e rabbia contro la dittatura dell’ignoranza’, *La Stampa*, 26 March 2012; Osvaldo Guerrieri, ‘Tabucchi, la letteratura come inquietudine’, *La Stampa*, 22 March 2013; Fulvio Paloscia, ‘Se Tabucchi si indignava’, *La Repubblica*, 26 March 2012; ‘Antonio Tabucchi, la scrittura e l’impegno’, *Micromega*, vol. 5 (January 2012). The most significant recent publications dealing with the literary profile of Tabucchi include: Antonio Tabucchi and Luca Cherici, *Dietro l’arazzo. Conversazione sulla scrittura* (Rome: Giulio Perrone Editore, 2013); *Tempo, spazio e memoria nella letteratura italiana. Omaggio a Antonio Tabucchi*, ed. by Zosi Zografidou (Rome: Aracne editrice, 2013); ‘La scrittura è la mia voce. Ad Antonio Tabucchi’, *Narrazioni. Rivista semestrale di libri, autori ed eterotopie*, 3 (Winter-Spring 2013); and Gioia Pace, *La ricerca di una logica del postmoderno. Tabucchi e la categoria della memoria* (Siracusa: Morrone Editore, 2012).

<sup>66</sup> ‘Nota Introduttiva’, in *Sosteneva Tabucchi*, p. 9, italics in the text.

<sup>67</sup> *Per Isabel. Un Mandala* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013).

Tabucchi has *always* constituted a problematic and challenging figure for critics. When mapping the literature about Tabucchi, a gap can be detected between the abundance of contributions coming from several countries and following the author since the early '80s, and an Italian critique that became truly significant only after the publication of the novel *Sostiene Pereira* in 1994.<sup>69</sup> Tabucchi's reception has engendered a puzzling situation that Schwarz Lausten delineates thus:

Tabucchi è uno degli autori italiani viventi [2005] più conosciuti e rispettati anche all'estero. Viene tradotto e studiato in molti paesi, ha ricevuto premi letterari (nel 2004 è stato anche fra i candidati al premio Nobel per la letteratura), e si organizzano convegni sulla sua opera in quanto rappresentante della narrativa italiana più interessante e innovativa di oggi. In un primo momento, la sua opera sembra aver fatto appello soprattutto al pubblico internazionale. La prima grande raccolta di articoli sulla sua opera uscì infatti in Australia [...] mentre la prima monografia è stata pubblicata in Italia (anche se scritta da un'italiana residente all'estero).<sup>70</sup>

In a sense, it is as though, in the critical responses he inspired, an opposition might be drawn between Tabucchi the bestselling author, contender for the Nobel prize, and subject of early collected reviews and profiles by foreign scholars or Italian professors living abroad, and the other Tabucchi, the one discovered belatedly by Italian academia. When, in 2007, Conti tried to recapitulate the critical works which had been produced about the author by that point, she began her analysis by stressing the correspondence between the international success of his fictional writings – she defines Tabucchi as ‘uno scrittore internazionale’ – and ‘un precoce successo critico all'estero’, whereas ‘alla metà degli anni Novanta, per lo studioso che si accingesse a scrivere un articolo su Antonio Tabucchi, la bibliografia critica disponibile in Italia era ridottissima’.<sup>71</sup> It is worth following Conti's review closely since she pinpoints a specific year, 1994, and an event, the publication of *Sostiene Pereira*, as the turning point for Tabucchi's Italian critique:

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<sup>68</sup> Serena Di Lecce, ‘Un “problema di poetica” al quadrato’, in *Narrazioni*, 49-54.

<sup>69</sup> *Sostiene Pereira. Una testimonianza* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994).

<sup>70</sup> Pia Schwarz Lausten, *L'uomo inquieto. Identità e alterità nell'opera di Antonio Tabucchi* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2005), pp. 9-10.

<sup>71</sup> Actually, as Conti declares, when she had already performed a similar task in 1995: ‘[n]on esistevano in Italia molti saggi in volume sull'autore [...] la critica su Tabucchi era per lo più limitata alle interviste o alle recensioni su quotidiani e periodici, in occasione di nuove pubblicazioni’. Eleonora Conti, ‘Il punto su Antonio Tabucchi’, *Bollettino 900*, n. 1-2 (2007) <<http://www3.unibo.it/boll900/numeri/2007-i/Conti1.html>> [accessed 17 November 2013]. See also: Eleonora Conti, ‘Alcuni elementi costitutivi dell'opera di Tabucchi’, *Bolettino 900*, n. 0 (1995) <<http://www.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/boll900/tabucchi.htm>> [accessed 17 november 2013].

La prima impressione che si ricava, intraprendendo una rapida ricerca fra le risorse di rete, è che di Antonio Tabucchi si siano occupati, in passato, più sistematicamente gli italianisti che lavorano all'estero, piuttosto che non gli studiosi in Italia. [...] La seconda impressione è che le monografie italiane sull'autore siano molto recenti e si infittiscano indicativamente a partire dal 2000. Eppure Tabucchi è autore che ha riscosso molto successo già alla fine degli anni Ottanta e che è stato lanciato definitivamente nel firmamento letterario con un romanzo che ha messo d'accordo pubblico e critica, *Sostiene Pereira* [...]. Proprio nel 1994, il successo di *Sostiene Pereira* – romanzo letto da molti come allusione al presente politico italiano – aveva scatenato un nugolo di polemiche circa 'l'impegno' degli scrittori e dunque una serie di articoli contrapposti sui quotidiani di destra e di sinistra sull'opportunità o meno che uno scrittore si pronunciasse circa la politica del proprio paese. [...] Al di là di questa impennata d'interesse per il romanzo e per l'indimenticabile figura del suo protagonista, mancava ancora una sistemazione critica della narrativa tabucchiana del decennio precedente, quella dei racconti e dei romanzi brevi, insomma quella del Tabucchi per lo più fantastico e postmoderno.<sup>72</sup>

The increase in critical contributions resulting from the publication of *Sostiene Pereira* seems to follow a shift that had already occurred in Tabucchi's own poetics, which would move from the postmodern texts of the 1980s to those characterised by the emergence of political concerns, published in the following decade. Not only did the publication of *Sostiene Pereira* represent for the Italian critique the birth of Tabucchi as the committed intellectual, but it also retrospectively denied his previous writings any ethical involvement. This marks the starting point, in my view, of a pervasive misreading of Tabucchi's oeuvre, whereby critics establish a rift in his work between the pre- and post-1994 books, nourishing the myth of two irreconcilable figures: from that moment and henceforth Tabucchi the engaged writer was born, ready to replace the postmodern one.

In actual fact, the difficulties surrounding Tabucchi's reception may be rendered more intelligible if looked at from three points of view: historical, stylistic and biographical. First, Tabucchi has never been affiliated with any literary school or cultural movement and consequently cannot be attributed any collective literary agenda or manifesto. In *The New Italian Novel* Lepschy stresses how Tabucchi 'like most writers of the 1980s belongs to no group or movement, but in his individualistic approach gives pre-eminence to the art of narration'.<sup>73</sup> Individualism characterised the Italian novelists of the 1980s, the period during which Tabucchi came to the fore. Analogously, in *La narrativa italiana degli anni*

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Anna Laura Lepschy, 'Antonio Tabucchi: Splinters of Existence', in *The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 200-18 (p. 200).

*Novanta*, Mondello distinguishes between the '90s, which were 'caratterizzati dalle presenze se non di gruppi certamente di tendenze' and the preceding decade, which was marked by 'esperienze isolate, scritture regolari o irregolari, che restavano entro il confine di percorsi individuali'.<sup>74</sup>

Second, not only did Tabucchi never make his own statements of poetics explicit, but he also mocked and questioned the very possibility and value of configuring an interpretation of his – and of any writer's – work in such terms. Notwithstanding his peculiar exploitation of and strategic dwelling in the liminality of the peritext, Tabucchi never, except perhaps once, and obliquely, in *Autobiografie altrui* (2003),<sup>75</sup> reflected on his own poetics in a straightforward way. According to Genette's definition, the peritext is a 'spatial category' and represents the space of a book occupied by 'such elements as the title or the preface [...] chapter titles or certain notes'.<sup>76</sup> As Brizio-Skov acknowledges, Tabucchi uses the peritext to establish an unconventional novelistic pact and to advance a metafictional problematisation of his own narratives.<sup>77</sup> By dwelling in the peritext, Tabucchi achieves four major goals: he declares the sources of his texts, traces their genesis, introduces and explicates the role of the author and of the reader within the narration, and provides critical readings of his own writing.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, even when dedicating an entire book to a speculation concerning what he designates as his own 'poetiche a posteriori',<sup>79</sup> Tabucchi

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<sup>74</sup> Elisabetta Mondello, 'La giovane narrativa degli anni Novanta. Cannibali e dintorni', in *La narrativa italiana degli anni Novanta*, ed. by (Rome: Meltemi, 2004), pp. 11-37 (p. 12).

<sup>75</sup> *Autobiografie altrui. Poetiche a posteriori* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003). In this volume Tabucchi comments, in story form, on some of his fictions, discussing their (possible) genesis and interpretation. However the epigraph taken from Joseph Conrad – 'Prima si crea l'opera, e solo dopo si riflette su essa' (ibid., p. 9) – immediately warns the reader not to passively trust the pages that follow.

<sup>76</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Iane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 4-5.

<sup>77</sup> Flavia Brizio-Skov, *Antonio Tabucchi. Navigazioni in un arcipelago narrativo* (Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2002), p. 36.

<sup>78</sup> Giovanni Palmieri, 'Per una volatile leggerezza: il "lato manco" di Antonio Tabucchi', in *Piccole finzioni con importanza. Valori della narrativa italiana contemporanea*, ed. by Nathalie Roelens and Inge Lanslots (Ravenna: Longo, 1993), pp. 125-36 (125).

<sup>79</sup> In *Autobiografie altrui*, Tabucchi defines his own 'poetiche a posteriori' as: '[t]endenzialmente illogiche, carenti di deontologia, cariche di false memorie e di false volontà, messaggere di un senso che ci sforziamo pateticamente di dare poi a qualcosa che avvenne prima. [...] Ipotesi vagabonde, nomadi e arbitrarie [...]' (p. 12). As for the paradoxical title 'autobiografie altrui', it is revealing of two important aspects of Tabucchi's poetics: his tendency to problematise the borders between factual, biographical experience and fiction – which I will discuss in chapters 3 and 5; and his exploration of plural, disarticulated subjectivities, of the other(ness) inhabiting the (individual and collective) self – which I will examine in chapter 4. This

ambiguously breaks down the distinction between theoretical and fictional writing, meaning that it is not entirely clear to which genre this text belongs. When asked to talk about his own poetics, Tabucchi operates a dual gesture: he frames it in plural terms, speaking of ‘poetiche’ instead of a more conventional ‘poetica’, and adopts a backward-looking perspective, according to which no theoretical speculation ever precedes the genesis of a text. These two aspects should be linked to the fact that Tabucchi regards literature and his own literary experience as a peculiar modality of signification and discourse of truth, which proceeds non-methodically, i.e. not following a pre-existing road but excursively producing it. For Tabucchi, poetics acts as a sort of late comprehension of the sense, that is, the meaning and direction, of his quest: this is what he calls ‘previsione del passato che si realizza postumamente’.<sup>80</sup>

These first two motives – his lack of affiliation with any literary movement and his refusal to make any statements of his poetics explicit –, which explain a somewhat critical uneasiness surrounding Tabucchi’s critique, are interrelated, inasmuch as his lack of affiliation with any group attests to a characteristic he shared with the vast majority of Italian writers of his time, as well as to an idiosyncratic dwelling within the history of literature,<sup>81</sup> which signals a precise, personal choice of poetics.

As for the third and final reason explaining the difficulties surrounding Tabucchi’s reception, any attempt at demarcating Tabucchi’s literary production, isolating it inside and from his wider, public engagement, is to my mind problematic – and, to some extent,

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latter aspect is strongly influenced by ‘Pessoa’s literary lesson, which is based on the rejection of the equation between identity and singularity in favour of the relation between identity and multiplicity, a relation famously exemplified by Pessoa’s creation of a number of fictional heteronyms’, namely independent poetic personalities (alter egos), each with his biography, poetics, worldview and writing style. Luca Poggi, ‘Tabucchi in the 1980s: The Phantasms of the Past in *Il gioco del rovescio*, *Notturmo indiano* and *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza*’, *Italian Studies*, 71:3 (September 2016), 403-418 (409). Indeed, Pessoa is a central presence in Tabucchi’s life and works: having bought a volume of Pessoa’s poetry from a bookseller in Paris by chance, Tabucchi was so fascinated by the reading that he decided to study Portuguese at University and then became one of the most important scholars on Pessoa. See: Alberto Scarponi, ed. by, *Alberto Arbasino, Italo Calvino, Andrea Camilleri, Umberto Eco, Mario Luzi, Claudio Magris, Dacia Maraini, Antonio Tabucchi raccontano se stessi* (Rome: Gangemi, 2002).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>81</sup> The centrality ascribed to literature is something Tabucchi shared with the Italian authors who came to the fore in the 1980s; in this sense, Pedullà writes: ‘Per cominciare, sia maiuscola l’iniziale: Letteratura. E la letteratura torna ad essere un mito per una generazione che si è trovata svuotata di ogni mitologia novecentesca, compresi gli antimiti delle varie avanguardie’. Walter Pedullà, foreword to Maria Pia Ammirati, *Il vizio di scrivere. Letture su Busi, De Carlo, Del Giudice, Pazzi, Tabucchi e Tondelli* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 1991), pp. 7-11 (p. 9).

disputable.<sup>82</sup> It is true to say that the combination of his avowedly elusive literary profile with a sharp, civic personality could also lead to a reading of his texts that is prejudicially filtered through the lens of his ‘public’ position.<sup>83</sup> In this respect, although it is correct to say that ‘[t]entare delle ipotesi sull’opera dello scrittore Tabucchi significa quindi non perdere mai di vista la produzione dell’uomo Tabucchi’ since ‘[a] ben vedere, esiste una corrispondenza tra la sua narrativa e la sua produzione non narrativa’,<sup>84</sup> I will examine the author’s articles published in Italian journals and newspapers solely when they appear influential or central in addressing his literary oeuvre. Accordingly, this study takes into account three types of texts: fictional works; initially non-fiction writings which were only later published as coherent, self-conclusive books, such as *La gastrite di Platone*, *Gli Zingari e il Rinascimento* and *L’oca al passo*;<sup>85</sup> and theoretical pieces dealing with literature and the uncanny, such as the transcript of the speech given at the University of Siena in 1997, entitled ‘Dal desassossego di Fernando Pessoa fino all’assurdo beckettiano’, now contained in the anthology *Parole per Antonio Tabucchi*.

Despite the difficulties in dealing with Tabucchi’s work, the thesis advanced in this study is geared at formulating an in-depth and comprehensive reading of his poetics. This entails a preliminary complication and/or confutation of two frailties, if not faults, in the critical reception of the writer: that the novel *Sostiene Pereira* opens up a hiatus<sup>86</sup> in Tabucchi’s works; and that he can be plainly defined as postmodernist tout court. These misappropriations are strictly intertwined, since, as Wren-Owens observes, ‘notions of intertextuality and dialogue with the literary heritage suggest a focus on self-reflexivity and interiority [Tabucchi’s postmodernism] at the expense of the dialogue with social

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<sup>82</sup> Exemplarily, Jeannet affirms that is not her intention ‘to explore the interweaving of the ethical dimension and the creative imagination in Antonio Tabucchi’, namely ‘to address what the man/citizen Tabucchi may say or write, as for instance in his *La gastrite di Platone*, or *Gli Zingari e il Rinascimento*, or what he asserts in his interviews as one of the most prominent intellectuals in today’s Italy, because those are in part *public relations phenomena*’. Angela M. Jeannet, ‘A Matter of Injustice: Violence and Death in Antonio Tabucchi’, *Annali d’Italianistica*, 19 (2001), 153-69 (154), my emphasis.

<sup>83</sup> For example, the right-wing journalist Luca Doninelli defined *Sostiene Pereira* as an electoral pamphlet. Luca Doninelli, ‘Macché letteratura, è propaganda’, *Il Giornale*, 9 March 1994.

<sup>84</sup> Brizio-Skov, p. 15

<sup>85</sup> *La gastrite di Platone* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1998); *Gli Zingari e il Rinascimento. Vivere da Rom a Firenze* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999); *L’oca al passo. Notizie dal buio che stiamo attraversando* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006).

<sup>86</sup> ‘La fortuna critica di Tabucchi mette in evidenza la divisione tra coloro che vedono la letteratura come fenomeno di sperimentazione raffinata e coloro che invece prediligono temi di un certo impegno politico ed esistenziale’ (Brizio-Skov, p. 11).

issues [which seemingly comes to the fore only after 1994]'.<sup>87</sup> As preliminary clarification, in this study I distinguish between postmodernity as a historical period or 'condition' (Harvey) defined by the development and affirmation of information technology, globalised, post-industrial economy and a pervasive 'media culture that generates sanitized collective memories and nurtures uncritical aesthetic sensibilities' (Francese), and which have caused, in the postmodern subject, the emergence of a feeling of spatial disorientation and the loss of a 'unitary sense of history' (Francese); and postmodernism, as the set of philosophical, cultural and aesthetic experiences, characterised by the so-called 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard), that represent, refract and respond to the structural transformations of the age. The adjectives 'modern' and 'postmodern' indistinctly apply to the historical periods and the related cultural experiences.<sup>88</sup>

The first point (the idea of a fracture within Tabucchi's opus) is the easiest to disprove. For not only, to adopt the chronological parameter, does it emerge that *Piazza d'Italia*, Tabucchi's 1975 debut, was already deeply concerned with ethical and political questions like history, memory and witnessing, but, additionally, the writer himself ascribed the same type of commitment to his most metafictional texts, such as *Il gioco del rovescio* (1981) or *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* (1985).<sup>89</sup> Hence he declared that, 'identificarmi nel punto di vista altrui, forse è questa la mia maniera di impegnarmi.[...] Il

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<sup>87</sup> Elizabeth Wren-Owens, *Postmodern Ethics. The Re-appropriation of Committed Writing in the Work of Antonio Tabucchi and Leonardo Sciascia: 1975-2005* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), p. 157.

<sup>88</sup> See: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. viii; Joseph Francese, *Socially Symbolic Acts: The Historicizing Fictions of Umberto Eco, Vincenzo Consolo, and Antonio Tabucchi* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2006), p. 12; Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv. Recently, a number of Italian literary scholars (Donnarumma, Luperini) has started to differentiate between postmodernity and the so-called 'ipermodernità', a period roughly beginning around 2000, which, although still characterised by the same, abovementioned political and socio-economical features of late, globalised capitalism, differs – specifically in its literary manifestations – from postmodernism in paying attention to and ethically engaging with reality. However, despite the latter elements being central in Tabucchi's poetics, Donnarumma fails to acknowledge them, as he deems realist commitment to be incompatible with (Tabucchi's) postmodernism; exemplarily, Donnarumma argues that '[a]nche quando prende di petto il presente, [Tabucchi] sente poi il bisogno di distanziarsene e di inserirlo in un gioco letterario'. Raffaele Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità: Dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), Amazon Kindle e-book (Chapter 2, para. 4, location 1180).

<sup>89</sup> *Piazza d'Italia* [Bompiani, 1975], 2nd edition (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996); *Il gioco del rovescio e altri racconti*, [1981] 2nd edition (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988); *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1985).



mio impegno consiste [...] nell'indagare la realtà con gli occhi altrui'.<sup>90</sup> The centrality of the ethical dimension throughout the entirety of Tabucchi's production has been correctly pointed out by, among others, Lazzarin, Burns and Wren-Owens. Significantly, Lazzarin claims that the fracture within Tabucchi's oeuvre is a reflex of the diplopia or double vision of the criticism, which nonetheless demands a resolution:

*Sostiene Pereira*, che alcuni considerarono, al momento della sua pubblicazione, come il sintomo di un nuovo interesse per il 'reale' da parte dello scrittore, non segna, in verità, alcuna svolta nell'opera di Tabucchi (una svolta si compie indubbiamente nella storia della sua ricezione: a partire dal fortunato romanzo del 1994, Tabucchi va sempre più acquisendo una notorietà mondiale; ma questa, naturalmente, è un'altra faccenda). [...] Non soltanto, dunque, il *fingitore* e il *polemista* si alternano in tutto il corso della carriera di Tabucchi, ma collaborano alla redazione di tutte le sue opere, che solo impropriamente possiamo suddividere in 'testi di finzione' e 'testi impegnati'.<sup>91</sup>

On the other hand, both Burns and Wren-Owens interpret Tabucchi's ethical commitment in the light of a reformulation of the notion of 'impegno' itself, taking into account its postmodern configuration as the 'break-up of the commitment to a single, overarching social agenda into a fragmentary attention to specific issues'.<sup>92</sup> Consequently, against those readings that divide Tabucchi's works into dissimilar strands, such as that of Guglielmi, who reads Tabucchi's short stories from the 1980s as 'non-storie',<sup>93</sup> they note that 'the themes pinpointed by other critics as divorced from engagement in fact represent a different yet powerful form of committed writing'.<sup>94</sup> Accordingly, as will be discussed in chapter 2, I intend to argue that an uncanny estrangement (the questioning of sense), which underpins Tabucchi's most self-reflective texts, makes room for the re-articulation of one's individual and collective being in the world, creating a potential enclave of meaning wherein it becomes possible to understand in what ways and forms we do and should make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and dwell in the world we inhabit.

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<sup>90</sup> *L'oca al passo*, p. 131.

<sup>91</sup> Stefano Lazzarin, 'Antonio Tabucchi Fingitore e Polemista', *Narrazioni*, 46-58 (49).

<sup>92</sup> Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative 1980-2000* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2001), p. 1. Speaking of 'postmodern impegno', Antonello affirms that 'si può adottare una definizione minima della nozione di impegno nei termini di una posizione di carattere etico e politico, veicolata da particolari modalità di espressione [...] che scavalcano irrigidimenti di carattere ideologico o strettoie di carattere storico'. Pierpaolo Antonello, *Dimenticare Pasolini. Intellettuali e impegno nell'Italia contemporanea* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2012), p. 142.

<sup>93</sup> Angelo Guglielmi, *Trent'anni di intolleranza (mia)* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1995), p. 198.

<sup>94</sup> Wren-Owens, p. 3.

In addressing the second weakness in Tabucchi's reception, namely his classification as a postmodern author, I intend to propose the following argument. There is, on the part of Tabucchi and his scholars, a certain uneasiness at defining the writer as postmodern. This critical discomfort is revealing of and should lead to a rethinking of (his) postmodernism as an appropriation and development of the modern need for and question of sense. Tellingly, this postmodern recuperation of modernity is made possible by and builds on the presence of the uncanny in both modernity and postmodernity. Consequently, the identification of such an historical continuity between the modern and the postmodern could (and demands to) be read through a different temporal model, which I identify in Tabucchi's view of literary fetishism.

First, Tabucchi himself rejects being defined as postmodernist – 'Sono stato classificato alcune volte, cosa che mi ha molto stupito, come un postmoderno. È una definizione che trovo *orribile e inaccettabile*'.<sup>95</sup> Next, this resistance emerges, albeit obliquely, in the fact that scholars have advanced very dissimilar interpretations of his postmodernism. For instance, Ceserani praises Tabucchi for being

[A]mong the most successful, talented, and sophisticated Italian postmodernist writers [...] although sometimes he might prefer to remain in the company of his high modernist model Fernando Pessoa. [...] Together with Cortázar, Tabucchi is one of the few contemporary writers capable of revitalizing, within our culture and our system of communication, the nineteenth-century genre of the fantastic short story, especially in its psychological version. [...] It is not difficult to find many of the typical features of postmodern literature in Tabucchi's fiction.<sup>96</sup>

Luperini, on the other hand, recognises in Tabucchi the presence of a tension between a 'postmodernismo retorico, volto a prediligere la riscrittura e a riciclare non senza raffinatezza stilemi e situazioni letterarie e artistiche del passato' and a 'postmodernismo mimetico, inteso a registrar un mondo vuoto, caotico e privo di direzione'.<sup>97</sup> However, as Dolfi warns, Tabucchi's opus moves 'da un minimo a un massimo di distanza dalle

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<sup>95</sup> Andrea Borsari, 'Che cos'è una vita se non viene raccontata? Conversazione con Antonio Tabucchi', *Italienisch*, 13.2 (November 1991), 2-23 (9).

<sup>96</sup> Remo Ceserani, 'Modernity and Postmodernity: A Cultural Change Seen From the Italian Perspective', *Italica*, 71.3 (Autumn 1994), 369-84 (380).

<sup>97</sup> Romano Luperini, *Tramonto e resistenza della critica* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2013), pp. 236-37.

modalità narrative caratterizzanti [...] gli ultimi decenni [...] senza per altro appartenere propriamente a nessuna'.<sup>98</sup>

Lastly, it is important to highlight that the concept of the uncanny enables us to rethink Tabucchi's position fully acknowledging the proximity he sees between modernity and (his) postmodernism. For Tabucchi, the uncanny is inherently modern and, reciprocally, modernity is essentially uncanny; thus he concedes his belonging to postmodernism only if this is understood as 'a new consciousness about the uncanny as a fundamental dimension of modernity',<sup>99</sup> which the writer describes as the ability to 'vivere pienamente la nostra modernità e al contempo temerla, guardarla negli occhi per indagarne gli aspetti più feroci'.<sup>100</sup> From this point of view, Tabucchi's postmodernism constitutes an attempt to come to terms with the main questions of and about modernity, the possibility of sense and the seeming lack thereof. But why is modernity uncanny? Tabucchi's answer is twofold. On the one hand, in his 'Elogio della letteratura' (2013) Tabucchi recognises the presence of an obscure side to modernity:

Negli ultimi anni, dopo che coloro che si prendono cura di noi ci avevano ricoverato in svariati reparti, strutturalizzandoci, formalizzandoci, destrutturalizzandoci, psicanalizzandoci, semiologizzandoci, e finalmente [...] erano giunti alla rassicurante conclusione che siamo semplicemente moderni, quando non postmoderni [...] ecco che all'improvviso dottissimi eruditi stanno arrivando alla conclusione che i migliori scrittori moderni (e anche *post*) in realtà sarebbero antimoderni. [...] Temo che a questi illustri pensatori sfugga il *conquibus* della questione: e cioè che *essere moderni è vivere pienamente la nostra modernità e al contempo temerla, guardarla negli occhi per indagarne gli aspetti più feroci*.<sup>101</sup>

On the other hand, as the following section will make clear, for Tabucchi modernity is uncanny to the extent to which it is driven by a search for sense, which, however, unlike Tabucchi's (postmodern) one is entirely concerned with questions of perception and knowing rather than with questions of being and signification.

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<sup>98</sup> Anna Dolfi, *Gli oggetti e il tempo della saudade. Le storie inafferrabili di Antonio Tabucchi* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2010), pp. 9-10.

<sup>99</sup> Mladen Dolar, 'I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-night: Lacan and the Uncanny', *October*, 58 (Autumn 1991), 5-23 (23).

<sup>100</sup> *Di tutto resta un poco. Letteratura e cinema*, ed. by Anna Dolfi (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013), p. 19.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13, my emphasis.

That modernity is in itself uncanny eventually also finds corroboration in the critical discourse concerning the concept. Hence, in their introduction to *Uncanny Modernity*, Collins and Jervis claim that:

The way these experiences [of the uncanny] emerge and are articulated implies an intimacy between these dimensions that is both very modern and central to the possibility of the uncanny itself. In particular, we can refer here to the way the conjunction of eighteenth-century rationalism, the disintegration of the early modern category of the marvellous, and the simultaneous internalisation, production and cultivation of 'affect' results in a self of insecure boundaries. [...] Explored extensively in the arts [...] the uncanny is also a presence in modernism itself, a reflexive 'defamiliarisation' being central to its programmes for artistic reinvention and renewal.<sup>102</sup>

### Reconsidering Tabucchi's Postmodernism

In the previous section I contended that there is, on the part of Tabucchi and his scholars, a certain uneasiness at defining the writer as postmodern. Accordingly, I suggested that this critical discomfort is revealing of and should lead to a rethinking of (his) postmodernism as an appropriation and development of the modern need for and question of sense. By the same token, this differentiates Tabucchi from the mainstream postmodern approach. Tellingly, his postmodern recuperation of modernity is made possible by and builds on the presence of the uncanny in both modernity and postmodernity. In this section I will explore how the identification of such an historical continuity between the modern and the postmodern could (and demands to) be read through a different temporal model, which I identify in Tabucchi's view of literary fetishism. In particular, I intend to argue that in the novel *Requiem* Tabucchi hints at his view of literary fetishism by producing a narration in which the latter appears in the form of melancholia. My argument premises on the theoretical proximity that Agamben identifies between fetishism and melancholia and that helps illuminating Tabucchi's own appropriation of the two concepts.

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<sup>102</sup> Jo Collins and John Jervis, 'Introduction', *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, eds. by (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), pp. 1-9. Similarly, Gunning argues: 'While I would never claim that the uncanny is exclusively a modern phenomenon, I would certainly claim there is a modern uncanny. Much of what we think of as uncanny entails the emergence of a modern world: the struggle that an enlightened scientific worldview undertook with what it understood as superstition and illusion'. Tom Gunning, 'Uncanny Reflections, Modern Illusions: Sighting the Modern Optical Uncanny', in *Uncanny Modernity*, pp. 68-90 (p. 68).

Since a concern with modernity is inherent to the (writer's) uncanny, it follows that his own categorisation as postmodern needs to be rethought. On the one hand, the quest for the possibilities and limits of sense differentiates Tabucchi from the mainstream postmodern approach. The latter, in effect, is characterised by a challenge to the possibility of a discourse of truth, and the collapse of the world and the self, a fall not reciprocated by the intention to seek answers, at the moment when grand narratives are no longer able to provide a reassuring totality. Tabucchi, on the other hand, problematises and transcends any definition of postmodernism, calling into question the sense of every act of classification based on chronological sequence. To his classification as a postmodern writer, Tabucchi counters a view of (his own) literature as a practice of fetishism:

Sono stato classificato alcune volte, cosa che mi ha molto stupito, come un postmoderno. È una definizione che trovo *orribile e inaccettabile*. Credo invece, per semplificare molto, di essere un *feticista*. Ho bisogno di dichiarare e toccare, toccare citandoli, i miei feticci. Il feticcio, come spiega Freud, è una creatura molto complicata perché presuppone la mania, ma anche la liberazione, la paura, ma anche lo scongiuro.<sup>103</sup>

Fetishism provides a possible clue to Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny as a somewhat topological articulation of modernism and postmodernism. According to Freud, fetishism arises out of the discovery of the lack of a penis in the female body, primarily that of the mother. This discovery engenders what Freud calls *Verleugnung*, a disavowal. Confronted with the absence of the phallus, the child does not accept the reality of his perception. He at once admits and dismisses it. The reason for the child's partial negation is ascribable to the necessity to exorcise and defend himself from the threat of castration, which produces 'uncanny and traumatic'<sup>104</sup> impressions. This is the same process Tabucchi is referring to when, in his own definition of fetishism, he juxtaposes terms such as 'mania' and 'liberazione', 'paura' and 'scongiuro'. Fetishism therefore becomes a metaphor that Tabucchi uses to describe his relationship with the literary tradition as a sort of interplay or negotiation between influence and originality.<sup>105</sup> Tabucchi needs and seeks for the (nonfactual) presence of his literary models, but only if this is not passively accepted. In what ways and to what extent is it possible to consider Tabucchi as a fetishist writer? And

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<sup>103</sup> Borsari, 9, italicised.

<sup>104</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey, vol. xxi (London: Hogarth, 1966), pp. 149-57 (p. 155).

<sup>105</sup> Significantly, Bloom observes how 'the special case of anxiety of influence' is 'a variety of the uncanny'. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.77-78.

how does this give rise to his postmodernism? A potential answer to such questions might come from a somewhat allegorical (in this respect) reading of the novel *Requiem*, for not only is it a postmodern book by virtue of its questioning of ontological problems such as the intermingling of reality and fiction,<sup>106</sup> but it also engages with theoretical reflections about the postmodern and the correlation of the latter with the modern. In particular I intend to argue that in *Requiem* Tabucchi hints at his view of literary fetishism by producing a narration in which the latter appears in the form of melancholia. My argument premises on the theoretical proximity that Agamben identifies between fetishism and melancholia and that helps illuminating Tabucchi's own appropriation of the two concepts.

Significantly, in Chapter 8, the protagonist meets his 'Convitato' – recognisably Pessoa – in a restaurant, which another character, the 'Venditore di Storie', depicts as postmodern:

Proprio di fronte al molo c'è un ristorante che prima era una stazione [...] adesso l'hanno trasformato in un luogo d'incontro polivalente [...] credo che sia un locale post-moderno. Post-moderno?, dissi io, in che senso post-moderno? Non glielo saprei spiegare neanche io, disse il Venditore di Storie, voglio dire che è un posto con molti stili, guardi, è un ristorante con molti specchi e una cucina che non si sa bene cos'è, insomma, è un posto che *ha rotto con la tradizione recuperando la tradizione, diciamo che sembra il riassunto di varie forme diverse*, secondo me è in questo che consiste il postmoderno.<sup>107</sup>

During his dinner with the 'Convitato', the protagonist – to some extent a projection of Tabucchi himself – explains postmodernism by reproaching his guest – 'può anche darsi che lei abbia una certa responsabilità [...] nel post-moderno' – adding that, 'a ben guardare sono state le avanguardie a rompere l'equilibrio, queste cose lasciano un segno'.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> As Brizio-Skov states, 'non è solo la posizione di uomo di fine secolo che rende questo protagonista postmoderno, bensì la scoperta che non è possibile arrivare alla verità. Tuttavia il romanzo è postmoderno anche ad un altro livello, giacché presenta una polifonia di discorsi e un peritesto che problematizzano il rapporto tra reale e fittizio e quindi costringono il lettore a interrogarsi continuamente sulla categoria del vero' (p. 126).

<sup>107</sup> *Réquiem. Uma allucinação* (Lisbon: Quetzal, 1991), *Requiem. Un'allucinazione*, trans. by Sergio Vecchio (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992), pp. 112-13. Set in a scorching Lisbon, the story is structured as a succession of ghostly meetings. Falling asleep while reading Pessoa's *Livro dos desassossego*, the protagonist dreams about encountering a wide range of figures, ranging from Pessoa's fictional characters – such as 'Lo Zoppo della Lotteria' – to Tabucchi's own, recurring literary creatures – Tadeus and Isabel – or pseudo-biographical projections – exemplarily 'Il Padre Giovane'.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

This episode has received a lot of critical attention, since it has been regarded as an essential hint left by Tabucchi to interpret his postmodernism. While for Brizio-Skov it marks the writer's ultimate acceptance of postmodernism, Bertone, on the contrary, interprets it as a distancing from postmodern nihilism in favour of modern commitment.<sup>109</sup> Botta addresses the issue in a contribution evocatively entitled 'Mourning Modernism', wherein she reads the entire novel as a turning point in Tabucchi's postmodern poetics insofar as she detects in it a mourning for modernism. The mournful gesture takes place at the levels of content and form alike. The narrator's encounters with figures from his memory, specifically his father, represent a summoning of the dead triggered by a sense of guilt.<sup>110</sup> In addition, that the entire novel is structured as both a viaticum and a hallucination, as indicated by Tabucchi in the preface and subtitle, alludes, respectively, to 'a process of re-integrating the ego' and to the fact that the protagonist is experiencing 'the first phase of mourning, [with] the subject's clinging to the lost object'.<sup>111</sup> To substantiate her view of the author's narrative as a grieving process, Botta relies on Vattimo's idea that:

Postmoderno [...] è ciò che ha con il moderno un rapporto *verwindend*, che lo accetta e lo riprende [...] e che lo prosegue, ma distortendolo. [...] [N]on si può lasciare semplicemente vuoto il posto prima occupato dai 'metaracconti' [...] sarebbe come non-elaborare un lutto.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Manuela Bertone, 'Frammenti per *Requiem*, allucinazione portoghese di Tabucchi', *Narrativa*, 8 (July 1995), 139-55.

<sup>110</sup> Anna Botta, 'Antonio Tabucchi's *Requiem*: Mourning Modernism', in 'Antonio Tabucchi. A Collection of Essays', ed. by Bruno Ferraro and Nicole Prunster, *Spunti e Ricerche*, 12 (1997), 143-57 (147).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-48.

<sup>112</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Moderno postmoderno. Soggetto, tempo, sapere nella società attuale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1987), pp. 102-07. The philosophical concept of the *pensiero debole* was first advanced by Vattimo and Rovatti with the publication of *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983): 'it defines a 'typically postmodern mode of reflection' as opposed to the 'strong' metaphysical thought of modernity. It optimistically salutes the end of modernity precisely as the liberation from a thinking founded upon the enlightened predominance of reason, from the Cartesian idea of a rational and integral subjectivity, from the conception of history qua unilinear progress'. Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 272. Reading Tabucchi's postmodernism through Vattimo's thought inserts the writer into the wider passage 'da un postmoderno di opposizione al moderno, a un postmoderno che concepisce la sua relazione con il moderno piuttosto in termini di 'oscillazione''. Monica Jansen, *Il dibattito sul postmoderno in Italia. In bilico tra dialettica e ambiguità* (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2002), p. 84. Adopting a similar expression, Tabucchi acknowledges how, at the core of literature, 'l'effetto pendolo agisce, riconducendo le modalità del narrare là dove erano state un tempo', while still ascribing an individualistic approach to it rather than accepting the influence of 'una vera o presunta predilezione generazionale' for the narrative forms he himself practiced (*Gli oggetti*, pp. 9-10).

While Wren-Owens reaches a similar conclusion, citing ‘Tabucchi’s view that modernist writers and thinkers [...] hold valuable truths but must be considered partial’<sup>113</sup> as that which makes him a postmodernist writer, Schwarz Lausten, too, reiterates in her analysis the correspondence between Tabucchi’s postmodernism and Vattimo’s position:

Forse la sua narrativa si colloca in un campo di tensione tra moderno e postmoderno, e il suo legame con la tradizione della letteratura moderna può essere descritto con [...] il concetto di ‘Verwindung’ e di rimemorazione del moderno. Tabucchi ripensa il moderno attraverso l’uso di figure e motivi postmoderni.<sup>114</sup>

Finally, Jansen comments on *Requiem* arguing that ‘con l’aiuto di un interlocutore moderno il protagonista tenta qui di decifrare la sua condizione postmoderna’.<sup>115</sup> And, following Botta’s reading, she regards the episode only as a lamentation of modernism, once again equating it with Vattimo’s idea of *Verwindung*.

*Requiem* undeniably performs a mournful process. Yet, it is my contention that this argument is not sufficient to describe the writer’s postmodernism, which, I believe, refuses Vattimo’s idea of filling up voids through mourning, and which also entails and enables a melancholic mechanism.<sup>116</sup> My interpretation requires and is premised upon a non-Freudian conceptualisation of melancholia: following Agamben’s reading, which moves away from a pathological interpretation, melancholia is here defined as a positive possibility and ability to experience and encounter what would otherwise remain unattainable, that is, the taking place of signification itself. For Freud, on the contrary, melancholia defines a negative incapacity to articulate and express grieving. As he explains in his 1915 essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, the two processes differ in two ways. First, with mourning, the libido, or psychic energy, is positively transferred from the lost object onto a new one, while with melancholia the loss is narcissistically internalised by the mourner’s ego. And second, in the case of mourning, ‘reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists’ whereas with melancholia ‘one cannot see clearly what it

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<sup>113</sup> Wren-Owens, p. 171.

<sup>114</sup> Schwarz Lausten, p. 150.

<sup>115</sup> Jansen, pp. 301-05.

<sup>116</sup> Bahun defines this interlocking of mourning and melancholia as ‘countermourning’, a mode of writing that suspends interpretative closure and sustains gaps within signification, wherein against ‘the premise that everything can be semantically pinned down’ the melancholic element insists ‘upon the vacancy that cannot be contextualized or filled in’. Sanja Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 39.



is that has been lost' and 'the object-loss [...] is withdrawn from consciousness'.<sup>117</sup> According to Agamben, the fact that 'mentre il lutto consegue a una perdita realmente avvenuta, nella malinconia [...] non è nemmeno certo che di perdita si possa parlare' leads to a situation in which 'la malinconia offre il paradosso di un'intenzione luttuosa che precede e anticipa la perdita dell'oggetto'.<sup>118</sup> How can this be seen in positive terms? The answer lies in the fact that, 'se la malinconia riesce ad appropriarsi del proprio oggetto solo nella misura in cui ne afferma la perdita',<sup>119</sup> it comes to designate the capacity to make sense of and sustain a symbolic – rather than actual – void. How and why might this apply to Tabucchi's postmodernism? Responding to this question means, on the one hand, recognising how, for him, modernity is not lost. This is why Tabucchi's hallucinatory requiem cannot be regarded solely as a grieving process. On the contrary, his *Requiem* also includes a process driven by melancholia.

For (Tabucchi's) postmodernism: first, mourns something that was already – though mostly unconsciously – mournful in itself (that is, lacking any sense of totality); and second, it processes grieving without saturating this lack but keeping it open. Tabucchi finds questions instead of answers in modernity and modern literature (that which makes them uncanny). And he keeps these same questions – and the need for sense underlying them – open.

On the other hand, reading Tabucchi's postmodernism as a melancholic process makes utterly intelligible the reasons why he describes his own approach to literary modernity as fetishist. For there is a similarity between the fetishist and the melancholic rationale, which, Agamben observes, consists in the fact that:

Come, nella Verleugnung feticista, nel conflitto fra la percezione della realtà, che lo spinge a rinunciare al suo fantasma, e il suo desiderio [...] il bambino non fa né una cosa né l'altra, o, piuttosto, fa simultaneamente le due cose [...] così, nella malinconia, l'oggetto non è né appropriato né perduto, ma l'una e l'altra cosa nello stesso tempo.<sup>120</sup>

Although I will engage, in chapter 1, with Agamben's intertwining of fetishism and the uncanny, inasmuch as they both propose a similar, spatial configuration of temporal experience, it should already be indicated that the melancholic disavowal might help

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<sup>117</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. xiv (London: Hogarth, 1968), pp. 243-58 (pp. 244-45).

<sup>118</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), p. 25.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

capture the true meaning of the final dialogue between the protagonist of the novel and the ‘Convitato’:

Non è stato bene in mia compagnia?, chiese lui. No, risposi, è stata molto importante, ma mi ha inquietato, ecco, diciamo che mi ha inquietato. [...] *Non crede che sia proprio questo che la letteratura deve fare, inquietare?*, da parte mia non ho fiducia nella letteratura che tranquillizza le coscienze. Nemmeno io, approvai, ma vede, [...] la sua inquietudine si aggiunge alla mia e produce *angoscia*. Preferisco l’angoscia ad una pace marcia, affermò lui [...].<sup>121</sup>

Arguably, Tabucchi moves from seeking answers in modernism to trying to answer the questions of modernity. What is lost – hence mourned –<sup>122</sup> is the possibility of finding a response in modernity, and what is interiorised – hence triggering melancholia and fetishism – is something that was not there in the first place, namely a founding meaning. For Tabucchi, modernity becomes a vacuum that he attempts to symbolise and narrate: his ‘liberazione’ is not reaching a plenitude of sense but sustaining a lack thereof. Postmodernism is the struggle to make sense of a loss which was however, already, a lack in itself (modernity as uncanny). This ultimately explains the commingling of mourning and melancholia in Tabucchi’s postmodernism.

To summarise, my reading of *Requiem* has shown how the continuity between modern literature and Tabucchi’s postmodernism is based on a fundamental similarity: they both uncannily engage in a quest for sense. However, this proximity is reciprocated by an essential difference. Modernity is incapable to sustain the void of a plenitude of sense and aims to saturate it through unearthing a bedrock of certainties – that which makes it ‘mournful’. On the contrary, Tabucchi’s postmodernism is able to keep this same void, to maintain this same question of sense open – that which makes it ‘melancholic’ and, eventually, ‘fetishistic’.

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<sup>121</sup> *Requiem*, p. 119, my emphasis.

<sup>122</sup> ‘Ed è soddisfatto della giornata che ha avuto?, chiese lui. Non saprei spiegarle, risposi, mi sento più tranquillo, più leggero’ (*Requiem*, p. 125). Tellingly, as Vidler maintains, when ‘historicized, the uncanny might be understood as a significant psychoanalytical and aesthetic response to the real shock of the modern’. Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 9.

The aim of this introduction has been to clear the ground for a new, possible pathway to reading Tabucchi's uncanny by removing the obstacles and debris standing in the way. What follows is a brief outline of the place and of the taking place of my journey through and alongside the writer's poetics.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 provide the speculative basis for the working hypothesis of the research project, looking at Agamben's and Tabucchi's theorisations and understandings of the uncanny against the backdrop of the critical debate about the concept. In effect, my investigation of the writer's uncanny was actually begun by collecting Tabucchi's theoretical meditations on the topic and comparing and contrasting it with the latter's main formulations. A methodological approach that revealed the lack, within the constellation of critical discourses about the uncanny, of a proper examination of its nexus with the problem of signification within a wider metaphysical perspective. Accordingly, scrutinising the uncanny within Agamben's thought appeared necessary insofar as the philosopher originally and most prominently addresses it as a matter of post-metaphysical (linguistic) signification. This enquiry, as already stated, lies also at the core of Tabucchi's use of the uncanny as poetics.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present a close reading of Tabucchi's texts with the purpose of describing and explaining the strategies employed by the writer to structure and give form to his poetics of the uncanny.

Chapter 1 surveys the main strands within the critical discourse about the uncanny, discussing its formulation in psychoanalysis, philosophy, aesthetics and literary criticism. Subsequently, it maps the use and understanding of the *unheimliche* within the context of Italian Studies. Finally, it makes the case for an interpretation of the uncanny inside and through Agamben's philosophy, analysing how the philosopher's meditation on language and on its potentiality to escape metaphysical nihilism leads Agamben to a reflection on the *unheimliche* as a different experience of sense making.

Chapter 2 begins with a recapitulation of the main issues concerning the interaction between the uncanny and postmodernism, as discussed in the introduction and in chapter 1, in order to examine the ways and extent to which they might apply to Tabucchi's poetics. It then offers a survey of Tabucchi's reflection on the uncanny, observing its relationship with the cognate phenomena of the nocturnal and the absurd, as well as with Freud's and Agamben's *unheimliche*. Combining theoretical reasoning with close reading, Tabucchi's

‘Inquietudine’ comes to be defined as a temporal non-coincidence with one’s own time, an ontological homelessness and a linguistic estrangement; key to his understanding of the uncanny appears the mode in which the latter might be practised and made intelligible in terms of a poetics, that is, as a disquieting, interrogative process of sense making.

Chapter 3 argues that Tabucchi combines diegetic and textual games in his uncanny attempt to signify otherwise, to estrange language from its familiar uses, which brings him close to the concepts of postmodern irony and Agamben’s profanation. This chapter demonstrates how Tabucchi’s characters play games through which they experience the two uncanny moments of sense-withdrawal and meaning production, while the author finds their discursive counterparts in the practice of illusion – based on the trope of metalepsis – and allusion, which form the principal narrative structures of his ludic signification.

Chapter 4 advances the idea that Tabucchi’s ‘rovescio’ designates the mode in which the writer tries to produce the unconscious mechanisms of meaning creation. Accordingly, the chapter problematises Tabucchi’s understanding of the unconscious as a semiotic potentiality, namely as way of looking differently at a reality which is ambiguous and ambivalent. Next, it scrutinises: how Tabucchi deploys a vast array of visual motifs and textual structures to produce and signify the uncanny other, a possibility of sense that is neither graspable nor propositional; and how Tabucchi’s other combines the individual and the collective dimension, drawing a parallelism between the functioning of consciousness and that of official historiographical accounts, and between the psychic unconscious and potential, untextualised historical narratives.

Chapter 5 employs Agamben’s and Felman’s reflections on testimony and its literary manifestations to examine the testimonial facet of Tabucchi’s uncanny, the act of signifying for the other. In particular, it contends that the writer’s theoretical move from feeling guilty by virtue of a supposed dichotomy between literature and life to the uncanny as a unique mode of literary engagement is mirrored in his characters’ gradual shift from passivity to activity, that is, from being mere observers to becoming the agents and shapers of their lives and of the (collective) world they inhabit.

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Mapping the Critical Debate

Referring to Agamben's treatment of the uncanny in reading Tabucchi allows one to identify and examine a type of philosophical enquiry within the latter's works that would otherwise remain (and has indeed remained thus far) overlooked. Tabucchi's philosophical enquiry addresses and at the same time embodies precisely the uncanny emergence of signification itself in literature (the uncanny as poetics), in relation to the ontological (or metaphysical) view of men as creators of sense. To this purpose, chapter 1 preliminarily interrogates Agamben's theorisation of the uncanny against the backdrop of the critical debate about the concept.

That the uncanny has nowadays become 'a master trope available for appropriation in a wide variety of contexts' together with the fact that 'by common consent, the theoretical explanation for the current fascination with the concept is Freud's 1919 essay',<sup>123</sup> is revealing of two things: first, the *unheimliche* has expanded beyond its original Freudian formulation and the psychoanalytic framework; and second, Freud still constitutes an essential interlocutor and point of reference in the critical debate on the concept.

Accordingly, this chapter intends to map the principal formulations and developments of the Freudian uncanny within the three main fields of psychoanalysis, philosophy and aesthetics (with a focus on literary criticism): as Masschelein argues, the entire historical process of conceptualisation of the *unheimliche* is characterised by 'discursive shifts' that 'also lead to semantic exchanges of the Freudian uncanny with related aesthetic and philosophic notions such as the sublime, the fantastic, and alienation'.<sup>124</sup>

Following from this, I then consider how Italian scholars have interpreted the *unheimliche*. Finally, I formulate an original understanding of the uncanny in Agamben's philosophy of language, which, as stated in the introduction, is essential to understand the emergence of the uncanny in Tabucchi.

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<sup>123</sup> Martin Jay, 'The Uncanny Nineties', in *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time Critical Perspectives On Modern Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), pp. 157-164 (p. 157)

<sup>124</sup> Masschelein, p. 5.

### 1.1.1 Psychoanalytic Uncanny

As Masschelein affirms, since its ‘stage of “preconceptualization” between 1919 and roughly the mid-1960s’,<sup>125</sup> psychoanalytic explorations of the Freudian *unheimliche* mostly focus on the latter’s relationship with anxiety.

In this context, the most important (re)formulation of the Freudian uncanny comes from Lacan’s 1962-63 *Seminar X*, precisely devoted to the theme of anxiety. For Lacan, Freud’s 1919 essay constitutes ‘the indispensable pivot to address the question of anxiety’.<sup>126</sup> Tellingly, if Freud explains the feeling of angst associated with the *unheimliche* by virtue of castration anxiety,

‘The Uncanny’ offers Lacan a key to the fundamental new insight in anxiety, namely that ‘anxiety may be without cause, but not without object’. Specifically, the object of anxiety is a special kind of object that has not yet attained the status of an object, namely the ‘object a’, which is also the ek-centric cause of desire. [...] Whereas Freud took castration anxiety as the model for anxiety [...] Lacan translates the threat of the absence of the phallus as the negative perception of the missing phallus [...] namely] an imaginary castration that is not confirmed by perception. The phallus, which should be missing, is still perceived as present.<sup>127</sup>

This can be best illustrated by making reference to the uncanny motif of the double. As Dolar explains:

The double is the same as me plus the object a, that invisible part of being added to my image. [...] Lacan uses the gaze as the best presentation of that missing object; in the mirror, one can see one’s eyes, but not the gaze which is the part that is lost. But imagine that one could see one’s mirror image close its eyes: that would make the object as gaze appear in the mirror. This is what happens with the double, and the anxiety that the double produces is the surest sign of the appearance of the object. [...] Here the Lacanian account of anxiety differs sharply from other theories [including Freud’s]: it is not produced by a lack or a loss or an incertitude; it is not the anxiety of losing something (the firm support, one’s bearings, etc.). On the contrary, it is the anxiety of gaining

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 49. Interestingly, Masschelein points out how ‘only in 1968 was the term [uncanny] included in a psychoanalytic lexicon for the first time by Ludwig Eidelberg [...]. In the lexicon of the American Psychoanalytic Association (Moore and Fine), “uncanny” is not included until 1990 and again in 1995 in Roland Chemama’s *Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse*. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis do not list the term in any of the editions of their influential *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*’ (ibid., p. 53).

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55.

something too much, of a too-close presence of the object. What one loses with anxiety is precisely the loss – the loss that made it possible to deal with a coherent reality.<sup>128</sup>

Lacanian psychoanalysis classifies three different, though intermingled, registers of experience: the imaginary, which is made of those images perceived or imaged in both conscious and unconscious thought (e.g. who one ‘imagines’ to be); the symbolic, i.e. the order of trans-subjective signification (e.g. language, institutions, laws, customs, rituals, etc.); and the real, that is what at once resists and invades any attempt at symbolising or representing it (e.g. nightmares or traumas). In his study of the Lacanian uncanny, Dolar argues that Lacan’s equivalent for Freud’s *unheimliche* might be found in the concept of *extimité* (i.e. extimacy), which describes the intermingling of Lacan’s three registers, and, most prominently, of the real and the symbolic:

The dimension of extimité [that] points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety. The extimate is simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body; in a word, it is *unheimlich*. [...] And it is this very dimension beyond the division into ‘psychic’ and ‘real’ that deserves to be called the real in the Lacanian sense.<sup>129</sup>

It follows, with Dolar, that the ‘simple Lacanian common denominator’ to Freud’s catalogue of uncanny phenomena ‘is the irruption of the real into homely, commonly accepted reality [...] the emergence of something that shatters well-known divisions and which cannot be situated within them’.<sup>130</sup> In order to understand Lacan’s account of the uncanny as the emergence of the real, and to recognise the way in which it parallels Freud’s discourse, it is fundamental to recall that the French psychoanalyst distinguishes between reality and the real: while reality defines ‘the product of our representations [...] a symbolic or imaginary construction’, the real could be grasped as ‘a void that arises through the symbolic order, as an effect of the symbolic order, which is nevertheless irreducible to the imaginary or symbolic’.<sup>131</sup> Reality, understood through the prism of the Freudian *unheimliche*, is the familiar that negates and represses the real, whose emergence constitutes, in turn, the return of the unfamiliar repressed. Lacan’s real is not necessarily traumatic in itself, but solely because and to the degree to which it is unfamiliar in relation

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<sup>128</sup> Dolar, 21.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Charles Shepherdson, *Lacan and the Limits of Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 32-34. Henceforth the two terms will be used with reference to Lacan’s distinction.

to the familiar reality: ‘[t]he real is traumatic because there has been no sufficient symbolic or imaginary network in place for representing it’.<sup>132</sup>

### 1.1.2 Philosophical Uncanny

As Masschelein observes, one of the main axes along which the uncanny develops is the “‘existential/post-Marxist” semantic line of alienation, strangeness, and angst [which] will emphasize the uncanny’s relation to society, politics, and ethics’.<sup>133</sup> Similarly Royle remarks that ‘[e]verything in Marx that speaks of a spectre that is haunting Europe, everything that has to do with notions of alienation, revolution and repetition comes down to a thinking of the uncanny’.<sup>134</sup> A central place, in this regard, is occupied by Heidegger’s formulation of the uncanny. In the latter there is, however, a crucial distance from the Freudian uncanny that is revealed by language itself: while Freud uses the term *unheimliche*, that is a substantivised adjective linguistically expressing openness and indeterminacy, Heidegger employs the substantive *unheimlichkeit*, which fittingly denotes an essence or condition. For the German philosopher, in effect, the uncanny is no longer (solely) a subjective feeling, but an ontological condition, insofar as ‘the experience of angst is not just a breakdown of familiarity but a breakdown that reveals something [...] not a pathological way of relating to the world [...] because it is a genuine way of latching onto how things are – a special mode of access to the ontological’.<sup>135</sup> This implies that, for Heidegger, the *unheimliche* ‘is not a negative revelation of what everyday life has been like but a positive revelation of what the human essence is like’.<sup>136</sup>

There are three main elements in Heidegger’s account of the *unheimliche*. First, Heidegger distinguishes the phenomenon of feeling uncanny, which takes place in an exemplary manner with anxiety. That is, the fact that the ‘particulars of our lives withdraw into the background or slip away and in this withdrawal is revealed something about me, about human life, or about the world as such’<sup>137</sup> is differentiated from the ontological grasping of being uncanny. Namely from the fact that the ‘human being is the entity that is essentially exposed or open to meaning’ through a ‘self-constituting reciprocity between openness and

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>134</sup> Royle, p. 4.

<sup>135</sup> Withy, p. 3.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 52.



finitude’, and whose ‘[i]ntelligibility is essentially finite’.<sup>138</sup> Second, for Heidegger uncanniness coincides, therefore, with human beings’ essence or being and defines them as sense-makers, for they ‘are distinguished from other entities by the fact that they understand being or make sense of the world’.<sup>139</sup> Therefore, ‘uncanniness would belong to the human essence as part of the human project of making familiar or making sense of things’<sup>140</sup> and ‘the essence is the seeking of the essence’.<sup>141</sup> Third, feeling and being uncanny are not opposite or mutually exclusive; rather, they co-enable each other, for ‘in anxiety one feels uncanny [...] enters into the existential mode of the not-at-home’.<sup>142</sup> As Witherly explains, the relationship between these two moments or movements (derealisation and revelation) ‘is less a forking than a folding’.<sup>143</sup> An idea that, I will argue, lays at the core also of Agamben’s uncanny.

### 1.1.3 Aesthetic and Literary Uncanny

In aesthetics, the uncanny is often considered as a sort of ‘negative Sublime’. Exemplarily, in *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, Bloom states that:

The Uncanny [is] the only major contribution that the twentieth century made to the aesthetics of the Sublime. [. . .] The Sublime, as I read Freud, is one of his major repressed concerns, and this literary repression on his part is a clue to what I take to be a gap in his theory of repression.<sup>144</sup>

This formulation premises on the belief that the sublime is based on repression. Therefore, the uncanny comes to be defined as ‘that mode in which the poet, while expressing previously repressed thought, desires or emotions, is able to continue to defend himself against his own created image by disowning it’.<sup>145</sup>

More recently, Kohon has argued that the Freudian uncanny is ‘a necessary condition for

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., pp. 143-58.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>142</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), p. 233.

<sup>143</sup> Witherly, p. 110.

<sup>144</sup> Harold Bloom, *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 101.

<sup>145</sup> Harold Bloom, ‘Freud and the Poetic Sublime. A Catastrophe Theory of the Sublime’, in *Freud: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Perry Meisel (New York: Prentice Hall, 1981), pp. 211–231 (p. 108).

the experience of the aesthetic’,<sup>146</sup> as the latter forms an encounter with the negative, i.e. what defies familiar meaning and representation. This is due to a certain commonality between psychoanalysis and aesthetics, which ‘share the task of making a representation of the unrepresentable’ although ‘[a]rt and literature have the capacity to create something unfamiliar within the familiar reality’ while ‘psychoanalysis reveals and identifies the unfamiliar already present in that apparent reality’.<sup>147</sup> According to Kohon, the uncanny inheres every aesthetic experience in two ways: first, because it makes room, on the part of the artist, for an ‘encounter with the negative, something secret or repressed in the subject, which the artistic or literary object has brought to light’;<sup>148</sup> and second, since it demands from the audience the ability to ‘withstand [...] feelings of depersonalisation (or derealisation)’.<sup>149</sup> The Freudian *unheimliche* becomes, therefore, a form of aesthetic anxiety.

On the other hand, as Masschelein notices, ‘Freud’s essay also serves to construct a post-Freudian theory of fiction, of writing and reading in terms of effect’.<sup>150</sup> This is evident when considering the conceptualisations advanced by deconstructionist thinkers, especially by Derrida. The latter understands the Freudian *unheimliche* as undecidability and dissemination, i.e. as an endless deferral and destabilisation of meaning. If ‘dissemination represents [...] the remarkable empty locus of a hundred blanks no meaning can be ascribed to, in which supplements and substitution games are multiplied ad infinitum’, Derrida writes that a similar textual play lays at the core of the uncanny (and of Freud’s 1919 essay), which is characterised by ‘undecidable ambivalence, the play of the double, the endless exchange between the fantastic and the real, the “symbolized” and the “symbolizer,” the process of interminable substitution’.<sup>151</sup> The Freudian *unheimliche* becomes a sort of synonym for literature’s capacity to problematise and question our familiar experience with language and signification. However, differently from what will be the case in Agamben and Tabucchi, this does not result in a positive experience of sense making. In effect, with Derrida and deconstruction,

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<sup>146</sup> Gregorio Kohon, *Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience: Psychoanalysis and the uncanny* (London: Routledge, 2015), Amazon Kindle e-book (Chapter 1, location 624).

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, (Chapter 1, location 790).

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, (Chapter 8, location 3406).

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, (Chapter 8, location 3414).

<sup>150</sup> Masschelein, p. 128.

<sup>151</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 268.

The uncanny becomes an insidious, all-pervasive ‘passe-partout’ word to address virtually any topic: politics, history, humanity, technology, psychoanalysis, religion, alongside more familiar aesthetic questions, related to genres, specific literary texts and motifs commonly associated with the uncanny. Because the uncanny affects and haunts everything, it is in constant transformation and cannot be pinned down.<sup>152</sup>

From this perspective, it is remarkable how the central place occupied by Derrida in the conceptualisation of the uncanny and the convergence of the latter with deconstruction, inherent in his formulation of the *unheimliche*, lead to the idea that ‘the Freudian uncanny [eventually] is a late-twentieth century theoretical concept’.<sup>153</sup>

Finally, within literary criticism, the uncanny is mostly discussed in relation to the fantastic. The centrality of Todorov for the theory of the uncanny depends partially on a misunderstanding. As Masschelein indicates, the English translation of the French term *étrange*, used by Todorov, with ‘uncanny’ is far from accurate and legitimate. Besides, such mistranslation appears to compromise, from the outset, the effectiveness and the truthfulness of the debate about the two concepts of the uncanny and of the fantastic. Masschelein suggests how it somewhat explains both an usual ‘conflation of the Freudian uncanny and the Todorovian uncanny’<sup>154</sup> as well as a more radical identification of the Freudian uncanny with Todorov’s fantastic. A conflation mainly due to the notion of ‘hesitation’ that occupies a central place in Todorov’s definition of the fantastic:

The fantastic requires the fulfilment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character [...]. Third, the reader must [...] reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations. The first and the third constitute the genre.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Masschelein, p. 2.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 8.2

<sup>155</sup> Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 33. Meaningfully, Tabucchi criticises Todorov’s work: ‘[U]n saggio molto brillante sulla “letteratura fantastica” ricco di speciose classificazioni e suddivisioni. Non gli si nega utilità, ma è un lavoro che al di là dell’ordine classificatorio e nomenclatorio non affronta il problema [...] che] transita nell’ordine puramente filosofico: la realtà nella quale viviamo è davvero reale o è solo la faccia visibile di una realtà “altra”’ (*Di tutto*, p. 105).

According to Masschelein, it is such idea, in actual fact, what ‘allows for a shift of the uncanny towards the fantastic, through the link with lexical ambivalence in Freud’s definition’.<sup>156</sup> However, what makes the *unheimliche* irreducible to Todorov’s literary genre of the *étrange* is the latter’s qualification as ‘supernatural explained’<sup>157</sup> and its being bound up solely with a psychological reaction of fear. Tellingly the literary critic oscillates between the acceptance and the dismissal of Freud’s theorization of the concept of the uncanny. Thus, after having recalled that ‘according to Freud, the sense of the uncanny is linked to the appearance of an image which originates in the childhood’, he counters that this is ‘a hypothesis still to be verified’.<sup>158</sup> Accordingly, he concludes that ‘there is not an entire coincidence between Freud’s use of the term and our own’.<sup>159</sup> Moreover Todorov tries to comprehend the uncanny (the Freudian *unheimliche* and his *étrange*) in the limited field of a genre, only to admit at a later point that it is a genre that ‘dissolves into the general field of literature’.<sup>160</sup> This fact, together with his reducing the *unheimliche* to a mere emotive aftereffect of the moment of hesitation, marks the distance from the uncanny traditionally understood.

With the explicit intent to resolve those blind spots found in Todorov’s work, Rosemary Jackson inaugurates a fundamental shift in the critical debate about the fantastic and its relation with the Freudian uncanny:

For to see the fantastic as a literary form, it needs to be made distinct in literary terms, and *the uncanny*, or l’*étrange*, is not one of these – it *is not a literary category*, while the marvellous is. It is perhaps more helpful to define the fantastic as a literary mode rather than a genre, and to place it between the opposite modes of the marvellous and of the mimetic.<sup>161</sup>

Two points should be highlighted in Jackson’s proposal.

First, she dismisses Todorov’s definition of the fantastic as a literary genre, opposing that of a literary mode. Tellingly such term designates ‘structural features underlying various works in different periods of time’.<sup>162</sup> The scholar describes her attempt to expand the

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<sup>156</sup> Masschelein, p. 94.

<sup>157</sup> Todorov, p. 47.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., pp. 46-47.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>161</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 32, italicised.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

poetics of the fantastic into a politics of fantasy, namely into a hermeneutical approach that conjugates psychoanalytic reading with cultural and historical contextualization. From this point of view, the poetics of the fantastic develops into and is to be understood as the narrative articulation of unconscious drives, precisely insofar as ‘it is in the unconscious that social structures are reproduced and sustained within us’.<sup>163</sup>

Second, moving the uncanny out of Todorov’s oppositional scheme, Jackson formulates it as a sort of historical configuration or embodiment of the fantastic mode, which follows the period of the marvellous and takes place in a scientific and rationalistic reality. Indeed this assumption is coherent with the recognition of a peculiar modern dimension of the uncanny and, conversely, of the defamiliarizing value of modernity itself.

## 1.2 The Italian *Unheimliche*

Speaking of an Italian *unheimliche*, namely of how Freud’s uncanny has been interpreted within the framework of Italian Studies, means, first of all, recognising a struggle in linguistic conceptualisation. In his 1919 essay Freud explicitly affirms that no equivalent for the German term exists in Italian language, where only a periphrasis might convey the concept’s whole significance. An observation later confirmed by the fact that the word *unheimliche* has been translated into Italian in different, often conflicting, ways. For instance, while Orlando defines Freud’s essay ‘il saggio sul mal traducibile *Das Unheimliche* (più “il sinistro” che il perturbante dei traduttori)’<sup>164</sup>, Rella maintains that ‘[l]a traduzione giusta sarebbe “spaesante”, “desituante”, “atopico”: l’ingresso in una sorta di extraterritorialità che ci appartiene come qualcosa costitutivo del nostro essere umani’.<sup>165</sup> This situation is complicated further from the fact that *unheimliche* is understood and, accordingly, translated differently in the texts of Freud and Heidegger. As a matter of fact,

Le traduzioni italiane del termine *unheimlich*, con le sue varianti, negli scritti di Freud e Heidegger, sono molteplici. Se, per quanto riguarda Freud, prevale il termine ‘perturbante’ [...], per quanto riguarda Heidegger la versione più frequente e accreditata è ‘spaesante’, ‘spaesamento’, introdotta da Chiodi nella traduzione di *Sein und Zeit*, e ripresa di recente, per altri testi, da Volpi; a essa si affiancano però la traduzione di Masi, con ‘inquietante’, e quella di Marini, con ‘inospitalità’.

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>164</sup> Francesco Orlando, *Illuminismo, Barocco e Retorica Freudiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), p. 15.

<sup>165</sup> Franco Rella, *Pensare per Figure: Freud, Platone, Kafka* (Bologna: Pendragon, 1999), p. 48 n. 49.

‘Spaesamento’ è forse la traduzione che più si avvicina al termine Tedesco, per la prossimità tra ‘paese’ e ‘Heim’, pur non potendo renderne la pregnanza di sfumature.<sup>166</sup>

Yet, despite this linguistic difficulty, the (Freudian) *unheimliche* constitutes an important point of reference and topic of discussion for several Italian scholars. In her survey of the most significant Italian contributions to the critical debate on the uncanny, Berto observes how ‘[i]l motivo dell’*Unheimliche* emerge comunque con una certa frequenza, benché in modo generalmente frammentario e indiretto [...] a indicare l’incontro con una dimensione di inappropriabilità, diversamente interpretata’.<sup>167</sup> Within the geographical and cultural perimeter of ‘un dibattito italiano particolarmente ricco’,<sup>168</sup> the uncanny is still addressed from a psychoanalytic, philosophical and aesthetic-literary perspective.

Ciaramelli, who combines Freudian psychoanalysis and Heideggerian philosophy, develops the most innovative reading of the psychoanalytic uncanny. For Ciaramelli,

Ciò che concerne l’uomo ineludibilmente e che tuttavia non gli è accessibile immediatamente costituisce il nucleo e il fondo della *Unheimlichkeit* dell’uomo, la latenza verso cui si dirigono psicoanalisi e fenomenologia, e dalla quale siamo ambigualmente attratti e restinti.<sup>169</sup>

This understanding of the uncanny as a sort of ‘original latency’, i.e. as a primal dimension of plenitude of sense and gratification never actually experienced by men, directly affects his conceptualisation of (unconscious) desire as inherently based on a relationship between the subject and the other:

Il mito infantile e primitivo dell’onnipotenza magica dei pensieri, considerato come caratteristica della vita psichica originaria, è un’espressione dell’onnipotenza immaginaria del desiderio, in quanto automatismo d’un appagamento immediato e totale, vale a dire allucinatorio. In questa fantasia retrospettiva si manifesta il carattere antinomico, insostenibile e perturbante del desiderio umano. Ciò che qui al tempo stesso attrae e respinge è l’estraneità stessa del proprio. Il vagheggiamento di questa totalità originaria, il richiamo avvincente ma paralizzante di questa inclusione inglobante nel proprio, nasce dalla tensione del desiderio verso l’impossibile riappropriazione del suo presunto oggetto originario. [...] La deriva del desiderio – il suo

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<sup>166</sup> Berto, p. 2.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Fabio Ciaramelli, ‘La nostalgia dell’origine e l’eccesso del desiderio: Lo “Unheimliche” e l’angoscia in Freud e Heidegger’, in *Diffrazioni: La filosofia alla prova della psicoanalisi*, ed. by Ciaramelli and others (Milan: Guerini, 1994), pp. 15-75.

movimento indiretto verso sempre parziali forme di appagamento e soddisfacimento differito – è originaria proprio perché il desiderio non è mai immediato e diretto ma fin dall'inizio coinvolto nella mediazione istituita. Il desiderio emerge nel rimando del senso all'altro da sé, all'estraneo: perciò, il desiderio è originario proprio in quanto incapace d'autogenerarsi.<sup>170</sup>

Thus, Freud's *unheimliche* reveals how unconscious desire can never be fully satisfied because it originates from and is inhabited by an irreducible, unfamiliar, radical alterity.

Meaningfully, the major contributions to the philosophical uncanny come from the members of the so-called 'pensiero debole'. In particular, while Vattimo reads the uncanny as a structural condition of postmodernity, for Rovatti it aptly designates the postmodern approach to philosophical thinking. Vattimo praises the postmodern condition of instability and ambivalence, of being-not-at-home as a possibility for authentic freedom:

Vivere in questo mondo molteplice significa fare esperienza della libertà come oscillazione continua tra appartenenza e spaesamento [...] ma anche perché noi stessi non sappiamo troppo bene quale fisionomia abbia, facciamo fatica a concepire questa oscillazione come libertà [...] a cogliere questa esperienza di oscillazione nel mondo postmoderno come chance di un nuovo modo di essere (forse finalmente) umani.<sup>171</sup>

As Jansen explains, Vattimo derives the two concepts of 'spaesamento' and 'oscillazione' from Heidegger. Therefore, his postmodern uncanny constitutes more an historicisation of Heidegger's *unheimlichkeit* rather than of Freud's *unheimliche*.

Rovatti shares Vattimo's identification of postmodernity with a condition of unfamiliarity or 'estraneità', claiming that 'per stare in una situazione come questa bisogna allentare il troppo, aprire interstizi [...] produrre in noi zone di vuoto, di silenzio, di estraneità'.<sup>172</sup>

Accordingly, he uses the term 'spaesamento' to describe the hermeneutical and linguistic approach that distinguishes the postmodern 'weak thought' as the philosophical attempt to produce 'il disincanto, un effetto di disillusione rispetto alla pretesa totalizzante' of philosophy itself by integrating 'una sospensione poetica all'interno del linguaggio della filosofia'.<sup>173</sup> In effect, as Schwarz Lausten comments, Vattimo and Rovatti adopt

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<sup>170</sup> Fabio Ciaramelli, 'Sull'ambiguità del desiderio', [<https://mondodomani.org/dialegesthai/fc01.htm#par3>], [accessed 23 July 2017]

<sup>171</sup> Giovanni Vattimo, *La società trasparente* (Milan: Garzanti, 1989), p. 20.

<sup>172</sup> Alessandro Dal Lago and Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Elogio del pudore: per un pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1989), p. 31.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-34.

[L]a metafora dell'abitare per descrivere la nuova condizione del soggetto [nella postmodernità]: l'io non abita più un luogo nel senso che ne è il padrone. Esso è spaesato e disorientato dopo il crollo dei sogni della metafisica, e il pensiero debole è un tentativo di rendere abitabile, cioè pensabile, questa nuova condizione.<sup>174</sup>

Furthermore, similarly to Kohon, Italian scholars frame the aesthetic uncanny in terms of an experience of the negative. Tellingly, Carboni declares that 'senza dubbio, il perturbante è una figura del Sublime moderno, una delle forme in cui esso riemerge'.<sup>175</sup> For this reason he defines as 'abbaglio' if not 'rimozione'.<sup>176</sup> Freud's affirmation, at the beginning of his 1919 essay, that 'nothing is to be found upon this subject [the uncanny] in elaborate treatises on aesthetics, which in general prefer to concern themselves with what is beautiful'.<sup>177</sup>

In a similar fashion, Rella argues that the aesthetic uncanny produces a crisis of representational logic, in particular by collapsing our familiar experience of time as linear continuity:

La logica iterativa, la ripetizione, che vediamo emergere [...] con una specificità, nelle opere d'arte, mette radicalmente in discussione la logica lineare a cui siamo abituati. L'evento o la forma, quando sono ripetuti, sono in questa ripetizione ribaditi [...] ma d'altro canto questo 'più' insinua in noi ciò che prima non era comprensibile [...]. Questo qualcosa è perturbante, strano, *unheimlich*, in quanto incrina la logica della rappresentazione. La perfetta corrispondenza tra significante e significato si spezza nell'emergere dell'*Unheimlich*.<sup>178</sup>

For Rella, this implies the fact that the uncanny reveals how every work of art makes room for the return of something previously repressed, i.e. a different modality of signification. Meaningfully, this reaches a climax in literature, where

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<sup>174</sup> Schwarz Lausten, p. 41.

<sup>175</sup> Massimo Carboni, *Il sublime è ora: saggio sulle estetiche contemporanee* (Rome: Castelvecchi, 1993), p. 49.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> 'The Uncanny', p. 219.

<sup>178</sup> *Pensare per figure*, p. 49.



Il materiale rimosso che ritorna è già stato lavorato dalla rimozione e porta le tracce sia del lavoro che l'ha 'sommerso', sia del lavoro e del materiale che l'hanno fatto riaffiorare, si esprime cioè in una differenza, in altro modo, con altre forme.<sup>179</sup>

As for the relationship between Freud's *unheimliche* and literature, the Freudian literary critic Orlando advances a distinctive formulation.

First, Orlando stresses the importance of shifting the Italian translation of the definition of the uncanny as 'return of the repressed, from 'ritorno del rimosso' to 'ritorno del represso'. On the one hand, this comes from the fact that, as stated in the introduction, Freud identifies two sources of the *unheimliche*: overcome childhood complexes and surmounted beliefs. In the latter case, however, one cannot properly speak of repression. Here, in effect, Freud 'estende [...] l'uso del termine rimozione al di là dei suoi confini legittimi, poiché tali credenze primitive non sono mai state [...] rimosse [...] sono state piuttosto sorpassate'.<sup>180</sup> Therefore, Orlando comments, '[a]nche se non la conia di fatto, dunque, concettualmente e virtualmente, Freud autorizza qui un'espressione analogica come "ritorno del sorpassato" [o] "ritorno del represso"'.<sup>181</sup>

On the other hand, Orlando's linguistic change leads to a major modification in the critical conceptualisation of the uncanny since, unlike 'rimosso', 'represso' includes a socio-collective dimension:

[I]nfatti 'represso', in 'ritorno del represso', è parzialmente sinonimo di 'rimosso', dato che può indicare qualcosa di inconscio. La sostituzione di 'represso' a 'rimosso' [è] una scelta terminologica esplicita, motivata dalla volontà di includere nell'espressione non solo contenuti individuali e inconsci, ma anche sociali e consci.<sup>182</sup>

Second, Orlando articulates a theory of literature as 'ritorno del represso socialmente istituzionalizzato', wherein what uncannily returns is:

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid. Significantly Agamben develops a similar understanding of the uncanny, although from a philosophical and linguistic perspective.

<sup>180</sup> Francesco Orlando, *Per una teoria freudiana della letteratura*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Turin: Einaudi, 1992) Amazon Kindle e-book, [Chapter 7, location 1575].

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. On this point, it is essential to distinguish the English terms 'repression' and 'repressed' that, in the Freudian dictionary, translate to the Italian 'rimozione' and 'rimosso', from the Italian 'represso', which entails a specific socio-political dimension.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., [Chapter 2, location 351]. In chapter 4 I use Orlando's definition of 'ritorno del represso' to analyse Tabucchi's narration of the collective unconscious.

1. Ritorno del represso come presenza di qualità formali assimilabili a quelle proprie del linguaggio dell'inconscio secondo la descrizione di Freud [what Orlando calls 'figure'];
2. Ritorno del represso come presenza di contenuti censurati dalla repressione sociale che grava sul sesso;
3. Ritorno del represso come presenza di contenuti censurati da una repressione ideologico-politica.<sup>183</sup>

Clearly the first point ('represso formale') is also the most significant as it addresses the formal and linguistic dimension of literature. From this it follows, for Orlando, that literature is a 'formazione di compromesso'<sup>184</sup> between two different logics or models: the conscious and the unconscious one. And this is ascribable to the fact that literature 'altera quella trasparenza nel rapporto tra significato e significato che dovrebbe essere prevalente o almeno normale nell'uso conscio-adulto del linguaggio' making room, although indirectly, for unconscious sense making.<sup>185</sup> Also within the context of Italian Studies, therefore, the nexus between literature and the uncanny, which I discussed in the introduction, is overtly acknowledged and thematised.

Eventually, mapping the Italian debate on the uncanny, Berto briefly alludes to Agamben, and to the presence, in the latter's writings, of a reflection on the relationship between the uncanny and '[la] dimensione della logica e del linguaggio'.<sup>186</sup> However she does not develop further this critical insight. Therefore, it is to the overlooked formulation of the uncanny in Agamben that I will now turn my attention.

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., [Chapter 2, location 377].

<sup>184</sup> By the concept 'compromise formation' Freud defines 'the form taken by the repressed material [...] in order for it to be admitted into consciousness. Thus the compromise formation is the formation of a symptom'. Jacki Watts and others, *Developmental Psychology*, 2nd edition (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2009), p. 62.

<sup>185</sup> Although focusing exclusively on literature and moving within a Freudian framework, Orlando develops arguments similar to those suggested by Agamben in the same years (Orlando's *Per una teoria freudiana della letteratura* was first published in 1973, Agamben's *Stanze* in 1977). Indeed, already with Orlando the uncanny is addressed as a matter of semiosis, but not in relation to its ontological (post-metaphysical) dimension, as with Agamben and Tabucchi.

<sup>186</sup> Berto, p. 12.

### 1.3 Agamben and the (Freudian) Uncanny

If it is true of Agamben that it is ‘the pure *factum loquendi* (the fact speaking beings exist), that he everywhere tries to think through’,<sup>187</sup> it is precisely his search for a different understanding of the signifying function of language that leads him, in *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale* (1977), to a direct engagement with the Freudian uncanny. The title of this volume<sup>188</sup> alludes to the metric division and measure of the troubadours’ poetry as well as, more broadly and metaphorically, to an im-possible place (in the case of the medieval poem, the space or taking place of erotic desire) that produces unsaturated meaning. In *Stanze* Agamben pursues a new conceptualisation of experience through which individuals may gain access to and abide by their ‘proper’ place:

Nelle pagine che seguono, il modello della conoscenza è così cercato in quelle operazioni, come la disperazione del malinconico o la *Verleugnung* del feticista, in cui il desiderio nega, e, insieme, afferma il suo oggetto, e in questo modo riesce a entrare in rapporto con qualcosa che non avrebbe potuto altrimenti essere né appropriato né goduto [...] un modello del significare che sfuggisse alla posizione primordiale del significante e del significato che domina ogni riflessione occidentale sul segno. [...] [S]olo se si è capaci di entrare in rapporto con l’irrealtà e con l’inappropriabile in quanto tali, è possibile appropriarsi della realtà e del positivo.<sup>189</sup>

Accordingly, the uncanny comes to ground and designate, for Agamben, a model of signification that is capable of exposing and undoing the metaphysical bearings inherent in the traditional understanding of the linguistic sign as the union of the signifier and the signified. For, while this apparent unification superficially conceals a linguistic fracture – the bar that at once joins and divides the two planes –, on a metaphysical level it hides and disregards the original (positive) fracture and estrangement inherent to the essence of

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<sup>187</sup> Justin Clemens, ‘The Role of the Shifter and the Problem of Reference in Giorgio Agamben’, in *Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature and Life*, ed. by Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron and Alex Murray (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 43-65 (p. 44).

<sup>188</sup> ‘I poeti del ‘200 chiamavano «stanza», cioè «dimora capace e ricettacolo», il nucleo essenziale della loro poesia, perché esso custodiva [...] quel *joi d’amor* che essi affidavano come unico oggetto della poesia’ (*Stanze*, p. xiii). The latter opens ‘uno spazio in cui il segno poetico appare come l’unico asilo offerto al compimento dell’amore e il desiderio amoroso come il fondamento e il senso della poesia’ (Ibid., pp. 151-52).

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., pp. xiv-xvi.

human beings, i.e. the fact that the latter have to acquire language and signification and, in infancy,<sup>190</sup> experience themselves precisely as a potential intention to signify.

For Agamben, the adjective ‘uncanny’ describes the modality in which a peculiar experience takes place as well as the content of that experience: the uncanny is how one encounters (through language, understood as a sense-making process available only to man) what is uncanny (man’s being). Or rather, an uncanny experience is always an experience of uncanniness. This reciprocity is due to the fact that formulating an understanding of the concept from and through Agamben’s theory of language entails considering the uncanny as a signifying potentiality, revealing of man’s proper essence, and hence as a possible way out of what he calls metaphysical nihilism.<sup>191</sup> It is, in fact, the oblivion of the possibility of experiencing language as such – what Agamben calls

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<sup>190</sup> ‘Infanzia’ is the term through which Agamben designates a radically new experience of language, ‘a new concept of experience that is based on a transcendental consciousness stripped of all psychological attributes and existing in language alone’. Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill/Queen’s University Press, 2008), p. 34. It is the experience of the taking place of language itself; and, despite the name, it is a somewhat transcendental potentiality not confined solely to childhood.

<sup>191</sup> Reaching its climax with modernity, for Agamben, nihilism might and should be understood not in the most traditional sense of a devaluation or absence of unifying and transcendental values, but, rather, as the presence of a foundation that is, nonetheless, unattainable, in a way always already lost to men. However, it is a negative grounding that can, in turn, be negated, for, as Molad points out, ‘Agamben believes that rather than maintaining a reactionary or merely critical attitude towards nihilism, our task is to put it to a new use by realising its redemptive potentiality’ (Yoni Molad, ‘Nihilism’, in *The Agamben Dictionary*, pp. 138-39 (p. 138)). Significantly, it is on this point that language, and literature, appear qua (negating) modalities of sense making: for Agamben ‘art’s privilege is located [...] in its power to disclose the nihilism of Western culture as such. [...] Art [...] is also that in which the surpassing of nihilism may be accomplished’ (Weller, p. 156). This is also why Hillyer assigns Agamben to what he defines as the ‘literature of the no’, namely to a conceptualization of literature that, far from reducing it to a mere acceptance and representation of metaphysical nihilism, is able to perceive a potential way out. Accordingly, the scholar finds in Agamben ‘[a] particular understanding of literature, its claim to verisimilitude, and therefore also a particular understanding of language, its signifying function [...] in which the communicative and informative functions of language are deactivated in order to open it up to a new potential use’ (Aaron Hillyer, *The Disappearance of Literature: Blanchot, Agamben, and the Writers of the No* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 9). According to Hillyer, Agamben is one of those authors who ‘having lost all hope of an expressible, totality of words, that signifies wholly, eternally and unequivocally, and of an accessible tradition, decide instead to build their work from a standpoint of extreme negativity, while still chancing that the literary word’s potential is not yet consumed’ (ibid., p. 1). From the perspective of Agamben’s uncanny, if nihilism defines a sort of ineffable ‘semantic saturation’, overcoming, or twisting free of nihilism means being able to sustain a state of void and doubt, being able to stay in an interrogative mode that seeks no ultimate answer.

*experimentum linguae* –, of the linguistic function and functioning regardless of any actual content to be communicated, that, for the philosopher, has estranged man from himself. Therefore, the two dimensions (the uncanny as mode and content of an experience) as well as the relationship existing between them both need to be examined. Indeed, I will argue that, ultimately, the uncanny takes place exactly through and in the form of this relationship, as the articulation between the estranging feeling of the uncanny and its occurring as ontological insight.

In *Stanze* Agamben develops his conceptualisation of and confrontation with Freud's *unheimliche* through a threefold process: he begins by picking upon what might be regarded as an archetypical manifestation and occurrence of an uncanny experience, namely the modern subject's alienation within and from a world that is seemingly in the process of losing its significance, thus focusing on the uncanny as an unsettling form of experience. Subsequently, examining the metaphysical presuppositions that underpin the familiar functioning of the linguistic sign and how they are questioned and estranged by the logic inherent in symbols or by the presence of the bar between the signifier and the signified, Agamben moves from an understanding of the uncanny qua subjective feeling of derealisation and depersonalisation to an understanding of uncanniness as a mode of being. Finally – and this is where the figures of Lacan and Derrida will come into play – Agamben formulates a potential, tentative description of this shift(ing) between the phenomenological and the ontological *unheimliche*, between the uncanny as the mode and content of such an experience, suggesting that, in the end, the uncanny resides neither in the formal disquiet nor in the ontological fracture, but precisely in the sense-making relationship, in the articulation between the two. The uncanny is the place and the structuring, the taking place of this articulation.

### 1.3.1 On Feeling and Being Uncanny

In *Stanze* Agamben first alludes to the Freudian *unheimliche* while trying to identify the properties that characterise and distinguish an uncanny experience, and thus engaging with the question: what is uncanny about an uncanny experience? This occurs in the second part of the volume, where Agamben is analysing the concept of fetishism.

A dual thrust structures the triadic relationship he develops between the uncanny, fetishism and the third element of modernity: on the one hand, the uncanny witnesses and enhances a

crisis of experience, the loss of any stable relationship with objects and of any firm meaning, a *horror vacui* characterising, at its climax, the trauma of modernity, the experience of modernity as traumatic, acknowledging that ‘trauma signifies the collapse of signification’.<sup>192</sup>

For Agamben, modernity is the highest example of what it takes to undergo an uncanny experience, since it is characterised by alienation, ‘il disagio dell’uomo di fronte all’inquietante metamorfosi degli oggetti più familiari’.<sup>193</sup> Thus, Agamben finds a somewhat primeval instance of Freud’s uncanny in Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism.<sup>194</sup> The chapter entitled ‘Beau Brummel o l’appropriazione dell’irrealtà’ opens with Agamben’s description of Grandville’s vignettes and disquieting illustrations of daily objects. What these drawings reveal is man’s discomfort when faced with mass-produced commodities,<sup>195</sup> since they display the parallelism that occurs between the alienation of the object through its commodification and the alienation of individuals no longer capable of experiencing them. According to Agamben, in fact, ‘Grandville scorge [...] la cifra di un nuovo rapporto fra gli uomini e le cose [...] il disagio dell’uomo di fronte all’inquietante metamorfosi degli oggetti più familiari’.<sup>196</sup>

A sense of alienation and disquiet might illuminate, therefore, the way in which the feeling of the uncanny arises and is experienced:

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<sup>192</sup> James Berger, *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and the Narratives of Modernity* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), p. 566.

<sup>193</sup> *Stanze*, p. 55. As he states in *Infanzia*, ‘[o]gni discorso sull’esperienza deve oggi partire dalla constatazione che essa non è più qualcosa che ci sia ancora dato di fare. [...] l’incapacità di fare e trasmettere esperienze è, forse, uno dei pochi dati certi di cui egli [l’uomo contemporaneo] disponga su se stesso’ (p. 5). The crisis of experience is, with modernity, also an experience of the crisis, of a fracture that, significantly, takes place in the form of a temporal disjointedness. Indeed, modernity is a time-centred idea. It presupposes, in effect, a linear concept of time bound up with the notion of progress. Or, rather, it assumes a twofold temporality, a caesura between ‘the objectified, socially measurable time of capitalist civilization [...] and the personal, subjective, imaginative *durée*, the private time created by the unfolding of the self’ (Călinescu, p. 5).

<sup>194</sup> ‘In quanto si presenta sotto questa doppia forma di oggetto d’uso e di porta-valore, la merce è un bene essenzialmente immateriale ed astratto, il cui godimento materiale è impossibile se non attraverso l’accumulazione e lo scambio [...]. Alla sovrapposizione del valore di scambio al valore d’uso corrisponde, nel feticismo, la sovrapposizione di un particolare valore simbolico all’uso normale dell’oggetto’ (*Stanze*, p. 45).

<sup>195</sup> ‘La degenerazione implicita nella trasformazione dell’oggetto artigianale in articolo di massa si manifesta quotidianamente per l’uomo moderno nella perdita della disinvoltura rispetto alle cose’ (ibid., pp. 55-56).

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

Proprio all'inquietante (*Das Unheimliche*, di cui scorge esempi insigni proprio in due temi cari a Grandville: l'occhio enucleato e il pupazzo animato, che egli trova nei romanzi di Hoffmann), Freud dedica un ampio studio, comparso nel quinto volume di *Imago*, le cui conclusioni sono molto significative. Egli vede nell'inquietante (*Unheimliche*) il familiare (*Heimliche*) rimosso. 'Questo inquietante non è in realtà nulla di nuovo, nulla di estraneo, ma piuttosto qualcosa che è da sempre familiare alla psiche e che solo il processo di rimozione ha reso altro'. Il rifiuto di prendere coscienza dei *facticia* mercificati si esprime criticograficamente nell'aura minacciosa che avvolge le cose più familiari, con le quali non è più possibile sentirsi al sicuro.<sup>197</sup>

Agamben links the Freudian uncanny to Marx's idea of alienation, since, to him, they are both exemplary instances of that receding of meaning and of signification that, despite underpinning the entire metaphysical tradition for Agamben, reaches its highest point with modernity.

This is a much shared position in the critical reception of the uncanny, as:

The basic Freudian definition of 'the familiar that has become strange' cannot be disconnected from one of the most important concepts in many discourses of the twentieth century: alienation as an economic, political, psychological and existential condition. [...] The infusion of the Marxist tradition of alienation in the concept of the uncanny provides it with a more critical potential.<sup>198</sup>

On the other hand, however, the *unheimliche* is also a way to signify such loss, to try to cope with it. In this sense – and on this point the texts partly anticipate the subsequent investigation into the experience of the uncanny qua ontological category – it functions similarly to fetishism, which has, according to Agamben, a profanating logic,<sup>199</sup> being based at once upon presence and absence.

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>198</sup> Masschelein, pp. 136-46.

<sup>199</sup> Agamben derives the idea of profanation from Roman law, where it was opposed to the act of *consacrare*, defining the action of 'restituire [le cose consacrate agli dei] al libero uso degli uomini'. Giorgio Agamben, *Profanazioni* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2005), p. 83. The Italian philosopher establishes, in particular, a parallelism between consecration, as that which presupposes the separation of something from the ordinary sphere of men, and all those pre-determined, pre-regulated actions and practices that punctuate an individual's daily life, but which, at the same time, separate him from his own awareness and free will. Thus Agamben employs the term *profanazione*, specifically addressing the creation of 'un mezzo puro [...] un nuovo uso [...] possibile per l'uomo solo disattivando un vecchio uso, rendendolo inoperoso' (ibid., p. 99). As Salzani argues, with profanation 'what is rendered inoperative, is an activity directed towards a goal, in

Disavowal, the gesture performed in fetishism, neither posits (or longs for) a full presence, nor does it dissolve into the vortex of the absence of meaning.<sup>200</sup> Rather, it tries to rethink and re-arrange semiosis and language in order to allow for the symbolisation of the trauma – which is exemplary of modernity – itself. Within Agamben’s thinking of a new modality of experience, which constitutes the fundamental issue in *Stanze*, ‘fetishism plays a central role here because of how it isolates its object in a curious space never clearly locatable in either the subject or the object.’<sup>201</sup> Fetishism, in its Freudian codification, allows for what Agamben defines as ‘l’appropriazione stessa dell’irrealità’,<sup>202</sup> the appropriation of that which can never be properly possessed or mastered, because it exists as potentiality<sup>203</sup>:

Le cose non sono fuori di noi, nello spazio esterno misurabile, come oggetti neutrali (ob-jecta) di uso e di scambio, ma sono invece esse stesse che ci aprono il luogo originale [...] sono cioè esse stesse comprese fin dall’inizio nel topos outopos in cui si situa la nostra esperienza di essere-al-mondo. La domanda dove è la cosa? È inseparabile dalla domanda dove è l’uomo? Come il feticcio [...] le cose non sono propriamente in nessun posto, perché il loro luogo si situa al di qua degli oggetti e al di là dell’uomo [...].<sup>204</sup>

That fetishes are properly no-where alludes to the fact that they unceasingly advance and remove meaning, articulating a topological, almost paradoxical, space of sense making, which is never at hand and yet always already at the core of man’s existence.

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order to open it to a new use’. Carlo Salzani, ‘Inoperative/Deactivation’, in *The Agamben Dictionary*, pp. 106-08 (p. 107).

<sup>200</sup> Significantly, on this point Agamben differs from Derrida, for whom fetishism is structured around an ‘economy of the undecidable’. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. by John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 210.

<sup>201</sup> Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009) p. 64.

<sup>202</sup> *Stanze*, p. 52.

<sup>203</sup> Interestingly Bodei defines as fetishist that dimension of virtual possibility that belongs to Tabucchi’s writings: ‘Tabucchi esprime il paradosso di ogni vera creazione poetica: i suoi prodotti appaiono infatti essere, nello stesso tempo, modi di potenziamento del senso di realtà e mezzi che sembrano indebolirla. In questa prospettiva ogni opera letteraria appartiene alla realtà e alla possibilità. [...] Si direbbe pertanto che la pienezza e il senso della vita siano in un altrove virtuale [...]. A tale ipotesi si accompagna peraltro l’oscura consapevolezza che l’altrove è già qui, incastonato nella pagina di un romanzo o nelle cadenze di una poesia. Nella letteratura *il fittizio* (o il fattizio, da cui viene anche, attraverso la mediazione del portoghese, il termine ‘feticcio’) *assume più realtà dell’immediatamente reale* [...]’. Remo Bodei, ‘Giochi proibiti. Le “vite parallele” di Antonio Tabucchi’, in *Dedica*, pp. 117-39 (pp. 123-25), italicised.

<sup>204</sup> *Stanze*, p. 69.



To summarise, it could be argued that, addressing the uncanny feeling reaching its climax with modernity, Agamben somehow advances the following proportion:

Freud's uncanny: Marx's fetishism = Agamben's uncanny: Freud's fetishism.

This implies that: Freud's *unheimliche* exemplarily takes place as the modern form of Marx's alienation; and Agamben's uncanny both incorporates this estranging experience of disorientation while indicating possible ways to cope with it or dwell within it – that which relates to men's uncanniness, i.e. the fact that men exist as creators of sense.

Indeed, the conceptual passage from the uncanny as affective property to the uncanny as mode of being, partly suggested with fetishism, is fully explored and accomplished in the second reference Agamben makes to the uncanny – and to Freud's essay – and which appears in the last part of *Stanze*, evocatively entitled 'L'immagine perversa. La semiologia dalla parte della Sfinge',<sup>205</sup> which I now set out to investigate.

Agamben's critique of Freud's account reveals the extent to which he leans on Heidegger's and Lacan's conceptualisations. In particular, from Heidegger – to whom *Stanze* is dedicated – Agamben derives his dual (phenomenological and ontological) understanding of the uncanny, the fact that, as anticipated, the uncanny is both a feeling as well as a feature of the human essence. In Lacan Agamben finds a psychoanalytic interpretation of the *unheimliche* that stands as an alternative to Freud's, from which he borrows a topological description of the uncanny as the interplay between the two moments of derealisation and engagement with the real, between the anxiety of feeling uncanny and the revealing understanding of being uncanny.

Addressing the ontological dimension of language, more specifically, the philosopher works through the following question: what is experienced within and through an uncanny experience? To answer this question, Agamben follows the same rationale that he adopted

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<sup>205</sup> Agamben's critique of the familiar, post-Saussurean understanding of the sign as the union of the signifier and the signified is however not a critique of Saussure himself, but of his legacy and misappropriation, for Agamben finds, in Saussure, a crisis of semiology, as well as an attempt to 'far segno verso quella differenza [...] che è stata coperta e rimossa, nella semiologia moderna, con la «barriera resistente alla significazione»'. As he further comments, '[i]solare la nozione di segno, inteso come unità positiva di signans e signatum, dall'originale e problematica posizione saussuriana del fatto linguistico come «plesso di differenze eternamente negative», equivale a far ricadere la scienza dei segni nella metafisica' (*Stanze*, p. 186).

in his previous discussion of the uncanny feeling, although he now takes into account more exclusively man's uncanny experience with language. In this case, uneasiness on the part of the subject and a sense of threatening estrangement on that of the object arise and are experienced with and before the symbolic, which, unlike the most familiar linguistic sign, forms an immediate union between the signifier and the signified, as well as before the bar, which, on the contrary, lies at the core of every sign, at once grounding and separating the signifier and the signified:

Il 'disagio' che la forma simbolica porta scandalosamente alla luce è quello stesso che accompagna fin dall'inizio la riflessione occidentale sul significare, il cui lascito metafisico è stato raccolto senza beneficio d'inventario dalla semiologia moderna.<sup>206</sup>

What is, therefore, this metaphysical discomfort implicit in the symbolic – and the bar<sup>207</sup> – and which is revealed by the uncanny? What is this meaninglessness, this resistance to signification that man encounters within signification itself? The answer lies in the fact that the traditional understanding of the linguistic sign as double is founded upon ontological nihilism:

In quanto nel segno è implicita la dualità del manifestante e della cosa manifestata, esso è infatti qualcosa di spezzato e di doppio, ma in quanto questa dualità si manifesta nell'unico segno, esso è invece qualcosa di ricongiunto e unito. Il simbolico, l'atto di riconoscimento che riunisce ciò che è diviso, è anche il diabolico che continuamente trasgredisce e denuncia la verità di questa conoscenza. Il fondamento di questa ambiguità del significare è in quella frattura originale della presenza che è inseparabile dall'esperienza occidentale dell'essere e per la quale tutto ciò che viene alla presenza, viene alla presenza come luogo di un differimento e di un'esclusione [...].<sup>208</sup>

For Agamben, that the uncanny can and does enable a way out of metaphysical nihilism is predicated upon the fact that ontology is essentially bound up with language:

Nella riflessione sul linguaggio, che è da sempre per eccellenza il piano in cui si proietta l'esperienza della frattura originale, questa interpretazione si cristallizza nella nozione di segno come unità espressiva del significante e del significato: la frattura della presenza prende così l'aspetto di un processo di significazione [...]. Nella semiologia moderna, l'oblio della frattura originale della presenza si manifesta proprio in ciò che dovrebbe denunciarla, e cioè nella barriera –

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>207</sup> For Agamben 'the bar is language as pure, insignificant, and ultimately indifferent mediality'. William Watkin, *The Literary Agamben* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 19.

<sup>208</sup> *Stanze*, p. 160.

del grafo S/s. [...] Dal punto di vista del significare, la metafisica non è che l'oblio della differenza originaria tra significante e significato.<sup>209</sup>

Thus the symbolic and, similarly, the bar disturb the more familiar functioning of the process of signification, insofar they occur as a caesura – almost an alienation of and inside language, to recall Agamben's observation on Marx's fetishism – pointing towards metaphysical oblivion. Interrupting the flow of signification that underpins our most familiar experience with the linguistic object, the symbolic<sup>210</sup> and the bar uncover its opacity. Consequently, Agamben delineates the modality in which, with modernity, this disruptive element intersects with and is absorbed by the Freudian uncanny:

Non è perciò sorprendente che, con l'eclisse dell'allegoresi barocca, la forma emblematica, che estrania ogni significante dal proprio significato, cominci ad apparire inquietante. [...] Il mondo delle raffigurazioni emblematiche [...] diventa ora il magazzino di rottami in cui l'Inquietante pesca i suoi spauracchi. [...] Nella forma dell'Inquietante, che invade ora sempre più prepotentemente la vita quotidiana, il simbolo si presenta come la nuova Sfinge che minaccia la cittadella della ragione. Freud è l'Edipo che propone la chiave che dovrebbe dissipare l'enigma e liberare la ragione dai suoi mostri. Per questo le conclusioni del suo studio sull'Inquietante sono per noi particolarmente interessanti.<sup>211</sup>

The uncanny is able to reveal this crisis of the more familiar *modus significandi* because, on a deeper level, it disturbs the traditional, metaphysical logic of the sign.<sup>212</sup> At the same time, however, it performs and enhances a new model of signification. This is a crucial point, inasmuch as it marks the conceptual passage from the feeling of the uncanny to (the feeling of) being uncanny. For Agamben, the *unheimliche* forms the paradoxical root of the apotropaic enigma of the Sphinx, as that which can be faced only obliquely, sideways.<sup>213</sup> It

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., pp. 161-62.

<sup>210</sup> Moreover, Freud found in the symbolic an example of the *unheimliche*: 'This is that an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes, and so on' ('The Uncanny', p. 232).

<sup>211</sup> *Stanze*, pp. 171-72.

<sup>212</sup> 'Agamben's object is a critique of the dominant metaphysics of language as presence, encapsulated in a theory of the linguistic sign where the signifier expresses and mirrors the signified: the signified is present in the signifier, and meaning is the consequence of that presence'. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 'Alice and the Spinx', in *Literature and Philosophy*, ed. by Herbert Grabes (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1997), pp. 25-35 (p. 30).

<sup>213</sup> '“*Unheimlich*” – lo si è detto fin dall'inizio – è una parola *unheimlich*. [...] Essa nomina qualcosa che normalmente in ogni dire rimane nascosto, che si ritrae nella pretesa all'univocità e all'esattezza.

comes to identify, as a synonym, the taking place of human language as such and not as a signification to be rationally deciphered:

Ciò che la Sfinge proponeva non era semplicemente qualcosa il cui significato è nascosto e velato dietro il significante 'enigmatico', ma un dire in cui la frattura originale della presenza era allusa nel paradosso di una parola che si avvicina al suo oggetto tenendolo indefinitamente a distanza. L'ἄϊνος dell'ἄϊνιγμα non è solo oscurità, ma un modo più originale del dire. Come il labirinto, come la Gorgone e come la Sfinge che lo proferisce, l'enigma appartiene infatti alla sfera dell'apotropaico, cioè di una potenza protettrice che respinge l'inquietante attirandolo e assumendolo dentro di sé. Il sentiero di danza del labirinto, che conduce nel cuore di ciò da cui tiene a distanza, è il modello di questo rapporto con l'inquietante che si esprime nell'enigma.<sup>214</sup>

Thus, Oedipus' most radical guilt lies in failing to recognise that the Sphinx was articulating a different model of sense making (the symbolic), which is not predicated upon and does not seek a meaning that closes down the chain of signifiers.<sup>215</sup> Tellingly, for the philosopher, Freud himself might be regarded as a sort of modern Oedipus precisely because, like the tragic character, he has imposed a psychoanalytical model of signification that postulates a hierarchical distinction between obscure (unconscious) meaning and proper (conscious) sense, and eventually represses the symbolic:

Freud è l'Edipo che propone la chiave che dovrebbe dissipare l'enigma e liberare la ragione dai suoi mostri. [...] Egli vede nell'Inquietante (*Unheimliche*) il familiare (*Heimliche*) rimosso [...]. Questa formula, che riassume anche l'atteggiamento di Freud rispetto ai simboli, che egli costantemente riconduce al meccanismo della rimozione, ci autorizza a domandarci perché la cultura moderna abbia così ostinatamente identificato il simbolico con l'Inquietante. [...] L'interpretazione edipica della parola della Sfinge come 'parola cifrata' governa segretamente la concezione freudiana del simbolo. La psicanalisi presuppone infatti la scissione del discorso in una parola oscura e per termini

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Nell'*Unheimliche* viene nominato ciò che sporge da ogni significato, ciò che rimane non detto in ogni dire che pretenda di afferrare qualcosa. Parola eccedente, essa nomina un'eccedenza della parola, una residualità del significante che non viene assorbita nella coerenza del discorso, ma che piuttosto interferisce con esso, ne disturba l'ordine e la compiutezza' (Berto, p. 143). 'The problem with Oedipus is that he translates the riddle posed by the Sphinx, thus making the signified (the meaning of the riddle) coincide with the signifier (its formulation). [...] We are indeed in the realm of the Sphinx, with this disjunction between signifier and signified, this excess of signified over signifier, and their paradoxical co-existence' (Lecerle, pp. 31-33).

<sup>214</sup> *Stanze*, p. 164.

<sup>215</sup> 'L'insegnamento liberatore di Edipo è che ciò che vi è di inquietante e di tremendo nell'enigma scompare immediatamente se si riconduce il suo dire alla trasparenza del rapporto fra il significato e la sua forma al quale solo in apparenza esso riesce a sfuggire. [...] [L]a colpa di Edipo non è tanto l'incesto quanto una ὕβρις verso la potenza del simbolico in generale' (ibid., pp. 163-64).

impropri, che è quella dell'inconscio fondata sulla rimozione, e in una parola chiara e per termini propri, che è quella della coscienza.<sup>216</sup>

Agamben's reception of Freud's uncanny is undoubtedly not entirely accurate, since he misses the fact that, as indicated in the introduction, the Freudian *unheimliche* is both a repression – comparable to Oedipus' repression of the symbolic – and the return of that which has been repressed, thus forming the base of a potential presencing of the Sphinx inside Oedipal semiosis.<sup>217</sup> Agamben overlooks how, also for Freud, the uncanny is the (positive) negation (through the articulation of a new linguistic experience for Agamben, and through the return of what was repressed in Freud's account) of negativity (nihilism for Agamben, psychological repression itself for Freud).

### 1.3.2 Beyond Freud: Agamben, Lacan, Derrida

Nonetheless, this distance from Freud's grasping of the uncanny is noteworthy as it leads Agamben to search for a different grounding of the same concept within the

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., pp. 172-75.

<sup>217</sup> Goux similarly reproaches Freud's Oedipal blind hubris, which derives from a misinterpretation of the Greek myth and results in a repression of the figure and the function of the Sphinx: 'The Sphinx is the unthought element of Freudian psychoanalysis, a riddle unresolved by the Freudian movement. And one that for structural reasons cannot be resolved, for its solution would threaten the entire Freudian edifice, based as it is on a certain fundamentally erroneous interpretation of the Oedipus myth and, more seriously still, of the Oedipus complex. The riddle of the Sphinx? An expression to be taken in two senses: the riddle that the Sphinx proposes, and the one that the Sphinx herself constitutes. Oedipus thought he had resolved the first and Freud the second. But what if neither had found the answer?' Jean-Joseph Goux, *Oedipus, Philosopher*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 23-24.

However, this criticism is not entirely accurate, as the Sphinx eventually haunts Freud's essay on the uncanny, emerging in his observation that: 'It often happens that male patients declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a humorous saying: "Love is home-sickness"; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, still in the dream, "this place is familiar to me, I have been there before," we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. In this case, too, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, homelike, familiar' (p. 245). Accordingly, although 'Freud starts his discourse on the uncanny in a typical frame of the Oedipus complex [...] he ends elsewhere, with a return of the repressed, in the womb-fantasy, exposing the repressed (m)other [...] the spectral Sphinx'. Wu Yuan Yuan, *The Riddling Between Oedipus and the Sphinx: Ontology, Hauntology, and Heterologies of the Grotesque* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2016), p. 99.

psychoanalytical field. In particular, alongside the abovementioned appropriation of the fetishist disavowal to describe the functioning of the *unheimliche*,<sup>218</sup> it pushes Agamben's reflection from a temporal explanation to a spatial and topological account of the psychoanalytical uncanny. The title *Stanze* foreshadows and accentuates the demand to conceive of a new topology of experience, while already in the preface Agamben alludes to the need to 'configurare un nodo borromeo'.<sup>219</sup> What kind of space is this? Agamben's answer accentuates the necessity to 'pensare il "luogo" non come qualcosa di spaziale, ma come qualcosa di più originario dello spazio',<sup>220</sup> not as an actual, static place, but as the force structuring it, as the taking place of the place itself. Hence, adopting a topological vocabulary points to the fact that, for Agamben, the *unheimliche* describes a shaping tension between two moments or movements – feeling uncanny and being uncanny – that are not opposite or intelligible in terms of chronological causality, since they enable each other and take place reciprocally, the one through the other. This spatial articulation of mutual inclusiveness is most clearly manifested by and located in the bar that, inside every sign, joins and separates the signifier and the signified, for:

The division within every speech-act between what is said and that it is said, is aimed at exposing humanity's irrevocable subjection to something enigmatic in communication, that is, to the indestructible barrier that founds the possibility of speech. The Sphinx, in this conception, is itself the half-body that bespeaks the half-said [*mi-dire*] of the enigma, which cannot ever be fully spoken.

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<sup>218</sup> 'La teoria [...] che vede in ogni simbolo il ritorno del rimosso in un significante improprio, non esaurisce tuttavia la concezione freudiana del simbolo. Freud descrive infatti a più riprese processi simbolici che non si lasciano in alcun modo ridurre a questo schema. Uno di questi è la *Verleugnung* del feticista. [...] La *Verleugnung* ci confronta, infatti, a un procedimento in cui, grazie a un simbolo, l'uomo riesce ad appropriarsi di un contenuto inconscio senza portarlo alla coscienza' (*Stanze*, p. 173). Lacan is cited also for his description of the bar as the foundation of 'quella posizione primordiale del significante e del significato, come due ordini distinti e separati da una barriera resistente alla significazione' (ibid., p. 162) and for his explanation of the metaphor (ibid., p. 176). However, the most relevant passage is the one in which Agamben compares Lacan's understanding of the unconscious (ibid., p. 173) to Benveniste's attempt to rethink semiology, whose 'distinzione di una doppia significanza del linguaggio [...] in cui la nozione semiotica di segno (come unità positiva di significante e di significato) non è più valida' gestures towards 'la stessa zona del significato che si è qui cercato di configurare opponendo la nozione edipica del significare a quella sfingea' (ibid., p. 186).

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p. xvi. The Borromean knot is also, strikingly, one of the most famous images through which Lacan, in the years 1972-77 (Agamben wrote *Stanze* during the same period, and published it in 1977), describes the intertwining of what for him constitute the three registers of human experience: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. See: Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Dragan Milovanovic, ed. by, *Lacan: Topologically Speaking* (New York: Other Press, 2004).

<sup>220</sup> *Stanze*, p. xvi.

The enigma is therefore not a riddle to be decoded; indeed, Oedipus' folly is that he treats the enigma as if it were a riddle, an utterance as if it were a statement. [...] Rather, *the enigma is nothing other than the emergence of the pure being of language itself*, its negative foundation without content.<sup>221</sup>

Significantly, it is on this point that Agamben's uncanny comes closest to Lacan. Observing how '[i]l territorio dell'inconscio, nei suoi meccanismi come nelle sue strutture, coincide integralmente con quello del simbolico e dell'improprio', Agamben clarifies in a footnote that 'è a questa concezione ortodossa del simbolismo [Freud's Oedipal uncanny], e non all'interpretazione lacaniana del freudismo che si rivolge la nostra critica'.<sup>222</sup> Also for Lacan, in effect, the bar between the signifier and the signified is uncanny, since and to the extent to which it shows how the real is extimate to language:

Esercita essenzialmente una funzione di cesura, di separazione, di divisione. La barra nell'algoritmo lacaniano non articola ma disarticola, non unisce ma divide. Essa, infatti, mette in evidenza non tanto la produzione di senso quanto la resistenza al senso.<sup>223</sup>

Indeed, for the French psychoanalyst the Real at once propels and marks the limit of symbolisation. However, this does not mean that Lacan's Real corresponds to Agamben's uncanny. Uncanny is the relationship (extimacy) between the Real and the Symbolic, the fact that language seeks to understand and make sense of that which is both at its core and outside of it.

Thus, Agamben draws upon the French psychoanalyst to strengthen and specify an interpretation of the uncanny as a topological process and counter-turning relationship, as a form of relationality as such. Arguably, the image of the fold stands for, within his philosophy of language, Lacan's psychoanalytical concept of extimacy. Making the case for a new model of signification, Agamben states that:

Il nucleo originario del significare non è né nel significante né nel significato [...] ma nella piega della presenza su cui essi si fondano: il logos, che caratterizza l'uomo in quanto zoon logon echon, è questa piega che raccoglie e divide ogni cosa nella «commessura» della presenza. E l'umano è precisamente questa frattura della presenza, che apre un mondo e su cui si tiene il linguaggio. [...] Solo quando saremo giunti in prossimità di questa "articolazione invisibile", potremo dire di essere

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<sup>221</sup> Clemens, p. 9, italicised.

<sup>222</sup> *Stanze*, p. 173.

<sup>223</sup> Massimo Recalcati, *Il vuoto e il resto* (Milan: Cuem, 2001), p. 68.

entrati in una zona a partire dalla quale il passo – indietro – al di là della metafisica, che governa l'interpretazione del segno nel pensiero occidentale, diventa veramente possibile.<sup>224</sup>

Agamben's uncanny defines a topological process of sense making as folding, in which '[I]' algoritmo S/s deve perciò ridursi alla sola barriera [...] ma in questa barriera non dobbiamo vedere soltanto la traccia di una differenza, ma il gioco topologico delle commisure e delle articolazioni'.<sup>225</sup> Agamben's 'barriera' illuminates how the functioning of uncanny semiosis takes the form of Lacan's extimacy, of an outside that is also, already, an inside. Language is not (solely) difference but topological interplay: it signifies complicating or literally folding together plural dimensions of sense.

What semiotic model is, therefore, Agamben's uncanny? Briefly, it determines a shift from propositional to performative language, from language 'as a system of signs for something, e.g. for the object of thought' to a word that 'brings forth, is enactive'.<sup>226</sup> This view of language as manifold(ing) distinguishes Agamben from that which constitutes his final polemical target in *Stanze*, Derrida's conflation of signification – and, tellingly, of the *unheimliche* – with the trace, with an endless deferral of meaning. Although both deconstruction and Agamben uncover how the dual structure of the Saussurean sign epitomises 'l'illusione di una presenza piena e originaria' that circumscribes, precisely, 'l'illusione della metafisica',<sup>227</sup> on closer examination their distance becomes patent:

La solidarietà dell'interpretazione del significare come unità di un significante e di un significato con la storia della metafisica occidentale è esplicitamente affermata da un'intenzione critica il cui progetto si enuncia come la sostituzione di una scienza della scrittura (grammatologia) alla scienza dei segni (semiologia). [...] Il carattere specifico del progetto grammatologico si esprime perciò nell'affermazione secondo cui l'esperienza originaria è sempre già traccia e scrittura, il significato sempre già in posizione di significante. [...] Porre all'inizio una scrittura e una traccia, significa mettere l'accento su questa esperienza originale, ma non certo superarla. [...] La metafisica della scrittura e del significante non è che l'altra faccia della metafisica del significato e della voce, il venire in luce del suo fondamento negativo e non certo il suo superamento.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> *Stanze*, pp. 188-89.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> Kenneth Maly, *Heidegger's Possibility: Language, Emergence-Sayng, Being* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. xxii.

<sup>227</sup> *Stanze*, p. 186.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186-87.



The fact that Agamben, concluding his conceptualisation of the *unheimliche*, alludes to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967) is noteworthy, since, as stated, the French philosopher is among the most important theorists of the Freudian uncanny, which he considers as a quasi-synonym for the trace.<sup>229</sup>

However, Agamben fiercely criticises the latter, defining it as 'una pratica interpretativa che sospende e [... non da] mai accesso ad un evento compiuto di significato'.<sup>230</sup>

If Derrida correctly identifies a problem of signification, a frailty in the Saussurean sign, his attempts to solve it are ill-founded, since they merely seem to reverse the hierarchy of the signifier and the signified, without taking into account the bar that articulates their reciprocal enabling. In a way, adopting Agamben's perspective, Derrida's uncanny does not constitute a new, post-nihilist model of signification, but solely an unfamiliar reversal of the familiar semiotic process. For Agamben, deconstruction is nihilist in that it is based upon the unattainability of a stable sense, and, more radically, because it is still entirely committed to searching for an ultimate signified. For the endless deferral of meaning, Agamben substitutes the 'condition of suspension in potentiality'.<sup>231</sup> While in Derrida's account the uncanny is the impossibility of reaching a final closure in the chain of signification and an unceasingly openness to a future always to come, for the Italian philosopher *unheimliche* is the experience in which a proper meaning is no longer sought-after.<sup>232</sup> Agamben's uncanny is an interrogation which only in being posed and not in being answered answers itself. It is a modality of signification which does not pursue a final meaning but which comes to form the grounding of meaningfulness itself.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> 'The trace calls to be thought in terms of the non-signifying difference that is originally at play in all signification'. Simon Morgan Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 129.

<sup>230</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura rerum. Sul metodo* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008), pp. 44 and 79.

<sup>231</sup> Mills, p. 123.

<sup>232</sup> This also distinguishes Agamben's uncanny from Todorov's fantastic, and from the traditional conflation of the literary uncanny with the fantastic genre. For Todorov, as seen, a fantastic text 'must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described' (*The Fantastic*, p. 33). However, when Agamben defines the final verse of a poem as the 'sublime esitazione tra il senso e il suono' (*Idea della prosa*, p. 21), he is referring to an entirely different kind of hesitation. Whereas for Todorov hesitation occurs within language, as a matter of referentiality to be explained, and is consequently solvable, for Agamben it is instead a hesitation of language, i.e. that through which language comes forth and reveals itself as such. To a hesitation within representation, Agamben opposes a hesitation of representation itself.

<sup>233</sup> 'The deepest paradox of language resides not, for Agamben, in the mutual attraction and repulsion of the signifier and the signified (or sign and sign) across the space or spacing of their difference (or of différance); that is to say, not in the irreducible play of the terms in the structure that semiology writes as 'S/s,' but rather

In the end, Agamben's topological articulation sheds light upon why, in the case of the uncanny, the quest is a questioning and vice versa. To say that a quest takes the form of a questioning means, with Agamben, that it occurs as the experience of language as such, before and beyond any actualised signified. To say that the act of questioning forms a quest implies that its answerability somewhat paradoxically and unsettlingly coincides with its questionability: it cannot be answered because it does not aim for it, remaining suspended in the condition of a potentiality to signify. While this further illuminates the theoretical underpinnings of the title of this study, I will now investigate why and how this interrogative semiosis becomes a matter of poetics for Tabucchi.<sup>234</sup>

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in what is pointed to, what is presupposed, in that bar or barrier between 'S' and 's' itself. What does this diagonal line separating the signifier from the signified signify? What does it mean? Because that bar resists signification, the answer to this question is difficult to formulate, since it can pertain neither to the sphere of the signifier nor to that of the signified. The sphere to which one must have recourse in order to investigate the meaning of this bar is one that exceeds or precedes those that represent either side of the fracture inherent to the linguistic sign. How, then, can one conceive of this sphere? What might precede significance and the mechanics of linguistic meaning? What is presupposed by the logic of the sign, which has at its centre, but is unable to see, this abyssal void or bar? While Derrida might answer 'différance' (or one of its near-synonyms, 'trace,' 'reserve,' 'writing' [G, 93]), Agamben's answer is: the signifying event itself, 'the pure fact that one speaks, that language exists'. Kevin Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 33.

<sup>234</sup> In the first chapter of *L'uomo senza contenuto*, entitled 'La cosa più inquietante', Agamben describes 'la capacità di pro-durre, di portare una cosa dal non-essere all'essere come ciò che vi è di più inquietante' (p. 13). Meaningfully, this is precisely what distinguishes poetics itself, for, Agamben states, 'il carattere essenziale della *poiesis* non era [...] nel suo aspetto pratico, volontario, ma nel suo essere un modo della verità, intesa come disvelamento' (ibid., pp. 21-22). For Agamben, speaking of an author's poetics means, therefore, examining the mode in which his/her work unveils, is an experience of sense making: unlike praxis, that aims for the creation of an object, the term poetics designates, in fact, a production and coming-forth of sense. In a way, it is as if, to him, every poetics were inherently uncanny and, reciprocally, the uncanny semiosis might (properly) take place only in terms of a poetics.

To summarise:

- The principal formulations and developments of the Freudian *unheimliche* occur within the three main fields of psychoanalysis, philosophy and aesthetics (with a focus on literary criticism).
- This applies also to the Italian reception of the uncanny, as the latter is mostly discussed as a psychoanalytic, philosophical and aesthetic (literary) concept.
- Mapping Agamben's thinking of the uncanny against this twofold theoretical background uncovers the philosopher's proximity to Heidegger, Lacan and Orlando, as well as his distance from Freud and Derrida.
- For Agamben, in effect, every uncanny experience is also one of uncanniness. Feeling and being uncanny cannot be separated (topological uncanny).
- Accordingly, Agamben's uncanny defines a modality of signification that, collapsing Saussurean semiosis, reveals: the fact that men exist as creators of sense (ontological, post-metaphysical uncanny); how this has been covered up by the familiar, nihilistic use of the linguistic sign (linguistic uncanny); and that modernity, with its traumatic experiences of alienation and estrangement, coupled by an incessant need for sense, constitutes a unique possibility to experience the uncanny (temporal uncanny).

## Chapter 2

### 2.1 Towards Tabucchi's Uncanny

Both the introduction and chapter 1 proposed a specific interpretation of the uncanny that, rooted in Agamben's philosophy of language, constitutes a unique theoretical basis for analysing Tabucchi's opus and poetics: accordingly, in this study the uncanny is defined as a question of sense, a potentiality of signification that always maintains itself as such. By the same token, the present chapter sets to interrogate Tabucchi's theoretical reflection on the uncanny as 'Inquietudine', comparing and contrasting it with Freud's and Agamben's understandings of the *unheimliche*. The main findings of the chapter – namely my conceptualisation of Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny as a disquieting and interrogative process of semiosis – will guide and lead up to the textual readings of Tabucchi's works in chapter 3 through 5.

The discussion so far, in relation to the *unheimliche* as well as, formerly, with regard to the critical reception and historical positioning of the Italian writer, clearly indicates that, in Tabucchi, the uncanny originates at the intersection of manifold areas of signification. Not only does the uncanny constitute a key notion in the process of rearticulating the dialectic between the modern and the postmodern, but it also provides useful conceptual tools to examine and make sense of the tension between the modality in which a certain postmodernism<sup>235</sup> – mostly inspired by Derrida's idea of the trace – has read this Freudian category and other ways in which it can be understood (once postmodernism itself has been resemanticised).

The uncanny solicits a rethinking of the relationship between modernity and postmodernism: it is an inherently modern concept in that it inhabits the territory of the need for signification. The fact that 'discontinuity and the consciousness of discontinuity have effectively entered into modernity'<sup>236</sup> is what causes, in reaction, the modern, obsessive demand for established values. Yet the *unheimliche* adopts a postmodern

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<sup>235</sup> 'Si potrebbe avanzare l'ipotesi che mentre negli Stati Uniti il postmodernismo letterario nasce come "l'anything goes" [...] il postmoderno italiano nasce come "rifiuto della letteratura" e quindi come crisi della sua funzione sociale. [...] A partire da questo momento la letteratura è diventata un gioco "post-realistico", consapevole dell'inutilità e dell'autoreferenzialità della scrittura letteraria' (Jansen, p. 239).

<sup>236</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959-May 1961*, trans. by John Moore (London: Verso, 1995) p. 180.

approach that discards any monolithic, nostalgic or utopic narrative of sense – which is what Agamben negatively labelled as metaphysical. Significantly, Tabucchi was himself very aware of this reciprocity between the uncanny and the modern-postmodern interplay. Indeed, the way in which he defines postmodernism is key to understanding his view of the uncanny and, mutually, through the category of the uncanny, the author's historical positioning becomes entirely intelligible. Explicitly embracing McHale's differentiation between the modern epistemological paradigm and the postmodern ontological one,<sup>237</sup> Tabucchi recognises the centrality of the latter to his writings; this is strictly connected to the fact that, for him, literature, as an expression of the uncanny, has to provide disquieting questions rather than answers:

Uno scrittore postmoderno non si domanda mai come può interpretare il mondo del quale fa parte, bensì si chiede in che tipo di mondo vive e cosa egli faccia in quel mondo. Da questo punto di vista probabilmente la mia opera contribuisce ad offrire un'idea del mondo estremamente problematica, a disegnare un'immagine della nostra vita con un punto di domanda, per cui forse si può considerare in effetti postmoderna.<sup>238</sup>

In the passage to the ontological dominant of postmodernism, Tabucchi retrieves the importance of what he calls 'un desiderio metafisico', which leads him to question reality, rejecting a literature that 'pretende di interpretare il mondo' to which he opposes 'le opere che si interrogano sul senso che questo ha'.<sup>239</sup> As indicated in the introduction, it could be argued that, in relation to the crisis bound up with the modern,<sup>240</sup> the writer's peculiar use of postmodernism marks his attempt to reflect and respond to it.

On the other hand, this interaction between the urgency of sense and the rejection of any univocal, predetermined meaning also triggers – as discussed in chapter 1 – the comparison between Derrida and Agamben, which is to say between a reading of the uncanny that depends on a traditional definition of postmodernism and a new interpretation of the *unheimliche* that implies a reformulation of the postmodern. With deconstruction,

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<sup>237</sup> For the scholar, postmodern fiction moves from 'problems of knowing to problems of modes of being'. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 10.

<sup>238</sup> Gumpert, p. 90.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>240</sup> The modern crisis originates, from this point of view, from the simultaneous surfacing of what, with Agamben, I have identified as the impossibility of a stable, metaphysical *modus significandi* (nihilism) and the need for a new experience of signification. In this regard, the (postmodern) uncanny occurs as a potential symbolisation of the trauma that begins with(in) modernity and that postmodernity deepens, exposes and sustains.

the necessity to free language from pre-existing metaphysical grids turns into a negative, differential play of signifiers and an endless deferral of meaning. Deconstruction keeps on looking for a final sense that, however, cannot be reached, as it is ceaselessly delayed. On the contrary, as I have shown, Agamben suggests an understanding of the taking place of language and of the uncanny in terms of topological fulfilment. Unlike deconstruction, he does not aim for an answer to fill the void inherent in any interrogation, but posits the capacity to sustain and engage with this sort of interrogative vacuum. The *unheimliche* neither conveys a unique signified nor dissolves into undecidability at the level of the signifier. Rather, it keeps asking, occurring as a process of sense making, a modality to investigate the conditions of possibility and the limits of signification itself. This is precisely the assumption that lies at the core of Tabucchi's characterisation of the uncanny and of his poetics qua negotiation of meaning. While recognising his own proximity to the postmodern problematisation of ontology, the writer discards that postmodernism that is based on the so-called theory of 'anything goes', which would find in deconstruction a possible basis if not a legitimisation.<sup>241</sup> The uncanny is a process of interrogation, interrupting reassuring readings and opening up to ambiguity, which calls for the reader's participation. Uncanny literature asks questions, its only answer being, in a sense, to offer the reader the possibility of adopting an interrogative approach. As Tabucchi claims, 'ho preferito non fornire alla mia opera un eccessivo interesse per le risposte, ho scelto piuttosto una letteratura che decidesse di porsi delle domande da sola'.<sup>242</sup>

To summarise:

- Modernity is uncanny because it is characterised by men's traumatic experience of disorientation and alienation, which is, nonetheless, reciprocated by a search for sense.
- Tabucchi's postmodernism is uncanny because, in a historical and cultural context of radicalised and occasionally even avowed disorientation (postmodernity) it tries to cope with the trauma of modernity, at the same time integrating the modern need for signification.

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<sup>241</sup> As D'Agostini argues, this is 'postmodernismo nella sua versione peggiore, quella che non è mai stata antirealismo, ma piuttosto *trivialismo metodologico*, ossia pratica sistematica dell'*anything goes* [...] se si ritiene (seguendo disciplinatamente Derrida) che quel che conta è la lettera e non lo spirito. Che in pratica vuol dire: quel che conta è l'apparenza, dunque mentite pure, purché non vi scoprano'. Franca D'Agostini, *Realismo? Una questione non controversa* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2013), p. 67. Significantly, Tabucchi accepts his definition as postmodern only on the condition that this term no longer define 'una certa corrente di letteratura light, caratterizzata dal manierismo o da una ricercata vacuità' (Gumpert, p. 89).

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

### 2.1.1 Uncanny Dwellings: the Labyrinth and the Mandala

Similarly to Agamben, Tabucchi understands the uncanny as a spatial relationship, a topological articulation of sense. Although his reflection on the concept originates from and tries to address a problematic experience of time, the temporal uneasiness Tabucchi perceives throughout modernity and postmodernity calls for a proper explanation and potential resolution in spatial terms. He compares temporal disquiet to the condition of homelessness, questioning how it might be possible to dwell within this state of disjointed time: ‘[q]uella malattia, cioè un rapporto sfasato con il Tempo quale dimensione in cui non riusciamo più ad abitare, un rapporto guasto con la storia [...], quella malattia mi pare appartenere in pieno al Novecento’.<sup>243</sup> However, the uncanny uncovers and sustains disjointedness, the not-being-at-home as the authentic essence of human being, since not-being-at-home designates the need for significance and the incessant creation of structures of meaning through which man makes sense of his being in the world. Modernity inaugurates and postmodernity deepens the gap separating individuals’ existence from a (presupposed, unreachable and ineffable) foundation of meaning, mirrored in the hiatus – the bar – that opens up between the signifier and the signified. In what ways, then, Tabucchi asks, could man recover a sense of belonging, of being at home in the time he inhabits? How can one live as an agent of signification when the fallacy – metaphysical and linguistic – behind the Saussurean sign is exposed? The answer lies in what Tabucchi identifies as the task of literature: ‘porre domande, inquietare, essere co-scienza critica’.<sup>244</sup> For, being uncanny means that human beings dwell ‘not at home’ in two ways: they produce sense solely when pre-existing familiar meaning withdraws; and they produce sense in the form of an interrogation, which does not seek closure at the level of the signified, but demands to be recognised as a different experience of semiotisation. Being able to inhabit an ontological homelessness metaphorically alludes to humanity’s possibility and capacity to articulate sense, to create a meaningful, yet not totalising (hence nihilistic) practice of signification.

Tabucchi’s view of the *unheimliche* as disclosing an unsaturated potentiality of sense informs his idiosyncratic use of multiple spatial structures and paradigms of signification, such as the labyrinth and mandala, which function as symbolic dwellings for man’s

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<sup>243</sup> *Di tutto*, p. 20.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

ontological homelessness. Not only are these semiotic models thematised within his stories, but the writer even adopts them to design the overall configuration of the narratives in which they appear, thus establishing a close correspondence between content and form. The labyrinth qua semiotic paradigm parallels and patterns the labyrinthine structure of the real. In his *Postille* to the novel *Il nome della rosa*, Eco distinguishes between the classical labyrinth, which ‘non consente a nessuno di perdersi’, the one he names ‘manieristico’, which develops along progressive bifurcations and is based upon a ‘trial-and-error process’, and, finally, the rhizomatic one, which ‘non ha centro, non ha periferia, non ha uscita, perché è potenzialmente infinito’, and which, as in Tabucchi’s opus, is linked to a view of the real as ‘strutturabile, ma mai definitivamente strutturato’.<sup>245</sup> Accordingly, Tabucchi writes:

Non conosco l’uscita precisa dal labirinto. Come tutti, procedo tentoni, quasi camminassi al buio. Sono cosciente del fatto che ci sono diverse direzioni possibili e preferisco lasciarle tutte plausibilmente aperte. La letteratura, forse, non è altro che questo, il tentativo di condurre a termine un discorso in cui finiamo per perderci. [...] Qualsiasi scelta significa addentrarsi in una strada unica e davanti a una tale costrizione proviamo la tentazione di procedere a zig-zag, saltando da una via all’altra, e ciò asseconda o forse disegna e crea, il labirinto. In questo si cela, dunque, sia il desiderio di soluzione di un enigma che il pericolo di rimanere catturato, come in una tela.<sup>246</sup>

Tabucchi identifies the possibility of approaching the labyrinth, the uncanny,<sup>247</sup> in three different ways. Firstly, one might fall prisoner to the desire to solve the enigma, thus making the same mistake Agamben attributes to Oedipus, namely that of trying to decipher through a familiar, metaphysical *modus significandi* that which, instead, disturbs and collapses it (the uncanny renders the unfamiliar familiar). Or, in the second and antithetical case, one might get caught up in the net of endless signifiers, which is the effect of deconstruction (where the uncanny serves to render the familiar unfamiliar). Finally, one might follow a third, oblique path, designing and creating the labyrinth, which is what Tabucchi’s uncanny poetics performs (the uncanny simultaneously renders the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar unfamiliar). This option implies that, for literature, to be uncanny means exploring the conditions of possibility as well as the limits of sense and of sense making: Tabucchi does not solve the enigma, and nor does he exit the labyrinth. Rather, he inhabits them both. But only as places where one is at home by being not-at-home.

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<sup>245</sup> Umberto Eco, *Postille a Il nome della rosa* (Milan: Bompiani, 1985), pp. 524-25. I

<sup>246</sup> Gumpert, p. 97.

<sup>247</sup> The motif of the labyrinth metaphorically stands for the uncanny since they are both characterised by an experience of disorientation and the subsequent need to find one’s bearings within an unfamiliar context.



A fitting representation of this kind of labyrinth is offered in ‘Sogno di Dedalo, architetto e aviatore’.<sup>248</sup> The story recounts Daedalus’ dream, in which, after having got lost in the maze he himself designed and having met, at its centre, the Minotaur sadly longing to escape and to contemplate the moon, Daedalus succeeds in finding the way out by solving the enigma of the two guardians – of which one always tells the truth, while the other provides only lies: ‘In questa stanza ci sono due porte [...] e a guardia di ciascuna porta ci sono due guardiani. Una porta conduce alla libertà e una porta conduce alla morte. Uno dei guardiani dice solo la verità, e l’altro dice solo la menzogna’.<sup>249</sup> However, this is not an ‘Oedipal’ solution: Daedalus cannot interpret the guardians’ words as if they were hiding a proper meaning, nor can he remain paradoxically paralysed by endlessly oscillating between the two sentinels’ responses. Like the protagonist of Pessoa’s drama *O Marinheiro*, whence the topos of the two guardians is derived, Tabucchi’s Daedalus ‘per arrivare alla verità [...] deve riuscire a percorrere in senso inverso il processo attraverso il quale gli arriva la risposta’,<sup>250</sup> namely he has to make the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar unfamiliar, reversing the answer he receives.<sup>251</sup> In effect, not only does the guardians’ enigma defy classical logic, according to which the negation of a negation is an affirmation: on the contrary, what their words open is a place of topological difference between affirmation and negation. But also, solving their enigma implies moving from the content-level (what they actually say) to the semiotic one (how they say it), thus recognising how a different modality of saying is at work.

But the story is uncannily labyrinthine also in another dual sense: because it is a sort of vicarious dream, as the heterodiegetic narration hypothesises another person’s dream (‘sogno di sogno’), which, however, unlike the other stories in the book, does not end on the protagonist’s awakening – as to signify that the oneiric labyrinth is not and should not be escaped; and since Dedalus’ struggles to find a way out of his maze, involving all his false steps, are linguistically mirrored and embodied in the text. In particular, if, on the diegetic level, Daedalus ‘si mise a cantare una nenia antica’ and ‘[I]e arcate del lungo

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<sup>248</sup> The text is included in *Sogni di sogni* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1992), a work in which Tabucchi hypothesises the dreams made by twenty artists and writers as different as, among the others, Pessoa and Freud.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>250</sup> ‘Una sciarada’, in Fernando Pessoa, *Il Marinaio. Dramma statico in un quadro*, trans. by Antonio Tabucchi (Turin: Einaudi, 1988), pp. 51-59 (p. 58).

<sup>251</sup> Tabucchi discusses the same paradox of the two guardians in *La gastrite di Platone*, where he explicitly acknowledges how literature offers the possibility to ‘[l]eggere la realtà «al rovescio» [...] con una logica che non ubbidisce a una sequenza conformista della realtà, e che ha uno statuto agnitivo’, inasmuch as ‘per arrivare alla verità bisogna sempre stravolgere l’opinione di un’opinione’ (pp. 24-28).

corridoio gli restituivano la sua voce ripetuta dieci volte’, the same claustrophobic echoing is achieved by Tabucchi’s use of repetitions: ‘Infilò un corridoio [...] [n]e infilò un altro [...] all’ottavo tentativo infilò un corridoio lunghissimo’; ‘Solo io posso sapere come uscire di qui, si disse Dedalo, e non lo ricordo. [...] Solo io posso sapere come uscire di qui, si disse Dedalo, e non lo ricordo’.<sup>252</sup> Indeed, it is precisely by producing a parallelism between story (the labyrinth as diegetic motif) and discourse (the labyrinth as textual and linguistic form) that Tabucchi’s uncanny creates and inhabits the labyrinth.

Likewise, the mandala might be regarded as another possible configuration of the uncanny as an encounter with and discourse of the real (understood as a semiotic limit and void), in that it constitutes, albeit paradoxically, ‘un simbolo della totalità’,<sup>253</sup> though a non-saturated form of totality, through which ‘invece di riempire il vuoto, la scrittura di Tabucchi apre in un certo senso dei nuovi spazi vuoti’.<sup>254</sup> This is precisely what his posthumous novel *Per Isabel* performs,<sup>255</sup> wherein the mandala acquires a threefold value. The first is ontological, in that it marks a possible representation of and a potential way to make sense of human essence, given that, as Tabucchi writes, ‘l’uomo che si è smarrito necessita di simbolizzare l’universo con una forma d’arte integrativa’.<sup>256</sup> The second is epistemological, since it defines how the protagonist Tadeus, trying to discover what has truly happened to his missing friend Isabel, patterns his quest, his ‘piccola inchiesta’<sup>257</sup>:

Sto lavorando con polverine colorate [...] un circolo giallo, un circolo azzurro, come in una pratica tibetana, e intanto il cerchio si stringe verso il centro, e io sto cercando di arrivare al centro [...] per arrivare alla conoscenza [...]. Diciamo che il mio è una specie di mandala, a suo modo, ma i cerchi si stanno stringendo, li ho disegnati, o meglio, li ho percorsi uno per uno, è una strana figura quella che viene fuori, sa, ma io sto stringendo verso il centro.<sup>258</sup>

And, finally, it has a literary dimension that is clearly perceivable in the way in which the novel is composed, being divided into nine chapters that correspond to the mandala circles, demanding a somewhat paratactic rather than consequential reading. The different

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<sup>252</sup> *Sogni di sogni*, p. 16.

<sup>253</sup> *I volatili del Beato Angelico* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1987), p. 45.

<sup>254</sup> Schwarz Lausten, p. 69.

<sup>255</sup> Arguably, the reader should consider the following passage from the epistolary novel *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001) as an anticipated reflection on the last novel: ‘mentre i cerchi si facevano sempre più stretti, proprio come nel mandala, lui riusciva ad arrivare al centro, che poi era il significato della sua vita’ (p. 145). A centre that is, however, positively void.

<sup>256</sup> *Per Isabel*, pp. 105-06.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65-107.

chapters, in fact, do not develop along the axis of causality, instead designating a chain of signifiers that invites the reader to continue the investigation. In a way, the mandala embodies the dual drives inherent in the uncanny: on the one hand, proceeding through the different circles involves a movement that oscillates between approach and removal, a detour constantly facing its own limits and failures; on the other hand, instead, leading to a centre, it describes an itinerary to potential meaning creation. This pattern also generates a parallelism between the role and itinerary of the reader and that of the protagonist, given that structuring the novel as a mandala is consistent with its belonging to the genre of the quest. Interestingly, Agamben observes, what distinguishes, in terms of semiosis, a quest from an adventure is the fact that, in the former, experience takes the form of an aporia, since it does not develop along a linear route, whereas, in the latter, it is possible to outline the experience of a direct journey towards meaning that takes place in the exotic and in the extraordinary:

Mentre l'esperienza scientifica è, infatti, la costruzione di una via certa [...] alla conoscenza, la quête è, invece, il riconoscimento che l'assenza di via (l'aporia) è l'unica esperienza possibile per l'uomo. Ma, per lo stesso motivo, la quête è, anche, il contrario dell'avventura [...]. Poiché l'avventura presuppone che vi sia una via all'esperienza e che questa via passi per lo straordinario e per l'esotico (contrapposto al familiare e al comune); mentre, nell'universo della quête, l'esotico e lo straordinario sono soltanto la cifra dell'aporia essenziale di ogni esperienza.<sup>259</sup>

This applies to Tabucchi's writing, since 'if adventure is taken to mean venturing forth to face events, indeed, eliciting events so as to match oneself against them, this is not at all what Tabucchi's characters experience'.<sup>260</sup> This is true also of the reader, who gets caught up in a tentative process of sense-building independent of any actual meaning. In this way there is, therefore, a precise consonance between the topological rationale of the quest and the logic of defamiliarisation that is essential to the *unheimliche*.

Ultimately, Bodei observes, Tabucchi's main concern does not relate to how it is possible to know the world but, rather, to how it is possible to make sense of it and of our living in it:

Tabucchi mostra nel concreto quel che ogni opera d'arte riuscita dovrebbe fare: aprire un mondo, stabilendo connessioni e ramificazioni tra vari comparti di senso, prima separati e distanti, e

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<sup>259</sup> *Infanzia*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>260</sup> Luigi Surdich, 'The Constant Search for Oneself', in 'Antonio Tabucchi. A Collection of Essays', ed. by Bruno Ferraro and Nicole Prunster, *Spunti e ricerche*, XII (1996), 158- 72 (159).

generando scintille e illuminazioni che si riverberano sull'esperienza. [...] L'opera letteraria ci mette infatti in rapporto con tutto ciò che eccede la nostra immediata capacità di comprensione, con la densità delle esperienze più estranee e sconosciute. Elabora l'inquietudine senza sopprimerla.<sup>261</sup>

What, therefore, is this uncanny which, paraphrasing Bodei, literature enlarges and makes intelligible? And in what ways does it affect the writer's literary discourse? In this chapter, I will suggest a possible answer to the first question, scrutinising Tabucchi's reflection on the uncanny, identifying to what extent it overlaps with Agamben's interpretation and what specific elements it adds. According to the Italian philosopher, the uncanny encompasses three levels: linguistic, ontological and temporal. I will argue that, in his discussion of the concept, Tabucchi incorporates all of these. However, the writer inserts a further dimension that identifies the uncanny in terms of poetics. For literature to be uncanny, in fact, means being disquieting and interrogative. And, specifically, the poetics of the uncanny unfolds as an interrogation aiming at complicating literary signification, producing a topological articulation of the two moments and movements already present in Agamben's account: feeling uncanny and being uncanny.

Addressing the second question, I will examine how the *unheimliche* functions within the writer's literary discourse, focusing on three narrative approaches through which Tabucchi arranges the topological dynamics of the uncanny into generative conversation. While in Tabucchi's fictions these strategies overlap and intermingle, I shall keep them separate in order to accentuate their specificity. I will discuss the logic of play (chapter 3), the reversal (chapter 4) and, finally, the idea of writing as testimony (chapter 5).

## 2.2 Tabucchi and the Uncanny: a Literary Approach

Tabucchi articulates his theoretical reflection on the uncanny and the (Freudian) *unheimliche* in two main texts. The first is a speech given at the University of Siena in 1997, entitled 'Dal desassossego di Fernando Pessoa fino all'assurdo beckettiano', now contained in the anthology *Parole per Antonio Tabucchi*. The second is the essay

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<sup>261</sup> 'Giochi proibiti', pp. 121-22.

‘Controtempo’, which is included in the posthumous collection *Di tutto resta un poco* and was often used as a working draft for other articles and talks.<sup>262</sup>

However close they may be, Tabucchi’s uncanny is not (solely) Freud’s *unheimliche*. Exemplarily, as already stated, the writer adopts the term ‘Inquietudine’, rather than the properly Freudian ‘perturbante’. Choosing a substantive instead of the adjective immediately suggests that the writer intends to engage with and conceptualise the uncanny on an ontological plane: Tabucchi’s ‘Inquietudine’ is a condition, before and beyond being an affective property. Likewise, by capitalising the term, Tabucchi seeks to emphasise how, although it ‘percorre il Novecento con varie sfumature’, and despite adopting different phenomenological manifestations, this ‘Inquietudine’ constitutes the common ground to them all, for it is exactly the (un)grounding (essence) of human beings.

Tabucchi approaches the uncanny from a literary perspective and situates it within a constellation of literary categories and experiences which, springing from Pessoa’s *desassossego* (i.e. disquiet), composes what he calls a unique ‘blocco semiologico’.<sup>263</sup> In particular, the writer finds in the nocturne<sup>264</sup> and the absurd two archetypal (modern) demonstrations of this ‘Inquietudine’, which nonetheless remains irreducible to them. While the nocturne, which also incorporates the fantastic, lacks a proper ontological

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<sup>262</sup> As Dolfi indicates: ‘Si tratta di un testo che ha subito numerosi rifacimenti [...] spesso utilizzato con significative varianti come traccia per articoli (*Novecento. Il filo dell’inquietudine*, in ‘Il Corriere della Sera’, 2 gennaio 1998), incontri e conferenze (basti ricordare quella alla Normale di Pisa del 23 maggio 2008: *Il filo dell’Inquietudine. Un percorso nella letteratura del Novecento dal Desassossego di Pessoa, al ‘rimorso’ di Gadda, alla ‘rabbia’ di Pasolini*; e gli interventi per un viaggio in Israele, evocati da Tabucchi in *Osservando il Novecento. L’inquietudine di Gadda e il ‘desassossego’ di Pessoa [...]*, in ‘Micromega’, 1, 1999, pp. 249-254)’ (*Di tutto*, pp. 279-80). Despite the fact that the two texts partially overlap, I have preferred to keep them separate, in that they focus on different, yet equally important, aspects of the uncanny.

<sup>263</sup> ‘Dal desassossego’, p. 67.

<sup>264</sup> Following Tabucchi, I adopt the category of nocturne rather than that of the fantastic, for the latter is traditionally used to define a genre or a literary mode – namely the presence of ‘structural features underlying various works in different periods of time’ (Jackson, p. 7). With the term nocturne, at least in light of Tabucchi’s use of this category, similarly to the uncanny, the focus shifts from the analysis of thematic and structural elements to that of their possible ontological value. In effect, Tabucchi openly criticises the most traditional definition of the fantastic, such as Todorov’s one. Doing so, he proposes a definition of the fantastic as a possible configuration of a research that is, however, uncanny. In particular, Tabucchi affirms that fantastic is ‘il *phántasma* (nel senso etimologico del greco antico), l’apparizione extra-naturale di una vita che non si è mai coagulata [...] nel reale ed è rimasta nella dimensione del possibile [...] che] indaga *oltre* il reale, nel mistero delle cose, come alla ricerca della loro essenza [...] e ciò crea un inedito *Unheimlich*, un iper-Perturbante’ (*Di tutto*, pp. 106-07).

problematization, hence comparing solely to an uncanny feeling – and not to the state of being uncanny –, absurdist literature seems to remain caught within a negative semiosis, a structural impossibility of meaning, which the post-nihilistic approach of the *unheimliche* refuses and negates.

### 2.2.1 Situating the Uncanny: Between Nocturnal Feeling and Ontological Absurdity

The nocturne is mentioned twice in the text ‘Dal desassossego’. Firstly, Tabucchi refers to Hoffmann’s *Nachtstücke* while discussing the Freudian uncanny, observing how ‘Freud costruisce fra l’altro la sua teoria del cosiddetto perturbante, dell’*Unheimliche*, intorno a un testo letterario che è un racconto di Hoffmann [... che] appartiene ai *Notturmi*’.<sup>265</sup> This alludes to the writer’s awareness that the nocturne has been the most familiar literary form embraced by the poetics of the uncanny. It is, in fact, a category Tabucchi also adopts to characterise one of his novels, *Notturmo indiano*,<sup>266</sup> and that applies to all those motifs and structures that belong to the catalogue of the fantastic used throughout his work. However, as Brizio-Skov points out in her analysis of *Requiem*, the writer’s poetics gestures beyond the (nocturnal) fantastic and towards the postmodern, for while the former presupposes a stable notion of reality and is bound up with epistemological doubts, the latter triggers ontological questions.<sup>267</sup> Provided that there are fantastic elements in Tabucchi’s texts, they function as ‘una sorta di sfondo, di ambientazione che pone [... il lettore] in uno stato di maggiore sensibilità (leggi: tendenza all’angoscia)’.<sup>268</sup> Nocturnal themes serve to

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<sup>265</sup> ‘Dal desassossego’, pp. 67-68. Freud’s analysis of Hoffmann’s short story *The Sandman*, included in his 1919 essay, at once legitimates and inaugurates a critical exploration of the mode in which the *unheimliche* and the fantastic intertwine. It is in the fantastic, in fact, that Freud finds the representation of the entire repertoire of themes proper of the uncanny. As a consequence, literary scholars, on the one hand, and thinkers of the uncanny, on the other, have often investigated the relationship between the two concepts, eventually accepting the idea of the fantastic as the most typical fictionalised transposition of the Freudian uncanny. See: Florea Marius-Virgil, ‘The Fantastic or the Uncanny Fantasy’, in *Petroleum - Gas University of Ploiesti Bulletin*, Philology Series, 62.1 (June 01, 2010), 107-14; *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, ed. by David Sandner (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004); George Aichele, ‘Postmodern Fantasy, Ideology, and the Uncanny’, *Paraxadora: Studies in World Literary Genres*, 3.4 (1997), 498-514; Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>266</sup> *Notturmo indiano* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1984).

<sup>267</sup> Brizio-Skov, p. 126.

<sup>268</sup> Andrea Bellavita, *Schermi perturbanti. Per un’applicazione del concetto di Unheimliche all’enunciazione filmica* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2005), p. 251.

emphasise the taking place of the uncanny as a dynamic process of signification, of which they are only one possible and superficial configuration.

This becomes clear with the second reference Tabucchi makes to the concept, when the accent shifts from the nocturne in literature to the nocturnal side of literature as such. Quoting Magrelli's commentary on a night scene included in Wystan H. Auden's poem *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), Tabucchi asks 'se questa notte abbia un'azione straniante e se questa notte sia la semplice notte del giorno solare o sia piuttosto [...] una metaforica tenebra che avvolge l'uomo di questa età dell'ansia'.<sup>269</sup> However, he provides no answer, focusing on the estranging presence of the night rather than on its function, on its affective property instead of its ontology. Here, Tabucchi reaches the threshold of a possible nocturnal ontology. But he stops. And moves his arguments in the direction of Freud's *unheimliche*. This is revealing of the fact that the nocturnal forms an essential but partial dimension of the poetics of the uncanny, occurring as one of the possible discursive strategies that this poetics orchestrates. If, Dolfi affirms, with the Italian writer 'il notturno [...] da funzione passiva [...] si fa attivo, può diventare una scelta',<sup>270</sup> it is a choice Tabucchi makes alongside others, or rather, it explains only half of his poetics. For, the uncanny comprises two movements: the first is oriented towards the practice of de-realisation and demystification of reality – the world seems to lose its significance – and exposes all its fractures; the second, on the other hand, tries to make sense of and sustain these gaps without trying to fill them. The nocturnal category, accentuating the estranging element of the uncanny experience, falls short of investigating the uncanniness that is experienced. Nocturnal literature addresses the moment when man no longer feels at home, as his network of familiar meanings 'loses its articulation and everything slips into an undifferentiated mass'.<sup>271</sup> But, with the *unheimliche*, this kind of epistemological loss deepens into and reveals human beings' ontological homelessness. For the nocturne to move from being an epistemological crisis to being an ontological condition – that is, the investigation and representation thereof – it requires 'una nuova presa di coscienza [...] dietro le tracce di un notturno allegorico [...] riaccendere il lume dell'allegoria della luce'.<sup>272</sup> The nocturne can enter Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny solely to the extent to

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<sup>269</sup> 'Dal desassosseggo', p. 71. Auden's poem *The Age of Anxiety* (New York: Random House, 1997) is set in a New York bar during the Second World War, where four strangers (three men and a woman) meet and drink together, while reflecting on the purposelessness of their lives and of the human condition.

<sup>270</sup> Anna Dolfi, 'Premessa', in *I 'notturni'*, pp. 11-21 (p. 16).

<sup>271</sup> Withy, p. 56. As Poggi observes, the nocturne expresses 'epistemological uncertainty' (414).

<sup>272</sup> Enza Biagini, 'Riflessioni a margine del notturno', in *I 'notturni'*, pp. 383-403 (pp. 401-02).

which it is incorporated into a structure of awakening, though not an awakening from but rather inside and to the nocturnal.<sup>273</sup>

The necessity to combine a denaturalisation and re-articulation of sense also arises in relation to the other literary experience included within Tabucchi's constellation of the uncanny: the absurd. The latter in fact constitutes an exemplary,<sup>274</sup> albeit partial, configuration of that sense of unfamiliarity that lies at the core of Pessoa's *desassossego* and of Tabucchi's thinking of the *unheimliche*.<sup>275</sup> Nevertheless, it is marked by an impossibility of meaning, lacking therefore that moment of decidability, which, on the contrary, characterises the uncanny. Decidability means, in effect, never stop asking interrogatives, never stop creating sense.

Si tratta di un sentimento abbastanza nuovo, tipico del nostro secolo, perché mai prima, a mio avviso, si era manifestato nella storia della letteratura. L'assurdo e l'incomprensibile, l'indicibile, è ciò che passa davanti ai nostri occhi, che si svolge davanti ai nostri occhi e che *possiede una logica formale, però è carente di logica sostanziale, vale a dire è incapace di dare una risposta alle domande che noi ci poniamo*.<sup>276</sup>

With the expression *logica sostanziale* the author designates a peculiar functioning of his literary discourse, which combines a metaphysical need for significance together with the choice of the uncanny as a potential way to complicate and, at the same time, to reach a proposal of meaning. The absurd remains within a logic that is merely formal and based on the principle of non-contradiction, therefore blocking men's interrogatives in a lack of answers. On the contrary, the *unheimliche* entails 'una forma di conoscenza diversa da

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<sup>273</sup> This will be developed in chapter 4.

<sup>274</sup> 'Camus formula proprio in termini narrativi quel concetto di estraneità perturbante che dall'inquietudine all'ansia, al male di vivere, all'inadeguatezza della vita oltrepassa ormai i confini esistenziali per sfiorare il metafisico' ('Dal desassossego', p. 73).

<sup>275</sup> In her study of Heidegger's *unheimliche*, Withy recognises a similar structure within absurdist and uncanny experience, since the absurd feeling also arises when we experience 'a self-contradiction internal to the mind, which desires to know the world as it is in itself but must employ means incommensurate to that end (namely, humanizing thinking)' and is therefore revealing of human beings' absurdity (p. 38). However, this does not confute the idea of an ontological distance between the two.

<sup>276</sup> Tabucchi, 'Il mio tram attraverso il Novecento', in *Parole per Antonio Tabucchi*, pp. 51-64 (p. 55). Tabucchi's assumption is very close to the most credited definitions of the absurd, for which the latter conceives of 'the human world as possessing no inherent truth, value or meaning' and where man undertakes a 'fruitless search for purpose and significance'. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, ed. by M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, eleventh edition (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2014), p. 1.



quella pragmatica e per questo disturbante’, founded precisely upon ‘il diritto ad indagare con la scrittura letteraria il non conosciuto, il non dato [...] secondo una logica sostanziale e non solo formale’.<sup>277</sup> This potentiality of meaning, which distinguishes the uncanny from the absurd, follows from their different ontological views: the absurd postulates an ontological lack of sense,<sup>278</sup> which in turn renders every attempt at signification arbitrary and nonsensical; the uncanny,<sup>279</sup> however, specifically in Agamben’s account, entails an ontology established upon potentiality, which eschews univocal meaning and embraces the capacity to think the process of sense making in the face of the modern vacuum – what Tabucchi defines as ‘una realtà composta e complessa e [...] piena di buchi’.<sup>280</sup> The absurd sees the void – semantic, epistemological and ontological – negatively as a lack and limit; the uncanny, on the other hand, sees it positively, as the clearing and uncovering of a different possibility for the production of sense.

### 2.2.2 Tabucchi and Freud’s Uncanny

The titles of Tabucchi’s main reflections on the uncanny (‘Dal desassossego di Fernando Pessoa fino all’assurdo beckettiano’ and ‘Controtempo’) are revealing of his stance on the concept, inasmuch as both the focus on a certain literary period – the twentieth century – implicated by the reference to Pessoa and Beckett, and the idea of a counter-turning caesura and disjointedness designated by the term ‘controtempo’ allude to the central place occupied by the temporal dimension. And this is so not only because the latter reveals the estrangement, the hiatus that opens between the subject and the real, but also in that it situates this traumatic fracture within the perimeter of modernity. For Tabucchi, the uncanny is a dimension inherent to modernity that finds in literature a peculiar seismographer: if modernity is uncanny insofar as it is traumatic, ‘questo trauma può farsi

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<sup>277</sup> Elisabetta Bacchereti, ‘Tabucchi almost noir’, in *I ‘notturmi’*, pp. 65-86 (p. 71). A logic or, rather, a pre-logic, is precisely the way in which Tabucchi defines the functioning of literature in his ‘Elogio della letteratura’ (*Di tutto*, p. 16).

<sup>278</sup> Accordingly, with the absurd, ‘[i]l linguaggio [...] non rivela niente e non è più portatore di senso’ (‘Dal desassossego’, p. 73).

<sup>279</sup> The absurd comprises at once ‘an epistemological claim that narratives fail to provide access to what has happened (reality remains fundamentally incomprehensible) and an ontological view according to which human reality lacks meaningful connections and evades attempts at narrative sense making’. Hanna Meretoja, ‘Narrative and Human Existence: Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics’, *New Literary History*, 45.1 (Winter 2014), 89-109 (93).

<sup>280</sup> *Piccole finzioni*, p. 155.

agente di altissima letteratura'.<sup>281</sup> In the article 'Osservando il Novecento', of which 'Controtempo' constitutes a draft, the author lists a number of factors that distinguish the modern uncanny from its previous occurrences:

L'inquietudine novecentesca ha certamente le sue radici nell'Ottocento, radici in gran parte romantiche. E comunque l'inquietudine in quanto tale non è patrimonio del nostro secolo: altre epoche hanno conosciuto una dimensione analoga. Ciò che tuttavia identifica l'inquietudine novecentesca è la presenza di alcune riflessioni razionali che si ripercuotono sull'atteggiamento emotivo. Queste riflessioni nascono banalmente dall'osservazione della realtà circostante. La più importante tra esse è la coscienza concreta che l'umanità può scomparire dalla faccia della terra. [...] Oltre la paura della scomparsa del genere umano ci sono però altri elementi distintivi di questo sentimento. Il più evidente, quello che rende la nostra ansia diversa da quella dei nostri antenati, è il fatto che essa sia stata, nel nostro secolo, *sistematizzata, innanzitutto dalla psicoanalisi e da Freud. Nell'Ottocento c'è solo un annuncio dell'inquietudine moderna, il Novecento la esprime chiaramente.*<sup>282</sup>

What should be emphasised in this passage is the centrality Tabucchi attributes to Freud<sup>283</sup> and to psychoanalysis, although, this time, it does not specifically address and refer to the Freudian *unheimliche*. Not only is Freud fundamental in Tabucchi's theorisation of the uncanny as 'inquietudine', which, for the writer, thanks to Freud, acquires the status of a concept that can be expressed or represented; also, more subtly and importantly, Freud's psychoanalysis gives rise to an understanding of this 'inquietudine' as a movement of signification and mechanism of textual production. The fact that 'il Novecento la esprime

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<sup>281</sup> *Di tutto*, p. 31.

<sup>282</sup> 'Osservando il Novecento', *Micromega*, 1 (1999), 249-51.

<sup>283</sup> The writer also engages with Freud's *unheimliche* in the following literary works: in *Gli Zingari e il Rinascimento*, Tabucchi reflects on the proximity between the uncanny and the so-called Stendhal syndrome: 'Se il sentimento di 'Unheimlich', come Freud definisce il disagio che ci può assalire di fronte a ciò che ci perturba per le sue categorie diverse da quelle che normalmente possediamo, deriva di solito dalla visione di qualcosa di terrificante o di spiacevole, forse lo stesso sentimento di 'Unheimlich' può provenire da un'eccessiva bellezza alla quale non siamo abituati' (pp. 56-57). In *La gastrite di Platone* (p. 26) Tabucchi explicitly associates the uncanny with the investigation of history: 'E se alla reversibilità del Tempo si sostituisce la reversibilità della Storia, la lettura si fa ancora più interessante e può riservare sorprese, soprattutto quando le cause sono avvolte nel mistero. [...] è davvero il Perturbante di Freudiana memoria, non più desunto da un racconto di Hoffmann, ma dalla Storia'. Freud's *unheimliche* is also quoted in the novel *Tristano muore. Una vita* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2004) as a possible scientific explanation for *déjà vu*: 'Freud invece ha indagato sul *déjà vu* nei suoi studi sull'Unheimliche, che voi italiani avete chiamato il perturbante, perché in effetti il perturbante accompagna spesso il *déjà vu*' (p. 122).

chiaramente' means that it recognises it as mode of sense making and linguistic expression and, in a way, allows it to speak.

In 'Dal desassossego' Tabucchi makes an explicit reference to Freud's 1919 essay. Having signalled both the difficulty inherent to the Italian translation of the German term *unheimliche* and how this linguistic dimension of the uncanny seems to be confirmed by the fact that Freud's theorisation is centred on a literary work, the writer finally formulates his own understanding of the Freudian *unheimliche*:

Il termine freudiano [...] fa riferimento a un qualcosa che turba perché non è familiare al soggetto. La parola contiene, negandola, l'indicazione di casa, focolare e anche patria: l'*Unheimliche* è ciò che non è familiare, è lo straniero, è ciò che ci è *estraneo*. *Qualcosa a cui non siamo abituati*, è questo che provoca turbamento e quindi che ci dà inquietudine.<sup>284</sup>

Once again, this passage confirms the fact that Tabucchi's 'Inquietudine' – Tabucchi's uncanny – is not reducible to and does not overlap with the Freudian *unheimliche*, as the latter is said to produce the former ('l'*Unheimliche* [...] dà inquietudine').

Furthermore, it is revealing of how the writer understands Freud's *unheimliche*. Tabucchi seems to be reducing the Freudian uncanny to a simple opposition between familiarity and unfamiliarity. However, for Tabucchi, the term 'estraneità', as well as the semantic sphere to which it belongs (that of extimacy), defines a distinctive relationship, a different logic of interaction between the two elements that are implied, between what is familiar and habitual and what is not. This is a kind of mutual relationship, wherein that which is 'estraneo' is neither inside nor outside the familiar but blurs any threshold between the two: it inhabits this threshold. Uncanny is precisely that which 'disturbs any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside [...] an experience of liminality'.<sup>285</sup> In a sense, the uncanny does not overlap with one of the two terms that are placed in correlation; rather it is the moment of defamiliarisation and estrangement that is produced as an output of such interaction. Therefore, in Tabucchi too, the uncanny – in both its Freudian sense and his own – occurs not as a simple negation of the familiar. It is not outside of it; rather it marks its inner reversal. It arguably functions similarly to what Tabucchi designates as the reverse. In the preface to the second edition of *Il gioco del rovescio*, the writer traces the aetiology of his idea of 'rovescio', affirming that:

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<sup>284</sup> 'Dal desassossego', p. 68, italicised.

<sup>285</sup> Royle, p. 2.

Tutti [i racconti di questo libro] sono legati a una scoperta: l'essermi accorto un giorno, per le imprevedibili circostanze della vita, che una certa cosa che era 'così' era invece *anche in un altro modo*. Fu una scoperta che mi turbò.<sup>286</sup>

What appears uncanny to Tabucchi is not (merely) the fact that something turns out to be different from what he thought it was. On the contrary, the term 'anche' denotes a (topological) condition of simultaneity and ambivalence. Tabucchi is not simply referring to the discovery of a reverse, negative side of a positive, familiar one – which was, for instance, at the basis of Saussure's identification of the signified/signifier pair with the recto and verso of a sheet of paper, and in general of representational discourse, and which would confine the uncanny solely to the epistemological level. He is referring to a process of othering, of investigating how this 'positive' and habitual side can be – and indeed is – extimate to, uncannily other than itself, thus projecting the *unheimliche* onto an ontological dimension.

An archetypal demonstration comes from the short story 'Lettera da Casablanca', included in *Il gioco*. In this text uncanny extimacy and reversal are used to problematise the main character's gender identity. The protagonist is, in fact, a transgender (almost a drag-queen performer: Giosefine, although the real name is Ettore) waiting to undergo a surgical operation to become a trans-sexual. (S)he writes a letter to his/her younger sister Lina, whom (s)he hasn't seen for 18 years (after the 'fatto', arguably the killing of their mother by their father). Clearly, the protagonist's gender identity is ambivalent, familiarly male ('così') and, at the same time, unfamiliarly female ('anche in un altro modo'). Linguistically, this is conveyed through the oscillation between male and female pronouns, nouns and adjectives: 'quando fui mandato', 'ero tuo fratello', 'ero un ragazzino malinconico e distratto', 'ero bella, ero giovane, ero felice'.<sup>287</sup> Linguistic ambivalence reaches its climax at the end of the story, when the protagonist asks the sister to be buried next to their mother's tomb: 'Voglio essere *sepolto* accanto a lei [...]. Non fare mettere iscrizioni sulla lapide [...] solo il nome, ma non Ettore: il nome con cui firma questa lettera [...] *la tua Giosefine*'.<sup>288</sup>

Likewise, the reversal informs Tabucchi's narrative strategy: his use of spatial discontinuities (as the story moves between Italy, Argentina and Morocco) and visual doublings (the images of the window and the palm, which belong both to a childhood memory and to the scenario the protagonist actually sees, at the diegetic present of his/her

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<sup>286</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 5, italicised.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-39.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40, italicised.

writing, from the hospital in Casablanca); the intended confusion between actuality (what happened) and potentiality (what might have happened), as the protagonist, thinking about his/her mother's childhood holidays, confesses how '[I]e ho tanto desiderate, le ho tanto immaginate che a volte mi succedeva uno strano sortilegio e mi ricordavo di vacanze [...] eravamo io e te [...] solo che tu invece di essere te eri la mamma da piccola'.<sup>289</sup>

The ontological dimension of Tabucchi's 'rovescio' is exemplarily illustrated also by the short story 'I morti a tavola'. The text follows the life of a retired Stasi agent wandering around Berlin while he heads towards the cemetery to visit the tombstone of one of his former, most famous targets, Brecht. The protagonist's subjectivity is immediately characterised in terms of an optical doubling and division, as when he stares at his image mirrored by a tram 'una striscia di gomma lo divid[e] in due'. However, what might seem to be a mere optical effect soon acquires an existential meaning: '[v]a bene diviso in due, mio caro, sempre diviso in due, metà di qua, metà di là, è la vita, così è la vita'.<sup>290</sup> The episode metaphorically alludes to the fact that adhering to a regime of surveillance offered the protagonist the only warranty of a stable, fixed subjectivity, as he identified himself with and worked as a sort of prosthetic eye for the government. For, the individuals he had to spy on were both visual targets to be surveilled – hence optically subjugated – and the illusionary reflection of his subjectivity – thus optically alienating him –, inasmuch as and to the extent to which he was able to separate himself and build his identity in relation to and in opposition to theirs:

Si disse: no, vado a piedi, *domino* meglio la situazione. La situazione, ma quale situazione?, beh, la situazione che era abituato a *dominare* in altri tempi. Allora sì, che c'era gusto: il tuo Obiettivo ti camminava davanti, ignaro, tranquillo, se ne andava per i fatti suoi. E anche tu, apparentemente, te ne andavi per i fatti tuoi, ma niente affatto ignaro, anzi. Del tuo Obiettivo conoscevi alla perfezione i tratti somatici dalle fotografie che ti avevano fatto studiare, avresti potuto riconoscerlo anche nella platea di un teatro. Lui invece di te non sapeva niente, tu eri per lui un volto *anonimo* come milioni di altri volti anonimi al mondo. Lui andava per la sua strada, e andando per la sua strada ti guidava, perché dovevi seguirlo. Lui *rappresentava la bussola del tuo percorso, bastava seguirlo*.<sup>291</sup>

Nonetheless, the gaze initiated by his dominating surveillance of his targets is not the only scopical field in which the character's identity is grounded and divided. When, following the collapse of the German Democratic Republic, he decides to examine the secret archives,

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>290</sup> *Il tempo invecchia*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 86, italicised.

the protagonist realises how, believing himself to be a watching eye, he had unofficially been looked at for his entire life:

Di me, invece, non sapevo niente. Credevo di sapere tutto, e di me non sapevo niente. [...] Che Renate mi ha tradito per tutta la vita l'ho scoperto solo due anni fa, quando hanno aperto gli archivi. Chissà perché mi venne in mente che anch'io potevo avere una scheda come tutti. Era una scheda completa, dettagliata, di chi è stato spiato ogni giorno. La voce 'Familiari' era un intero dossier, con fotografie prese col teleobiettivo.<sup>292</sup>

Thus the regime eventually appears as both the familiar guarantor of a fixed identity and the unfamiliar blindspot exposing the character's blindness, which, as the previous quote demonstrates, was entirely based on the wrong equation of visual mastery – 'dominare' defines the spy's existential action – and visual invisibility, his anonymous condition.

To summarise, although critics have commonly understood Tabucchi's 'rovescio' as a modality to read and decipher reality, my interpretation seeks to think it as a modality of being.<sup>293</sup> As for the term 'così': it anticipates a fundamental trait of the uncanny qua poetics and, in particular, of its committed facet. For, Tabucchi writes in his 'Elogio della letteratura', 'la letteratura è essenzialmente questo [...] il dubbio che ciò che l'istituzione vigente vuole sia *così*, non sia esattamente *così*'.<sup>294</sup> Here the word 'così' works as the indicator of an imposed, univocal and hypostatized view. So the functioning of the uncanny as a topological reversal constitutes the fundamental nexus between the interrogation of the real and the possibility of dwelling in it, by recovering and affirming its openness, its being otherwise, its triggering a quest of sense that can never be ultimate or totalising.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., pp. 97-98. As Francese comments, '[o]ne innovative charge of Tabucchi's fictions is the manner in which his fictional writings lead his readers to see themselves being seen. *Il tempo invecchia* has at its core the awareness that the other, the observed, does indeed look back', and, in particular, 'the reader sees how seeing and being seen, the basis of human community, was transmogrified into a pathology by totalitarianism, destroying the social fabric'. 'Memory and Nostalgia', p. 927.

<sup>293</sup> My position is close, for instance, to Jansen's, who retrieves the ontological component of Tabucchi's reversal game in its Pessoa origin. Monica Jansen, 'Tabucchi: molteplicità e rovescio', in *Piccole finzioni*, pp. 13-46 (p. 139): here, Jansen quotes from Tabucchi's *Un baule pieno di gente*, where he characterises Pessoa's reversal as 'la perversione di abdicare al reale per possedere l'essenza del reale' (pp. 23-24).

<sup>294</sup> *Di tutto*, p. 12, italics in the text.

<sup>295</sup> Giglioli accentuates the nexus existing between Agamben's idea of potentiality and the semantic perimeter of the term 'così' arguing that 'potenza significa poter essere diversi, un così che potrebbe anche non essere così'. Daniele Giglioli, *Critica della vittima* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2014), p. 108.

In conclusion, having situated the uncanny in relation to other related literary categories, observing how, for Tabucchi, following Freud's key theorisation, it is with modernity that it evolves into a modality of signification built around a logic of reversal, I will now turn to a closer analysis of the writer's 'Inquietudine'.

### 2.3 Tabucchi's Uncanny: Time, Ontology, Language

Similarly to Agamben, Tabucchi examines the uncanny in its temporal, ontological and linguistic configurations, reaching a definition of the *unheimliche* as a topological articulation of sense. The following three sections investigate the extent to which their conceptualisations approximate one another and how Tabucchi's texts give form to these threefold dimensions.

#### 2.3.1 Tabucchi's 'Inquietudine' and Time: Feeling Uncanny

As with Agamben's modern alienation, for Tabucchi the uncanny represents the experience of temporal disjointedness. The mutual estrangement that occurs between the subject and the world finds its most adamant manifestation in one's lack of synchronicity with the time he inhabits, which is tantamount to the emergence of an estranging temporality within chronological time. This temporal hiatus and interplay, which Tabucchi calls 'la non coincidenza del proprio tempo individuale con il tempo collettivo',<sup>296</sup> reaches its climax with modernity. Positing Auden's *The Age of Anxiety* as an exemplary manifestation of the uncanny in literature, Tabucchi writes that:

La parola forte che connota il suo libro è appunto 'ansia', che ha certo un altro valore da inquiet con cui è stato tradotto *Il Libro dell'Inquietudine* di Pessoa [...]. Comunque anche l'altra parola del titolo del poemetto di Auden è molto importante, the age, 'età', e questa combinazione di 'età' e di 'ansia' mi sembra interessante perché è una parola che radica fortemente l'ansia a un certo momento storico; il fatto di mettere accanto alla parola 'ansia' la parola 'età' è un modo per inserire l'ansia nella storia [...].<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> *Di tutto*, p. 22.

<sup>297</sup> 'Dal desassosseggo', p. 69.

What comes to the fore with modernity is, as for Agamben, a feeling of the uncanny as the modality of experience. The idea of ‘ansia’ evokes Heidegger’s angst and Agamben’s alienation and, unlike Pessoa’s disquiet, fades from the existential into the ontological. For, the feeling of the uncanny is not solely the negative moment of self- and world-withdrawal, but also the grounding of a potential signification.

In effect, Pessoa’s *desassossego* is not Tabucchi’s uncanny. There are two main differences between the two. To begin with, *desassossego* is characterised by an existential rather than ontological concern. Pessoa’s *desassossego* is, as Tabucchi explains it,<sup>298</sup> a privation, a lack of something that appears to exist despite being remote: the homely, the familiar dwelling within a meaningful world. Disquiet belongs to the phenomenological level, for it retains the belief in a possible homeliness. It designates solely an epistemological loss of meaning. On the contrary, anxiety, hence the feeling of the uncanny, radicalises<sup>299</sup> Pessoa’s disquiet to the point to which it evolves into an ontological<sup>300</sup> condition: not solely ‘man does not belong in the world even if he may experience a familiarity with it’,<sup>301</sup> but also this homelessness is the positive cause and mode in which the individual’s quest for meaning takes place. In this regard, it is interesting to observe, with Carotenuto, that ‘il sentimento dell’inquietudine scatena *anche* paura e angoscia, ma la sua cifra distintiva è un’altra, e ha a che fare con una forte ambiguità [...] in cui la paura è unita alla fascinazione, la voluttà al terrore, la repulsione all’attrazione’.<sup>302</sup> Uncanny anxiety is more of an after-effect of a certain ontological structure.

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<sup>298</sup> ‘*Desassossego* è un regressivo verbale che indica mancanza di sossego, cioè di quiete’ (*Di tutto*, p. 20).

<sup>299</sup> First, with anxiety, Tabucchi’s uncanny moves from a feeling of estranging detachment from the world to that of one’s impossible coincidence with oneself, hence from world- to self- withdrawal. In fact, if Pessoa’s disquiet entails ‘un disagio di vivere, un’estraneità nei confronti della realtà circostante’, with anxiety ‘l’Inquietudine si è trasformata in tale disaccordo con il reale che ha intorno da farlo sentire straniero perfino a se stesso’ (*ibid.*, pp. 21-23). Second, anxiety opens onto the essence of human beings as creators of sense insofar as it questions signification itself. For, feeling angst, men become ‘estranei persino al linguaggio’, that is, their proper mode of being. Significantly, as he affirms of Pessoa in *Requiem*, speaking to his ‘Convitato’, ‘la sua inquietudine si aggiunge alla mia e produce angoscia’ (p. 119).

<sup>300</sup> ‘L’importante è proprio questo sentimento di estraneità che provoca l’ansia [...]. Il poeta è straniero, la realtà che lo circonda, addirittura il suo volto riflesso nello specchio è unheimlich, non è familiare, possiede un’estraneità tale che provoca il turbamento, l’inquietudine, anzi qui l’ansia’ (‘Dal desassossego’, p. 71).

<sup>301</sup> Masschelein, p. 140.

<sup>302</sup> Aldo Carotenuto, *Il fascino discreto dell’orrore. Psicologia dell’arte e della letteratura fantastica* (Milan: Bompiani, 1997), p. 43, italics in the text.



Second, even when it attempts a metaphysical interrogation, Pessoa's *desassossego* is entirely solipsistic and passive, for the subject meditates on being and the world in a condition of social isolation and retreat from any form of practical agency. Exemplarily, Pessoa's Bernardo Soares lives his disquiet all alone, passively looking at the window. On the contrary Tabucchi's uncanny, as chapter 5 will make clear, entails the recuperation of a social dimension wherein the subject actively relates to the others.

This second dissimilarity between Pessoa's *desassossego* and Tabucchi's uncanny is best illustrated by the different ways in which they integrate the temporal category of *saudade*. Trying to define the latter, Tabucchi explains how:

In italiano (come anche in altre lingue europee) la *Saudade* viene generalmente tradotta con 'nostalgia'. Parola inadeguata, ma soprattutto troppo giovane per un termine così antico come la *Saudade*. Semmai, se proprio volessimo andare in direzione nostalgica, meglio tornerebbe all'uopo il 'desío' dantesco, che nello strazio reca una tenera dolcezza, visto che quel desío (a cui l'ora volge) intenerisce il cuore a chi naviga in mari lontani. Ma della parola 'desío' si è perso l'uso. Oggi lo si chiamerebbe 'struggimento'. Forse 'magone'. Com'è noto la 'nostalgia' fu coniata nel Settecento da Johannes Hofer, che indicava con essa la 'malattia del paese' (*Heim Weh*) dei soldati mercenari svizzeri, che lontani a lungo da casa a un certo punto deperivano, cadevano in malinconia e si ammalavano [...]. Ma per Eduardo Lourenço, il maggior filosofo portoghese vivente, che si è fatto etnologo dell'anima lusitana (*O labirinto da Saudade*) la *Saudade* è qualcosa di più di tutto questo: quasi una categoria dello spirito che non si trova altrove (la *Saudade* è una cosa che solo i portoghesi hanno perché hanno una parola per dire che ce l'hanno, ha scritto Pessoa), una *Stimmung* che costituisce anche un labirinto nel quale i portoghesi sono penetrati (o si sono rifugiati) senza riuscire a trovare più una via d'uscita.<sup>303</sup>

Meaningfully, in an interview, Tabucchi clarifies the proximity he sees between *saudade* and *disio*, in that the latter 'è una parola molto complessa che indica uno slancio, un rimorso, un'aspirazione. La *saudade* può essere nostalgia del futuro, un desiderio del futuro'.<sup>304</sup> From this it follows that: first, *saudade* defines a temporal category, a distinctive experience of time, which disrupts the chronological continuity of past-present-future by inscribing over it the dichotomy between possibility and actuality. There are, in effect, four possible configurations of *saudade*: nostalgia of the past, i.e. of what took place and is now gone; nostalgia of the present, i.e. of the moment one is actually living;<sup>305</sup> metaphysical nostalgia, that is a nostalgia of the possibile, of what could have been but did not actually take place, and which rejects historical facts in favour of their essence; and,

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<sup>303</sup> *Di tutto*, p. 58.

<sup>304</sup> Romana Petri, 'Uno scrittore pieno di gente', *Leggere*, n. 61 (June 1994), 68-75 (72).

<sup>305</sup> *Viaggi e altri viaggi*, p. 170.

finally, nostalgia of the future, namely of what could be different, in the present and in the future.

Second, and this is decisive to understand the difference between *desassossego* and uncanny, *saudade* oscillates between the two poles of passive, nostalgic contemplation (the first three types of nostalgia) and active aspiration (nostalgia of the future). Nostalgia of the past and the present and metaphysical longing characterise the solipsistic retreat of the subject of *desassossego*, who sees himself living, or meditates upon and writes about his life without properly living it. On the contrary, the uncanny is driven by a nostalgia of the future, since the subject's lack of synchronicity with collective, historical time, rather than blocking him in a condition of isolated passivity, positively becomes a space of difference from and resistance to a pre-given, dominant situation.<sup>306</sup> As stated in the introduction, this is what allows Tabucchi and his characters to be 'contemporanei', i.e. to take a step outside the historical time they inhabit, to be able to perceive the obscure kernel or the hidden potentialities of the latter. Thus Francese explains,

Tabucchian *saudade* is a utopian nostalgia for the future that 'coincides with the dream of a different history, with the hope for change.' It is a retrieval and elaboration of the past that provides needed orientation within the electronic-paced intensity of the present. In this scheme of things, literature, by looking both to the past and to the future, can provide points of orientation capable of contrasting the eternal present of media culture; if and when it does, it can make individual and collective time coincide once again.<sup>307</sup>

This is all the more important if one considers how, discussing the temporal dimension of the uncanny in relation to Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*, Tabucchi's focus on the term 'age' anchors the *unheimliche* to the historical dimension of modernity and postmodernity, for, to him, 'un rapporto sfasato con il Tempo quale dimensione in cui non riusciamo più ad abitare, un rapporto guasto con la Storia [...] pare appartenere in pieno al Novecento'.<sup>308</sup>

An exemplum of this reciprocity between the traumatic view of historical time (the non-coincidence of individual and collective time) and the temporal dimension of the literary *unheimliche* (nostalgia of the future) may be found in the short story 'Notte, mare o

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<sup>306</sup> Exemplary, in this regard, is Pereira's story, which I shall discuss in chapter 5.

<sup>307</sup> Joseph Francese, 'Memory and Nostalgia in Antonio Tabucchi's Last Two Books', *The European Legacy*, 17.7 (2012), 918-34 (930).

<sup>308</sup> *Di tutto*, p. 20.

distanza', part of the 1991 collection *L'angelo nero*.<sup>309</sup> The text narrates a night of violence that occurred in Salazar's Portugal when, following an evening of wine and poetry spent at the home of Tadeus, a poet in his fifties, four young friends (Luisa, Tiago, Michel, Joana) on their way back home through the streets of Lisbon are stopped, searched and questioned by a member of the regime's secret police, who intends to teach them some political lessons. The lesson dealt out by the political policeman reaches its climax in the arrogant recollection of the unspeakable atrocities he himself committed in the Portuguese colony of Angola.

There are two narrative levels in the story: the one inhabited by a male character imagining/remembering that 1969 night of violence and where the heterodiegetic narration takes place; the lower one, where the imagined/remembered episode occurs. Through the central elements of time, the night and imagination, the text gives form to the protagonist's repeated attempts at making sense of and giving expression to a traumatic episode of the past, which is both a semantic vacuum and a semiotic hole. By provoking disquietude, the text functions as a sort of message in a bottle, warning the reader about some similarities (s)he might find with the current historical situation.

Time is an essential feature in and for the text. A certain temporal estrangement distinguishes not solely Tadeus, who 'non aspettava di meglio che una complicità per fare le ore piccole e quando leggeva poesia perdeva la nozione del tempo',<sup>310</sup> but also the entire historical situation, where 'il tempo fa fssssss, come un pallone che si affloscia' and 'si incomincia a vivere in un mondo senza atmosfera, sotto vuoto'.<sup>311</sup> It is a story dominated by the night, a 'notte anticipata' that 'occupava lo spazio con la sua presenza e aveva creato una pozza immobile, un maleficio nel quale [...] si sentivano prigioniere le persone che occupavano quella stanza'.<sup>312</sup> This is also a metaphorical night, the taking place of a temporal dislocation that is revealing of uncanny homelessness, for all the characters feel:

[U]n disagio, come una tenue malattia; non paura; piuttosto un misto di sicurezza e struggimento, come sentirsi profughi in una città che era la loro e avere nostalgia della loro vera città, che era quella stessa, ma in un altro momento che non fosse quella sera ostile, quella notte, con le sue onde malefiche che vibravano pronte a scaricarsi.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> *L'angelo nero* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1991). Remorse, violence and death are the main themes of this collection, which, Tabucchi explains, originates from 'quel luogo doloroso e privilegiato, per guardare il mondo, che è l'esperienza del malessere' (*The New Italian Novel*, p. 217).

<sup>310</sup> *L'angelo nero*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, italics in the text.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Analogously, the peculiarity in the structure of this short story resides in the fact that the narration constantly blurs the line between memory and imagination, positing the imaginative element as the possibility of fulfilling signification of and coming to terms with the past:

E tutto ricominciava, nell'immaginazione di chi immaginava quella notte, come una pantomima o una stregoneria: come povere creature condannate a una ripetizione insensata, forzate a mimare e a ripercorrere il preludio all'avventura atroce che le aspettava nella notte e che una immaginazione non aveva il coraggio di far loro vivere come dovevano viverla. [...] E fu a quel punto che arrivò la cernia. [...] Ma questo dipendeva dall'immaginazione di chi pensava a come avrebbero potuto essersi svolti i fatti quella notte. Così, a quel punto, la sua immaginazione produceva una cernia.<sup>314</sup>

What characterises the text is, in effect, a pervasive sense of circularity, as it begins and concludes with the act of its own narration, unfolding a narrative based on the interaction between the proceeding of imagination and what is imagined. In a sense, blending plural temporal layers engenders imaginary memories. Significantly, the linguistic transposition of such a temporal oscillation is rendered through the intermingling of two grammatical moods (indicative and conditional) and three main tenses (imperfect, past historic and present). The present indicative, however, does not refer to the temporal positioning of the character imagining/recalling the scene, as the reader would expect. On the contrary, the present tense is used to signal the appearance of a grouper, hence characterising the instant of highest proximity to the uncanny and to trauma alike – '[p]erò ormai c'è un pesce, insieme a loro [...] in questa notte evocata è lì, presente'.<sup>315</sup> Trying to signify a traumatic episode – 'come se quella vicenda dovesse concludersi, sciogliersi, o trovare una piega nella quale nascondere se stessa'<sup>316</sup> – Tabucchi creates a narrative that, as I will argue in chapter 4, intends to embody unconscious mechanisms of sense making.

### 2.3.2 Tabucchi's 'Inquietudine' and Ontology: Being Uncanny

Moving on to the second dimension of the uncanny, I previously indicated that one of the reasons for the irreducibility of the uncanny to a feeling is its being bound up with

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-39.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

ontological questions. Already with Agamben, the uncanny, overcoming the metaphysical, nihilist fracture, configures itself as man's only authentic dwelling place, as the possibility of finding familiarity, within and through defamiliarisation. Tabucchi identifies the constellation of the uncanny issuing from Pessoa's *desassossego* with a 'senso di estraneità' that 'funziona a doppio senso, cioè dalla realtà verso il poeta [...] e dal poeta verso la realtà',<sup>317</sup> where the process of subjectification takes place within the tentative symbolisation of the real. However, with Tabucchi, this interplay also occurs on an ontological level that transcends the existential one. While the existential perspective questions one's sense and identity, the ontological one speaks to (human) beings as such. For Tabucchi, this means asking and exploring man's (interrogative) mode of being or not-being-at-home within an unsaturated world. Or, more precisely, Tabucchi's ontological concern moves him – and his characters – from the (still existential) questioning of the sense of their life to reflecting on the way in which the latter can be signified. For, it is only by trying to make sense of one's life that one 'properly' is.

This is evident, for instance, in the novel *Il filo dell'orizzonte*. Despite his natural indolence, Spino, who works in a morgue, abruptly becomes the protagonist of a detective story aiming to discover the identity of the victim of a shoot-out between the police and a group of alleged terrorists: a young man – symbolically called Carlo Nobodi – no one seems either to know or care about. This text elicits plural levels of reading. Firstly, there is the ethical and political dimension, linked to a specific contingency, which is the murder of a suspected terrorist, but that, at the same time, conveys the entire atmosphere of the Italian '70s; Tani comments, 'il fatto che il doppio di Spino, Carlo Nobodi, fosse stato in vita, con tutta probabilità, un terrorista propone l'eversione come una strada che negli anni settanta poteva essere imboccata facilmente da chiunque'.<sup>318</sup> This is all the more true if one considers the genesis of the novel which, Surdich explains, lies in a long story called *Perdute salme*, which was inspired, in turn, by some news about the killing of four terrorists in Genoa.<sup>319</sup> However, the political facet is coupled with the ethical one, originating in Spino's belief that 'non si può lasciar morire la gente nel niente [...] è come se uno morisse due volte'.<sup>320</sup> Accordingly, the reader is required to move on to an existential level, which derives from the ethical imperative posited by the unidentified corpse and evolves into a search for the self (Spino's) through the other: 'colui che cerca e

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<sup>317</sup> 'Dal *desassossego*', p. 68.

<sup>318</sup> Stefano Tani, *Il romanzo di ritorno* (Milan: Mursia, 1990), p. 160.

<sup>319</sup> 'The Constant Search for Oneself', 169.

<sup>320</sup> *Il filo dell'orizzonte* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986), p. 51.

colui che è cercato scambiano i ruoli, e il giallo [...] diventa una metafora della ricerca interiore in cui le persone cercano se stesse e la propria identità attraverso l'altro'.<sup>321</sup> For, Surdich observes, 'the goal [...] is not cognition but re-cognition'.<sup>322</sup> Still, Spino's method of investigation is 'diverso e apparentemente incongruo' since it obeys 'una logica implacabile come una geometria ignota: qualcosa di intuibile ma impossibile da formulare in un ordine razionale o in un perché',<sup>323</sup> as a consequence of reality itself. Finally, the novel demands a metaphysical interpretation. If it is true that detection and quest are structured around a 'sforzo continuo, imposto dalla vita stessa, per ristabilire la relazione divenuta incerta tra individuo e società, nel senso di un ordo ontologico, di un accordo tra essere e essente',<sup>324</sup> in Tabucchi's case this leads to no 'integration in a higher order'.<sup>325</sup> If one assumes that 'il filo dell'orizzonte, un luogo geometrico che si sposta con il nostro sguardo [...] è metafora dell'irraggiungibilità del senso e del fallimento del progetto conoscitivo inteso come progetto razionale',<sup>326</sup> this is due to the fact that, for Tabucchi, as already indicated, it is the real itself that is made up of blank spaces, and that, consequently, hollows out any definitive signification. The possibility of performing several readings and, in particular, the centrality of the metaphysical level are achieved by turning an epistemological genre into an ontological one, moving the story from detection to signification. Tabucchi defines *Il filo* as 'modellato e modulato sulla struttura del romanzo poliziesco', that, to him, represents a specific modality of 'una letteratura interrogativa'.<sup>327</sup> Yet Pinzuti indicates that with this novel 'il giallo in quanto genere si spezza proprio nel mutamento dal classico *who done it* [...] nel più perturbante *who is he* addirittura ipostatizzando la domanda principale dell'ontologia: *is he?*'.<sup>328</sup>

Facing the trauma of the real, Tabucchi's uncanny describes a process of semiosis that rather than answering questions constitutes a climatic redefinition of his own interrogations. This is why I share Scrivano's view that 'non si tratta tanto di scoprire qualcosa attinente ad un delitto, quanto mostrare che non si verrà a capo di nulla, ed anche

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<sup>321</sup> Schwarz Lausten, p. 80.

<sup>322</sup> 'The Constant Search for Oneself', 159.

<sup>323</sup> *Il filo*, p. 98.

<sup>324</sup> Erich Köhler, *L'avventura cavalleresca. Ideale e realtà nei poemi della Tavola Rotonda* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1985), p. 113, quoted in 'The Constant Search for Oneself'.

<sup>325</sup> 'The Constant Search for Oneself', 160.

<sup>326</sup> Schwarz Lausten, p. 132.

<sup>327</sup> *Conversazione con Antonio Tabucchi*, p. 19.

<sup>328</sup> Eleonora Pinzuti, 'Sub specie Jankélévitch', in *I 'notturni'*, pp. 143-54 (p. 147). Similarly, Brizio-Skov observes that 'la dominante ontologica nelle opere di Tabucchi [...] si rivela attraverso il sovvertimento delle strutture tradizionali della narrazione' (p. 97).

se questo accadesse, conta solo aver indagato [...] il racconto non è di cose, ma è il racconto stesso'.<sup>329</sup> For the gesture of deciphering the sense of reality that characterises the traditional detective novel and the metaphysical view it embodies, Tabucchi substitutes the urgency and potentiality to preserve and to create meaning. In this respect, Brizio-Skov speaks of 'una specie di intossicazione semiotica' where 'invece di partire dai segni per ricostruire la realtà, passa da segno a segno in un processo arbitrario in cui i segni non additano, ma diventano la realtà',<sup>330</sup> in which signs become the discourse of the real. That Tabucchi's text triggers multiple readings is consistent with his reformulation of the detective novel in ontological rather than epistemological terms, for it acquires a 'valore metafisico e costringe il lettore a porsi quesiti ai quali è impossibile rispondere, ma che danno un senso profondo alla sua esistenza'<sup>331</sup>:

The metaphysical detective story does not have the narcotizing effect of its progenitor; instead of familiarity, it gives strangeness, a strangeness which more often than not is the result of jumbling the well known patterns of classical detective stories. Instead of reassuring, they disturb. They are not an escape, but an attack.<sup>332</sup>

Ultimately, Tabucchi's reader is asked to integrate and mutually contaminate the reading with his own life, as 'the solution cannot be had by breaking a seal in a book – the solution must be found in the experience of the reader himself'.<sup>333</sup>

### 2.3.3 Tabucchi's 'Inquietudine' and Language: Saying the Uncanny

The analysis of the linguistic dimension of the uncanny represents the conclusive step in Tabucchi's survey of the concept. In a sense, what the uncanny – and the uncanny in

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<sup>329</sup> Riccardo Scrivano, 'L'orizzonte narrativo di Antonio Tabucchi', in *Conversazione con Antonio Tabucchi: dove va il romanzo?*, ed. by Paola Gaglianone and Marco Cassini (Rome: Omicron, 1995), pp. 35-52 (pp. 48-49).

<sup>330</sup> Brizio-Skov, p. 95.

<sup>331</sup> Brizio-Skov, p. 97.

<sup>332</sup> Michael Holquist, 'Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction', *New Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971), 135-156 (155).

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

Tabucchi's opus – proposes, is the possibility of exiting the grid of predetermined, nihilistic meanings by undertaking a specific experience through and within language:

Il discorso conclusivo che volevo fare è che siamo arrivati al linguaggio che diventa estraneo [...]. Insomma, le parole per dirlo sono le parole dello stesso linguaggio scoppiato, il linguaggio estraneo, l'*Unheimliche* arriva attraverso il linguaggio.<sup>334</sup>

Since the ontological encounter with the real is disturbing and uncanny and takes place through linguistic symbolisation, it follows that the uncanny becomes the rationale that structures language itself, the being of language, a distinctive modality of linguistic experience. Tellingly, in his critical survey, Tabucchi provides two different examples of this linguistic *unheimliche*. Firstly, he observes how, in Auden, anxiety manifests itself through 'un farfuglio [...] discorso molto confuso, molto imbrogliato' where 'il linguaggio diventa incomprensibile [...] siamo al balbettio'.<sup>335</sup> Then, Tabucchi focuses on Samuel Beckett's 1953 play *En attendant Godot*, as an archetype of a work to which,

[N]on è più consentito neanche il linguaggio della logica comunicativa, solo un balbettio che [...] fa la parodia alla gag [...] che è priva di valore rivelatorio. Questo brogliaccio, questo linguaggio che Auden definisce in un certo modo, e che invece Beckett, andando al di là di Auden, fa agire. Questo linguaggio che Auden definisce incomprensibile o assolutamente illogico, Beckett lo prende e lo mette in scena e lo fa vivere, diventa proprio le parole che vengono dette.<sup>336</sup>

The uncanny, therefore, turns language into a form of babbling<sup>337</sup> and a gag. Linguistic estrangement also affects the functioning of the reversal game. As Tabucchi writes in 'Il gioco del rovescio', recounting the origin of the game:

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<sup>334</sup> 'Dal desassossego', p. 74.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-72.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., pp. 73-74. In Beckett's play, the two protagonists Vladimir and Estragon wait in vain to meet a man named Godot.

<sup>337</sup> Significantly, Agamben investigates these same linguistic experiences. Firstly, in *Infanzia e storia*, the philosopher defines precisely 'l'ingresso nel balbettio dell'infanzia' (p. 51) as that which signals man's entry into history, but also as that which persists, in all speech, as its own transcendental condition of possibility. Babbling, in fact, is inherent to the semiotic, the taking-place of language regardless of actualised meaning. It is the experience of signification as potentiality and of potentiality as signification. Secondly, in Agamben, the gag also comes to be defined as 'a kind of silent condition of possibility for speech'. Deborah Levitt, 'Gesture', in *The Agamben Dictionary*, pp. 79-82 (p. 81). In this case, however, the term 'gag' is used with the English meaning (i.e. 'something you put in someone's mouth to prevent them from talking'), while Tabucchi uses it with the Italian meaning (i.e. 'joke').



Il gioco consisteva in questo, diceva Maria do Carmo, ci mettevamo in cerchio, quattro o cinque bambini, facevamo la conta, a chi toccava andava in mezzo, lui sceglieva uno a piacere e gli lanciava una parola, una qualsiasi, per esempio *mariposa*, e quello doveva pronunciarla subito a rovescio, ma senza pensarci sopra, perché l'altro contava uno due tre quattro cinque, e a cinque aveva vinto, ma se tu riuscivi a dire in tempo *asopiram*, allora eri tu il re del gioco [...].<sup>338</sup>

Interestingly Palmieri provides an accurate examination of the rationale implicated by the reversal game, noting that:

La lettura retrograda di un lessema può produrre tre tipi linguistici differenti:

- a) una neoformazione priva di senso: es. 'asopiram';
- b) un palindromo: es. 'ossesso';
- c) un bifronte: es. 'Roma' – 'amor'.

Accettando l'idea che rovesciare le parole sia rovesciare anche le cose, o piuttosto, vederle da un altro punto di vista, in quale di queste categorie si colloca il gioco di Tabucchi? Probabilmente nell'ultima dove la sequenza rovesciata non produce una distruzione del senso, ma un nuovo senso per così dire inedito.<sup>339</sup>

Palmieri correctly postulates an implicit nexus between the functioning of the reversal as a linguistic game experienced by the characters in Tabucchi's works and as a modality of Tabucchi's own literary discourse, what he calls the 'gioco di Tabucchi'. Next, he identifies which processes of sense making are at stake in this practice of reversing the signifier, concluding that, in Tabucchi's case, this leads neither to nonsense nor to tautology, but rather to a new semantic formation. I agree with Palmieri in that, in my view, the uncanny constitutes a semiotic process that investigates the limits of signification itself. However, there is a passage missing in the scholar's reasoning. I believe that Palmieri is wrong in positing the couple signifier-signified at the centre of his reflection. What Tabucchi concentrates on is, on the contrary, a gesture, an *experimentum linguae* made possible by the uncanny within and of language, where 'il legame tra il significante e il significato è interrotto [...] e il significante ha raggiunto la sua autonomia dalle leggi di significazione',<sup>340</sup> and where what is produced is not meaning but what Bellavita calls 'un vortice di senso'.<sup>341</sup> Consequently, I think that all three of the linguistic categories identified by Palmieri embody and structure a potential process of sense making.

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<sup>338</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 14.

<sup>339</sup> Palmieri, p. 128.

<sup>340</sup> Bellavita, p. 104.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

An example of the linguistic *unheimliche* can be found in the short story ‘I pomeriggi del sabato’, which is part of the collection *Il gioco del rovescio*. Here, the traumatic real materialises as the death of the father and where the young son tries to accommodate the vacuum of his loss, to make sense of and within it through a peculiar *experimentum linguae*, the study of Latin declinations. As Schwarz Lausten observes, this constitutes ‘una sorta di silenzio o non detto o meglio indicibile in quanto [...] linguaggio senza referente e senza significato logico che appartiene piuttosto a una dimensione pre-linguistica dell’infanzia perduta’<sup>342</sup>: an assumption that echoes Agamben’s idea of infancy. It also marks a possibility of sense making through the uncanny. This is why I would counter Ammirati’s interpretation, wherein the young son ‘incarna la ragione e la razionalità (razionale è la materia che studia tutto il giorno nella sua camera: il latino) e perciò non sa vedere i fantasmi’.<sup>343</sup> Likewise, I do not share Schwarz Lausten’s opinion, according to which the child’s babbling as well as his ‘abitudine [...] di cancellare le frasi con tante piccole crocette, come un filo spinato’<sup>344</sup> represents a tentative process of repression. Quite the opposite: what is at stake here is a gesture of disavowal, the othering of language that allows for the encounter with the real and the dwelling within an unsaturated symbolic. The father is, in fact, neither a nostalgic absence nor a hallucinatory presence, but both things at the same time. Accordingly, the act of crossing out written words is best understood as a gesture through which the uncanny, by estranging language, tests both the conditions of possibility and the limits of literature to signify the real. This requires, in turn, a specific approach on the part of the reader: thus, in the protagonist, one should read a projection of both the author and the reader. On the one hand, this short story constitutes a miniature of Tabucchi’s overall poetics of the uncanny insofar it illustrates the interaction between the traumatic real, the uncanny and the latter’s ethical stance. In effect, for the writer, as already noted, the real is traumatic in a dual sense,<sup>345</sup> in that it testifies to the potentiality of things to be otherwise, by revealing the presence of our inner world

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<sup>342</sup> Schwarz Lausten, p. 100.

<sup>343</sup> Ammirati, p. 118.

<sup>344</sup> Schwarz Lausten, p. 62.

<sup>345</sup> For Tabucchi, the term ‘trauma’ is not restricted to a specific repertoire of shocking experiences, such as war, death or, generally speaking, episodes of violence. On the contrary, it defines, more profoundly, the morphology of the experience of the real as that which cannot be mastered and objectified, thus collapsing familiar values and estranging accustomed modes of sense making. As Caruth affirms, trauma ‘precisely registers the force of an experience’ that is ‘not yet fully owned [...] and] cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge’. Cathy Caruth, ‘Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History’, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1995), pp. 151-57 (pp. 151-53).

within what we call reality or outer world – in the case of this text, the possibility for the father to be still alive – and because it represents a blank space within signification, which the uncanny performs through non-representational language, here exemplified by Latin language. And herein, precisely, lies the precondition for its ethical dimension, given that it is in the process of estrangement that the *unheimliche* makes room for the re-articulation of one's being in the world – in this case, the son's experience of dealing with his loss. On the other hand, if, for the son, 'l'estraneità della lingua'<sup>346</sup> carries within itself a sense of absurdity and fear, to the reader, stressing linguistic opacity, it signals the instauration of a specific fictional agreement founded upon the necessity to experience language and literature as an interrogative practice. Consequently, while the young kid's use of Latin – as exemplified by his repetition of the formula 'strix-strigis strix-strigis',<sup>347</sup> which 'è un effetto fonosimbolico molto efficace [...] inquietante [...] nel senso del perturbante freudiano'<sup>348</sup> – belongs, like the enigma, 'alla sfera dell'apotropaico [...] che respinge l'inquietante attirandolo e assumendolo dentro di sé', for it 'conduce nel cuore di ciò da cui tiene a distanza, è il modello di questo rapporto con l'inquietante'<sup>349</sup>, it also gives shape to a potential itinerary that should be followed by the reader in approaching Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny. This requires, in fact, paying attention to blank spaces and omissions, in order to generate meaning. Tabucchi's texts elicit an interpretative activity that is constantly aware of its potentialities and limits, which, as Perli suggests, follows an interrogative and hypothetical logic rather than an apodictic one.<sup>350</sup>

#### 2.4 Tabucchi's 'Inquietudine' and Poetics: the Quest(ion) of the Uncanny

As stated in the introduction, Tabucchi's poetics is inherently uncanny by virtue of the fact that the writer ascribes to literature a specific, disquieting function: that of making room for and trying to give answers 'alle necessità religiose dell'uomo'. Likewise, and

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<sup>346</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 72.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>348</sup> *Piccole finzioni*, p. 157.

<sup>349</sup> *Stanze*, p. 164.

<sup>350</sup> Antonello Perli, *Auctor in fabula. Un essai sur la poétique de Tabucchi* (Ravenna: Giorgio Pozzi Editore, 2010), p. 76.

conversely, his conceptualisation of the uncanny as interrogative semiosis cannot be excluded from his own literary experience, where Tabucchi puts into practice his view of literature qua disturbing questioning of sense.

In an attempt to scrutinise the way in which the uncanny gives form to Tabucchi's literary discourse, I will read a passage from *Requiem* where meta-fictional theorisation and narrative actualisation of the *unheimliche* are blended. Accordingly, I will examine: how Tabucchi's poetics proposes a non-representational process of sense making, and how it articulates a topological, rather than mimetic, realism. The presentational<sup>351</sup> nature of Tabucchi's writing derives from the fact that its focus and purpose is an experience of language's signifying function regardless of content. Tabucchi's presentational literature is the equivalent of Agamben's *experimentum linguae*, or the taking place of language as such. Speaking of realism, though not one that is told and telling,<sup>352</sup> owes instead to the fact that:

La maestria di Tabucchi consiste proprio nel tenersi simultaneamente a distanza sia dalla letteratura come rifugio e fuga dalla realtà, sia dal realismo o verismo come pretesa di rispecchiamento impersonale. Egli 'spiazza' il lettore rispetto alla realtà del quotidiano, violandone i canoni più banali, ma solo al fine di darne indirettamente una visione più perspicua [...] un depotenziamento di realtà che però la esalta.<sup>353</sup>

'Spiazzare' the reader through 'un depotenziamento di realtà che però la esalta' suggests how Tabucchi's realism consists precisely in his attempt to address that possibility of sense – the taking place of signification – that lies behind, beyond pre-given structures of meaning. It is therefore topological because it combines at once an estrangement of and engagement with language's signifying function.

In the second chapter of *Requiem*, waiting to meet his Convitato, the protagonist undergoes an uncanny experience of semiotisation: he suffers from 'un attacco d'ansia', feeling 'un

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<sup>351</sup> I derive this notion from Bollas: 'I shall distinguish between the "presentational" and the "representational", between self-presentation and self-representation. Presentation (in any context) is the form of a being or a communication; representation refers to the content of a communication'. Christopher Bollas, *China on the Mind* (Hove and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 6.

<sup>352</sup> To be more precise, Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny cannot be considered in terms of a realism of telling if one merely continues to associate the latter with traditional mimetic strategies such as impersonal narration, detailed description or the use of straightforward chronology. On the contrary, it can be regarded as a realistic discourse when it is believed to adopt an estranging approach precisely because it reproduces those estranged elements constitutive of the real, thus opposing a realism of the real to the realism of reality.

<sup>353</sup> 'Giochi proibiti', pp. 122-34.

fiume dentro' that 'fa sudare' and forces him to stop by the cemetery of Lisbon in order to buy some t-shirts from an Old Gypsy Woman.<sup>354</sup> Angst, however, as previously observed, works both as an uncanny feeling and, in this case, as (literary) insight. The 'Vecchia Zingara', in fact, offers to read his palms: 'figlio mio, te lo dico io cos'hai e perché stai sudando in questa maniera'.<sup>355</sup> Her reading reveals the protagonist's (and Tabucchi's) uncanniness:

La Vecchia Zingara si appropriò della mia mano sinistra e guardò con molta attenzione il palmo aperto. [...] Figlio, disse la vecchia, ascolta, così non può andare, *non puoi vivere da due parti, dalla parte della realtà e dalla parte del sogno, così ti vengono le allucinazioni, sei come un sonnambulo che attraversa un paesaggio a braccia tese e tutto quello che tocchi entra a far parte del tuo sogno, anch'io che sono vecchia e grassa e peso ottanta chili, mi sento dissolvere nell'aria a toccarti la mano, come se anch'io facessi parte del tuo sogno.* [...] Sarà un giorno di *tribolazione ma anche di purificazione*, forse poi sarai in pace con te stesso, figliolo, perlomeno è quello che ti auguro.<sup>356</sup>

Hallucination<sup>357</sup> is the term used to describe both the hiatus and the interplay occurring between reality and dream, between the net of accustomed meanings and what dissolves or suspends it. It compares to the experience of world- and self-withdrawal inherent in the taking place of the uncanny. It is a topological articulation or clearing: hallucination produces a fracture that is also a path, as the narrator 'attraversa un paesaggio' he himself created. And, like the uncanny, it designates the lacking or fading away of familiar structures of meaning, as well as the opening up of a different modality of sense making. The dichotomy between living 'dalla parte della realtà' and living 'dalla parte del sogno' could be read through the linguistic signified/signifier opposition. While the first terms in each pair entail a certain closure and saturation of meaning, the second ones involve a subtraction, a sliding away of sense. Tabucchi's uncanny hallucination, however, lives 'dalla parte della realtà e dalla parte del sogno', for it inhabits the bar that at once joins and divides the signifier/signified. Tabucchi affirms that an hallucination 'è come un sogno che sai di sognare, e in questo consiste la sua verità: nell'essere reale al di fuori della realtà'.<sup>358</sup> The truth of hallucination lies in its producing a step backward beyond Saussurean semiosis, in relation to which it is both internal and external: it is external because the *unheimliche* negates or deactivates familiar structures and structuring modes of sense, and

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<sup>354</sup> *Requiem*, p. 22.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, italicised.

<sup>357</sup> It should not be forgotten that the subtitle of the novel is *Un'allucinazione*.

<sup>358</sup> *I volatili*, p. 40.

internal since as uncanny signification brings up and can be located in its disturbance, modification, or othering of men's linguistic experience. Tribulation is Tabucchi's term for the uncanny estrangement of familiar networks of sense, for the disquieting moment of epistemological not-being-at-home; purification is how he calls that of ontological homelessness, the uncovering of the fact that what makes human beings is their being creators of signification. Still, in *Requiem* mourning generates purification. As stated in the introduction, this novel combines both mourning and melancholia; the ability to expose and sustain the fractures inside signification – the very essence of purification – corresponds exactly to Tabucchi's capacity to deal with the loss of familiar significance, and to his discovery that being human is tantamount to being able to dwell within an unsaturated experience of sense making. In a sense, uncanny semiosis is a melancholic mourning for Saussurean signification, as it bears the semantic void it uncovers in the latter without attempting to fill it.<sup>359</sup>

Focusing on literature, Tabucchi's hallucination orchestrates an experience of the other in language, of the othering of language, of language as such in its unfolding, which dismantles and transcends any representational constraint.<sup>360</sup> Uncanny writing is an interrogative modality of sense making that resists consequentiality, saturation and closure. That of the character – as well as of the author –, therefore, is not incapacity to discriminate between reality and dream, but rather the desire and urgent need to bring them into dialogue. For, the task of uncanny literature is exactly 'to maintain this passionate movement toward an intimate strangeness opened by language at the heart of the ordinary and familiar and to speak the language that would keep it open'.<sup>361</sup> Uncanny is 'il tentativo di dare forma ad un incontro con la realtà per cui [...] l'elaborazione di adeguate strutture narrative non precede questo incontro ma è prodotta nel momento stesso in cui ha luogo'.<sup>362</sup> This is why Tabucchi's poetics belongs to and accentuates the presentational

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<sup>359</sup> As in the introduction, I follow Agamben's reading of melancholia, which moves away from a pathological interpretation and explicitly relates to uncanny semiosis: melancholia is here defined as a positive possibility and ability to experience and encounter what would otherwise remain unattainable, that is, the taking place of signification itself.

<sup>360</sup> Moreover, Trentini suggests the importance of considering hallucination as Tabucchi's indication of the necessity of a 'reflection on literature' and writing. Nives Trentini, 'Towards a Study of Dream in Antonio Tabucchi', in *Spunti e Ricerche*, 71-96 (87).

<sup>361</sup> Jeff Fort, 'Introduction', in *Aminadab*, by Maurice Blanchot (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. xvii.

<sup>362</sup> Luca Somigli, 'Negli archivi e per le strade: considerazioni meta-critiche sul ritorno alla realtà nella narrativa contemporanea', in *Negli archivi e per le strade. Il ritorno alla realtà di inizio millennio*, ed. by (Rome: Aracne, 2013), pp. I-xxii (p. xvii).

rather than the representational dimension of literary language, shifting towards what Benedetti calls ‘ideologia del performativo’, for which literature should ‘aprire nuovi punti di vista, [...] far vedere ciò che non si vede’.<sup>363</sup>

Moreover, the fact that hallucination lies in-between the symbolic and the real determines, as a consequence, the identification of the character’s – as well as of Tabucchi’s – posture with that of a sleepwalker. If hallucination etymologically defines a ‘wandering of the mind’,<sup>364</sup> sleepwalking dramatises or choreographs the narrative rhythm of such drifting: this is a quest, which is also a questioning. This identification with a ‘sonnambulo’ introduces us to the second element that distinguishes Tabucchi’s poetics: the uncanny as a practice of topological realism.

Tabucchi is a sleepwalker in that he cannot peacefully sleep the dream of reality nor can he escape from it, or get outside of it, for the ‘sonnambulo’ is the one in the process of awakening from sleep, but solely and to the extent to which he remains inside it, to disturb and resist it. The sleepwalker produces a vacuum inside the dream of reality, just as the uncanny investigates, creates and dwells within the ruptures of signification itself. Similarly, in the prologue to *Donna di Porto Pim*, Tabucchi adopts a geographical vocabulary to describe what he calls his ‘paradossale senso di realismo’<sup>365</sup>:

Ho molto affetto per gli onesti libri di viaggio e ne sono sempre stato un assiduo lettore. Essi posseggono la virtù di offrire un *altrove* teorico e plausibile al nostro *dove* imprescindibile e massiccio. Ma una elementare lealtà mi impone di mettere in guardia chi si aspettasse da questo piccolo libro un diario di viaggio, genere che presuppone tempestività di scrittura o una memoria inattaccabile dall’immaginazione che la memoria produce – qualità che per un paradossale senso di realismo ho desistito dal perseguire [...].<sup>366</sup>

Tabucchi’s realism is paradoxical in the etymological sense of the term, because it goes against and disrupts accepted views, interrupting the conventional equation of realism with

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<sup>363</sup> Carla Benedetti, *Pasolini contro Calvino. Per una letteratura impura* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), pp. 127-31.

<sup>364</sup> ‘From Latin *alucinari* to wander in the mind + -ation indicating a process or condition’. ‘Hallucination’, in *A Dictionary of Psychology*, ed. by Andrew M. Colman, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 331.

<sup>365</sup> *Donna di Porto Pim e altre storie* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1983), p. 9.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10, italics in the text.

familiarity.<sup>367</sup> It is, however, topological in that, like the sleepwalker, it juxtaposes and aligns, in a critical constellation, familiar reality and estranging real. It is based upon a spatial articulation between what belongs to the actual realm of the symbolised ‘dove’ and what, instead, gestures towards ‘quello immaginifico dell’altrove’,<sup>368</sup> that resides at its innermost core. As Dolfi comments,

Ciò che cerca (e che invita a cercare) è un *altrove* che abbia radici nel reale e che ne sfugga, ma muovendo da quello. ‘Onesto’ è il libro che non si scatena nella fantasia, ma offre le alonature del possibile, i segni della *deregulation*, il punto [...] che potrebbe non tenere. Quel mondo alternativo che mantiene le tangenze col nostro, seguendo le piste dei tracciati inattuati [...].<sup>369</sup>

To conclude, the narrator’s encounter with ‘la Vecchia Zingara’ in *Requiem* is a meta-fictional reflection on the uncanny as an on-going interaction between two complementary tensions. The first moment or movement of the uncanny is that of disturbance and defamiliarisation of axiomatic interpretative grids and values (Tabucchi’s ‘dove’) and modes of sense making (Saussurean semiology). It is aware of the opacity of our interpretations and of how these create a paradigm of familiarity and stability. Stressing the artificiality of reality, the uncanny ‘enables critical reflection on how cultural narratives steer our self-understanding and regulate our being in the world with others’.<sup>370</sup> The second moment or movement of the uncanny is that of decidability, of a commitment to and engagement with language’s signifying function (Tabucchi’s ‘altrove’). This builds on the view that the way in which individuals experience the world is through a constant negotiation of sense, the conditions of possibility and limits of which are explored and exposed by the *unheimliche*.

In the end, Tabucchi’s ‘Inquietudine’ is the mode in which literature engages with the question of how it is possible to live authentically and meaningfully, that is, in accordance with man’s ontological condition as sense maker, by giving rise to a disquieting and disturbing linguistic experience. The next three chapters will examine the ways in which Tabucchi’s texts issue from and give form to this quest(ion) of sense, moving from a discussion of Tabucchi *and* the uncanny to a survey of the uncanny *in* and *through* Tabucchi.

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<sup>367</sup> Nelson Goodman, ‘Realism, Relativism, and Reality’, *New Literary History*, 14.2 (Winter, 1983), 269-72.

<sup>368</sup> Tommaso Tarani, ‘L’inutile faro nella notte. I raggiri del fantastico in *Donna di Porto Pim*’, in *I notturni*, pp. 159-87 (p. 162).

<sup>369</sup> Dolfi, *Tabucchi, la specularità, il rimorso* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2006), p. 15, italics in the text.

<sup>370</sup> Meretoja, 104.



To summarise, in his theoretical discussion of the uncanny Tabucchi suggests how:

- Despite its proximity to the postmodern problematisation of ontology, the uncanny is not comparable to some postmodern ‘anything goes’.
- On the contrary, it is a process of interrogation, interrupting reassuring readings and opening up to ambiguity, which calls for the reader’s participation.
- Moreover (his) uncanny (‘Inquietudine’) is not equivalent to the literary nocturne or the absurd, or to Pessoa’s *desassossego*.
- Likewise it is not reducible to the Freudian *unheimliche*, although Tabucchi’s reading of the latter is pivotal to his understanding and conceptualisation of the uncanny.
- For, Tabucchi’s Inquietudine, similarly to Agamben’s uncanny, encompasses a fourfold dimension: temporal (the uncanny as temporal disorientation, which reaches its climax with modernity); ontological (the fact that men always engage with metaphysical questions and exist as creators of sense); linguistic (the uncanny as unfamiliar semiosis); and literary (the uncanny as poetics, i.e. as a disquieting, interrogative modality of literary experience).

## Chapter 3

### 3.1 Tabucchi Ludens, or: Games Characters Play

Stating that Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny produces a quest(ion) of sense addresses the fact that the writer sees his literary experience as an example of 'Inquietudine', that is as a disquieting, interrogative modality of sense making. This philosophical enquiry underlying the writer's works has been made evident in the previous chapters by using Agamben to read Tabucchi's theoretical reflection on the uncanny. Accordingly, chapters 3 to 5 set to explore the narrative, rhetorical and discursive strategies, modes and motifs Tabucchi adopts in his texts to produce the uncanny.

In particular, this chapter argues that play constitutes the first step *in* or the configuration *of* Tabucchi's uncanny poetics. Play designates the 'ludic economy', a type of set of rules operating throughout his opus, on which the 'language games' produced by each text are grounded.<sup>371</sup> These textual games tend to have diegetic equivalents, as Tabucchi inserts a wide range of games covering all four of the modalities theorised by Roger Caillois into his fictions: those of agon or competition, mimicry or make-believe, alea or chance and ilinx or vertigo.<sup>372</sup> Examining the games *in* the texts is therefore essential in order to fully appreciate the games *of* his texts and comprehend the way in which Tabucchi's play works at the level of both content and form.

Agonistic games are those based on competence and competition, such as in sport or chess, where players actively try to direct the result of a match; mimicry is founded on the illusion of the games functioning as the reality they imitate and simulate, such as in role play or stage performances, thus involving a preliminary suspension of reality; the category of alea, the Latin word for 'dice', includes all those games mostly based on chance, as hazard games, where players are relatively passive; ilinx, the Greek term for 'whirlpool', describes games incorporating a certain loss of perceptual stability, physical disorientation and euphoria, such as with children turning around to feel dizzy or jumping elastics. To begin with the first category, that of ludic competition, by narrating the dreams

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<sup>371</sup> This distinction between literary play and games is identified in Warren Motte's *Playtexts. Ludics in Contemporary Literature* (Lincoln&London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

<sup>372</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. by Meyer Barash (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

dreamt by the Greek poet Pindar while attending the Olympic Games, the short story ‘Una giornata a Olimpia’, included in the second edition of *Il gioco del rovescio*, offers an archetypal illustration of the category of agon and of its link, in Tabucchi’s fictions, with the act of writing, as the Games provide the inspiration for Pindar’s *Olympian Odes*, which Tabucchi partly quote in his text. Indeed, in the story this nexus is explained by the fact that both play and poetry have a similar rhythm and pattern, by virtue of their being ruled by Time, defined as ‘l’armonia e il movimento, la battuta e il ritmo’, so that, Pindar observes, ‘la gara è come la musica, la danza e la poesia’.<sup>373</sup> Like literature, play is (acknowledged as) a semiotic experience of sense creation.

This understanding of the relationship between agon and literature is explored further with the description of the pool match between the narrator and the Maître of the Casa do Alentejo in *Requiem*. In this case the game, rather than being a source of poetic inspiration, works as a double and prefiguration of the unfolding of the story itself and of its tempo, that is of the protagonist’s unconscious quest for his Convitato and for the figures of his past – and, more specifically, of his later meeting with Isabel; this adds to the match an element of chance – meaningfully, the protagonist speaks of ‘una scommessa, piuttosto uno scongiuro, un esorcismo, una domanda al destino’ –:

Mi andava solo di star lì, a fumare, a guardare il biliardo con quella strana combinazione geometrica che le biglie avevano formato sul piano e che dovevo superare. Lo strano percorso che la mia biglia avrebbe dovuto disegnare [...] mi parve un avvertimento: era evidente, quella parabola impossibile che dovevo realizzare sul biliardo era la stessa parabola che stavo compiendo quella sera [...] e così feci una scommessa con me stesso, ma non propriamente una scommessa, piuttosto uno scongiuro, un esorcismo, una domanda al destino, e pensai: se ci riesco Isabel appare, se non ci riesco non la vedrò mai più.<sup>374</sup>

Playing cards (agon) is then endowed with a seemingly metaphysical significance in the detective novel *Il filo*:

[I]l vecchio faceva un solitario al tavolo accanto al suo e ogni tanto lo guardava con gli occhietti mongoli, ammiccando sorridente alle carte che non tornavano. Lo ha invitato a giocare e hanno fatto una briscola, entrambi molto attenti al gioco, come se fosse la cosa più importante del mondo e da essa dipendessero le sorti di un avvenimento che non sapevano quale fosse ma che indovinavano superiore alla realtà delle loro presenze.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 158.

<sup>374</sup> *Requiem*, p. 101.

<sup>375</sup> *Il filo*, p. 25.

Spino, the protagonist, also plays with a tarot book, seeking a potential sense (the game of alea) that may orient his search for the corpse's identity:

Sul tavolo [...] c'era un libro che parla di destino e di tarocchi [...] 'Non so se le piacerà, padre', ha aggiunto, 'è un libro che parla delle strane combinazioni della vita'. Il prete ha sorriso e lo ha guardato con indulgenza. 'Solo Dio conosce tutte le combinazioni dell'esistenza, ma solo a noi spetta di scegliere la nostra combinazione fra tutte quelle possibili', ha detto, 'solo a noi'. E così dicendo ha spinto il libro verso il suo interlocutore. Allora, per gioco, Spino l'ha preso e l'ha aperto a caso, senza guardare. Ha detto: 'Pagina quarantasei', e con voce grave, come se fingesse di essere un cartomante, ha letto il primo paragrafo. Hanno riso per educazione, come si conviene dopo una frase scherzosa, e quel loro ridere significava anche un commiato [...].<sup>376</sup>

Pretending to be a fortune-teller, Spino anticipates a truth he will realise only at the end of the story, 'che c'è un ordine delle cose e niente succede per caso; e il caso è proprio questo: la nostra impossibilità di cogliere i veri nessi delle cose che sono'.<sup>377</sup> Tarots typify a pattern of signification that illuminates, almost en abyme, the ludic ontology of the novel, the idea of life as a game of contingencies and possible combinations, 'un gioco dell'oca fatto di caselle vuote e di trucchi nel quale lui continua a girare sperando che a un certo punto la ruota si fermi e la pallina cada su un numero che dia significato a tutto'.<sup>378</sup> If Genoa seems 'un giocattolo dal quale è un sollievo disabituarsi',<sup>379</sup> Spino's quest is informed by the creed that 'se uno non ha il coraggio di andare oltre non capirà mai, sarà solo costretto a giocare per tutta la vita senza sapere il perché'.<sup>380</sup> His physical detection across the town – 'vagare in cerca di niente'<sup>381</sup> – acquires a sense of vertigo that culminates when he is taken up the hill aboard the funicular, and 'all'improvviso i muri si aprono: è come se l'ascensore avesse sfondato i tetti e puntasse direttamente verso il cielo, per un attimo ci si sente sospesi nel vuoto'.<sup>382</sup> Tabucchi's writing produces a comparable game of ilinx in his 'attempts to surprise, puzzle or confound'<sup>383</sup> the reader, including several ellipses – such as the paragraph from the tarot book read by Spino – and loosely juxtaposing chapters; the vertiginous discourse disturbs the reader's competition with the narrator to solve the case. As for the novel's diegetic games, the ludic dimension of

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., pp. 45-47.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>383</sup> Peter Hutchinson, *Games Authors Play* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 6.

mimicry is further represented through Spino's consistent references to films and literary works, which compose a familiar repertoire upon which he draws in his attempt to render intelligible the traumatic real he inhabits. The transgression of the boundaries between the commonsensical imaginary and the protagonist's life reaches its climax in three distinct episodes of (mis)identification: first the attribution to the anonymous corpse of a nickname – 'il Kid' – borrowed from a movie; second, Spino's confusion between the cities of Luino, where his girlfriend Sara has gone on a school trip, and Duino, which is memorably linked to Rilke's 1923 elegies; and, finally, partly adopting the principle of the play-within-the-play to problematise the illusionary threshold between life and literature, the character's identification of the corpse with Hecuba:

Ha preso un foglio bianco e ha scritto, in caratteri grandi e anche lui in stampatello: 'Piange? Chi era Ecuba per lui?'. Ha disposto il foglio accanto al biglietto e ha pensato al nesso che li univa. Ha avuto la tentazione di telefonare a Corrado e di dirgli: 'Corrado, ti ricordi questo verso?, ho capito perfettamente cosa significa'. [...] forse lo avrebbe scritto a Sara [...] e anche lei avrebbe capito che il guitto che piangeva (ma chi era?), anche se in altra forma e in altro modo vedeva in Ecuba se stesso.<sup>384</sup>

This tragic figure reappears in the short story 'La maschera è stanca', a letter an old actor writes to his beloved and former partner on stage, 'dolce Ofelia'; the text constitutes a sort of meta-theatrical reflection revealing the identity of theatre and life:

E come luccica, quella lacrima, falsa più di ogni altra cosa falsa, affinché il pubblico possa piangere lacrime vere, per l'illusione che al prezzo di un biglietto gli vendiamo ogni sera. Ma il principe di Danimarca non permette che il pubblico pianga per un attore che non sia lui: avvicina lo spadino al collo del compagno di quel simulatore che finge di piangere, e gli chiede: piange?, chi è Ecuba per lui.<sup>385</sup>

It thus exposes the alienating and hypostatizing rationale that underpins a deteriorated form of mimicry, for if life is a performance, it is one we are mostly unaware of:

[L]a trovata più geniale fu adoperare quelle due grosse marionette settecentesche [...] pupazzi meccanici costruiti da quegli antichi artigiani che pensarono in quell'epoca di produrre l'automa

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<sup>384</sup> *Il Filo*, pp. 97-98. In Greek mythology, Hecuba is the wife of King Priam of Troy. In Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*, the player performing Hecuba grieving for her dead husband illuminates, by contrast, Gertrude's lack of sorrow over the murder of Hamlet's father.

<sup>385</sup> *Si sta facendo*, p. 156.

[...] e che [...] producevano un effetto di straordinario turbamento. Guardate, cari spettatori, i veri attori sono questi, sono marionette meccaniche [...].<sup>386</sup>

The impossibility of eschewing the drama of life is witnessed by the protagonist who leaves the theatre only to find himself at the Theatre Museum, a place symbolising ontological fossilisation: ‘così passano gli anni, e si invecchia, attaccati alla maschera che ci è stata imposta, anche se la si è scelta noi stessi’.<sup>387</sup> The mutuality between mimicry and alienation is further explored in the short story ‘Piccoli equivoci senza importanza’, where the first-person narrator, a journalist, observes a trial involving his long-time friends in the opposite roles of judge and suspect, opponents in a game of agon that eventually unfolds as ‘una recitazione [... una] commedia che ci stavano giocando’.<sup>388</sup> Here, play blurs the barrier between actors and spectators, since ‘anche il mio semplice guardare loro che recitavano la loro parte, anche questa era una parte, e in questo consisteva la mia colpa, nello stare al gioco’.<sup>389</sup>

Other games of simulation and make-believe range from the theatrical playing of the Shakespearean actor Wilfred Cotton in ‘Teatro’, to Nena’s childish desire to ‘giocare alle visite, io faccio la signora e tu l’architetto che mi fa la corte’<sup>390</sup> in ‘I pomeriggi del sabato’ and Piticche’s playing with Pinocchio in ‘Dolores Ibarurri versa lacrime amare’, from the circus in ‘Sogno di Lucio Apuleio, scrittore e mago’, to the hypothetical game the narrator describes in ‘Libri mai scritti, viaggi mai fatti’.

Alea is represented through the trope of hypotyposis in ‘Sogno di Samuel Taylor Coleridge, poeta e oppiomane’, which recounts the protagonist’s fatal dice game with death, as well as through the motif of the lottery in *Requiem*, while chance shapes the game invented by the young Antero de Quental, ‘*Il Cielo e la Terra*, dove le pedine erano ciottoli e conchiglie, e che giocavano su una scacchiera circolare tracciata nella polvere’, in *Donna di Porto Pim*.<sup>391</sup>

If the essence of human beings, our uncanniness, is that of being creators of meaning, then, in Tabucchi, alea reveals the role of literature in making and dwelling within a meaningful

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-55.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>388</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 15.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>390</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 63.

<sup>391</sup> *Donna di Porto Pim*, p. 42.

world.<sup>392</sup> An example of this can be found when the retired soldier protagonist of the short story ‘Nuvole’<sup>393</sup> practices ‘l’arte della nefelomanzia’:

[È] una parola greca, nefele vuol dire nuvola, e manzia indovinare, la nefelomanzia è l’ arte di indovinare il futuro osservando le nuvole, o meglio, la forma delle nuvole, perché in quest’arte la forma è la sostanza [...] ci vuole un’intuizione rapida ma la riflessione è indispensabile.<sup>394</sup>

Analogously, the narrator of ‘Piccoli equivoci senza importanza’, facing the absurdity of the trial that vertiginously swallows up his past friends, recovers a possibility of sense making, a pattern to create meaning in the gesture of walking

[C]on passi pausati e lenti, cercando di non calpestare gli interstizi del lastricato, come quando ero bambino e con un ingenuo rituale provavo a regolare sulla simmetria delle pietre la mia infantile decifrazione del mondo ancora senza scansioni e senza misura.<sup>395</sup>

In *Requiem* the protagonist evokes a game he used to play with the lighthouse:

Sa che ci facevo io con questo faro, una volta? [...] facevo un gioco, di tanto in tanto, quando non riuscivo a dormire, venivo in questa stanza e mi mettevo alla finestra, il faro ha tre luci intermittenti, una bianca una verde e una rossa, io giocavo con le luci, avevo inventato un alfabeto luminoso e parlavo attraverso il faro [...] parlavo con i fantasmi.<sup>396</sup>

A similar game is played in the posthumous *Per Isabel*; in a castle on the Swiss Alps, the protagonist meets Lise, an astrophysicist who, like him, is conducting a personal quest informed by Buddhist principles:

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<sup>392</sup> Negotiating the encounter with the real also means articulating the encounter with the other, such as in the short story ‘Voci’, where the protagonist volunteers for a helpline: ‘non buttiamo via quest’incontro, qualcosa deve pur significare, mi ascolti, facciamo un gioco, io ho qui un bicchiere davanti a me, lo faccio suonare con una matita, *tlin*, mi sente?, se mi sente faccia altrettanto [...]’ (*Il gioco*, p. 126).

<sup>393</sup> A game with clouds is also represented in the short story ‘Forbidden Games’. I believe Tabucchi derives the association between clouds and play from Pessoa’s *Livro dos desassossego*: ‘Nuvole [...] ancora piccole, simili a giocattoli di forme poderose, palle irregolari di un gioco assurdo’. Fernando Pessoa, *Il libro dell’inquietudine. Di Bernardo Soares*, trans. by Antonio Tabucchi and Maria José de Lancastre, 8th edition (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2004), pp. 56-57.

<sup>394</sup> *Il tempo invecchia in fretta* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2009), pp. 72-73.

<sup>395</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 18. Similarly, in *Si sta facendo*: ‘I pavimenti erano a losanghe bianche e nere [...] potevo persino stare ora su una losanga nera, ora su una losanga bianca e giocare a scacchi con me stesso, fino a darmi scacco matto’ (p. 82).

<sup>396</sup> *Requiem*, pp. 93-94.

Molti anni fa avevo un figlio [...] e la vita me l'ha portato via. [...] Lo avevo chiamato Pierre, continuò, e la natura era stata matrigna con lui, non lo aveva dotato di certe facoltà, ma lui aveva una sua forma di intelligenza, e io la capivo [...] per esempio, avevamo trovato un codice [...] per esempio, battere con un cucchiaino su un bicchiere, non so se mi spiego, battere con un cucchiaino su un bicchiere [...] è necessario studiare la frequenza e l'intensità del messaggio, e io di frequenze e di intensità me ne intendevo, faceva parte del mio mestiere nello studiare le stelle all'Osservatorio Astronomico di Parigi, ma non fu tanto questo a guidarmi, fu perché ero sua madre e perché si ama un figlio più di noi stessi. [...] Il nostro codice funzionava perfettamente [...] una lingua che gli umani non conoscono [...]. Stavo al radiotelescopio alla ricerca di emissioni radiogalattiche con segnali modulati provenienti da eventuali creature intelligenti, e a mia volta inviavo messaggi modulati [...]. Era una notte di tempesta di neve [...] e in quel momento arrivò il messaggio da Andromeda, era un messaggio modulato, lo passai al decifratore e lo riconobbi immediatamente, la stessa frequenza, la stessa intensità, in termini matematici era un messaggio che avevo sentito per quindici anni della mia vita.<sup>397</sup>

These four examples share a vision of playing as a modality to structure ludic codes and negotiate the encounter with what seems to be exclusively aleatory, but which instead follows uncanny patterns of sense making. Playing is, for Tabucchi, a way to symbolise the real since, as Lise glosses, 'l'uomo che si è smarrito necessita di simbolizzare l'universo con una forma d'arte integrativa, insomma ha bisogno dei suoi punti cardinali'.<sup>398</sup> This perfectly captures the uncanny as a topological articulation of sense.<sup>399</sup>

Moving on to the fourth modality, ludic vertigo informs the several episodes of flights and falls that appear throughout Tabucchi's works.<sup>400</sup> A telling example is the story of Leonida-Leonido – could the dual name hint at his being torn between a twofold impulse,

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<sup>397</sup> *Per Isabel*, pp. 103-05.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-06.

<sup>399</sup> Similarly Tabucchi finds in Pessoa '[la] capacità di vivere l'essenza di un gioco [...] il gioco di Pessoa è giocare il gioco [...] la sua finzione vera'.<sup>399</sup> *Un baule pieno di gente: Scritti su Fernando Pessoa* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1990), pp. 8-9.

<sup>400</sup> That of the plongeur is a leitmotiv throughout Tabucchi's entire opus. Dolfi, for instance, commenting on the cover image of *L'oca al passo*, Klein's picture *Le Saut dans le Vide*, asks: 'Che cosa indica (sulla copertina del libro) quel salto nel vuoto? La voce libera dell'artista che a dispetto di tutto si lancia, incurante del rischio, per guardare dall'alto le cose? [...] Oppure che [...] non ci resta ormai che lanciarsi nel vuoto, visto che, come ebbe a scrivere Montale, «nessuno», anche il più innocente, «è incolpevole»?'. Anna Dolfi, 'Lo Spleen di Parigi e il senso di colpa', in *Echi di Tabucchi/ Échos de Tabucchi. Actes du Colloque international d'Aix-en-Provence, 12-13 gennaio 2007*, in *Italies* (2007), 29-45 (29).



between walking and flying – in *Il piccolo naviglio*,<sup>401</sup> which narrates how the character's encounter with a wounded bird prompts his game of *ilinx*, in the form of a derealising compulsion to fly, that Tabucchi calls 'una molla segreta':

Ma esistono le gru. E le gru sono uccelli migratori che svernano nei paesi mediterranei e nell'Africa settentrionale [...] Finché un giorno ne arrivò una. [...] Leonido la portò a casa sottobraccio [...]. Forse cominciò a volare proprio quella sera d'autunno, sul viale di casa, con una gru fra le braccia: lo spingeva una leggiadria uccellesca, una molla segreta, una natura fino allora taciuta o nascosta [...].<sup>402</sup>

Tellingly, Leonido establishes a pragmatics of meaning production with the animal that goes beyond an instrumental, communicative use of language in the direction of a pre-symbolic production of sense:

Qualcosa successe in quel lontano inverno [...] quando un uomo che risponde al doppio nome di Leonida-Leonido cominciò a ritirarsi privatamente con l'uccello, a seguirne con l'occhio i passi e i brevi voli, a fissare su dei fogli, con schizzi improvvisi, un'apertura alare, una piuma, una vescica natatoria, uno scheletro. I due amici trovarono il linguaggio comune che non è né la favella umana né la lingua ornitologica, ma un sistema di segni di comunicazione, al di là del raziocinio umano, che per comodità e convenzione gli uomini comuni definiscono follia. [...] E si capirono. Risero insieme [...] e insieme spiccarono lo stesso volo.<sup>403</sup>

Leonida's desire to fly is best understood as a path to meaning, as a gesture of world- and self-intelligibility; contextually, it retains an ontological value, given that 'Leonido pensava degli uccelli: che fossero nati per pertinacia e per sfida alla natura, per rivincita sulle leggi della fisica che li avrebbero voluti goffi e saltellanti sulla terra; insomma che si erano ribellati e avevano vinto'.<sup>404</sup> Leonido's uncanny drive diegetically develops as a game of vertigo:

Accoccolato davanti alla finestrella [...] era intento a dare affettuosi colpetti alle perline del lampadario nuziale, allineate come nel gioco delle biglie, sporgendosi a ogni colpo a vederle cadere. [...] Argia pianse in segreto [...] sulla certezza che la malattia della gravità galoppava nelle vene del suo disgraziato consorte.<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Leonida is the progenitor of Capitan Sesto, the protagonist of the novel, who remembers his figure in an attempt to recollect and narrate the story of his family.

<sup>402</sup> *Il piccolo naviglio* (1978), 2nd edition (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2011), p. 30.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

And resembling ‘un fantoccio [...] involontario imitatore di fantocci’ is how Leonido is described in his attempt to actualise his ascendant impulse, ‘un tuffo: un volo ad angelo di dieci metri, dal cornicione che correva sulla parete superiore della montagna, fino alle creste inferiori [...]’.<sup>406</sup>

The hypothetical narration of Leonido’s death is also dual: a realistic chronicle might imagine that ‘minato da una paralisi progressiva conseguente alla sua caduta (quella vera), si spense seduto su di una sedia sotto un orribile lampadario di vetro’,<sup>407</sup> thus adumbrating a kind of equivalence between the gravitational force he tried to disobey and the law of retaliation. A more absurd version, on the contrary, could recount ‘la scena di una tragedia ilare, lieve e velata come le cose del sogno’ in which ‘l’uomo-uccello [...] precipita dolcemente, trasportato dal vento, come un aquilone dal filo spezzato’: ‘GRAVITAS ME RAPUIT’ would be engraved on his tombstone.<sup>408</sup>

Furthermore, Leonido’s vertiginous flight anticipates and prefigures another fatal fall; in the chapter ‘Aeroplani di carta’, a title that confers a sense of playful lightness upon the episode, the protagonist Capitan Sesto hears the story of his girlfriend Ivana’s death:

Ma l’Ivana detta Rosa non stette ad aspettare i poliziotti: fece dietro-front e cominciò a correre con i suoi volantini o ‘l’Unità’ che fosse. Forse non si era accorta che dall’altra parte del ponte c’era un nugolo di poliziotti che sbarrava l’uscita. [...] È impossibile sapere come fece l’Ivana detta Rosa a emergere dal nugolo di poliziotti come una catapulta [...] Quelli che potevano guardare dalle spallette dei Lungarni *la videro volare* di sotto. La gonna le si gonfiò a palloncino e i volantini, o i giornali che fossero, le sfuggirono di mano e disegnarono uno stormo di aeroplani di carta che continuarono a svolazzare a lungo in aria [...] e poi, volteggiando, alcuni di quei fogli le si posarono intorno, altri, invece planarono sull’acqua come tante barchette e partirono dondolandosi.<sup>409</sup>

However, Leonida experiences ‘self-withdrawal [...] depersonalization’ characterised by a feeling of ‘automation and self-spectatorship’<sup>410</sup> and that is reciprocated by ‘self-revelation’, one’s understanding of being ‘the kind of entity that has possibilities at all’ and that ‘sense-making is a telos to which I’m bound and so to which I am committed’.<sup>411</sup> Ivana’s fall, on the other hand, could be grasped as a dialectics between world-withdrawal

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., pp. 187-88, italicised.

<sup>410</sup> I derive the four-part schema of the uncanny mood from Wither (pp. 64-65).

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., pp. 66-67.

and world-revelation: the former defines the moment when ‘the world loses its articulation and everything slips into an undifferentiated mass’<sup>412</sup> – expressed here through the metaphor of the floating leaflets –, while in the latter ‘the world shows up with its logic or structure on display [...] as a unified whole – as it hangs together’.<sup>413</sup> The latter is suggested by the fact that Ivana’s flyers seem to pattern new semiotic configurations and intelligible shapes, such as those of a bevy or of some little boats. This last image is all the more important since ‘il piccolo naviglio’ from the novel’s title alludes to Sesto’s attempt to symbolise, to make sense of his forgotten childhood and to find his real identity and sense, thus suggesting a parallelism between the boat motif and (Tabucchi’s) writing.<sup>414</sup>

Also the short story ‘Gli incanti’ is entirely developed around the gaming model of ilinx, at the level of both content and form. First, the narrating child describes the attempt of his cousin, a young girl named Clelia, to kill her stepfather, whom she deems responsible for her father’s death. She does so by playing voodoo games: ‘le sue mani magre con le unghie rosicchiate che sistemavano il vestito bianco di quel bambolotto così curioso, col papillon, un risolino: ti piace?, ti piace?, non ti ricorda nessuno? [...] tu ripeti con me questa parola [...] con convinzione, altrimenti non funziona nulla. E infine quello spillone brandito come un pugnale’.<sup>415</sup> Immediately, though stupefied by aunt Ester’s words – ‘gioca tanto, tanto, ti scongiuro, ragazzino mio. Come preghiera era abbastanza buffa’<sup>416</sup> – the child realises that ‘ormai non era più un gioco come quelli degli anni precedenti, un gioco così, per passare l’estate’,<sup>417</sup> and even the girl’s usual toys are endowed with a sense of the uncanny: ‘guardavo tutte le bambole di Clelia allineate nello scaffale, non mi piacevano quelle bambole, avevano qualcosa di cattivo, di minaccioso’.<sup>418</sup> Second, the story tracks a correspondence between Clelia’s walleye<sup>419</sup> and the vertiginously precipitating events. At the beginning, ‘l’occhio di Clelia roteava come impazzito [...] vorticosamente’ while she explains to the narrator that she believes her mother to be ‘stregata [...] diciamo meglio,

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., pp. 61-62.

<sup>414</sup> Thus, at the end of the novel, Sesto ‘comprò una penna e un quaderno, perché, per sciogliere finalmente i nodi della sua vela, aveva fretta di cominciare a scrivere questa storia’ (*Il piccolo naviglio*, p. 202).

<sup>415</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 59.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>419</sup> Analysing Hoffman’s *The Sandman*, Freud significantly attaches an uncanny value to the motif of the eye, as a symbol of the fear of castration, that is the feeling of being controlled by and at the mercy of an external agent.

*possessa*, dato che la fattura era opera di un essere diabolico [...] lo zio Tullio come Satana'.<sup>420</sup> Then, the fact that Clelia 'si tolse gli occhiali [...] e il suo occhio sinistro cominciò a girare all'impazzata, non l'avevo mai visto vorticare così'<sup>421</sup> signals the success of her first voodoo trial on the servant Flora. And finally, 'si era tolta gli occhiali e il suo occhio aveva preso a vorticare, mi guardò in modo terribile, sul suo volto c'era un'espressione di terrore e di nausea, e insieme di smarrimento',<sup>422</sup> when her game seems to cause her mother's – and not her stepfather's – death. The story also comprises several games of make-believe that emphasise the protagonists' naiveté, in contrast to their playing with life and death, which function as porous thresholds between inner and outer worlds, those same boundaries transgressed by the young girl's voodoo practices.

Finally, the wordplay Tabucchi orchestrates in the fictional letter 'La circolazione del sangue' belongs to the category of vertigo: 'Ebbene sì, a me piacciono i giochi di parole, detti anche calembour. Cala cala, caro mio, cala cala che qui tutto cola, ogni parola cola sul pavimento e si frange, spillaccherà [...] sembra un frattale, perché è fratta, poverina, è una frazione di noi [...]',<sup>423</sup> while 'Strana forma di vita' juxtaposes the childish game of *ilinx* to adults' agon:

[M]agari i nostri papà giocheranno anche a biliardo, che è un gioco che imita la vita perché è pieno di angoli retti, ottusi e acuti, che è il percorso che devono fare le biglie, ma noi invece gireremo in circolo, il girotondo si fa beffa degli spigoli.<sup>424</sup>

In conclusion, although this is just a sample of the most significant and recurrent games Tabucchi's characters play, it is nonetheless revealing of some trends in his ludic strategy. First, central to his texts is the ludic mechanism of mimicry; arguably, this uncovers an ongoing identification of reality with (mostly theatrical) play, by virtue of which mimicry can be compared to the uncanny experience of sense-withdrawal. Games of make-believe in fact expose the discursive construction of reality, and serve to estrange this alienating network of pre-given narratives and meanings. However, as Foust observes, synecdochical games – those played by characters – have a dual purpose: they 'reflect the writer's

<sup>420</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 51, italics in the text.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>423</sup> *Si sta facendo*, p. 57.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

intuitive understanding of play in social experience while acting as metaphors (parts) that cue the reader to the narrative's (whole) thematic purpose'.<sup>425</sup> Tabucchi, therefore, and this is the second point, also uses play to uncover and represent humanity's uncanniness. Characters play uncanny games of signification in an attempt to produce and negotiate the sense of their own lives. While mimicry negates familiar meaning, agon, chance and vertigo are the ludic generators of significance. However it seems that, unlike the games of alea, those of competition and ilinx aim more at creating a safe place and protecting the subject from the traumatic real, and solely to a lesser degree, at really producing new patterns of sense – for which the presence of an element of chance appears necessary.

### 3.2 Defining Play: Between Postmodern Irony and Agamben's Profanation

The section examines Tabucchi's ludism alongside postmodern irony<sup>426</sup> and Agamben's idea of (post-metaphysical) profanation.<sup>427</sup> In doing this, it fundamentally addresses two questions. Firstly, what is Tabucchi's play? And secondly, how does the author play? Among the many definitions of the term play,<sup>428</sup> following Ehrmann's pivotal '*Homo Ludens* revisited',<sup>429</sup> I will first consider (Tabucchi's) play as an 'articulation, opening and

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<sup>425</sup> Ronald E. Foust, 'The Rules of the Game: A Para-Theory of Literary Theories', *South Central Review*, 3.4 (Winter, 1986), 5-14 (8).

<sup>426</sup> Postmodern irony constitutes 'the central mode of consciousness of postmodernism and [...] marks the postmodern attitude of disenchantment towards the totalizing narratives [...] and is also one of the main strategies used by postmodernist fiction to retain the ability to represent the world while raising awareness of art's own status as cultural artifice and potential instrument of power'. *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. by Salvatore Attardo (London: Sage, 2014), p. 589.

<sup>427</sup> Tabucchi explicitly suggests a parallelism between metaphysical nihilism and the literary forms of ludism as 'anything goes', on the one hand, and between post-metaphysical sense making and a serious understanding of the ludic, on the other. For the writer, since antiquity men have lived in the 'illusione che le geometrie, grazie ai loro perimetri e gradi di angoli, riuscissero a circoscrivere i sogni e il desiderio. E qui mi infilerei in un labirinto pericoloso se mi mettessi a parlare del labirinto [...] per arrivare magari fino alle parole incrociate o a certi rompicapi con cui si è misurata persino la letteratura più recente, vedi il compianto Georges Perec e i suoi compagni di Oulipo'. *Racconti con figure* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2011), pp. 237-38.

<sup>428</sup> Broadly speaking, there are two main theoretical threads concerning play and its interaction with literature: the mathematical theory of social games based on strategic calculation, and the philosophical-anthropological approach which includes contributions spanning from Plato to Schiller, and which reaches its climax in the systematisation operated by Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1938), Caillois' *Man, Play and Games* (1958) and Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (1971).

closing of and through language',<sup>430</sup> which makes possible and gives shape to the subject's experience of the real. Play is a playing of, over and with the real, a specific modality through which to make sense of the world and of one's dwelling in it: since reality has a game-like function,<sup>431</sup> play turns out to be a modality of being. This is strictly related to postmodern irony, for postmodernism is traditionally equated with the idea of inhabiting a world ruled by randomness and chaos: its playful attitude is thus regarded as a reaction to this historical condition. While some scholars read postmodern irony as a modality of solipsistic retreat and disengagement, to others it signals a specific approach towards a potential process of sense making and a form of ethical attentiveness to the present. For instance, Erbert opposes postmodern playfulness to a 'postmodernism of resistance',<sup>432</sup> where the former is characterised by socio-political passivity and complicity with the status quo, while the latter is said to open up a niche of criticism. On the contrary, Wilde theorises postmodern ludic strategy in terms of a 'suspensive irony' that defines 'the tolerance of a fundamental uncertainty about the meanings and relations of things in the world'<sup>433</sup> and that is balanced by the so-called 'generative irony', which constitutes 'an attempt [...] to create, tentatively and provisionally, anironic enclaves of values in the face of – but not in the place of – a meaningless universe'.<sup>434</sup> These are, indeed, the two moments and movements that also punctuate Tabucchi's ludic discourse – and, more broadly, the uncanny:

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<sup>429</sup> Jacques Ehrmann, 'Homo Ludens revisited', *Yale French Studies*, No. 41, Game, Play, Literature (1968), 31-57. Interestingly, Ehrmann reprimands both Huizinga and Caillois for their dichotomisation between play and reality, maintaining that 'play cannot be defined by isolating it on the basis of its relationship to an a priori reality and culture. To define play is at the same time and in the same movement to define reality and to define culture [...] since] the distinguishing characteristic of reality is that it is played' (55).

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>431</sup> Significantly, for Tabucchi the place of happiness is similar to a game: 'esso consiste di una città tutta virtuale [...] ha la forma di una scacchiera circolare e si estende per miglia e miglia: e ogni giorno i pellegrini con un semplice gesso muovono gli edifici a loro piacimento come se fossero scacchi [...]. Al centro della scacchiera sorge una torre in cima alla quale posa un'enorme sfera dorata [...] questa sfera è il dio. [...] Arguisco che esso abbia relazione con l'idea della completezza, della pienezza e della perfezione: un'idea altamente astratta e poco comprensibile dall'intelletto umano. Ed è per questo che io ho pensato trattarsi del dio della Felicità' (*Donna*, pp. 16-17).

<sup>432</sup> Teresa L. Erbert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

<sup>433</sup> Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent. Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 132.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

O non si scriverà piuttosto per gioco? Ma non il puro gioco, come pretendeva l'avanguardia dell'avantieri in Italia e anche altrove, cioè la letteratura intesa come parole crociate che è tanto utile per ammazzare il tempo. Il gioco naturalmente c'entra, ma è un gioco che non ha niente a che vedere con gli scherzi in cui eccellono certi giocolieri, i prestidigitatori della domenica che sanno come dilettere lo spettabile pubblico. È semmai un gioco che somiglia a quello dei bambini. Di una terribile serietà. Perché quando un bambino gioca mette tutto in gioco. Prende un sassolino e, seduto sul gradino di casa, mentre scende la sera, reggendo il sassolino sul palmo della mano dice che quel sassolino è il mondo. Sottolineo: non lo pensa soltanto, ma lo dice, perché è *solo quando lo dice* che il sortilegio si avvera e il sassolino diventa il mondo: è *il patto assoluto*. Il bambino sa che se quel sassolino cadesse il mondo precipiterebbe, l'universo in cui il mondo gira sarebbe perturbato, gli astri impazzirebbero e avanzerebbe il caos. Sa che finché durerà il gioco avrà nelle mani le sorti del mondo.<sup>435</sup>

If Tabucchi's gesture as a writer can be compared to a child toying with the world, in what ways and to what extent does the ludic signify the real? Answering this question introduces us to the second aspect of play, for ludism entails an idea of looseness, of making room for potential movement, though a limited space within a bound system. This is a crucial point, since postulating limits or a system in relation to and inside which play operates distinguishes Tabucchi's textual ludism from Derrida's play of *différance*,<sup>436</sup> or the endless deferral of meaning, and brings it closer, for instance, to Iser's recognition of the ludic as the interaction between instrumental and free play.<sup>437</sup>

As with the uncanny in general, Tabucchi's play does not trigger a ceaseless supplementation and dissemination of sense. It opens, instead, a locus and modus significandi, a negotiation of sense. It works similarly to Agamben's idea of profanation.

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<sup>435</sup> *Di tutto*, pp. 17-18, italicised. This is an interpretation that he substantiates by making reference to Caillois and Huizinga: 'Giocare non significa scherzare, in questo caso. È un gioco che appartiene ai *Giochi degli uomini*, per dirla con il Caillois antropologo; e Huizinga, da parte sua, lo ha spiegato molto bene nell'*Homo ludens*'. Marco Alloni, *Una realtà parallela: dialogo con Antonio Tabucchi* (Lugano: ADV, 2008), p. 41. It is at this level of the ludic as poetics that, I shall argue, the literary discourse questions itself as a mode of signification, thus orchestrating textual games in order to explore the possibility of oblique, plural, absent, redundant meaning. And, in a way, the 'patto assoluto' mentioned by Tabucchi corresponds precisely to the fictional agreement he posits to the reader.

<sup>436</sup> 'One could call play the absence of the transcendental signified as the limitlessness of play, that is to say the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence' (*Of Grammatology*, p. 50).

<sup>437</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). Iser interestingly observes that in literary play 'we open ourselves up to the unfamiliar [...] and become present to ourselves' (p. 259).

First, play has a ‘vocazione puramente profana’ that is ‘[l]a creazione di un nuovo uso [...] disattivando un vecchio uso’<sup>438</sup>: like the uncanny, it negates a negative familiarity that has in turn repressed the possibility of a non-instrumental experience of and relationship with things.<sup>439</sup> As Agamben explains in ‘Il paese dei balocchi. Riflessioni sulla storia e sul gioco’, reversing the functioning of rituals and of the sacred, play displaces and explodes a self-iterating, conservative experience of time: the economy of play is that of a disconnection from the time one inhabits and a suspension of the means-ends logic. While profanation is radically ludic and affirmative, play turns out to be a major act of undoing,<sup>440</sup> as it discloses the contingency of and therefore the possibility for things to be otherwise.<sup>441</sup>

Second, as practice of profanation, play is a sort of counter-apparat, since it aims at deactivating ‘anything that has the capacity to capture, order and model the gestures, the behaviours, the discourses or the opinions of living beings’.<sup>442</sup> Apparatuses administer processes of subjectification or, rather, de-subjectification, since they reduce human agency to passive acceptance of pre-established roles. Thus, for instance, a cell phone is an apparatus that reduces humans to easily governable numbers. Language, too, is an apparatus. It is the most ancient and most important one, given the fact that, as seen in chapter 1, for Agamben living beings become proper subjects only by acquiring and entering language. In this regard, play neutralises the linguistic apparatus – and its appropriation by, among others, law, politics and the mass media – just as the *unheimliche* deactivates Saussurean semiosis. This vision is at the basis of Tabucchi’s ludism, which

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<sup>438</sup> *Profanazioni*, p. 99.

<sup>439</sup> Exemplarily, ‘[i]l gatto che gioca col gomito come se fosse un topo – esattamente come il bambino con antichi simboli religiosi o con oggetti che appartenevano alla sfera economica – usa consapevolmente a vuoto i comportamenti propri dell’attività predatoria (o, nel caso del bambino, del culto religioso o del mondo del lavoro)’ (ibid.).

<sup>440</sup> In a similar manner, Iser concludes that textual play, though apparently negative, is to be understood in the productive terms of negativity ‘which is basically an enabling structure [...] far from negative in its effects’ (p. 259).

<sup>441</sup> Even Pereira’s progressive becoming aware of his role and of his ethical responsibility – and hence of the contingent nature of the (fascistic) reality he inhabits – originates when he ‘capì che era in gioco e che doveva giocare. E stranamente capì che era in grado di farlo’ (*Sostiene Pereira*, p. 22). However, Tabucchi explicitly admits and acknowledges the limitedness of his ludus, the existence of forbidden games, which, as in the homonymous short story, correspond to the impossibility of undoing what has actually taken place: ‘perché i giochi dell’essere [...] sono proibiti da ciò che dovendo essere è già stato. È il minuscolo eppure invalicabile Forbidden Game che ci impone il nostro Attuale’ (*Si sta facendo*, p. 50).

<sup>442</sup> ‘Introduction’, *The Agamben Dictionary*, p. 10.



defines the uncanny attempt to signify otherwise, to estrange language from its familiar uses, to keep it open as a potentiality for sense making.

### 3.2.1 Signifying *Otherwise*: Playing By/With the Rules

With Tabucchi, ludic profanation occurs in the guise of playing with rather than by the rules. Play is the way the uncanny tries to estrange the discursive practices and processes of signification inherent in the apparatuses. Playing with rather than by their rules is the mode in which his texts and his characters explore and negotiate the possibilities and limits of sense making, both of which aim at reappropriating the signifying function of language. The short story ‘Il battito d’ali di una farfalla a New York può provocare un tifone a Pechino?’, which is structured around a deposition made by the informer ‘Signor Farfalla’, driven and imposed by the fascistic ‘Dottor Coscienza’, plays with the rules of law.<sup>443</sup> The text might be considered as a metafictional reflection on the genesis and the telling of a story, for, as Palmieri observes, ‘è addirittura una metastoria in quanto narra come si dovrebbe (e non si dovrebbe) raccontare la storia stessa del racconto [...] è un microtrattato di retorica narrativa di tipo prescrittivo’.<sup>444</sup> Equally, in this light, the allusion to chaos theory, already present in the title,<sup>445</sup> testifies to the fact that ‘language is recognized not as a neutral occasion for the direct transferral of meaning, but as a chaotic generator of significance’.<sup>446</sup> Likewise, the story might also be read as a confession, both religious and judicial – ‘la sua confessione deve cominciare esattamente così [...] tutto quello che dirà è basato sul pentimento [...] lei ha un nome in codice col quale noi

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<sup>443</sup> Admittedly, the text fictionalises the confession by the ‘pentito’ Leonardo Marino that initiated the Sofri trial. Adriano Sofri, head of the leftist movement *Lotta Continua*, was arrested in 1988 and sentenced to twenty-two years in prison for having instigated the murder of the police officer Luigi Calabresi, as testified by Marino, who confessed to being the get-away driver in the assassination. Many intellectuals (including Tabucchi, Sciascia and the historian Carlo Ginzburg) questioned the validity of Marino’s deposition, which appeared to be full of incongruities and omissions. Sofri was released in 2012 as his term of imprisonment had been reduced to 15 years. Although acknowledging a sort of moral responsibility for the murder, as he had written many ferocious articles against Calabresi, whom he deemed guilty for the death of the anarchist Pinelli back in 1969, Sofri has always proclaimed his factual innocence.

<sup>444</sup> Palmieri, p. 131.

<sup>445</sup> The title alludes to the so-called ‘butterfly effect’: one of the main pillars of chaos theory, it was theorised by Lorenz in his 1972 paper ‘Predictability: Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?’, and it describes how a minor change in initial conditions can massively affect subsequent events.

<sup>446</sup> Peter Stoicheff, ‘The Chaos of Metafiction’, in *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*, ed. by N. Katherine Hayles (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 85-99 (p. 86).

abbiamo deciso di battezzarla, [...]'.<sup>447</sup> The oscillation between the past and the conditional in the linguistic texture of the narrative mirrors the playful to-and-fro movement that, hovering between the principle of historical, actualising necessity and that of ludic contingency, makes room for the hypothetical:

E allora mi ascolti [...] le propongo un gioco. Giochiamo a fare una bella supposizione, è d'accordo? [...] Le ho detto che stiamo facendo un gioco [...] il gioco ora passa in mano sua [...] giochiamo questo gioco in maniera onesta [...].<sup>448</sup>

However, that 'Dottor Coscienza' forcefully determines the rules of the game shows how play, in order to create space for awareness and responsibility, needs to undergo a process of self-deactivation, profanating those degenerated forms in which it itself has lapsed. At what game are we – the characters and the readers – playing? In relation to the characters, I would argue for a game ascribable to the dual category of agon, given the contest-like quality of the confession, and mimicry, since it thematises and exposes the game, the process of storytelling as a rewriting of the real; in a way, agon defines the object of the game, while mimicry its how. On the reader's side, one could equally speak of agon, yet played against its own rules. As Iser comments,

[A]gon appears to be directed toward winning the game, but in postmodern literature is frequently used to play a losing game. This may entail all conflicts of norms and values being deliberately marked as things of the past [...] it may also show that all forms of meaning are nothing but defence mechanisms designed to achieve closure in a world where open-endedness reigns.<sup>449</sup>

A similar tension informs *L'oca al passo*, which aims to profanate<sup>450</sup> those media that 'hanno appunto lo scopo di neutralizzare questo potere profanatorio del linguaggio [...] emancipato dai suoi fini comunicativi'.<sup>451</sup> The title carries two interrelated references: the most explicit and immediate is that to the familiar board game 'gioco dell'oca', which straightaway signals the ludic dimension permeating the writing; the second alludes to the military goose-step, exposing the focus on critical episodes of recent and current history.

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<sup>447</sup> *L'angelo nero*, p. 73.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-81.

<sup>449</sup> Iser, p. 256.

<sup>450</sup> The term 'notizie' in the subtitle and the journalistic matrix of the texts collected in this work clearly indicates its central issue: the relationship between mass media and literature.

<sup>451</sup> *Profanazioni*, p. 102.

This is a ludic narrative in which the reader is called upon and eventually comes to the fore as the co-creator of meaning. As Tabucchi explains:

Il dado è tratto: siete in gioco. Potete giocarlo come volete. Se la vostra indole preferisce la consuetudine del pagina dopo pagina [...] la vostra lettura sarà solo passiva e il libro vi risulterà meno comprensibile perché frutto di un disegno prestabilito. Se invece volete prendervi parte attivamente [...] avete due opzioni [...].<sup>452</sup>

The address made to those ‘pagliacci funebri che guidano le sorti del mondo’<sup>453</sup> in the novel’s dedication to Susan Sontag illustrates how, for Tabucchi, a perverted game also marks our ontological condition: the world men inhabit is trapped in a self-renovating process of carnivalisation, where play has been deprived of its own role,<sup>454</sup> as is echoed by the reduction of literary games to sterile, authorial exercises or divertissement.

This is not the case for Tabucchi. Taking the lead from the recognition of the crisis of ‘lapalissian truth’, the reader is further instructed to choose between two paths<sup>455</sup> that converge, at the end of every round, on the so-called ‘casella garante’, the space occupied by the author’s direct plea to and accusation against Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, who was President of the Italian Republic at the time. The collection is split into seven sections, preceded by an introduction and followed by an authorial epilogue; every section – which corresponds to a round – comprises, in turn, various articles, each equivalent to a square in the board game. Still, the writer admits that he has orchestrated an ‘insolito gioco dell’oca’ in that it ‘sembrava lasciarvi scegliere tra due opzioni di percorso, ma conduceva allo

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<sup>452</sup> *L’oca al passo*, p. 17.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>454</sup> Agamben affirms that ‘[i]l gioco come organo della profanazione è ovunque in decadenza. Che l’uomo moderno non sappia più giocare è provato proprio dal moltiplicarsi vertiginoso di nuovi e vecchi giochi. [...] Restituire il gioco alla sua vocazione puramente profana è un compito politico.’ (*Profanazioni*, p. 111) In Bartezzaghi’s words, ‘[l]e diverse forme di degenerazione che Caillois puntualmente indicava sono tutte in atto: l’agon produce la concorrenza brutale e priva di regole, l’alea produce la superstizione, la mimicry produce la perdita dell’identità, l’impulso alla vertigine produce la ricerca dell’ebbrezza’. Stefano Bartezzaghi, ‘Il gioco infinito. Forme, linguaggi, sconfinamenti, patologie’, *Aut Aut. Indagini sul gioco* (January-March 2008), 3-21 (19).

<sup>455</sup> ‘Unless one ignores the author’s recommendations and reads the collection from start to finish in strictly linear fashion, the experience of reading this text is therefore one of looping in and out of its various sections, changing direction and pace according to the latest instruction.’ Jennifer Burns, ‘Re-thinking Impegno (again): Reading, Ethics and Pleasure’, in *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 61-80 (p. 69).

stesso punto'.<sup>456</sup> Concluding his reading, the reader might therefore experience a sense of enjoyment as well as a hint of frustration, finding himself guided by strict instructions along pre-established routes. While the opening reference to the dice and the same rules of the Italian board game may suggest that this text belongs to Caillois' category of aleatory games, the author's dominant presence and intention seem to dispute it. Is it, then, merely a superficial freedom that one experiences in reading a playful text? The answer is negative. As Francese observes, 'Tabucchi neither seeks to absolve himself from responsibility for his text by claiming that the reader is the only creator of meaning, nor does he seek to impose a univocal reading'.<sup>457</sup> In a way, at the end of the book, the reader finds himself in Spino's condition, since, as Tabucchi writes about the protagonist of *Il filo*, 'Spino ha fatto un giro a vuoto, è tornato al punto di partenza come nel gioco dell'oca. Alla fine del suo percorso capisce che ha giocato al gioco dell'oca, e che forse la vita stessa è un gioco dell'oca'.<sup>458</sup> Spino concludes his investigation with laughter, the ironical self-awareness that, facing the impossibility of reaching an ultimate truth, what remains, and what truly matters, is vertiginously revolving around it, dis-locating it. Likewise, the reader of *L'oca al passo*, being involved in a game of ilinx, does not gain access to a new sense or value, beyond that of the act of questioning itself. Tabucchi's literature is ethical to the extent to which it is an investigation of sense. This is essential for understanding his insistence on defining this work as a literary one, even a novel:

Le pagine di questo libro erano articoli di giornale, e continuano ad esserlo, se lette isolatamente: pezzi di una realtà complessa che ci circonda e che si lascia osservare soltanto in parte, tenendo aperte le valenze di cui non ci accorgiamo, se ci contentiamo della campionatura, e che si spalancano sull'ignoto. [...] Il tutto ci è vietato, ma del tutto possiamo conoscere parti sufficienti a farci capire di più se riusciamo a collegarle tra di loro [...]. In questo libro ho cercato di fare questo, intendendolo una forma di romanzo, in maniera forse illegittima per chi concepisce la letteratura come un manuale, in maniera più plausibile per chi è convinto che la letteratura sia una forma di conoscenza attraverso la scrittura. In questo caso una conoscenza dei legami e delle analogie fra fatti e avvenimenti suggerita con le regole di un vecchio gioco italiano, il gioco dell'oca.<sup>459</sup>

Nevertheless, the ethical potentiality of literature cannot be measured against praxis. As Tabucchi writes in the epilogue, 'il gioco è dunque finito. [...] È giusto che uno scrittore, a

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<sup>456</sup> *L'oca al passo*, p. 165.

<sup>457</sup> Joseph Francese, 'Satire and Social Commitment in Tabucchi's *L'oca al passo*', *MLR*, 103.4 (October 2008), 1006-1020 (1009).

<sup>458</sup> *Autobiografie altrui*, p. 56. Actually *Il filo dell'orizzonte* might be described as an ontological quest through the detective genre.

<sup>459</sup> *L'oca al passo*, p. 8.

un certo punto, ceda il testimone della visione diretta della realtà e riprenda i suoi strumenti più consoni. [...] Il futuro è di vostra competenza: pensateci voi'.<sup>460</sup>

Play also functions as a counter-apparat in the novel *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro*, where the card game 'Milligan' turns into a metaphorical representation of politics: as Loton, the lawyer, explains to the novice journalist Firmino, who is investigating the murder and beheading of a young man in Porto, 'il Milligan è molto interessante [...] è basato sulle mosse che ciascun giocatore esegue al fine di frapporre trappole per limitare il gioco dell'avversario che viene dopo di lui, e così a catena, come nelle discussioni internazionali di Ginevra'.<sup>461</sup> However, the paradoxical logic underpinning the card game itself encompasses the possibility of its own undoing, so that the barrister plays it as a 'solitario, in modo da essere simultaneamente me stesso e il mio avversario'.<sup>462</sup> Doubling the subject playing the game constitutes another example of agon played towards losing a game, in Tabucchi's attempt to disentangle ludic rules from their ritualised aspect, estranging conventional instructions and re-articulating them as potential patterns of uncanny signification.

Ultimately, Agamben's idea of profanation finds its ideal ludic counterpart in the playing of mimicry, in the game of (dis)simulation. In Tabucchi's short story 'Festival', mimicry discloses, denaturalises and toys with rules to make room for original, free practices of meaning creation. Attending an exhibition that pays posthumous homage to a famous director, a screenwriter tells the narrator that the filmmaker's greatest movie is the one that never got to be actually shot; a movie set in politicised trials, where the appearance of the camera would turn the farce of the court into a game of make-believe:

[E]ro un avvocato dello stato, per conto dello stato difendevo le persone che lo stato voleva condannare, non so se capisce il circolo vizioso, stavo dentro un circolo vizioso, ero il cane che si mordeva la coda, anzi, ero la coda morsa dal cane. [...] Anch'io allora in qualche modo stavo al gioco [...] ma si sta al gioco anche se è truccato quando si spera che un giorno esca la carta vincente, è questa la perversità del circolo vizioso [...]. E l'imprevisto fu che la porta dell'aula si aprì [...] e fece entrare un giovanotto che portava una macchina da presa e un microfono [...].<sup>463</sup>

The repeated, almost obsessive use of the words 'stato' and 'circolo vizioso' try to convey, from a linguistic point of view, the pervasiveness of a politicised state, the exclusive

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>461</sup> *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997), p. 166.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>463</sup> *Il tempo invecchia*, pp. 126-130.

producer and occupier of its own discursive regime. In light of the impossibility of escaping a saturated, vicious circle, constituting a sort of ludic loop, it is playful contingency – ‘l’imprevisto’ – that provides a potential way out. The act of mimicry, which hovers between illusion and referentiality – the filmmaker is defined as ‘l’illusionista che aveva incantato le fiere cambiando sotto gli occhi degli spettatori il numero del circo’ –,<sup>464</sup> counters and deactivates the functioning of law precisely by exposing and exploiting its fictitious, demystifying nature. Hence when ‘l’imputato [...] non era neppure una persona, era una recita [...] era la maniera di mettere in scena quello spettacolo, considerata sovversiva [...]. Venga a filmare un processo alla finzione, gli dissi, un processo alla pura finzione’,<sup>465</sup> the trial to fiction is reversed into, or unmasked as, a fictional process.

The barrister/scriptwriter’s memory is narrated as if it were a game in its own right – ‘meglio scherzarci sopra’,<sup>466</sup> he tells the narrator. It combines several popular proverbs and aphorisms – ‘se stasera non dorme piglia un pesce insolito’ or ‘è come Achille e la tartaruga’ – and is dominated by the two tropes of hypotyposis, such as ‘la violenza era grigia, neanche in bianco e nero, grigia, e io dovevo adeguarmi a quel grigio, perché ero il grigio funzionario di uno stato’, and hyperbole – ‘c’era un silenzio, in quell’aula, [...] un silenzio di tomba [...] anzi [...] un silenzio d’oltretomba’.<sup>467</sup> This playful thread reaches its climax at the moment when the screenwriter remembers how he persuaded the director to keep filming his trials, despite having run out of film:

Fu così che vennero filmati i miei processi successivi [...] con la macchina da presa vuota, e ogni volta le sentenze furono generosamente indulgenti. Di quel breve documentario [...] le immagini girate senza pellicola, sono le più emozionanti, ma queste vivono solo nell’archivio della mia memoria [...] la cosa più buffa di tutta questa storia è la frase che gli dissi per convincerlo a venire a filmare senza pellicola: maestro, qui si tratta della realtà, non di un film. Pensi un po’ alla sciocchezza che dissi: qui si tratta della realtà, non di un film.<sup>468</sup>

Toying with the real, the uncanny undoes and others the apparatuses of reality, deactivating their network of naturalised discourses and procedures. Tabucchi’s playing with rather than by rules produces a textual game of (dis)simulation that eventually exposes how reality is governed by alienation, a deteriorated form of mimicry.

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., pp. 133-34.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid., pp. 126-31.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

### 3.3 Tabucchi's Ludism: Illusion and Allusion

Tabucchi's textual ludism has two main narrative strategies: illusion and allusion. Play is etymologically implicated in both terms, but illusion – from the Latin 'in ludus', meaning 'being within the game' or that 'un'illusione (ci) mette in gioco'<sup>469</sup> – focuses on how Tabucchi questions the interplay between literature and the real. What is at stake when it comes to illusion is the first aspect of play, being a specific modality through which it is possible to make sense of the real and of one's dwelling in it. Allusion – from the Latin 'ad ludus', meaning 'playing with' – emphasises, conversely, an estranging approach towards the literary *modus significandi*. It is an invitation to play,<sup>470</sup> through which the writer explores and questions literature as a practice of signification. Both illusion and allusion are revealing of how, for Tabucchi, the ludic forms an attempt to experience language freed from metaphysical reification, and of how it inaugurates a rethinking of semiosis on an uncanny basis, seeking a modality of signifying otherwise.

#### 3.3.1 Tabucchi's Illusion: Metaleptic Games

Illusion, in Tabucchi, is grounded on the metafictional<sup>471</sup> trope of metalepsis. Bound up with ideas of boundaries and thresholds, it re-articulates the relationship between writing

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<sup>469</sup> Ermanno Bencivenga, *Filosofia in gioco* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2013), Amazon Kindle e-book (Chapter 7, location 881).

<sup>470</sup> And with an invitation to play begin also two texts previously analysed: 'Il battito d'ali' and *L'oca al passo*.

<sup>471</sup> Moreover, metafiction is essential in order to differentiate between a loose characterisation of the term ludic fiction, understood as literary pragmatics, as the institution of a pact between the reader and the text within the two polarities of antagonism and cooperation, closure and open-endedness, and a more circumscribed sense by which it defines those texts 'in which the rules of textual production and operation are sufficiently unusual to become noticeable in features of the text itself. [...] The ludic is one of the ways in which writing can be seen as reflecting on its own production'. David Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction: Georges Perec and Modern French Ludic Narrative* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 17. Stoicheff also suggests that it does constitute 'an investigation of the chaos of meaning's production [...] yet, as in the phenomenal world, hidden structures exist within this apparent chaos, which emerge when instability is given its due' (Stoicheff, pp. 87-88).

and the real,<sup>472</sup> while embodying the ludic movement along the various levels of the text. Borrowing Foust's classification of literary games, the writer's metaleptic illusion constitutes a 'game of logos', since it 'functions as a subliminal cue directing the reader's attention to the homologies between reality and imagination' and presupposes the belief that 'the entropic structurelessness of natural experience aspires to the condition of fiction, that contingency desires to become textuality' and vice versa.<sup>473</sup> Metalepsis produces a process of complication and self-questioning that collapses rational mastery and hypostatisation: this is precisely how, Schwarz Lausten suggests, 'invece di riempire il vuoto, la scrittura di Tabucchi apre in un certo senso dei nuovi spazi vuoti'.<sup>474</sup>

Defined by Genette as 'any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse',<sup>475</sup> metalepsis blends 'the fictional world and the ontological level occupied by the author'.<sup>476</sup> This narratological figure shares several aspects with the *unheimliche*: both entail 'a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality';<sup>477</sup> like the uncanny, metalepsis is not a static textual locus, but rather a drive underpinning and animating writing; and finally, metalepsis undoes representational language, through defamiliarisation.<sup>478</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> Metalepsis is usually regarded as an illusion-breaking device. However, its association with Tabucchi's ludic strategy of illusion is coherent and consistent with my use of the latter in terms of a problematisation of the referential encounter with the real. As Iser indicates, 'mimicry is a play pattern designed to generate illusion. [...] If the illusion, however, is punctured and so revealed as what it is, the world it depicts turns into a looking glass enabling the referential world outside the text to be observed' (p. 256).

<sup>473</sup> Foust, 9.

<sup>474</sup> Schwarz Lausten, p. 69.

<sup>475</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 234-35.

<sup>476</sup> McHale, p. 213.

<sup>477</sup> Royle, p. 2.

<sup>478</sup> Thus Tabucchi exits, or deactivates, the debate concerning the effect of metalepsis; as for the latter, scholars tend to draw a distinction between those who consider it an illusion-breaking device and those who champion it as a narratological trigger of aesthetic immersion. See: Karin Kukkonen, 'Metalepsis in Popular Culture: An Introduction', in *Metalepsis in Popular Culture*, ed. by Karin Kukkonen and Sonja Klimek (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), pp. 1-21.



### 3.3.2 Use and Forms: Intradiegetic Metalepsis

How does Tabucchi's ludic metalepsis work? Three main modalities can be tracked in the writer's oeuvre: intradiegetic, extra-textual and peri-textual.

Indicative of the first type, in 'Dolores Ibarurri versa lacrime amare' the mother of a dead terrorist evokes the games of make-believe his son used to play as a child: Piticche and his father 'si scrivevano delle lettere, facevano un gioco, era un gioco bellissimo, [...] leggevano dei libri e poi si scrivevano delle lettere come se ciascuno di loro fosse un personaggio di libri che avevano letto'.<sup>479</sup> Alongside writing, the act of directing/acting in a play or a film marks a habitual metaleptic pattern. This can be seen, for example, in 'Casta Diva' with the doubling between the level of the letter in the frame, sent by the narrator to his beloved 'donna gentile', and that of the letter en abyme, sent by the opera director – truly, the narrator's split disguise – to the same woman, 'con una cornice, una specie di finestra a tutto teatro, grazie alla quale, come in certi quadri di Magritte, il fuori sembrava entrare nel dentro e annullarlo'.<sup>480</sup> The caesura between the two diegetic levels (and the two letters) is signalled both linguistically – 'Passo, dunque, la mano e mi ritiro fra le quinte',<sup>481</sup> says the lover – and visually, through the use of three asterisks, and by including the nested letter between double inverted commas and double breaking space. Analogously, in 'Cinema' the director's cut literally and textually opens a gap between the actors' lives and the film they are actually shooting, between the desire to re-experience their past together and the re-making of the film in which they first met and acted: the situation creates an experience 'tipo cinema-verità, ma finto [...] la recita dentro la recita, con noi che stiamo lì dentro a recitare noi stessi'.<sup>482</sup>

*Notturmo indiano* constitutes the strongest example of a self-erasing and looping text: as McHale indicates, 'the paradoxical continuity between the nested narrative and the primary narrative, violating and thus foregrounding the hierarchy of ontological levels',<sup>483</sup> generates an effect comparable to a visual 'trompe-l'oeil, deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world'.<sup>484</sup> In the novel's

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<sup>479</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 99.

<sup>480</sup> *Si sta facendo*, p. 66.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>482</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 140.

<sup>483</sup> McHale, p. 120.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

final paragraphs the narrator seems to reverse what has thus far guaranteed continuity and consistency to the plot: the fact that he was searching for a friend lost in India:

La sostanza è che in questo libro io sono uno che si è perso in India [...] un altro mi sta cercando, ma io non ho nessuna intenzione di farmi trovare. [...] Ma [...] sono uno che non vuole farsi trovare, dunque non fa parte del gioco dire chi è. [...] Una volta mi conosceva, supponiamo che siamo stati grandi amici, un tempo. Ma questo succedeva molto tempo fa, fuori dalla cornice del libro. [...] Riesce evidentemente a sapere dove mi trovo [...] per scenario prendo questo. Supponiamo che sia una sera come questa, calda e profumata [...] supponiamo che abbia la cravatta [...].<sup>485</sup>

The narrative act is explicitly compared to ludic make-believe, while the plot reversal aptly demonstrates the topological functioning of the uncanny. Partly altering McHale's definition, however, the *mise en abyme* does not 'foreground the hierarchy of ontological levels'. Depth is solely an effect created and accrued by the folding of the writing.

A vertiginous rhythm moves and confuses, as in a glove turned inside out, the storyworld, the narration and the process of reading itself in 'Voci portate da qualcosa... impossibile dire cosa'. This is a meta-ludic narrative, which covers all the categories of game theorised by Caillois. The first-person narrator simultaneously plays and describes his personal game of literary creation, a game that consists in building a sort of vocal collage of phrases captured from strangers, while wandering around Pisa:

A volte può prendere il via con un gioco, un piccolo gioco segreto e quasi infantile che solo tu conosci e che per pudore non diresti mai a nessuno, cose così non si fanno, ma è un gioco, diciamo uno scherzo con se stessi, o con gli altri [...] ignari compagni del tuo gioco, anche se non lo sanno. Perché parlano. È un gioco facile, non costa niente, non ci sono regole se non con se stessi [...] basta una frase e tu decidi che è quella [...] ripeti la frase dentro di te un paio di volte, la assapori, una buona apertura, come delle buone carte in un poker [...] fino a creare una faccenda che non esisteva e che ora esiste: la tua storia.<sup>486</sup>

The turning point in the story occurs when the narrator hears a voice, which actually ventriloquises his own remorse, though he attributes it to his long-time friend Tadeus, reading it as an urgent request to meet. 'Voci portate' enhances the playful element<sup>487</sup> both in terms of content and form: on the thematic level, the category of *agon* is included

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<sup>485</sup> *Notturmo indiano*, pp. 102-07.

<sup>486</sup> *L'angelo nero*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>487</sup> Dolfi speaks of an 'ambigua sinonimia di *gioco/scherzo* (nel passaggio da una positività ludica a una ludicità inquietante)' (*Tabucchi, la specularità*, p. 183, italics in the text).

specifically through the insisted representations of card games – ‘vecchietti sempre col cappello, sputano spesso, giocano a carte’ – and football matches – ‘la Juventus sta perdendo [...] per via del terreno da gioco’ while ‘a ridosso del campo sportivo [...] alcuni ragazzini vestiti per un incontro di calcio [...] aspettano di cominciare la partita della domenica’.<sup>488</sup> To some extent, the narrator’s game is also informed by agonistic principles, given that the conditions of possibility as well as the rationale behind the literary discourse are explicitly equated with the rules of card playing:

[C]osi ti guardi intorno sorseggiando il tuo caffè, indeciso sul tavolo da scegliere. A quello di fondo c’è un poker drammatico, meglio di no; a quello vicino alla porta c’è uno scopone abbastanza animato; al tavolino dei raffinati una briscola a cinque, è un gioco strano la briscola a cinque, partecipa del caso e dell’astuzia, è un po’ come il tuo gioco con le parole, bisogna scegliere fra le carte che il caso ti attribuisce e grazie a quelle indovinare il tuo complice, perché hai un complice e bisogna indovinarlo fra quattro possibili complici, bisogna affidarsi alla sorte e all’intuito, va bene la briscola a cinque, avvicini una sedia e ti metti a guardare in silenzio [...].<sup>489</sup>

Contextually, Tabucchi designs a game of correspondences between the narrator’s unconscious need for a resolute appointment with his old, dead friend Tadeus and the young kids discussing whether or not to play their football match, considering the adverse climatic conditions: in the end, however, both the encounters have to take place on ‘*il giorno 10 maggio alle ore sei pomeridiane*’.<sup>490</sup> Arguably, creating tales out of overheard conversations also includes a certain amount of alea – so that, at a certain point, ‘puoi mettere un punto e aspettare quello che ti porta il destino’ –,<sup>491</sup> although, as Dolfi indicates, ‘il caso è nella possibilità limitata delle frasi disponibili [...] ma in quell’ambito sta allo scrittore scegliere e decidere’.<sup>492</sup>

Reading the text in ludic terms makes it possible to understand and illuminate the continuity that exists between the beginning and the end of the story: mimicry fades into ilinx, and ludic vertigo – ‘la vertigine che ti cattura lo sguardo e che si trasforma in un pizzicore che ti scende lungo la schiena e ti raggiunge le mani che ora si aprono e si chiudono da sole sul ferro del parapetto’<sup>493</sup> – most likely turns into a factual fall from the

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<sup>488</sup> *L’angelo nero*, pp. 15-24.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25, italics in the text.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>492</sup> *Tabucchi, la specularità*, pp. 192-93.

<sup>493</sup> *L’angelo nero*, p. 28. Arguably, a similar episode of (ludic) vertigo constitutes the climax of Hoffman’s *The Sandman*, indicated by Freud as an archetypical example of the literary uncanny. Also, Rimini identifies

tower. After all, an estranging sense of vertigo pervades and is embodied by writing itself, given that, despite its being constructed as a sort of guided reading, the reader is confused by several elements: firstly, the loose juxtaposition of different scenes, linked only by the narrator's wandering, at the beginning a simple 'andarsene in giro' that speeds up into a nervous run – 'prendi a correre [...] acquisti il biglietto ansando [...] affretti di nuovo il passo'–, and is paralleled by the climatic shifting from a 'domenica di primavera inoltrata' to 'una giornata stregata';<sup>494</sup> secondly, the confusion is enhanced by the doubling of the stories narrated – the one, '*il mio defunto marito, quando festeggiammo le nozze d'argento*', which constitutes a mere game and is then forgotten, and the other, '*non sono mai riuscito a dirtelo prima, ma ora è necessario che tu sappia*' which is driven, instead, by remorse.<sup>495</sup> In effect, writing attempts to symbolise the return of a repressed, traumatic real, 'quell'estate, che avevi così accuratamente dimenticato riponendola in una cantina sulla quale avevi posato un pesante coperchio. E ora quel coperchio [...] si è mosso, è slittato aprendo una fessura'.<sup>496</sup> Two terms operate here as indicators of the uncanny. The first of these is 'slittato', which imitates the floating movement of the signifiers, namely of the voices earwigged in the story, but which does not, however, represent an endless dissemination of sense, given that the protagonist comes to terms – literally – with his guilt. The second, similarly, is the word 'fessura', which might be considered as an analogon for the bar between the signifier and the signified, as the caesura that at once divides and joins together conscious and unconscious discourse, representing the gap of the real within the symbolic. And, if the other people 'parlano con gli altri come se parlassero fra sé e sé',<sup>497</sup> in a way, the narrator speaks to himself as if he were speaking to – and being spoken to by – others, in a ludic discourse – 'incongruo ma [...] molto logico'.<sup>498</sup> This reaches its climax in the use of mechanisms of defence, such as denial ('non fu colpa mia, io non sapevo niente', 'io non avrei voluto, te lo giuro, per anni non ho voluto pensarci [...] l'ho fatto per non sapere, non avrei altre spiegazioni'), ambiguity ('il romanzo fece una brutta fine [...] ma era giusto buttare via una creatura a quel modo?'), and catachresis ('l'amico del cuore, anzi, l'amico dell'intelligenza').<sup>499</sup>

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several similarities in Tabucchi's short story with Hitchcock's 1958 movie *Vertigo*. Thea Rimini, *Album Tabucchi. L'immagine nelle opere di Antonio Tabucchi* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2011).

<sup>494</sup> *L'angelo nero*, pp. 13-27.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-18.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-26.

Thirdly, the reader ultimately precipitates with the narrator in his vortex of inner thoughts, a stream of consciousness in which free reported speech and a plethora of interrogations render any full stop difficult, indeed almost impossible to reach, even linguistically, while, on the contrary, playing his initial game, the protagonist had the opportunity and the ability to ‘mettere un punto e aspettare quello che ti porta il destino’.<sup>500</sup> If Tadeus’ voice marks an ‘invito, subdolo e maligno, [...] una sfida, una tentazione’,<sup>501</sup> the narrator also challenges the reader, since he plays with and reverses his own rules: while all the voices overheard and re-arranged in the form of a narrative are visually italicised, the last sentence – ‘è una malattia che oggi si può controllare, dice lui, è un virus simile all’herpes zoster’<sup>502</sup> –, the clue to make sense of the entire story, runs the risk of going unnoticed within the texture of his tale of sorrow. That this phrase refers to remorse becomes intelligible only if this short story is read alongside the novel *Requiem*,<sup>503</sup> where the virus is explicitly equated with regret: thus, not only does the reader have to mirror the narrator in his gesture of selection and extrapolation within a single narration, but they also have to extend the scope of their game to Tabucchi’s entire oeuvre.

Another specific intradiegetic case is that of horizontal or intertextual metalepsis, the shifting of characters between different fictional worlds, such as books, paintings, photographs or films.

The metaleptic functioning of the short story ‘Vivere o ritrarre’, for instance, is at once intertextual and intradiegetic. Here, the narration unfolds along three subsequent embedded levels: the ‘Disegnatore’ dreams (the first level) of drawing the figures of a film director and of his assistant (second level) in the act of shooting a movie called ‘O ritrarre’ (third level) made up of assembled try-outs, though he eventually auditions his very own image reflected in a mirror (back to the first level, but with estranging duplication). Tellingly, the ludic element is both performed, through metalepsis, and explicitly discussed: ‘oggi

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<sup>500</sup> Ibid., p. 16. ‘L’*ars combinatoria* del narratore in seconda persona trasforma i singoli segmenti linguistici in un messaggio preciso che [...] possono essere letti tutti insieme con un senso compiuto’; analogously, the reader is asked to fulfil the sense of the story. Alessandro Iovinelli, ‘I dialoghi manca(n)ti di Antonio Tabucchi’, in *Echi di Tabucchi*, pp. 149-171.

<sup>501</sup> *L’angelo nero*, p. 23.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>503</sup> ‘È un virus molto strano, disse il Copista, pare che tutti ce lo portiamo dentro allo stato larvale, ma si manifesta quando le difese dell’organismo sono infiacchite, allora attacca con virulenza, poi si addormenta e torna ad attaccare ciclicamente, guardi, le dico una cosa, penso che l’herpes sia un po’ come il rimorso, se ne sta addormentato dentro di noi e un bel giorno si sveglia e ci attacca [...] ma è sempre dentro di noi, non c’è niente da fare contro il rimorso’ (*Requiem*, p. 79).

giochiamo a preparare un film',<sup>504</sup> declares 'il Disegnatore' at the beginning of the story, who dislikes 'i giochi che tranquillizzano, tipo i giochi di società. Gli piacevano i giochi sovversivi'.<sup>505</sup> Proclaiming that 'il gioco è aperto', he then goes on to encourage his own character, 'il Maestro', to start shooting.<sup>506</sup> If the latter 'era abituato a mettere gli uomini in cornice e infatti stava aspettando di mettere in cornice [...] le comparse del suo nuovo film',<sup>507</sup> similarly the narration is sustained by rhetorical strategies of verbal framing: this can be seen in the anaphoric repetition of the phrase 'O ritrarre! Provino [...] ciak' and the epistrophic reappearance of the formula 'Fermo così un istante! Perfetto', which is matched by physical bordering, namely the textual sub-division into numbered chapters separated by double spacing. Contextually, Tabucchi also tackles the ontological component of metalepsis, reflecting on the ludic interaction (illusion) between literature and the real: 'il Maestro' wants his 'Assistente' to perform 'il disegnatore che si è svegliato dal sogno in cui ci disegnavo. [...] Voglio fare il ritratto di chi mi ha fatto il ritratto'.<sup>508</sup> The text also emphasises the transgressive stance of metalepsis: the final escape of the 'Assistente', who runs away from the set, moves metalepsis from the level of diegesis to that of telling, patterning a game of *ilinx*. This results from the fugitive's concluding scream for help turning into the 'Disegnatore's yell for awakening, in order to ' riguadagnare il senso di realtà': 'Accidenti che strano sogno. Ho sognato che disegnavo un Maestro per fargli fare dei ritratti e che lui, con la scusa di un Assistente, voleva trasformare in ritratto anche me'.<sup>509</sup>

In the end, this story might be ascribed to the peculiar and limit case of metalepsis, that of the *mise en abyme*, a 'perpetual dialectic of interpretation and deconstruction [...] that stretches, not toward revelation, but around it'.<sup>510</sup> An archetypal example of Tabucchi's use of the *mise en abyme* to structure a convergence between thematised and performed play can be found in the short story 'Il gioco del rovescio'. On the content level, the text recounts a game played by the protagonists:

Il gioco consisteva in questo, diceva Maria do Carmo, ci mettevamo in cerchio, quattro o cinque bambini, facevamo la conta, a chi toccava andava in mezzo, lui sceglieva uno a piacere e gli lanciava una parola, una qualsiasi, per esempio *mariposa*, e quello doveva pronunciarla subito a

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<sup>504</sup> *Racconti con figure*, p. 165.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179-80.

<sup>510</sup> *Stoicheff*, p. 90.

rovescio, ma senza pensarci sopra, perché l'altro contava uno due tre quattro cinque, e a cinque aveva vinto, ma se tu riuscivi a dire in tempo *asopiram*, allora eri tu il re del gioco [...].<sup>511</sup>

As discussed in chapter 2, this linguistic game constitutes an example of *experimentum linguae*, which reverses the familiar use of language as a tool of communication, insofar as ‘il legame tra il significante e il significato è interrotto [...] e il significante ha raggiunto la sua autonomia dalle leggi di significazione’.<sup>512</sup> But this childish game is also literary, since, as Maria do Carmo affirms, the king of it was Pessoa. However, in Maria’s case, the game evolves into existential fragmentation and political subversion. For this reason, the backward game belongs, on the diegetic level, to agon, since it originally occurs as a competition between children, with a winner to be crowned, and to mimicry, especially in relation to Maria’s alleged feigning of identities. Considering Tabucchi’s textual playing with the reader, it extends, on the contrary, to the categories of *alea*, whose ‘basic thrust is defamiliarization [...] overturning familiar semantics’,<sup>513</sup> and of *ilinx*, which defines, precisely, a kaleidoscopic proliferation of positions and roles. The formal game is triggered by Tabucchi’s abysmal encapsulation of Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*,<sup>514</sup> which opens and concludes the narration. It is also fostered by Maria’s cryptic posthumous message for the narrator, consisting of the word ‘SEVER’, whose palindrome can be decoded either as the French for dream or the Spanish for reversal, and which forces the reader to question the story’s reliability (is the protagonist dreaming it all?) in a vertiginous agon played towards losing the game. According to Maria do Carmo, a potential solution or, at least, a more complex understanding of the canvas and of the backward game tout court lies in the figure depicted in the background of the painting, with whom she eventually coincides, in the narrator’s dream. But the latter’s final question for the woman – ‘tu vedi il rovescio del quadro, che cosa si vede da codesta parte?’<sup>515</sup> – remains unanswered. For, as stated in chapter 1, uncanny semiosis is not about deciphering an obscure meaning, but rather about uncovering a different modality of signification. Playing ‘il gioco del rovescio’ signifies, therefore, reversing, playing with and not by its rules. The narrator might make sense of Maria’s puzzling message solely by leaving its presumed ambiguous content in the background and focusing instead on its form. In the end, ‘il gioco del rovescio’ brings up

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<sup>511</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 14.

<sup>512</sup> Bellavita, p. 104.

<sup>513</sup> Iser, p. 256.

<sup>514</sup> Significantly, the painting (1656) is structured around the metafictional devices of metalepsis and *mise en abyme*, as it depicts Velazquez in the act of painting *Las Meninas*.

<sup>515</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 24.

no new signified but uncovers a ludic, non-consequential and unsaturated pattern of meaning creation.<sup>516</sup> Or rather, the only thing that Maria reveals to the narrator is man's uncanniness, the fact that asking about the sense of one's life means asking in what ways it can be made meaningful.

### 3.3.3 Extradiegetic and Peritextual Metalepsis

The second type of metalepsis in Tabucchi's work is the one characterised by the interaction between fictional discourse and extra-textual universe, in a sort of extradiegetic metalepsis. In particular, halfway between horizontal and extra-textual metalepsis is the writer's simultaneous appropriation, as characters, of Pessoa's historical figure and of the latter's imaginary heteronyms. In *Gli ultimi tre giorni di Fernando Pessoa* the dying Portuguese author is visited by his heteronyms, who inhabit the embedded narrative of a hallucinated dream, one level below the chronicle of his last days: Pessoa's delirium lingers between dreams – 'Pessoa si sedette su una poltrona e cominciò a sognare' – and insomnia – 'una pace strana, come se una nebbia fosse calata su di lui'.<sup>517</sup> Contrarily, in *Requiem*, not only does the protagonist encounter 'vivi e morti sullo stesso piano',<sup>518</sup> but he also structures a narratological syncretism, meeting, on the same narrative level, both Pessoa and some characters derived from the heteronym Bernardo Soares' *Livro dos desassossego*, the book the protagonist is reading at the beginning of the novel and which prompts the first-person narrator's hallucination. Delusions, dreams and hallucinations constitute exemplary manifestations of ontological metalepsis,<sup>519</sup> and Tabucchi adopts them to illuminate the interference existing between the fictional world and the actual one, as well as between unconscious thoughts and lucid wakefulness.<sup>520</sup> Thus, the construction

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<sup>516</sup> After all, 'il pieno [...] è una forma di salvezza, o comunque di accettazione di ciò che tutti siamo' (*Si sta facendo*, p. 146).

<sup>517</sup> *Gli ultimi tre giorni di Fernando Pessoa. Un delirio* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1994), pp. 15-22.

<sup>518</sup> *Requiem*, p. 7.

<sup>519</sup> 'Ontological metalepsis opens a passage between levels [...] that] must be separated by the type of boundary that I call ontological: a switch between two radically distinct worlds, such as "the real" and "the imaginary", or the world of "normal" (or lucid) mental activity from the worlds of dream or hallucination'. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative Across Media. The Languages of Storytelling* (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 442.

<sup>520</sup> In psychoanalysis, metalepsis 'is equivalent to the uncanny intuition of the unconscious'. Giuseppe Civitarese, *The Intimate Room. Theory and Technique of the Analytic Field*, trans. by Philip Slotkin (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 58.



of *Sogni di sogni* is entirely metaleptic, as it based on the author dreaming other people' dreams. Similarly, in the short story 'Sognando con Dacosta', the speaking voice explains that 'lui stava facendo il suo sogno e io entrai da visitatore',<sup>521</sup> while in the fragment *Esperidi. Sogno in forma di lettera*, the narrator realises that 'ho sognato che ti scrivevo questa lettera, e che io non ero il Greco che salpò a cercare l'Occidente e non fece più ritorno, ma che lo stavo solo sognando'.<sup>522</sup>

Analogously, Pessoa or 'un attore [...] oppure, se più vi piace, [...] Pessoa che finge di essere un attore che stasera interpreta Fernando Pessoa'<sup>523</sup> is the protagonist of Tabucchi's *Il signor Pirandello è desiderato al telefono*, the first of his two *Dialoghi mancati* and that, as the title suggests, represents a hypothetical phone call Pessoa made to Pirandello, set in a Portuguese asylum in 1935:

Vorrei telefonare a Pirandello,/ forse lui saprebbe aiutarmi/ a uscire da questa situazione/ lui ci sa fare coi personaggi/ che si trovano intrappolati, schiavi/ di un ruolo e di una maschera.<sup>524</sup>

In this play, Tabucchi blends intertextual and diegetic metalepses in order to theorise and dramatise the possibility of freedom and authenticity internal to playful motion, in contraposition to the 'vera commedia che ogni giorno recitiamo'.<sup>525</sup> Feigned madness – 'una recita in un manicomio per pronunciare un monologo sconnesso e fingere che sono sublime', a 'stupida illusione [...] pagata quattro soldi'<sup>526</sup> – triggers mimicry, emphasising the theatrical permormativity of the writer's metaleptic ludism. Accordingly, the element of alienation – 'in mezzo alle scapole ha una chiave come quella dei giocattoli, enorme' while the choir greets the protagonist as a 'poeta pupazzetto'<sup>527</sup> – is both radicalised and reciprocated by the exploration of the illusionary threshold between fictional and actual feeling. As with the figure of Hecuba in *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, the protagonist confesses: 'una volta [...] interpretai un giovane attore che si innamorava dell'arte [...] e quella sera piansi di emozione estetica nel sentire ciò che recitavo'.<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> *Racconti con figure*, p. 81.

<sup>522</sup> *Donna di Porto Pim*, p. 18.

<sup>523</sup> *I dialoghi mancati* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988), p. 16.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-31.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Finally, a peculiar, controversial case of extratextual metalepsis, in which reality folds back on fiction, lies at the origin of the short story ‘Il battito d’ali’. As Tabucchi explains in the article ‘Sofri, una grazia per l’Italia, signor presidente’:

Era il 1989, mi pare, era appena cominciata la tua Odissea e io avevo letto sui giornali di un signore che [...] vi inchiodava con la sua spontanea testimonianza [...]. L’incerta testimonianza [...] mi suggerì allora un racconto intitolato: Può il battere d’ali di una farfalla a New York provocare un tifone a Pechino? [...] Il mio racconto [...] fu subito oggetto di un’occhiuta magistrata, la dottoressa Laura Bortolè Viale, che lo inserì nella sentenza del primo processo d’appello, del 1991, in compagnia di un libro di Leonardo Sciascia [...]. Era la prima volta in Italia, dall’Inquisizione e dal Ventennio fascista, che due opere di letteratura venivano pubblicamente indicate al rogo dalle istituzioni giudiziarie. Ciò mi seccò assai. Fra l’altro anch’io avevo letto attentamente le teorie sulla cosiddetta «autonomia del personaggio» come ci insegnavano gli strutturalisti e i narratologi dell’epoca, e trovai dignitoso protestare: come si permetteva la signora magistrata, di violare l’intoccabilità dell’autonomia del mio personaggio? [...] Oggi, passati dodici anni, devo ricredermi [...] quel personaggio è davvero Leonardo Marino. Nel senso che dai processi che sono seguiti, Marino ha fatto di tutto per assomigliare al mio personaggio. È diventato il mio personaggio. Mi ha copiato.<sup>529</sup>

The third type of metaleptical ludism employed by Tabucchi erases the barrier between peritext and narrative *stricto sensu*, manipulating the ‘material’ borders of his books. A telling example can be found in the novel *Tristano muore*, where the image that appears on the cover of the physical book – the one actually signed by Tabucchi – seems to converge with the picture that Tristano, in his last goodbye, offers to the writer/transcriber of his memories, precisely with the intention of using it as the illustration for his (intradiegetic) biography: ‘È una bella foto, gliela regalo, la metta sulla copertina del suo libro, non è Tristano ma lo è un po’ visto che è suo padre’.<sup>530</sup> As Brizio-Skov comments, ‘Tabucchi ha creato un circolo vizioso: la fine riporta all’inizio, il testo al peritesto, la finzione alla realtà, il presente al passato, il figlio al padre’.<sup>531</sup> The authorial game of mimicry, which plays with illusion and (dis)simulation, translates into a vertiginous space of reading. This

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<sup>529</sup> Tabucchi, ‘Sofri, una grazia per l’Italia, signor presidente’, *L’Unità*, 1 August 2002, p. 31.

<sup>530</sup> *Tristano muore*, p. 162.

<sup>531</sup> Flavia Brizio-Skov, ‘Storia, Letteratura e Ontologia nell’opera di Antonio Tabucchi’, in *Pour Tabucchi. Les Rencontres de Fontevraud. Colloque Littéraire* (Saint-Nazaire: Meet, 2009), pp. 196-215 (p. 207). Tabucchi formulates a similar reflection about the cover image of *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi* in his text ‘Storia di un’immagine’. As the title reveals, this text constitutes a fictional narration, despite being included in *Autobiografie altrui*, the hybrid collection in which the writer explores his own poetics. Significantly, in a vertiginous game of ilinx, on the cover of *Autobiografie altrui* appears a picture of Tabucchi himself reading *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi*.

introduces us to Tabucchi's exploitation of the paratext<sup>532</sup> and, specifically, to his inhabiting of the peritext: since the *unheimliche* is 'associated with an experience of the threshold, liminality, margins, borders, frontiers',<sup>533</sup> the peritext constitutes an uncanny space for excellence. The peritext is the place of agon, where Tabucchi advances and stipulates his fictional pact with the reader; it is also the locus of *alea*, which toys with the impossibility of any attempt to 'voler tracciare i confini esatti fra le cose che sono, di credere di misurare al millimetro dove finisce la realtà e dove comincia la finzione'.<sup>534</sup> Lastly, it is in the peritext that Tabucchi's game of *ilinx* occurs, given that 'al contrario di quanto affermano critici autorizzati, la copertina di un libro, oltre che una soglia, può essere una tromba delle scale nella quale si precipita ignari'.<sup>535</sup>

### 3.4 Tabucchi's Allusion

While metaleptic illusion foregrounds the ontological component of Tabucchi's ludic uncanny, allusion – though the two strategies most often tend to overlap<sup>536</sup> – addresses its linguistic dimension, as it tries to articulate an experience of language freed from communicative constraints and pre-determined meanings, encompassing and moving along different threads of signification.

As a literary device, allusion defines a peculiar modality of referring that 'awakens the addressee to grasp a meaningful cultural unit borrowed from other texts or discourses by using a suggestive signal'.<sup>537</sup> Interestingly, Perri compares it to Freud's description of

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<sup>532</sup> 'Come se non bastasse [... Tabucchi] tende a destabilizzare il lettore anche attraverso il paratesto, ovvero lasciando travasare la fiction in prefazioni, note, epiloghi, in tutto quell'apparato testuale che normalmente il lettore considera veritiero [...] una tale tecnica destabilizza ulteriormente il lettore e serve a metterlo di fronte al fatto che la verità non esiste, ma esistono molte possibili verità, a dimostrazione che la soglia tra realtà e fiction è alquanto porosa' (ibid., p. 197).

<sup>533</sup> Royle, p. vii.

<sup>534</sup> *Autobiografie altrui*, p. 122.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid.

<sup>536</sup> Tellingly, Schwarz Lausten underscores the ontological valence of Tabucchi's intertextuality: 'L'intertestualità conferma l'importanza della narrazione non solo come 'metodo' di conoscenza del mondo, ma anche come parte della formazione o della costruzione dell'identità [...]. La presenza di più strati nella voce narrante, e del gioco tra reale e immaginario rappresenta un soggetto che non sa esprimere certezze, ma solo ipotesi, dubbi, frammenti, un soggetto che continua tuttavia a cercare un modo di vivere e di esprimere questa condizione inquieta' (p. 111).

<sup>537</sup> Marko Juvan, *History and Poetics of Intertextuality*, trans. by Timothy Pogačar (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008), p. 29.

jokes as ‘the rediscovery of something known’,<sup>538</sup> which, indeed, also constitutes an apt explanation of the uncanny: analogously to the *unheimliche*, allusion deals with the articulation of temporal doubling and returns, playing over a familiar textual reality. On the other hand, a ludic interpretation of allusion, rooted in and legitimated by its etymology, radically accentuates its metafictional, estranging rationale: playing with a constellation of discourses, with(in) allusion, writing eventually toys with and reflects upon itself. So, I adopt the term allusion to designate a formal game, a ludic exploration and manipulation of the possibilities and of the limits inherent in literary sense making. It is a form of textual play with literary and cultural discourses, between Tabucchi’s texts and between one text and the reader.

There are two main allusive practices in Tabucchi. The first, a sort of ‘intertextual allusion’,<sup>539</sup> is based on intertextual quotations and internal repetitions. It is intertextual to the extent to which it creates ‘a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’.<sup>540</sup>

Thus, intertextual allusion is playful precisely because it toys with and elicits the reader’s involvement: the signifying mechanism of allusion stimulates the reader’s participation in the construction of the text’s signification. Tabucchi’s familiar sources of intertextual allusion serve as instructions for the reader, providing the rules according to which the writer’s text could – and has to – be played. In a way, ‘intertextual allusion’ eventually comes to define another modality Tabucchi plays with, rather than by the rules, an ‘anagogic game of cooperative competition’ between the author and his audience.<sup>541</sup>

The second allusive practice – ‘enigmatic allusion’ – further stresses the importance of the reader’s contribution, for it addresses and gives form to the interrogative and disquieting nature of the uncanny poetics, as Tabucchi posits questions that, far from demanding and reaching a closure, explore and problematise literary signification. Enigmatic allusion is a type of ‘structural game’, in that it has a quest-like logic working as ‘a heightened simulacrum of the agonistic and usually unstructured competitions of daily life’.<sup>542</sup> In Caillois’ classification, it belongs to *agon*, since it engages the reader in the process of

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<sup>538</sup> Carmela Perri, ‘On Alluding’, *Poetics*, vol. 7 (1978), 289-307 (301).

<sup>539</sup> In 1966, Kristeva first defines intertextuality as ‘a mosaic of quotations [for which] any text is the absorption and transformation of another’. Julia Kristeva, ‘Word, Dialogue and Novel’, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 64-91 (66).

<sup>540</sup> Roland Barthes, *Images, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 146.

<sup>541</sup> Foust, 10.

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

sense making itself. Like the intertextual one, it might be defined as anagogic, although the aspect of cooperation is less present and influential.

### 3.4.1 Intertextual Allusion

By definition, allusive writing estranges and transforms what might be taken as commonsensical literary repertoire: this explains its habitual convergence with the practice of intertextual quotation without quotation marks, both as ‘indirect reference and phraseological adaptations’.<sup>543</sup>

Tabucchi’s short story ‘Il piccolo Gatsby’, included in *Il gioco del rovescio*, constitutes an archetypical demonstration of how – and why – intertextual allusion works. First, its inclusion in the collection *Il gioco del rovescio* offers a preliminary suggestion as to the kind of involvement on the part of the reader that the text seeks:

Il continuo rinvio ad altri testi sovverte [...] l’apparente unidirezionalità e orizzontalità della lettura a favore di un gioco del rovescio che [...] coinvolge il lettore e il suo rapporto con la parola scritta. A chi legge, si impone pertanto la necessità di ritornare sui propri passi, di ri-leggere, di compiere al pari dell’io narrante un percorso rovesciato. [...] Il processo interpretativo viene così costantemente sospeso e differito, costringendo il significato degli eventi in una posizione precaria e mutevole: quanto era stato interpretato in un modo può venir reinterpretato in maniera diversa e ciò che era insignificante può essere reso significante.<sup>544</sup>

Thus, as far as the reader is concerned, intertextual allusion is ludic to the extent that it is driven by the uncanny logic of topological reversal. And, in effect, Tabucchi provides, in a footnote before the story’s incipit, a sort of set of preliminary reading instructions.

Second, the text embodies a certain number of italicised quotations without quotation marks that, alongside what immediately strikes the reader as an ironic title, clearly expose its intertextual nature.

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<sup>543</sup> ‘So the two phenomena generally conflated under the term allusion differ from each other in a number of important respects. True, there is a playfulness in each: indirect references are like a riddle or trivia question [...] phraseological adaptations are like a sophisticated version of peekaboo or *fort-da*, in which a treasured object, having disappeared from view, delightfully reemerges’. Gregory Machacek, ‘Allusion’, *MLA*, 122. 2 (March 2007), 522-36 (527-28).

<sup>544</sup> Michela Meschini, ‘Tra storia e finzione: il gioco del tempo nella narrativa di Antonio Tabucchi’, *Quaderni d’Italianistica*, 19.1 (Spring 1998), pp. 71-91 (p. 81).

The game Tabucchi plays, both inside and through the story, is a questioning of literary signification, of how literature negotiates and gives form to a meaningful experience with(in) the world. An allusive text ‘non esaurisce la rappresentazione; anzi, la costringe a rinnovarsi ad infinitum, e a offrirsi sempre nuova all’occhio del pensiero, immettendo l’opera nell’inarrestabile movimento della vita’.<sup>545</sup> In this way, Tabucchi’s allusion also allows for a game of vertigo, as the text ‘aims at bringing out the rear view of the positions yoked together in the game’.<sup>546</sup> That is, it forces characters and readers alike to problematise their own assumptions and values.

The story (the third element) in fact develops a parallelism between the narrator’s and the author’s intentions. The former directly addresses his (past) lover to finally denounce and unmask the hypocrisy and falsity of their personal and social lives. The narrator is a kind of ‘impotential’ writer, who cannot and does not want to write the novel everyone expects from him, as he spends his life in the company of middle-class people utterly making up their existence, drinking champagne, listening to some jazz music and discussing literature on the French Riviera. The story is written like a game of agon, for the narrator challenges the woman to quit the game they used to play: that of living like characters from Gatsby’s fictions, in a sort of existential mimicry:

Inevitabilmente mi si chiedeva l’inizio del libro, tutti trovavano *delizioso* che io sapessi a memoria gli inizi dei romanzi di Fitzgerald: solo gli inizi, che erano una mia passione [...] il gioco era aperto, era bastato questo per dare il via. [...] nonostante il mio vecchio romanzo, io non avrei mai saputo scriverne un altro [...]. Io sapevo solo a memoria inizi di romanzi altrui, appartenevo a una storia affine, ero un personaggio trasmigrato da un altro romanzo, la sua stilizzazione in una dimensione minore [...]. Io ero un gioco nel nostro gioco: ero il tuo caro piccolo Gatsby. Basta, non avevo più voglia di recitare.<sup>547</sup>

However, the narrator manipulates textual allusions that play against the rules of his own game, misattributing false quotations or concluding his narration with Fitzgerald’s final words – this time from *The Great Gatsby* – and hence contradicting his initial confession of only knowing the American author’s incipits. He himself plays with rather than by the rules, searching for a way to signify otherwise, breaking away from the annihilating discourse of the reality he inhabits.

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<sup>545</sup> Nicola Gardini, *Lacuna. Saggio sul non detto* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014), Amazon Kindle e-book (Part 3, chapter 4, location 2648).

<sup>546</sup> Iser, p. 256.

<sup>547</sup> *Il gioco*, pp. 82-84, italics in the text.

This is consistent with the purpose of Tabucchi's uncanny and intertextual allusions, that of being disturbing, estranging interrogations of sense.

A disquieting quest(ion) also animates the writer's practice of intra-textuality or internal quotation. In an exemplary manner, in *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi*, a collection of seventeen (love) letters 'whose authors are overwhelmed by impossible regrets [...] their needs to somehow make amends for the past [...] contemplating the relationship of love to life and death',<sup>548</sup> the repetition of several phrases, such as 'Come vanno le cose. E cosa le guida: un niente', or distinctive terms, like 'frattempo',<sup>549</sup> activates the writer's ilinx, his attempt to embody knots and clearings of sense within the text. Arguably, this narrative vertigo finds its diegetic manifestation in the motif of the net, further illuminating the allusive play of the novel. In the prologue, Tabucchi quotes the refrain from a folk song that alludes to a ludic to-and-fro movement, and which might imply a possible interpretation of this volume: 'Avanti, 'ndrè/ avanti, 'ndrè/ che bel divertimento/ Avanti, 'ndrè,/ avanti, 'ndrè/ la vita è tutta qua'.<sup>550</sup> Countering Roelens' opinion, I believe that this collection is not a case of Derridean 'destinerrance',<sup>551</sup> on the contrary, these are stories in the form of letters one might imagine that the seventeen male senders were writing not (solely) to their female addressees, but, more deeply, to themselves, or that these were 'unidirezionali', as Tabucchi suggests in 'In rete'.<sup>552</sup> These texts are crossed and driven by a playful counterturning motion – and, significantly, 'circolare' is the way in which the writer describes the final, eighteenth letter, which was sent to all the other male senders by Atropos, one of the three fates in Greek mythology.

'La lettera è un equivoco messaggero',<sup>553</sup> Tabucchi declares in his post-scriptum: as such, it is a form of split self-investigation, a looping quest. If, as Athropos writes about the dispatchers, 'ciascuno a suo modo, nella sua vita, ha cercato di liberarsi da un filo, fosse

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<sup>548</sup> 'Tabucchi's Fragments of Lovers' Discourses', 389.

<sup>549</sup> In the novel, the expression 'Come vanno le cose. E cosa le guida: un niente' is used several times: pp. 41, 109, 183. The same phrase appears already in *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 71. As for the term 'frattempo', it occurs on pages 26, 92, 110.

<sup>550</sup> *Si sta facendo*, p. 9.

<sup>551</sup> *Piccole finzioni*, p. 149. Derrida coined the neologism 'destinerrance' to signify the wandering nature, or the possibility of not reaching its destination, its addressee, inherent in the functioning of a letter; significantly, Hillis Miller compares this to a 'loose thread in a tangled skein that turns out to lead to the whole ball of yarn'. Joseph Hillis Miller, 'Derrida's Destinerrance', *MLN*, 121.4 (September 2006), 839-910 (893).

<sup>552</sup> *Autobiografie altrui*, p. 85.

<sup>553</sup> *Si sta facendo*, p. 224.

esso spinato o meno’,<sup>554</sup> perhaps each letter is precisely this thread that they are all playing with, and both its functioning and purpose might be related to play as a tentative symbolisation of their lost or missed love.<sup>555</sup>

### 3.4.2 Enigmatic Allusion

Alongside estranging pre-existing texts, Tabucchi’s allusion functions according to the ludic principle of the enigma, a modality of saying – too much and too little – obliquely. This takes the form of rebuses and equivocations, a zigzagging between images and words, a hybridisation of plural languages and different genres of discourse, as well as, literally, mis-directions and detours, both physically – through the use of footnotes, endnotes, maps, indexes, cross-references and the paratext, to engage the reader in the game – and by scattering false, irrelevant clues and omissions throughout his opus.

Tellingly, in his detective stories – such as *Il filo dell’orizzonte* or *Notturmo indiano* – the enigma is posited and formulated, but gets no final resolution.<sup>556</sup> It falls short of the intermediate passage of equivocation, so that no conclusive disclosure discharges the story. Tabucchi’s enigmatic allusion integrates agon and vertigo; it challenges the reader to find the solution while countering any linear reading.

The short story ‘Rebus’ offers the most prominent example of enigmatic allusion. The first-person narrator recounts a past, mysterious adventure, when he, a young mechanic, was paid by a noble woman, with whom he fell madly in love, to drive her to Biarritz and take part in a race. However, detours, sabotages, missed encounters and sudden departures punctuate the journey and, as the protagonist is finally left alone, many questions arise. For example, was her husband trying to kill her? Or did they use the narrator simply to smuggle illegal stuff hidden in the car? As the title suggests, this text offers a narrative enigma that not only withdraws any possible solution but also questions the validity of any attempt at finding one: ‘per esempio io non starei qui a raccontare una storia, a proporre un

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<sup>554</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>555</sup> Thus the man sending the first letter, ‘Un biglietto in mezzo al mare’, says: ‘C’è una rete nella quale pare sia ormai impossibile non essere catturati, ed è una rete a strascico. In questa rete io insisto a cercare i buchi’ (ibid., p. 13). The importance of the image of the thread is also confirmed by the use of the mythic figures of the Three Fates and of Ariadne, whose ‘Lettera al vento’ Athropos sends back to all men writing in the novel.

<sup>556</sup> The driving force behind the enigma in Tabucchi’s writings may also be interpreted by making reference to Barthes’ ‘hermeneutic code’, which designates ‘the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed’. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 19.



rebus che non ha soluzione, o ha una soluzione che è inevitabilmente quella che ebbe e che io ignoro'.<sup>557</sup> For, 'Rebus' is an interrogative text, which concludes on a series of unanswered questions, mirrored, on the diegetic level, by the characters' vertiginous journeys:

Un appuntamento e un viaggio [...] mi riferisco alla vita, naturalmente [...] e poi nel grande viaggio si fanno dei viaggi, sono i nostri piccoli percorsi insignificanti sulla crosta di questo pianeta che a sua volta viaggia, ma verso dove? È tutto un rebus.<sup>558</sup>

The story has, as its ideal centre, the Bugatti's elephant,<sup>559</sup> of which the narrator says that 'quello era un vero simbolo, misterioso da decifrare come tutti i simboli'.<sup>560</sup> Bearing in mind that a rebus is a 'discourse disguised as visible object',<sup>561</sup> it might be argued that the elephant is the visible object behind which hides a symbolic discourse (as for the previous quote). In turn, the image of the elephant and its disguised discourse (first or diegetic rebus) constitute the visible object standing for Tabucchi's discourse: they are revealing of how the story forms an investigation of the mode in which it is possible to articulate a symbolic narration (second or narrative rebus). Thus the motif of the rebus, best understood through the image of the Bugatti's elephant, figuratively alludes to Tabucchi's deeper, uncanny enigma: how signification works.

It is in order to observe the latter that Tabucchi explores the nexus between play and dream. The story opens with an oneiric sequence:

Stanotte ho sognato Miriam. [...] A volte una soluzione sembra plausibile solo in questo modo: sognando. Forse perché la ragione è pavida, non riesce a riempire i vuoti fra le cose, a stabilire la completezza, che è una forma di semplicità, preferisce una complicazione piena di buchi.<sup>562</sup>

It ends on a similar affirmation that 'a volte, quando si è bevuto un po', la realtà si semplifica, si saltano i vuoti fra le cose, tutto sembra combaciare e uno dice: ci sono'.<sup>563</sup>

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<sup>557</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 30.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>559</sup> As Miriam's Bugatti lacks the original elephant, the narrator has a copy made for her, which, however, gets mysteriously substituted at the end of the story. Furthermore 'Elefante perduto cerca Bugatti del Ventisette' is the advertisement the narrator eventually, though unsuccessfully, leaves on a newspaper hoping to find the woman again (p. 46).

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>561</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 297.

<sup>562</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 29.

The mode in which the narrator eventually addresses his audience testifies to the latter's incapacity to eschew the game:

[T]i propongo un rebus, vediamo come lo risolvi. Ma poi perché a lei interessano i rebus, ha la passione dell'enigmistica o forse è solo la curiosità sterile di chi osserva la vita altrui? [...] Ma a lei perché interessano le storie altrui? [...] Non le sono sufficienti i suoi propri sogni?<sup>564</sup>

The protagonist – and his interlocutor – therefore constitutes a sort of model reader, and 'poiché il disegno sfugge sia a lui che al lettore, dal piano dei piccoli rebus si passa al rebus universale, al mondo come rebus'.<sup>565</sup> In effect, playing rebus has an ontological scope, as 'sa come è la vita, è come una tessitura, tutti i fili si intrecciano, è questo che un giorno vorrei capire, vedere tutto il disegno'.<sup>566</sup> If life has the form of a picture-puzzle, in what way is it possible, therefore, to dwell in it? What does it mean to play with, or make sense of it? Arguably, the idea of the entanglement of rebus with dreams is derived from Freud, for whom '[a] dream is a picture-puzzle of this sort'.<sup>567</sup> However, unlike Freud's explanation of the dream-work, the (oneiric and/or ludic) enigma is not a search for an obscure, latent meaning or truth. The story hides no codified message for the reader to decipher. Tabucchi's enigmatic allusion is a different kind of saying, as with Agamben's Sphinx, inasmuch as it exposes the mechanism and the limits of linguistic signification. In a sense, Tabucchi's enigmatic allusion is a symbolic play, a mode that language toys with and from which it estranges itself.

This is something Tabucchi discusses in the fourth chapter of *Notturmo indiano*, where the protagonist encounters a dying man at the Railway's Retiring Rooms in Bombay:

'Cosa ci facciamo dentro questi corpi', disse il signore che si stava preparando a stendersi nel letto vicino al mio. La sua voce non aveva un tono interrogativo, forse non era una domanda, era solo una constatazione, a suo modo, comunque sarebbe stata una domanda alla quale non avrei saputo rispondere. [...] Da lontano veniva una voce lenta e monotona, forse una preghiera oppure un lamento solitario e senza speranza, come quei lamenti che esprimono solo se stessi, senza chiedere

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-46.

<sup>565</sup> Brizio-Skov, p. 114, note 26.

<sup>566</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 32.

<sup>567</sup> Freud, 'The Interpretation of Dreams', in *The Standard Edition*, vol. iv (London: Hogarth, 1955), pp. 1-338 (p. 278).

niente. Per me era impossibile decifrarlo. L'India era anche questo: un universo di suoni piatti, indifferenziati, indistinguibili.<sup>568</sup>

The character's failure to decipher the interlocutor's – as well as, more generally, India's – words and voices does not stand for a mutual inability to communicate between Western and Eastern cultures; quite the opposite, this scene introduces and solicits a different semiotic approach, from both the narrator and the reader. The two elements of a presumed interrogation without a question mark and of a prayer, perhaps a lamentation, which, however, asks for nothing, express and perform a modality of signification comparable to the Sphinx' enigma: they do not require an answer, triggering, instead, a process of questioning and problematisation. The impossibility of deciphering made explicit by the character indirectly expose the limitedness of a rational semiosis: what is really at stake, therefore, is not the applicability and relevance of the Western deciphering model when it comes to the Eastern world, but, more radically, the limitation inherent in the model itself. Significantly, the dialogue between the protagonist and the old Indian man touches upon this aspect:

Parlava un inglese molto elegante, con piccole pause e le congiunzioni leggermente strascicate ed esitanti, come si usa in certe università, me ne accorsi. '*Practically... Actually*', disse, 'che parole curiose, le ho sentite tante volte in Inghilterra, voi europei usate spesso queste parole'. Fece una pausa più lunga, ma capii che il suo discorso non era finito. 'Non sono mai riuscito a stabilire se è per pessimismo o per ottimismo', riprese, 'lei cosa ne pensa?'.<sup>569</sup>

In a way, the old man's speech demonstrates and dramatises, through its overtly elliptical rationale – illustrated by the use of ellipses and the break taken between the two sentences – the necessity to literally punch holes in Western metaphysical-nihilist semiosis, which, as evidenced by the two English adverbs, is exclusively founded upon actuality and utterly dismisses the logic of potentiality that, by contrast, structures uncanny semiosis. In the end, potentiality is the word for the uncanny's capacity to sustain the gaps it exposes inside Saussurean signification. And this is exactly what Tabucchi's play is all about.

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<sup>568</sup> *Notturmo indiano*, p. 38.

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41, italics in the text. The same reflection also reappears in 'La frase che segue è falsa': 'Forse la nostra conversazione fu abbastanza stravagante: in realtà essa partì da due avverbi molto usati in Occidente (practically e actually) e poi tentammo di risalire alle categorie mentali che presiedono a avverbi come questi. Il che ci condusse, con una certa logica, a parlare del pragmatismo e della trascendenza' (*I volatili*, p. 42).

To summarise, Tabucchi uses textual and diegetic games:

- To arrange a new, unfamiliar experience of sense making;
- By estranging, i.e. profanating or de-activating pre-existing, familiar semiotic modes, discourses and apparatuses (including language and literature);
- Through playing with rather than by their rules – what I called ‘signifying *otherwise*’.
- In effect, Tabucchi’s play is defined as a playing of, over and with the real, a specific modality through which to make sense of the world and of one’s dwelling in it.
- This is strictly related to postmodern irony, for postmodernism is traditionally equated with the idea of inhabiting a world ruled by randomness and chaos: its playful attitude is thus regarded as a reaction to this historical condition.
- Tabucchi’s textual play is based on two main narrative strategies: illusion and allusion. Illusion problematises the interplay between literature and the real, while allusion is a form of textual play with literary and cultural discourses, between Tabucchi’s texts and between one text and the reader.
- Likewise, play is also a diegetic motif, as Tabucchi’s characters play games of agon, alea, mimicry and vertigo. In particular, Tabucchi uses diegetic play to uncover and represent humanity’s uncanniness. Thus, characters play uncanny games of signification in an attempt to produce and negotiate the sense of their own lives.

## Chapter 4

### 4.1 Signifying the *Other*: the Semiotic Unconscious

Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny sees literature as a way to deal with human beings' need for sense and sense making. In this regard, Tabucchi's uncanny can be best understood through Agamben's reflection on the topic, whereby the latter is defined as a unique experience of semiosis. In chapter 2 I argued that this is made evident by the two purposes Tabucchi assigns to his personal narrative production: those of disturbing and questioning. In the previous chapter I discussed how this emergence of the uncanny as a semiotic problematisation lays at the core of Tabucchi's playful attempt to signify otherwise, namely to expose and dismantle all those mechanisms through which meaning is familiarly produced. By the same token, this chapter examines how Tabucchi's 'rovescio' may be interpreted as the writer's attempt to signify or express the *other*, i.e. the signifying function inherent in men's uncanny experience of language, that is: the unconscious.

This chapter formulates the hypothesis that, in Tabucchi's poetics, it is through the narrative practice of the 'rovescio' that the writer's uncanny tries to make room for the unconscious, for what resists and disturbs the Saussurean sign. As discussed in chapter 2, in the preface to the second edition of *Il gioco del rovescio*, the writer traces the aetiology of his idea of 'rovescio', affirming that:

Tutti [i racconti di questo libro] sono legati a una scoperta: l'essermi accorto un giorno, per le imprevedibili circostanze della vita, che una certa cosa che era 'così' era invece anche in un *altro* modo. Fu una scoperta che mi turbò.<sup>570</sup>

Tabucchi's reversal therefore is twice other: it is (first) the ability to look differently at what is (second), at the same time, familiar and unfamiliar, always unsaturated. The idea of the unconscious as 'other' overtly resonates also with Lacan's view of the latter as the 'discourse of the Other'. For Lacan the capitalised Other refers to the symbolic order, to the language we are born into, must acquire and learn to speak, as well as to the discourses of the persons around us. By the same token, for the French psychoanalyst, that the unconscious is 'the discourse of the Other' means that it is a signifying function shaped by the symbolic, namely that we articulate our own desire through and in relation to the

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<sup>570</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 5, italicised.

discourses and desires of other individuals. From this perspective, the idea of the unconscious as other is strictly related to Lacan's and Agamben's conceptualisation of the uncanny as unfamiliar semiosis, which is pivotal to Tabucchi's poetics, for two main reasons: first, because it emphasises the fact that the unconscious is a discourse, a chain of signifying elements, a sense making process; second, since it addresses the transindividual dimension of the unconscious, which is uncannily extimate, at once internal and external to the subject. Accordingly, the relationship between the uncanny and the unconscious as other in Tabucchi can be summarised in the following way:

unconscious: consciousness = uncanny semiosis: Saussurean semiosis

The unconscious is the other in that it is the site, the taking place of a different discourse, of an unfamiliar, reversing and disturbing signification. From this perspective, while chapter 3 analysed Tabucchi's deconstructive strategies – how he collapses familiar processes of meaning creation –, this chapter aims at exploring the modes in which Tabucchi's opus opens novel spaces for (unconscious) sense making. For, Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny *signifies the other* insofar as it makes room for an interrogative, unsaturated experience of signification (the discourse of the unconscious, the unconscious as discourse).

In particular, by unconscious I mean:

[A] function of personality [that] expresses the deepest psychological capacity that human beings possess for making sense of experience: the ability to compose the 'poetry' of reality, that is, *to see it from different angles, as something rich and positively ambiguous*.<sup>571</sup>

Nowadays this definition of the unconscious as semiotic – remarkably similar to Tabucchi's own definition of 'rovescio'<sup>572</sup> – is commonly accepted and shared in psychoanalysis:

Generally speaking, we can distinguish three ways of conceptualising the nature of the unconscious. The classical view of the unconscious is that of a motivational force. This reminds us of the definition of the concept of drive given by Freud: a demand made upon the mind for work. A

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<sup>571</sup> Giuseppe Civitarese, *Truth and the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Adam Elgar, Ian Harvey and Philip Slotkin (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 92, italicised.

<sup>572</sup> This conceptual proximity owes to the fact that both 'rovescio' in Tabucchi's definition and the unconscious in Civitarese's explanation designate (first) a specific way of looking at things, an ability to make sense of a reality that (second) is uncannily ambivalent, unfamiliar and unsaturated.

different conception is that of the unconscious as a sort of programme of information processing [...] put forward both by attachment theorists [...] and by psychoanalysts influenced by cognitive theory [...]. It is a third viewpoint that introduces *the postmodern attitude: it deals with the unconscious from a semiotic angle, seeing it as a generative matrix of symbolization processes, and therefore as a semiotic process through which the subjects involved in the discourse organize the sense of the experience. [T]his position can be considered transversal and can be found in numerous models:* in intersubjective theory, with its attention to the dialogical processes of co-construction of meaning; in the Lacanian idea of the linguistic structure of the unconscious; in the bi-logic model of Matte Blanco, which treats the unconscious as a peculiar form of categorization; and in Bion's vision of the group as a phantasmatic field, shaping the minds of the participants.<sup>573</sup>

Likewise, as I intend to argue, this is a view of the unconscious Tabucchi addresses and adopts in his writings, in opposition to a formulation of the unconscious as an obscure (improper) meaning to be decrypted or (solely) as a reservoir of repressed contents.<sup>574</sup> The latter lies at the core of a lay understanding of psychoanalysis, which Tabucchi openly criticises. That the narrator in *Requiem* declares 'l'Inconscio, voglio dire, ormai l'Inconscio io ce l'ho, l'Inconscio uno se lo prende, è come una malattia, mi sono preso il virus dell'Inconscio, capita',<sup>575</sup> is 'symptomatic', in turn, of Tabucchi's refusal to embrace any theoretical reduction of the unconscious to a reservoir of repressed drives and complexes, as well as of his distance from any simplistic belief in psychoanalysis as a positivistic science, in opposition to which he elicits and proposes to take into account their ontological scope.<sup>576</sup> Tabucchi is interested in what psychoanalysis and the unconscious can say and reveal about men's being as producers of sense. Accordingly, also for Tabucchi the unconscious is semiotic. And the latter defines 'a modality of working of the mind [...] a specific form of semiotization of the experience';<sup>577</sup> a mechanism of sense making, the taking place of uncanny signification as 'una dislocazione della stessa strutturazione metafisica del designare',<sup>578</sup> which produces unfamiliar meaning.

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<sup>573</sup> Sergio Salvatore, 'Steps Toward a Dialogical and Semiotic Theory of the Unconscious', *Culture & Psychology*, vol. 12 (2006): 124-36 (129), italicised.

<sup>574</sup> That of repression is only one of the function of or process activated by the semiotic unconscious. This is why psychoanalysts distinguish between repressed and non-repressed unconscious contents.

<sup>575</sup> *Requiem*, p. 18.

<sup>576</sup> This is clearly illustrated by his assertion, in *Si sta facendo*, that: 'I divani degli psicoanalisti non mi piacciono, perché sono pieni di pulci dei pazienti che vi sono stati sdraiati [...] l'anima risiede nel sangue. Non in tutto il sangue, naturalmente, ma in un solo globulo' (pp. 89-90).

<sup>577</sup> Sergio Salvatore and Claudia Venuelo, 'The unconscious as symbol generator', in *Symbolic Transformation: The Mind in Movement Through Culture and Society*, ed. by Brady Wagoner (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 59-73 (p. 60).

<sup>578</sup> *Stanze*, p. 179.

## 4.2 Tabucchi's 'rovescio'

The reversal has been widely acknowledged as being Tabucchi's distinguishing trait; the writer declared himself to be 'incline a considerare "tabucchiano" [...] una "poetica del rovescio" [...] il tentativo di guardare anche l'altra faccia della medaglia, continuando però a guardare anche la prima faccia'.<sup>579</sup> However, in spite of the importance ascribed to the element of 'rovescio' and to its problematisation of the visual process as a sense making mechanism, it has never been explicitly and thoroughly considered in relation to the unconscious. I intend to fill this gap by suggesting how, through his counterturning gaze, Tabucchi's narrative tries to articulate the psychic unconscious, inasmuch as the latter constitutes an idiomatic site or mode of uncanny semiosis.

The next sections will address the following questions: What is the unconscious for Tabucchi? How can it be narrated? And why is it relevant to a study of his poetics of the uncanny? Firstly, I will explore the writer's appropriation and understanding of the unconscious, clarifying its nexus with the gaze as well as the extent to which it may be understood both in individual and collective terms.

For, Tabucchi's writings metaphorically orchestrate a modality of vision that, collapsing ocularcentric imperatives, produces a different discourse of truth<sup>580</sup>:

Tabucchi cerca di esplorare la realtà umana e sovrumana attraverso l'intenso scrutare, anzi attraverso una prospettiva del guardare [...] che sa farsi molto ossessiva e anche patologica. A volte un semplice sguardo anima un rapporto tra l'io e il suo ambiente. *Guardare è una necessità impellente dell'animo inquieto* [...]. Si tratta di una funzione complicata del guardare. [...] In Tabucchi guardare è cercare qualcosa dappertutto, da ogni posizione e da ogni prospettiva.<sup>581</sup>

I will then investigate the diegetic objects and discursive modalities through which the unconscious is articulated and signified in his texts. And lastly, I will demonstrate how and why the gesture of the 'rovescio' becomes wholly intelligible only if situated within and considered through the uncanny.

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<sup>579</sup> Alloni, p. 39.

<sup>580</sup> With Royle, it might be argued that the unconscious alethic discourse as a quest(ion) of sense is what informs 'language's uncanny power to refuse the truth that nonetheless it never stops demanding' (p. 61).

<sup>581</sup> Franco Zangrilli, *Dietro la maschera della scrittura. Antonio Tabucchi* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2015), pp. 9-11, italicised.



#### 4.2.1 The Individual Unconscious

Arguably, in Tabucchi, the unconscious designates ‘l’eccedenza del *senso* (sulla razionalità volta all’oggettività e ai significati) [...] un radicamento nel mondo e un’apertura al mondo in una dimensione di senso di cui i *significati* oggettivi e l’identità dell’*io* sono effetti, prelievi, misconoscimenti e riduzioni’.<sup>582</sup>

In ‘Il penoso caso del Signor Silva da Silva e Silva. Storia però di una bella amicizia’ Tabucchi narrates the story of a Portuguese man who, since his early childhood, has repeatedly seemed to present all the unmistakable symptoms of a particular disease, yet each time without being actually affected by the presumed, corresponding malaise. The man eventually decides to be treated by a Portuguese doctor and, then, by an English psychoanalyst, who successfully reconstructs the cause of his tribulations, the trauma of being menaced by the assault of a horse when he was just a kid. The story ironically, uncannily literalises Freud’s case of the little Hans<sup>583</sup>:

Fu così che cominciò l’analisi psicoanalitica [...] ed essa andò avanti per molti anni, non solo perché le terapie psicoanalitiche, come è noto, sono lunghe, ma soprattutto perché il complesso che scatenava i micidiali sintomi delle inesistenti patologie del signor Silva da Silva e Silva era davvero molto rimosso, in un profondissimo buchino degli abissi del suo inconscio [...]. Finché un giorno, nel suo racconto sconnesso, che il dottor Costa da Costa e Costa, con un’eco vagamente lacaniana, definiva il Verbo dell’Io in panne, il signor Silva da Silva e Silva rammentò il puledro. [...] Il dottor Costa da Costa e Costa [...] desunse un trauma metaforicamente fallico [...] come era successo al piccolo Hans. Povero piccolo Hans! Povero piccolo Silva da Silva e Silva!<sup>584</sup>

In the end the protagonist is able to relive the primary scene of his trauma, and thus to symbolise it, paradoxically at the moment when (*coup-de-théâtre!*) the unconscious logic of the *après-coup*<sup>585</sup> turns into a far too real, mortal blow, that of being hit by a bus:

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<sup>582</sup> Paolo Gambazzi, *L’occhio e il suo inconscio* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 1999), pp. 14-27.

<sup>583</sup> This is one of Freud’s most famous case studies (1909): it concerned the observation of a five-year-old patient whose phobia of horses was then interpreted as symptomatic of a fear of castration within the wider psychoanalytical frame of the Oedipus complex.

<sup>584</sup> *Racconti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005) pp. 408-09.

<sup>585</sup> The Freudian concept of deferred action describes the a-temporal and a-causal functioning of the unconscious by means of which a later fact engenders the memory and the tentative signification of an earlier episode or experience, which, however, had not entered consciousness.

Era proprio vero, quel puledro aveva proprio minacciato di investirlo, terrorizzando il suo inconscio per tutta la vita. L'aver rivissuto la scena traumatica con la consapevolezza dell'analisi lo fece sentire un uomo del tutto diverso. [...] Uscì dal portone pensando alla sua nuova vita [...] sul marciapiede opposto vide una cabina telefonica, di quelle tipiche inglesi [...]. Vi si diresse risolutamente [...] guardando con prudenza alla sua sinistra. L'autobus a due piani, tipico londinese, lo investì in pieno, travolgendolo, senza neanche tentare di frenare.<sup>586</sup>

On the other hand, this narrative move is indicative of the writer's overall approach to the notion of the unconscious – and to psychoanalysis tout court – insofar as it might be argued that, in Tabucchi's opus, similarly to Silva da Silva e Silva's situation, psychoanalysis is present(ed) in a disguised, oblique form, through a plethora of symptoms, and yet never entirely accepted. This is due to the fact that Tabucchi mocks and rejects a lay understanding of psychoanalysis. In effect, the unconscious is not something that can be deciphered. By not paying attention to the reversal – which is the real nature of the unconscious – that is, by looking in the wrong direction, Da Silva is overwhelmed by the unconscious. For, in this story, the unconscious, like England, is another country, where everything, including driving, works differently.

Tabucchi's unconscious is a labyrinth and a fracture, the production of unsaturated sense:

[L]a prima volta in cui visitai Cnosso [...] [p]ensavo al labirinto, al suo simbolo misterioso, quasi ne cercassi una soluzione. Mi parve di trovarla il giorno dopo nel museo di Heraklion guardandone la raffigurazione su una delle più antiche tavolette d'argilla. Mi convinsi che si trattava di un cervello umano. La forma leggermente ovoidale, i circuiti che si perdevano in se stessi facendo perdere il filo della geometria a chi li guardava mi parvero [...] come una TAC arcaica: *questo labirinto sei tu stesso che mi stai guardando*, è il tuo pensiero, mi diceva quella tavoletta. [...] Forse ero troppo occupato a pensare [...] a Freud, *ingegnoso Dedalo che aveva pensato di poter percorrere il labirinto in senso inverso per trovare il punto di partenza*. Ma dov'è il punto di partenza del labirinto?<sup>587</sup>

As indicated in chapter 2, Tabucchi's *unheimliche* inhabits the labyrinth rather than trying to evade it. Accordingly, the labyrinthine unconscious disrupts any conclusive narrative, while also marking the condition that enables writing itself. Tabucchi's Freudian Daedalus must look at and, at that very moment, misses the unconscious in order to authentically

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<sup>586</sup> *Racconti*, p. 415. Weber observes that the temporality of the uncanny is 'that of the 'coup de théâtre', of *theatricality as a coup*, a blow or a *Schlag* that gives the beat, marks time, but also interrupts the expectation of a continuous, progressive, linear-teleological course of events' (*The Legend*, p. 16, italicised).

<sup>587</sup> *Viaggi*, pp. 203-04, italicised.

dwell in it. The writer explores this idea in his *Sogni di sogni*, which commences with Daedalus' dream and ends with Freud's nightmare of being turned into his patient Dora:

La notte del ventidue di settembre del 1939, il giorno prima di morire, il dottor Sigmund Freud, interprete di sogni altrui, fece un sogno. Sognò che era diventato Dora e che stava attraversando Vienna bombardata. [...] Il dottor Freud sentì un grande smarrimento e si lasciò cadere sul divano. E in quel momento si svegliò. Era la sua ultima notte, ma lui non lo sapeva.<sup>588</sup>

Compiling his catalogue of 'coloro che sognano in questo libro', Tabucchi hypothesises that Daedalus might be considered as 'forse un nostro sogno',<sup>589</sup> while he writes of Freud that:

[I]nterpretò i sogni degli uomini [...], intendendo risalire da quelli all'infelicità che ci perseguita. Sostenne che l'uomo, dentro di sé, ha un grumo oscuro che egli chiamò Inconscio. I suoi *Casi clinici* possono essere letti come ingegnosi romanzi. Es, Io e Super-Io sono la sua Trinità. E, forse, ancora la nostra.<sup>590</sup>

However, one might read *Sogni di sogni* backwards, from Freud's nightmare to Daedalus' labyrinth, that is, not from a reverie towards its lucid, rational explanation, but, on the contrary, from wakeful consciousness towards the nocturnal,<sup>591</sup> following the movement of the uncanny, which awakens to and inside the night. Recalling Agamben's reproach of Oedipus' folly, this reversed reading would imply a view of the unconscious not as an obscure meaning to be rationally deciphered – at the core of the lay understanding of psychoanalysis Tabucchi incorporates and criticises in his writings –, but as a fracture to be sustained.

The posthumous story *Isabella e l'ombra* expresses precisely a view of the unconscious as a fissure. The protagonist of this text is Isabella, a famous painter who, already in childhood, displayed an ability to 'pensa[re] per colori';<sup>592</sup> a potentiality of signification that her teacher and parents failed, at least at the beginning, to comprehend. The narration ends on her decision, as an adult and affirmed artist, to incorporate, alongside colours, also the shadow, which finds its symbolic dwelling place in the painting she is creating –

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<sup>588</sup> *Sogni di sogni*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>591</sup> As Loton observes, 'i sogni non si spiegano, non avvengono sul terreno del formulabile come vorrebbe farci credere il dottor Freud' (*La testa perduta*, p. 171).

<sup>592</sup> *Isabella e l'ombra*, p. 11.

‘Resta, povera ombra [...] sta arrivando la notte e ti inghiottirebbe. Mettiti pure comoda nel quadro che preferisci, questa è casa tua’.<sup>593</sup> The shadow is Isabella’s blindspot. That it inhabits her picture metaphorically alludes to the negative ability of the unconscious, its capacity to sustain, and not to fill, but to inhabit the void. For, as discussed in chapter 2, what distinguishes man is the uncanny as an ontological homelessness, the possibility and power to articulate sense, to create a meaningful, although not totalising (hence nihilistic) practice of signification.

#### 4.2.2 The Collective Unconscious

Alongside the individual unconscious, Tabucchi’s semiotic other is expressed in the dimension of the collective unconscious. I adopt the expression ‘collective unconscious’ to define a sociocultural experience and discourse of truth: it designates what has been historically – or still is, at the moment of writing – repressed. In Tabucchi, the collective unconscious comprises all ‘those untextualized traces of past reality that survive in conscious and unconscious memory [...] latent, disparate elements of the past [...] its unwritten detritus’<sup>594</sup> Following Orlando’s terminology, discussed in chapter 1, I argue that the ‘collective unconscious’ in Tabucchi’s texts constitutes both: a ‘ritorno del represso formale’, inasmuch as it occurs as a semiotic experience exposing the opacity of linguistic signification; and a ‘ritorno del represso ideologico-politico nella sostanza del contenuto’, in that what is repressed is a (ideological, political, cultural) discourse that has been either accepted by the individual but not by the society (‘accettato ma non propugnato’, in Orlando’s terms) or acknowledged solely by a minority group (‘propugnato ma non autorizzato’).<sup>595</sup> Tabucchi’s collective unconscious, therefore, is

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<sup>593</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>594</sup> *Narrating Postmodern*, p. 108.

<sup>595</sup> Meaningfully, Orlando openly distances his formulation of the collective unconscious from a Jungian one. In ‘The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious’, Jung defines the latter as ‘universal and impersonal’, which ‘consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes [...] which give definite forms to certain psychic contents’. Carl Jung, *Collected Works*, vol. 9, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), par. 110. However, for Orlando, this definition lacks a proper historical problematisation, as the Jungian collective unconscious turns out to be ‘estraneo a evoluzione storica’ (Chap 9, para. 7, location 2893). Accordingly, in this research I follow Orlando’s position rather than Jung’s. Strikingly, in *Requiem* Tabucchi mocks Jungian psychoanalysis, as the character of Tadeus affirms that ‘io ho sempre preferito il materiale all’immaginario [...] anche l’immaginario collettivo, bisogna cantarglielo chiaro al signor Jung, prima dell’immaginario viene la pappa’ (p. 45).

made up of those ‘collective desires and wish-images, the forgotten future in the past [...] of which the individuals were and are aware only in the form of mute suffering and anxiety’.<sup>596</sup> The collective unconscious in Tabucchi’s works comprises all those other discourses that constitute a semantic vacuum by virtue of having never entered official narrations.

Similarly to the individual one, it issues from the demand to look differently at what is other, as Tabucchi addresses the collective unconscious through a cluster of optical motifs.

This is the case, for instance, with the windows in *Piazza d’Italia*,<sup>597</sup> which embody and amplify the dreads and expectations of the inhabitants of Borgo. Tabucchi ascribes to the windows the function of Maria’s corpse in ‘Il gioco del rovescio’, that of a blindspot, which lacerates any symbolic narrative of collectively traumatic events. Initially, he writes that ‘quell’inverno le finestre del paese erano restate cieche per una settimana, perché c’erano in giro le febbri’.<sup>598</sup> Later on in the novel this equivalence between the gaze and the window (and between in-visibility and in-significability) is made even more blatant, on the occasion of the Nazis’ devastation of the town: ‘Dicono che all’alba di quel mattino partirono le finestre. [...] Le case, con le occhiaie vuote, dicevano la resa’.<sup>599</sup> Finally, Garibaldo’s imminent death – he is shot by the police while publicly protesting against the government – is presaged by ‘un gemito di cardini e di legno’ that, in the character’s hallucinated dream, allows for an identification between the windows and his tombstone: ‘si girò a guardare la lapide. Ma non era una lapide, era la finestra di camera sua’.<sup>600</sup>

In *Piazza d’Italia*, alongside the windows, another image, which is related to mechanisms of vision and representation, visualises the collective unconscious: the contrast between the ever-changing monument that sanctions the historical advancement of the country and the emptiness of the movie theatre. The symbolic reality in which history is monumentalised aims at recording and saturating any differential meaning, incorporating and adapting, each time, the grand narrative of official events: while at the beginning it is noticed how ‘[a] Plinio il nuovo monumento piaceva molto di più: c’era un soldato con capelli al vento e sciabola al fianco che offriva sulle braccia una bambina a un signore

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<sup>596</sup> George Markus, ‘Benjamin’s Critique of Aesthetic Autonomy’, in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (Melbourne: Re.press, 2009), pp. 111-28 (p. 125).

<sup>597</sup> Structured as a family saga set in the Tuscan village of Borgo, the novel narrates Italian history from 1859 to the rise of Christian Democracy in the aftermath of World War II.

<sup>598</sup> *Piazza d’Italia*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>599</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

maestoso coi baffi a punta. [...] Garibaldi che consegna l'Italia al re',<sup>601</sup> the conclusion closely follows Garibaldi, who 'si accomodò sui piedi della Democrazia cingendola con un braccio, per non cadere'.<sup>602</sup> In between, the group of statues also witnesses the rise of Fascism:

Arrivarono su due macchine, cantando Giovinezza. [...] Imbraccarono con le funi la statua del re che al primo strattone piombò al suolo in una nuvoletta di polvere, senza fare resistenza. Garibaldi per alcune notti, offrì l'Italia alla barberia dirimpetto. Qualche settimana dopo ci fu [...] il rimpiazzo della statua sottratta. [...] Il Duce, a torso nudo e con l'elmetto in testa, teneva il mento all'insù e pareva che Garibaldi gli facesse un gran favore a offrirgli l'Italia.<sup>603</sup>

However, this net of familiar meanings upon which historical accounts are founded gravitates around a void that finds its expression in the image of the theatre fallen into disuse.<sup>604</sup> At first, building the theatre seems to mirror and duplicate the aforementioned logic of monumentalisation:

Borgo stava diventando una città. Al teatro ci lavoravano speditamente; aveva già la facciata completa, con un cornicione neoclassico e la Vittoria di Samotracia che indicava il nome a lettere di gesso in rilievo: *Splendore*. Avrebbe aperto, si diceva, per il prossimo carnevale, con *Il paese dei campanelli* e forse un film: *Cabiria*.<sup>605</sup>

Conversely, it is soon made clear how the necessity to occupy and fill any space for potential sense lies beneath and behind the monumental attempt to spectacularise history, in order to cover up the lack of meaning inherent in historical events:

Lo Splendore era finito. Lo avevano fatto cineteatro [...]. Si sentì dire: 'Lo inaugurano questa settimana'. 'Quando?' 'Il giorno tal dei tali'. E si pensava: cosa daranno? Un film, un teatro? [...]. Poi apparve il cartello di Cabiria [...] 'Lo danno! Questa volta lo danno per davvero' [...] Invece si

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<sup>601</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>602</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>603</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>604</sup> This scene might be compared to Magris' analysis of Musil's 1940 novel *The Man Without Qualities*: 'Il fulcro ideale dell'impero [...] è il palco vuoto dell'imperatore, il palco riservato – in ogni teatro di ogni città della monarchia – per l'eventuale visita del sovrano e nel quale il sovrano non compare mai', and which turns into the symbol of 'verità dell'assenza o della latitanza di senso, che [...] non implicano tuttavia mai la rinuncia all'esigenza o alla ricerca del senso stesso [...] l'esigenza inappagabile ma insopprimibile del senso'. Claudio Magris, *L'anello di Clarisse: grande stile e nichilismo nella letteratura moderna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), pp. 3-16.

<sup>605</sup> *Piazza d'Italia*, p. 85.

sentì un vocione slittante, e la piazza ammutolì, presa a tradimento. Le prime parole erano: ‘Combattenti di terra, di mare!’. Fu il primo spettacolo dello Splendore. E fu anche l’ultimo, perché era scoppiata la Guerra.<sup>606</sup>

In the end, the theatre is completely deprived of its proper function, metaphorically evolving into a sort of rotten setting to be inhabited by those same voices that have been marginalised by any official, historical narrative<sup>607</sup>:

Accanto al portone, dalla parte sinistra, pendeva il cartello di un film che avrebbe dovuto inaugurare il cinema una decina di anni prima. Sulla destra un manifesto giallo, scritto a mano: ‘QUESTA SERA AL CINE TEATRO SPLENDOR ALLE ORE 21 COMIZIO POPOLARE SUI PROBLEMI DELLA FABBRICA [...]’.<sup>608</sup>

The collective unconscious is at the core of Tabucchi’s second novel, *Il piccolo naviglio*. Indeed, the text explores the dichotomy between official, historical accounts and what has been omitted, silenced and repressed from such familiar versions: the narrator Capitano Sesto employs memory and the imagination to reconstruct the forgotten story of his own family. Yet, ‘forse temendo di aver ecceduto nell’immaginazione’ he seeks ‘un conforto di verità nelle autorevoli cronache di uno storiografo locale’, who, however ‘era avaro di particolari nel suo impegno statistico; faceva Storia e non storie come quelle di Capitano Sesto’.<sup>609</sup> To this formal, annalistic chronicle, Sesto opposes the attempted narrative of a repressed, collective unconscious made up of ‘frammenti e oggetti disparati: una gru impagliata, un quaderno di ricette [...], un temperino di madreperla [...]’, aware that ‘per sciogliere finalmente i nodi della sua vela, aveva fretta di cominciare a scrivere questa storia’.<sup>610</sup> For, not only can Capitano Sesto’s attempt to deal with and make sense of his private trauma – the loss of his mother and the almost integral oblivion of his childhood – not be detached from the broader perspective of traumatic, historical episodes such as the

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<sup>606</sup> Ibid., pp. 97-98.

<sup>607</sup> The exclusion from the official accounts epitomises the characters’ denied political agency. An exemplary implication of this can also be found in Garibaldi’s death, at the end of the novel, which occurs when he is embracing the statue of democracy, trying to deliver a public speech: ““La mia proposta è questa,” gridò Garibaldi. Si accomodò sui piedi della Democrazia cingendola con un braccio, per non cadere. [...] Il monumento era un terreno franco, confine fra la folla e le file dei poliziotti. [...] In quel momento si sentì uno sparo. Uno solo. Garibaldi sciolse l’abbraccio della statua e lentamente si girò su se stesso. Aprì il pugno alzato e il sasso rotolò sulla piazza’ (ibid., pp. 143-45).

<sup>608</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>609</sup> *Il piccolo naviglio*, p. 55.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid., pp. 201-02.

two world wars and the Italian Resistance. But, even more notably, Sesto can only successfully undergo an experience of subjectivation at the moment when he understands that signifying the other (his unconscious) goes along with an ethical opening towards the other(s) (the collective unconscious).

In exemplary fashion, Sesto tries to structure a narration of his own infancy, coming to terms with those voices – ‘quelle voci che parlano per comandare o per vietare o per domandare’ –<sup>611</sup> and images – such as entering the disturbing scene of a tapestry – experienced long before they could gain access to ‘l’archivio dei ricordi ricordabili’<sup>612</sup>:

E pensando e ripensando, frugando in un archivio in cui aveva schedato i ricordi ricordabili [...] in oscuri cantucci, rimuoveva tappezzerie, riascoltava conversazioni di cui gli restavano schegge, frammenti, spezzoni rosicchiati e ammuffiti [...].<sup>613</sup>

After his mother’s death, he chooses silence, resisting the temptation ‘di aprire la benché minima breccia nella sua campana di vetro, il più piccolo forellino attraverso cui si potessero insinuare le voci che parlavano per domandare, per proibire o per comandare’.<sup>614</sup> These could be read as instances of the nihilistic, representational regime of metaphysical signification, in relation to which Sesto’s silence performs Agamben’s idea of infancy as the experience of the taking place of language, before and beyond any rigid signified. Not speaking, Sesto dwells in the potentiality to speak, which compares to man’s ‘statuto poetico’: his silence is not a lack of sense, but a fracture thereof.

Capitano Sesto’s narration constitutes, therefore, an attempt to negotiate a possibility of meaning and of identity – ‘come una vela da sciogliere’<sup>615</sup> –, which has to make room, within the symbolic practice of language, for the unconscious. Accordingly, the narrator’s poetical apprenticeship, in the conclusive chapters, might be read as an archetypical demonstration of the negative capability of the uncanny. For, it is the othering of language that makes it possible to dwell within an unsaturated symbolic, as the unconscious is

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<sup>611</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid., p. 143. Thus, Sesto struggles to represent both his repressed and non-repressed unconscious: while the former defines ‘ordinary repressed memories’, the latter includes ‘the most archaic mnestic traces [...] registered only in a non-representational form’ and which constitute ‘the only memory available in the first two years of life’ (Civitarese, pp. 8-9).

<sup>613</sup> *Il piccolo naviglio*, pp. 150-51.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid., pp. 146-47.

<sup>615</sup> Ibid., p. 157.



‘quella lacuna della nostra storia che attende ancora di essere pensata e scritta’.<sup>616</sup> Having moved to Florence at the end of his adolescence, Sesto becomes friends with Socrate, ‘un vecchio filosofo’ who ‘dialogava con le cose. Le toccava, le accarezzava, le scomponeva, gli faceva il solletico, vi si tuffava: le guardava dal di dentro come un sottomarino che fa rotta dentro le cose’.<sup>617</sup> Significantly,

Fu lì che Sesto [...] cominciò a sospettare che per conoscere il mondo bisogna prima di tutto conoscere noi stessi. A quel tempo [...] cominciò anche a scrivere brevi poesie [...] dalle quali ricavava poi leggeri aeroplani di carta che faceva planare sull’Arno [...]. Imbiancò l’Arno di foglietti che parlavano di una realtà impenetrabile disposta in versi liberi [...] perché essi non facevano neppure in tempo a essere registrati nell’archivio dei ricordi ricordabili: si materializzavano in subitanei aeroplani di carta [...].<sup>618</sup>

This dual movement from the unconscious to consciousness and from empty signs to authentic words leads Sesto to experience a sort of uncanny epiphany, which is both de-realising and revealing:

Ma un giorno Sesto [...] si accorse che non aveva aeroplani di carta da buttare nel fiume [...] e si mise a guardare l’acqua del fiume. [...] E come quando l’udito si libera in una discesa, le orecchie di Sesto si stapparono ed egli cominciò a sentire il brusio del mondo che scorreva. Sentiva la voce interna delle cose [...]. E capì, anche all’improvviso, con un senso di panico e di meraviglia come si addice a un poeta senza poesia, di essere il punto di un tempo in progressione [...] ed ebbe voglia di allungare la mano verso il fiume delle cose per pescarsi, per afferrare il piccolo naviglio detto Sesto [...]. [S]apeva solo che esisteva, nascosta da qualche parte, una poesia da scoprire che potesse insegnare a navigare al piccolo naviglio [...].<sup>619</sup>

The attempt to make sense of himself, of his own identity, ‘di sillabare un nodo che lo ingombrava’, in the belief that ‘sarebbe salpato verso se stesso, avrebbe dato un senso a quei due punti sui quali si arrestava la sua unica poesia interrotta’,<sup>620</sup> as anticipated, reaches its climax when Sesto understands how signifying the other – experiencing the unconscious – requires and evolves into the gesture of signifying for the other (in his case, Ivana) – as

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<sup>616</sup> Massimo Recalcati, *Elogio dell’inconscio. Dodici argomenti in difesa della psicoanalisi* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007), p. 70.

<sup>617</sup> *Il piccolo naviglio*, p. 157.

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>619</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-62.

[U]no squarcio chiaro, un'illuminazione, una liberazione [...] senti, con un immensa sensazione di vuoto, tutto il vuoto che c'era oltre i suoi due punti e si mise a correre senza mèta. Si mise a correre verso l'Ivana detta Rosa, senza sapere ancora che esistesse.<sup>621</sup>

Sesto feels and dwells in the void that uncovers uncanniness, man's sense of not-being-at-home, the fact that individuals exist as producers of meaning: the colon symbolises a caesura that is also an articulation, a linguistic fold laying bare the taking place of language itself. This is the withdrawal, the letting go of familiar sense and the grounding of unfamiliarity as the possibility of sense making. Sesto is not, as Pezzin has contended, 'significanza senza aggancio alla realtà',<sup>622</sup> as he personifies a demand and a quest for unsaturated sense, the non-propositional, poietic language of the unconscious.

#### 4.3 Objects and Modes of the Uncanny Reversal: Reconsidering Maria's Gaze

The next sections focus on the most significant, and thus far less widely addressed, diegetic images and discursive modes of the unconscious in Tabucchi. For, the latter forms an uncanny gaze that questions and withdraws pre-existing precepts and visual practices, seeking a potential view, a different logic of sense making.

Nonetheless, this is evident already in short story 'Il gioco del rovescio', the first text to be explicitly and programmatically informed by the idea of the reversal, and which is utterly dominated by Maria do Cadmo's gaze. For this reason I will first analyse the story, in order to identify and interrogate those motifs and rhetorical strategies associated with the unconscious.

What kind of gaze is Maria's? And in what ways is it represented or, better, performed in its sense making function by Tabucchi's narrative? That death makes it impossible for the narrator to see her body for the last time – 'Posso vederla?, chiesi. [...] Non è possibile, disse, è alla clinica Cuf, è morta là, e poi il medico ha dato ordine di chiuderla, non era possibile lasciarla aperta, date le condizioni'<sup>623</sup> – acquires a metaphorical value of darkness and opacity: Maria's corpse functions as the blindspot within the protagonist's (and the reader's) eye. This is made explicit when, turning the woman's regard into the gaze of

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<sup>621</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>622</sup> Claudio Pezzin, *Antonio Tabucchi* (Sommacampagna: Cierre, 2009), p. 21.

<sup>623</sup> *Il gioco*, pp. 20-21.

Velázquez' painting, *Las Meninas*, the narrator undergoes an aesthetic and oneiric experience that erases the boundary between art and life. Initially, he is informed of Maria's death while staring at the picture: 'Quando Maria do Carmo Meneses de Sequeira morì, io stavo guardando Las Meninas di Velázquez'.<sup>624</sup> And symmetrically, the story concludes with the protagonist dreaming of 'linee prospettiche che convergevano verso il punto di fuga di un quadro, il quadro era Las Meninas di Velázquez, la figura di fondo [...] che buffo, quella figura di fondo era Maria do Carmo col suo vestito giallo'.<sup>625</sup> The woman evades from, is extimate to what can be seen. This is evidenced not only by the fact that her corpse is invisible, lying outside the scopic field; but, also, in relation to the figure of the painting onto which the narrator overwrites Maria's appearances. This figure is that of the man in the doorway, caught in the act of leaving the scene, of withdrawing from representation. He constitutes the geometrical vanishing point<sup>626</sup> of *Las Meninas*, regarding whom Maria would say that 'la chiave del quadro sta nella figura di fondo, è un gioco del rovescio'.<sup>627</sup>

In the story, the woman's glance is personified, for instance, by the sound of 'il motore di un piccolo rimorchiatore azzurro', which initially appears in the guise of the narrator's hallucination – 'mi trovavo in uno strano dormiveglia, fuori ronzava il traffico della città e nella camera ronzava il condizionatore d'aria che però nella mia coscienza era il motore di un piccolo rimorchiatore'.<sup>628</sup> Secondly, the reader discovers that the little towboat belongs to *Ode Marittima*, a poem by Pessoa's heteronym Alvaro de Campos, of which Maria 'recitava qualche verso' commenting that 'Pessoa è un genio, perché ha capito il risvolto delle cose, del reale e dell'immaginato, la sua poesia è un *juego del revés*';<sup>629</sup> 'il suono di una sirena, forse una nave che entrava in porto'<sup>630</sup> is later heard by the narrator during his discussion with Maria's husband, Nuno Meneses de Sequeira. And finally, the protagonist overhears 'il fischio lontano di una sirena attutito dal cuscino sul quale poggiavo la guancia' that turns into an oneiric impression inspired by Campos' ode – 'e in quel

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<sup>624</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>626</sup> After all, for Tabucchi, far from signalling the mastery of an enclosed perspectival vision, the vanishing point 'è un luogo geometrico, perché si sposta mentre noi ci spostiamo' (*Il filo*, p. 107). Thus, the writer appropriates and reverses what was the apex and the key concept behind the geometrical optical regime.

<sup>627</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 11.

<sup>628</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 11.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid., p. 22. Indeed, Tabucchi once explained that in Pessoa this is the 'metafora di un Molo Assoluto a cui l'uomo approda per poi partire verso l'ignoto'. *Viaggi e altri viaggi*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010), p. 202.

momento la sirena fischiò un'altra volta, la nave attraccò, io scesi lentamente dalla passerella e cominciai a seguire i moli'.<sup>631</sup>

Answering the first question – what gaze is Maria's? – therefore means recognising the reversal as an ontological gaze, disregarding metaphysical binary oppositions and making room for the simultaneous articulating of different, if not opposite, potentialities of sense. This is testified by Velázquez' painting itself,<sup>632</sup> which metaleptically represents the gesture it is performing: the schism between the perspectival eye and the disquieting gazing of the unconscious. Maria's is the gaze that comes forth and perforates the familiar veil of reality, and which becomes visible only in the fissure between different perspectives. In Tabucchi's text this is symbolised by her multiple, controversial identities, so that the narrator and the reader never get to know whether she was a conservative landowner supporting Salazar's regime or a subversive republican born to exiled parents in Argentina – 'a Maria do Carmo piaceva molto un gioco, lo ha giocato per tutta la vita [...] lei deve essere capitato in un suo rovescio'.<sup>633</sup> The optical modality of the unconscious, the writer's 'rovescio', presupposes a mutual modification between the seer and the seen, insofar as the movement and change in point of view of the one corresponds to the overturning of the other. Consequently, it could be argued that the uncanny reversal is a form of parallax view, borrowing Žižek's formula for the optical mechanism of the (Lacanian) real:

The common definition of parallax is: the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical twist to be added, of course, is that the observed difference is not simply 'subjective,' due to the fact that the same object which exists 'out there' is seen from two different stations, or points of view. It is rather that [...] an 'epistemological' shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an 'ontological' shift in the object itself. Or, to put it in Lacanese, the subject's gaze is always-already inscribed into the perceived object itself, in the guise of its 'blind spot,' that which is 'in the object more than object itself,' the point from which the object itself returns the gaze.<sup>634</sup>

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<sup>631</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 24.

<sup>632</sup> In Tabucchi's words, 'si tratta di una tela che [...] in realtà è un concetto basato sul punto di vista, sul modo di guardare e di essere guardati, e che divaga su ciò che significa guardare ed essere guardati' ('La letteratura come enigma', p. 50).

<sup>633</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 22.

<sup>634</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), p. 17. Similarly in *Il filo*, shifting perspectives are Tabucchi's narrative equivalent for the protagonist's metaphysical detection and for its underlying tension between semantic blindness and semiotic insights: as Rustioni indicates, 'linea mobile dello sguardo, il filo dell'orizzonte è un luogo geometrico inafferrabile perché muta col variare della

This is why, to answer the second question (how does Tabucchi produce Maria's gaze?), the latter works as the centre of a sort of optical and nocturnal narrative vortex. Several visual elements belong to the diegetic level. In addition to *Las Meninas*, one should mention: the iterated references to the window, which are emblematically associated with the figure of Maria – 'lei mi aspettava da dietro una finestra', 'non ce la facevo più a vedere quel cortile dalla mia finestra';<sup>635</sup> the train window, facing which the narrator undergoes an experience of depersonalisation – 'dal finestrino si vedevano le luci della cittadina di frontiera' staring at which 'provavo una sensazione stranissima, come se dall'alto stessi a guardare un altro me stesso';<sup>636</sup> the correspondence between the closed environment inhabited by Nuno Meneses de Sequeira and an exhibited, even tangible, nihilistic blindness – 'le imposte erano chiuse e nella stanza ristagnava un odore greve di vecchia tappezzeria [...] si alzò, andò alla finestra, dischiuse leggermente le imposte', although, while he is mocking the protagonist's illusion of having known the real Maria, 'dalla finestra arrivò il suono di una sirena, forse di una nave che entrava in porto';<sup>637</sup> and, tellingly, there is also a merely virtual window, the one described in Pessoa's heteronym Alvaro do Campos' poem *Lisbon revisited*, 'una poesia nella quale una persona è alla finestra della sua infanzia, ma non è più la stessa persona e non è più la stessa finestra', which merges optical and temporal illusions, at once offering and dislodging the possibility of a palindromic temporality.<sup>638</sup> Accordingly, from a temporal perspective, the story oscillates between an awareness of the irreversible passing of chronological time and the fact that the latter is reversed in a dual sense: collapsing the linearity between past and present (mostly on the level of the narration, juxtaposing diegetic present and memories of multi-layered pasts), and introducing the dimension of potentiality inside and beyond mere actuality.

The component of unconscious potentiality also informs the second thematic cluster that Tabucchi adopts in his strategy of the uncanny 'rovescio', which intermingles dreaming, insomnia and awakening: 'Mi svegliò il telefono verso le cinque, o forse non mi svegliò,

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posizione e del punto di vista del soggetto'. Thus, the title of the novel figuratively hints at the optical rationale structuring Spino's quest for a truth – Nobody's identity – that is impossible to pin down, which Spino helps to shape, as 'il reale può dirsi conosciuto solo se comunica con quanto in esso rimane incommensurabile e al di là di ogni criterio di dimostrabilità'. Marco Rustioni, 'Un'ignota geometria. Note sul *Filo dell'orizzonte*', in *I 'notturni'*, pp. 209-17 (p. 210).

<sup>635</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 12-15.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>637</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

mi trovavo in uno strano dormiveglia'; 'Mi preparai a una notte di insonnia [...] ma contrariamente al previsto fino ai dintorni di Talavera de la Reina dormii profondamente. Poi giacqui immobile, sveglio, a guardare il finestrino buio sul buio deserto dell'Estremadura', up to the conclusion 'E mi trovai in un altro sogno'.<sup>639</sup> The coincidence between the reversal and the dream and their triangular relationship with visibility is suggested by the narration itself, at the moment when the protagonist realises that the French word *rêves* (dreams) and the Spanish *reves* (reverse), namely the reverse of the term 'sever', which the woman left for him as her final note, 'coincidevano in un punto [...] il punto di fuga di una prospettiva [...] Maria do Carmo'.<sup>640</sup> For, Tabucchi observes, 'non solo la realtà è rovesciabile, ma anche il sogno, affinché vadano l'uno incontro all'altro, entrambi nel loro rovescio'.<sup>641</sup> The unconscious is a mode of semiotic experience, a potentiality and mechanism of sense, which is not exhausted in any one signified. A clear illustration of this can be found, for instance, in the insisted use of the adverb 'forse' throughout the story.

Despite the narrator's questioning – 'tu vedi il rovescio del quadro, che cosa si vede da codesta parte?'<sup>642</sup> – Maria cannot say what she sees from her reversed position, because the unconscious defies any monolithic, conclusive attribution of sense. The ambivalence intrinsic to her final message points to the need to articulate a negotiation of meaning capable of sustaining the nocturnal blindness, which does not seek any final, fixed, familiar truth. Looking backward at the reversal, hence re-turning from the linguistic pair dream/reverse to the original (English) term 'sever', Maria's message might be read as an indication of that very logic of separation or split (between consciousness and the unconscious, and the signifier and the signified) that belongs to Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny, hence suggesting that this is a message that can be neither pinned down nor deciphered, producing instead a withdrawal of sense, an incessant questioning instead of an answer. But the term 'sever' could also allude to Maria's own parting from the narrator. This is a moment of separation and estrangement, which is, however, a productive opening: for it is solely the caesura between the two characters that moves him, that makes him part with/towards Maria, towards the night, just as it is only the bar in the Saussurean sign that triggers uncanny signification. Ending on the narrator's oneiric de-pature – 'mi

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<sup>639</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>641</sup> *Di tutto*, p. 105.

<sup>642</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 24.

incamminai verso quel punto. E in quel momento mi trovai in un altro sogno<sup>643</sup> – the text uncannily awakens to the unconscious.

#### 4.3.1 Pictures

When discussing Tabucchi's diegetic use of pictures, it is important to assess how the camera works in his stories, on what specific aspects of the photographic process the author focuses the narrative attention and whether it is aimed at reinforcing the symbolic reality or at making room for an uncanny encounter with the real. As Trentini contends, '[m]etafora dello scrivere, la fotografia racchiude in sé la potenzialità di una rappresentazione, pur parziale e frammentata, del mondo'.<sup>644</sup> Photography concerns Tabucchi because and to the extent to which it constitutes a singular grammar of sense making: he uses the dual semiotic facet of the photographic image, that of being both an icon and an index, to orchestrate a broader, theoretical juxtaposition between photography as representational sign and as poietic gesture.<sup>645</sup>

This is what distinguishes, for instance, the photographic approach of the mass media from those of the protagonists in Tabucchi's detective novels *Il filo dell'orizzonte* and *La testa perduta*. In *Il filo*, Spino's search for the identity of the anonymous corpse significantly takes place in his spatial as much as symbolic dwelling on the threshold between life and death – working in a morgue, he is the one who '[a]mmministra l'anticamera della definitiva scomparsa della loro immagine visibile'.<sup>646</sup>

While journalistic chronicles remain attached merely to raw facts – 'solo pura cronaca, senza supposizioni e arabeschi' –,<sup>647</sup> Spino's own metaphysical detection performs a shift in paradigm, from the supremacy of actualised events to the metaphoric plane of *possibilia*. Two main visual turning points accelerate and direct his quest: initially, an observation made by his girlfriend while looking at the picture of the deceased in a newspaper – '[c]on

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<sup>643</sup> Ibid.

<sup>644</sup> Nives Trentini, *Una scrittura in partita doppia. Tabucchi fra romanzo e racconto* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2003), p. 90.

<sup>645</sup> In his 1867 article 'On A New List of Categories', the philosopher Charles S. Peirce firstly divided signs into icons, which are related to their referents through similarity, indexes, having a physical connection with their referents, and symbols, which arbitrarily and conventionally signify their objects.

<sup>646</sup> *Il filo*, p. 10.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

la barba e venti anni di meno potresti essere tu'<sup>648</sup> – and, later on, his decision to enlarge a picture found in the pocket of the deceased boy:

*Nella vasca del reagente i contorni sembrava stentassero a delinearsi, come se un reale lontano e trascorso, irrevocabile, fosse riluttante a essere resuscitato, si opponesse alla profanazione di occhi curiosi ed estranei, al risveglio in un contesto che non gli apparteneva. [...] Un graffio, che l'espositore ha ingrandito a dismisura, sfregia diagonalmente i loro corpi e il loro paesaggio. È un graffio involontario di un'unghia, l'inevitabile usura delle cose, la traccia di un metallo (chiavi, orologi, accendisigari) con il quale quei visi hanno coabitato in tasche e cassetti? Oppure è il segno volontario di una mano che voleva elidere quel passato? Ma quel passato, comunque, è ora un altro presente, si offre suo malgrado a una decifrazione.*<sup>649</sup>

Three points should be stressed in this quote: firstly, Tabucchi openly compares Spino's gaze to an act of profanation and awakening; secondly, the scratch might be understood as a literal and metaphorical punctum piercing the representation, as well as a blindspot in the visual field it displays; and finally, the photographic image is adopted as a signifier belonging to a different semiosis. Although it seems to offer itself up to a sort of Oedipal deciphering, the picture is not a propositional sign, for it has no truth (or identity) to reveal, apart from that of its own signifying function (e.g. how identity is constructed). This is why Spino's detection is uncannily structured. He refuses to accept a reality 'dai contorni troppo netti, come una fotografia contrastata, la luce e l'ombra si scontrano con prepotenza, senza coniugarsi', becoming aware that, facing the real 'è tutto buio, bisogna andare a tentoni', and eventually resolves to follow, in his photographic quest, a 'logica implacabile come una geometria ignota'.<sup>650</sup> For Spino, the camera elicits and activates the same metaphorical reading that he applies, elsewhere in the text, to the policemen who first brought the corpse to the morgue – 'quattro ragazzi dai capelli scuri e i gesti di sonnambuli [...] con l'andatura di chi non capisce bene quello che fa [...] un balletto leggiadro e funesto la cui sintassi gli era ignota'<sup>651</sup> – and to Nobodi's death itself – 'Così aveva fatto Carlo Nobodi, che da bambino si chiamava Carlito: aveva stabilito un nesso; attraverso di lui le cose che sono avevano trovato il modo di disegnare la loro trama'.<sup>652</sup> As if facing a rebus, Spino somehow has to link the dots and allow the image of truth – the truth as image – to emerge.

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<sup>648</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55, italicised.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid., pp. 73-98.

<sup>651</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid., p. 99.



In *La testa perduta* Tabucchi brings to its climax the gap separating journalistic representation from the idea (illustrated above) of the photographic image as a mode of the semiotic unconscious. The protagonist Firmino, a journalist himself, is forced to face, accept and incorporate, within his investigation, the mainstream logic of spectacularisation, which imposes visual exposure and the publication of close-ups of the beheaded corpse:

L' *Acontecimento* dedicava al caso la copertina, con un disegno violetto in cui si vedeva la silhouette di un corpo senza testa sormontato da un coltello gocciolante di sangue. Il titolone diceva: Ancora senza nome il cadavere decapitato.<sup>653</sup>

The element of superficial voyeurism underpins the entire mediascape in the novel – ‘Era una rivista che si chiamava *Vultos* e dedicava le sue pagine al jet-set portoghese e internazionale’<sup>654</sup> – as also attested to by Firmino’s editor-in-chief’s demand for a description of the murder ‘con molti dettagli pittoreschi, calca sul patetico e sul drammatico, come un bel fotoromanzo’.<sup>655</sup> And, through an optical metalepsis that creates a trompe-l’oeil effect for the reader, the narrator zooms in on Firmino’s article and its theatrical tone: ‘Lo scenario di questa triste, misteriosa e, aggiungeremmo, truculenta storia, è la ridente e operosa città di Oporto’.<sup>656</sup>

However, the protagonist struggles with his journalistic eye, as he is personally aware of the impossibility to rationally, frontally master the gaze of the real, epitomised by the shocking sight of the severed head:

Firmino guardò la testa sul vassoio cercando di vincere la ripugnanza [...] prese la macchina fotografica e scattò. Fotografò la testa e di lato. [...] Firmino sentì un brivido nella schiena pensando all’effetto che avrebbe fatto il giornale: peggio di un film dell’orrore. [...] In prima pagina la fotografia del volto preso di fronte [...], nelle due pagine interne il profilo destro e il profilo sinistro, e nell’ultima pagina una fotografia classica di Oporto col Douro e il ponte di ferro, naturalmente a colori.<sup>657</sup>

Contrasting with this traditional, postcard-like image of the city sold by the media, the protagonist’s attempt to come to terms with the traumatic real explains and produces the nocturnal tone of the novel: it is not accidental, therefore, that, towards the end, Firmino’s

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<sup>653</sup> *La testa perduta*, p. 52.

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>657</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-81.

memory of the trial against the policemen accused of Damasceno's murder fades into a sort of reverie:

Di quella giornata Firmino avrebbe poi ricordato soprattutto le sensazioni fisiche, precise e insieme quasi estranee, come se non lo riguardassero, come se una pellicola protettiva lo isolasse in una specie di dormiveglia nel quale le informazioni dei sensi sono registrate dalla coscienza, ma il cervello non è capace di elaborarle razionalmente, e rimangono a fluttuare come vaghi stati d'animo [...].<sup>658</sup>

In *Per Isabel* Tabucchi establishes a parallelism between the photographic image and the mandala, inasmuch as both serve to 'arrivare alla conoscenza'.<sup>659</sup> As the novel develops in the form of an inner quest, it is in turn impossible for the narrator – embodying the signifying function of the unconscious – to be photographed. The unconscious is described as 'un luogo troppo luminoso, [...] così luminoso che l'obiettivo fotografico a volte rimane abbagliato',<sup>660</sup> precisely because it is the unconscious itself that functions as a camera in the story. Searching for Isabel, the protagonist Tadeus meets a photographer who explicitly compares the photographic image to a gaze, that of the real, that of life, from which men are always looked at in advance:

Mi [...] lasci filosofeggiare, perlomeno su quest'ultima foto, mi viene in mente che qualcuno ha detto che la fotografia è la morte perché fissa l'attimo irripetibile. Si passò la fotografia fra le dita, proprio come se fosse un gioco di carte, e continuò: ma poi mi chiedo ancora: e se invece fosse la vita?, la vita con la sua immanenza e la sua perentorietà che si lascia sorprendere in un attimo e ci guarda con sarcasmo, perché è lì, fissa, immutabile, e invece noi viviamo nella mutazione, e allora penso che la fotografia, come la musica, coglie l'attimo che non riusciamo a cogliere, ciò che siamo stati, ciò che avremmo potuto essere, e contro questo attimo non c'è niente da fare, perché ha più ragione di noi, ma ragione di che cosa?, forse ragione del cambiamento di questo fiume che scorre e che ci trascina, e dell'orologio, del tempo che ci domina e che noi cerchiamo di dominare.<sup>661</sup>

Photography can compare to death only if observed as a sign to be deciphered. Yet it is life (and thus, metaphorically, the potentiality for signification and literature) when recognised as the blindspot in the narrator's scopic field. Significantly, Tadeus' search for Isabel

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<sup>658</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>659</sup> *Per Isabel*, p. 65.

<sup>660</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>661</sup> Ibid., pp. 67.

evokes Orpheus' myth.<sup>662</sup> In both cases, a male protagonist (Tadeus, Orpheus) loves a dead woman (Isabel, Eurydice) and tries to bring her back to life. In Tabucchi's novel, though, this is purely symbolic, for it is only the narrator's act of recalling and mourning that makes Isabel live again. While Orpheus is the protagonist of a *katabasis*, as he actually descends into underworld regions, Tadeus experiences a *nekyia*, summoning and encountering the dead in what arguably is, however, solely an inner journey. Tadeus is driven by remorse: he wants to know what happened to Isabel and if she was pregnant by him when they split: 'volevi liberarti dei tuoi rimorsi, non ero tanto io che tu cercavi, ma te stesso, un'assoluzione e una risposta'.<sup>663</sup> His quest is structured as a question that he asks all the characters he encounters: 'where is Isabel?' Nonetheless, it is an uncanny interrogation, since no final answer or closure is really possible in the story: the mandala is not the discovery of a truth, but its production.

The couple Tadeus-Isabel already appears in *Requiem* and in the short story 'Voci portate da qualcosa': in the two texts, Tadeus is a long-time dead friend of the first-person narrator, yet they give no information on whether or not the woman is still alive. The situation is reversed in *Per Isabel*, as Isabel is certainly dead, but the reader is left wondering if Tadeus, who defines himself as a pulsar, is also deceased. Yet, Isabel's tomb is twice empty: firstly at the beginning of the story, when her death is just a pretense, and, secondly, at the end of the novel, when she tells Tadeus that she was laid to rest in 'un minuscolo cimitero, nel viale di centro, tra le tombe più povere [...in] una tomba disadorna',<sup>664</sup> which is, however, a cenotaph. Similarly to Maria do Carmo, her corpse is out of sight. This constitutes a diegetic and narrative vacuum around which the story gravitates without filling it: when the mandala is completed, the void is not filled, but rather sustained as such, or, as she tells Tadeus, 'il tuo centro è il mio nulla in cui mi trovo ora'.<sup>665</sup> Placing a picture of the woman at the centre of the mandala, Tadeus finally sees her: the picture is what keeps the woman visible as invisible, a symbol of that other night which makes room for an authentically nocturnal practice of signification.

E in quel momento vidi Isabel. [...] E proprio in quel momento mi parve di riconoscere quel golfo e le sue luci, e io le chiesi con una certa angoscia, Isabel, dove siamo? Siamo nel nostro allora, rispose

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<sup>662</sup> The story is well-known: Orpheus, playing his lyre, is granted by the infernal gods the opportunity to lead his beloved Eurydice from the underworld regions back to life, on the condition that he resists turning around to look at her before full daylight is reached. Yet Orpheus cannot resist, and as a result of his gazing upon Eurydice, she is lost forever to the deadly darkness.

<sup>663</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid.

Isabel. Le presi la mano e le dissi: spiegati meglio, ti prego. Il vaporetto ha attraversato la quinta parete, rispose Isabel, siamo nel nostro allora, vedi, quelle sono le luci del Portinho da Arràbida, siamo partiti da Setùbal, è il vaporetto che ci porta da Setùbal al Portinho da Arràbida, siamo nella notte in cui ci dicemmo addio, sul vaporetto di quella notte, ti ricordi?, siamo nel nostro allora. Ma non si può essere contemporaneamente nell'ora e nell'allora, risposi, Isabel, non è possibile, ora siamo nel nostro ora. L'ora e l'allora si sono annullati, rispose Isabel, tu mi stai dicendo addio come a quel tempo, ma siamo nel nostro presente, il presente di ciascuno di noi, e tu mi stai dicendo addio.<sup>666</sup>

‘Questa la porto con me [...] di tutto resta un poco, a volte un’immagine’,<sup>667</sup> Tadeus eventually admits. The picture functions like Orpheus’ gaze: it loses the woman because this is the only way to signify her, to sustain her (as a) void.

#### 4.3.2 Ocular Instruments

For Tabucchi, binoculars and microscopes function as reversed prosthetic eyes: far from improving man’s perspectival sight, they embody and widen the blindspot inherent in human vision, which is what makes ocular instruments figuratively work as the basis for and the limits to uncanny signification. Binoculars symbolise the uncanny withdrawal of the familiar: looking at what is distant distances the viewer from himself and his reality. Microscopes embody the uncanny movement of ontological insight, a type of topological nearness, offering what Tabucchi calls ‘microprospettiva [...] una forma di concentrare

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<sup>666</sup> Ibid., p. 114-15. Tellingly, in the final chapter Tadeus finds out how his quest has been ‘guided’ by ‘il Violinista Matto’, who admits: ‘io conosco tutto il suo percorso, è da quando lei è arrivato che la seguo, anzi in qualche modo ho diretto tutto lo spartito [...] sono io che dirigo i suoi cerchi concentrici’ (ibid., pp. 112-14). The final circle, where the encounter with Isabel takes place, is traced by the fiddler himself: ‘[p]oi prese il suo archetto e disegnò sulla sabbia un piccolo cerchio. Siamo arrivati al centro, mi sussurrò, mi dia la fotografia di Isabel. Io gliela porsi e lui la collocò al centro del cerchio’ (ibid.). Tabucchi derives the figure of the Mad Fiddler from Pessoa; in the Portuguese poet’s homonymous poem, written in English between 1911 and 1917, the mad fiddler really appears as an uncanny guest. Coming from nowhere, his music produces in those who hear it a letting go of familiar significance and the abysmal opening up of a different possibility of sense making: ‘[...] His music strange did fret/ Each heart to wish ’twas free./ It was not a melody, yet/ It was not no melody./ Somewhere far away,/ Somewhere far outside/ Being forced to live, they/ Felt this tune replied./ Replied to that longing/ All have in their breasts,/ To lost sense belonging/ To forgotten quests’. Fernando Pessoa, ‘The Mad Fiddler’, in *Arquivo Pessoa* <<http://arquivopessoa.net/textos/1908>> [Accessed 28 July 2016].

<sup>667</sup> *Per Isabel*, p. 117.

l'attenzione, tutta l'attenzione, su un piccolo dettaglio della vita, del tran-tran quotidiano, come se quel dettaglio fosse la cosa più importante di questo mondo'.<sup>668</sup>

Binoculars are used in 'Libri mai scritti, viaggi mai fatti', to decipher

[I] mosaici di ceramica che ornano il cortile della moschea di Ulug Beg, quel motivo di fiori dai venti petali iscritto in una stella a dodici punte dalla quale si diramano motivi geometrici che finiscono in una sorta di labirinto. Sarà così la vita, chiedesti, comincia in un punto come se fosse un petalo, e poi si disperde in tutte le direzioni?.<sup>669</sup>

Likewise, in 'Sogno di Giacomo Leopardi, poeta e lunatico', the poet is taken by his beloved Silvia 'a una finestra dove c'era un cannocchiale'<sup>670</sup> from which he sees himself watching: he is both the eye and the gaze in the Lacanian scopic field. However, the most important occurrences are to be found in the novel *Tristano muore*, as Tristano meditates on the relationship between focal length and the capacity to authentically see the real:

Scrittore, se guardi in biblioteca, accanto al tavolo sotto la finestra c'è il cannocchiale di mio nonno e il microscopio di mio padre... Che strano, pensaci un po', mio padre studiava le vite vicinissime col microscopio, mio nonno cercava quelle lontanissime col cannocchiale, entrambi con le lenti. Ma la vita si scopre a occhio nudo, né troppo lontana, né troppo vicina, ad altezza d'uomo...<sup>671</sup>

In the novel, Tabucchi suggests a sort of reciprocity between the optical instrument and the gun: 'In montagna Tristano portava un mitra a spalle, certo, e con quel mitra diventò l'eroe che sai, ma fin là ci andò con un cannocchiale d'ottone a cui era affezionato'.<sup>672</sup> The gun makes him a hero of the Italian Resistance and allows Tristano to exit the plane of chronicle and enter that of History. Likewise, binoculars figuratively mark a sort of visual infancy, for they stress the importance of looking at things or situations in unfamiliar ways and from different angles, to see how they are and how they might be, to metaphorically put them in the right perspective. Accordingly, looking through binoculars before shooting, Tristano begins to question how to make sense of his own life: what choices can he make? Does he want to be a hero? Is it really worthwhile? In a way, binoculars distance Tristano from a blind adherence to the flow of existence and of the Italian Resistance.

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<sup>668</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 130.

<sup>669</sup> *Si sta facendo*, p. 143.

<sup>670</sup> *Sogni di sogni*, p. 46.

<sup>671</sup> *Tristano muore*, p. 41.

<sup>672</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Tabucchi also uses the element of eyeglasses to figuratively express the – solely apparent – contradiction between blindness and insight. In *Gli ultimi tre giorni di Fernando Pessoa*, the Portuguese poet asks for his glasses in the face of death:

[È] ora di partire, è ora di lasciare questo teatro di immagini che chiamiamo la nostra vita, sapesse le cose che ho visto con gli occhiali dell'anima [...]. [S]ono stanco, la mia candela si è consumata, la prego, mi dia i miei occhiali.<sup>673</sup>

It is as if Pessoa were finally able to look straight into and reciprocate the gaze of the real, exiting, like Maria do Carmo, the visual field of which he eventually becomes the blindspot. Equally, that the cemetery custodian in *Requiem* suffers from a cataract and is obliged to wear glasses symbolically alludes to the unconscious othering of the narrative eye, the necessity of seeing otherwise in order to uncover what is other. Arguably, the presence and role of spectacles in Tabucchi's texts could be compared to those images of characters with half-closed eyes – such as Volturmo from *Piazza d'Italia* and Spino – and who, as he says of Leonida in *Il piccolo naviglio*, 'teneva gli occhi socchiusi per poter vedere ciò che sognava'.<sup>674</sup>

#### 4.3.3 Mirrors

In *Tristano muore* the recurrent motif of the 'moscone' that 'batte contro lo specchio, quello stupido, vuole uscire, pensa che lo specchio sia una finestra'<sup>675</sup> may be interpreted as a metaphor for the protagonist's need for some fresh air, for a final reconciliation with his own life. This is to be reached through a confession which, like a mirror, divides the individual between a subject gazing – the speaking I – and one being gazed upon – the third person through which he refers to his past self. This possible reading is reinforced by Tristano's subsequent claim that

[I]o non sono qui per confermare, al contrario... mai fidarsi degli specchi, lì per lì sembra che riflettano la tua immagine, e invece te la stravolgono, o peggio, la assorbono, si bevono tutto, risucchiano anche te... Gli specchi sono porosi, scrittore, e tu non lo sapevi.<sup>676</sup>

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<sup>673</sup> *Gli ultimi tre giorni*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>674</sup> *Il piccolo naviglio*, p. 21.

<sup>675</sup> *Tristano muore*, p. 16.

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Far from being the visual confirmation of a stable identity, Tabucchi's mirror produces

[U]n effetto che può anche adombrare un sortilegio: ci guarda da fuori ma è come se ci frugasse dentro, la nostra vista non ci è indifferente, ci intriga e ci turba come quella di nessun altro: i filosofi taosti la chiamarono *lo sguardo ritornato*.<sup>677</sup>

In exemplary fashion, the woman protagonist of 'Staccia buratta' and the child in the short story 'Capodanno', both from *L'angelo nero*, glimpse their guardian angel in the mirror, which metaphorically embodies their unconscious. In 'Staccia buratta', the angel is described as having

[I]l volto di una bambina con gli occhi grandi e le treccine scure. Ma il volto era di una bambina vecchia, e le ali non avevano piume, ma un pelame scuro e raso come quello di un topo. Fu un attimo. Nascose la testa fra le mani e tornò a guardare lo specchio: l'angelo era sparito.<sup>678</sup>

Similarly, the young protagonist of 'Capodanno' wonders whether he would ever be able to catch the angel's reflection:

Si girava di scatto, eppure non riusciva mai a sorprenderlo. Ma sentiva il fruscio delle ali. [...] Com'era angelo Duccio? [...] Avrebbe tentato di vederlo nello specchio. [...] Mentre si spogliava sbirciava furtivamente nello specchio: angelo Duccio non poteva prevedere esattamente tutti i suoi movimenti, forse si sarebbe scoperto.<sup>679</sup>

A plethora of elements in this text produce a sort of visual field: Duccio, the young protagonist, is obsessed with the memory of his fascist father's execution of a group of partisans. However, this is an impossible reminiscence, as he did not see the murder directly, but only overheard it, for '[d]ietro il buio delle palpebre, nel buio della notte, una voce gridò: "Nel Sotterraneo! Portateli nel Sotterraneo!"'.<sup>680</sup> This primal blindness, the lack of a direct vision of the deadly scene, generates in Duccio a scopic compulsion to see the cellar still covered in his dad's blood:

Si fece avanti e cominciò a perlustrare le pareti col fascio della lampadina. Le macchie erano ben visibili, parevano proprio umidità. Ebbe la tentazione di toccarle, ma ritrasse la mano. Tenendo il pezzo di carbone bene all'estremità, per evitare il contatto della mano con il muro, le marcò

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<sup>677</sup> *I volatili*, p. 51.

<sup>678</sup> *L'angelo nero*, p. 69.

<sup>679</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>680</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

accuratamente [...]. Quando ebbe finito, le macchie erano visibili perfettamente. [...] Tracciò le croci alla svelta, su ogni macchia, procedendo quasi di corsa. [...] Quando uscì si accorse che piangeva. In silenzio e a dirotto, senza riuscire a fermarsi.<sup>681</sup>

Yet, as with ‘la cancellatura a reticolato’ in the story ‘Pomeriggi del sabato’, as discussed in chapter 2, the child’s gesture does not constitute a moment of repression. It issues from a disavowal, where ‘negation is different from mere absence or blindness’,<sup>682</sup> and which functions similarly to the *unheimliche*, in that it simultaneously accepts and dislodges the trauma of his father’s violence. The cellar defines a physical and symbolic hole, which, in his childish fantasies, the protagonist transforms into the sea bottom – a ‘cripta sottomarina’<sup>683</sup> – he perlustates on board Capitano Nemo’s submarine:

In mezzo alla radura [...] [n]el centro della croce c’era una cornice ovale, con una piccola fotografia sfumata ai bordi: il babbo, vestito di bruno e con la pistola al fianco, salutava eternamente col braccio teso gli abissi che gli stavano di fronte.<sup>684</sup>

Thus, the oneiric unconscious gives form to that scene, that missing dimension of sense, which turns Duccio’s actual lack of an image into a theatrical experience of sense making, as he produces a ‘meaningful narrative’ that ‘demonstrates the priority of the signifying function over that of representation’.<sup>685</sup>

#### 4.3.4 Windows

It is possible to identify two main categories in Tabucchi’s windows: the nihilistic, rational one that is intended to create and geometrically master a visual, comfort zone, and the uncanny one, which dislodges any rigid border between the inside and the outside. As he writes in ‘Lettera al vento’,

Finestre: ciò di cui abbiamo bisogno, mi disse una volta un vecchio saggio [...] la vastità del reale è incomprensibile, per capirlo bisogna rinchiuderlo in un rettangolo, la geometria si oppone al caos,

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<sup>681</sup> Ibid., pp. 144-45.

<sup>682</sup> Charles Shepherdson, ‘Lacan and Philosophy’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 116-52 (p. 124).

<sup>683</sup> *L’angelo nero*, p. 111.

<sup>684</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>685</sup> *Theatricality as Medium*, p. x.



per questo gli uomini hanno inventato le finestre che sono geometriche, e ogni geometria presuppone gli angoli retti. [...] Ma] le finestre sono solo una pavida forma di geometria degli uomini che temono lo sguardo circolare, dove tutto entra senza senso e senza rimedio, come quando Talete guardava le stelle, che non entrano nel riquadro della finestra.<sup>686</sup>

The unconscious window is the frame that functions as a theatrical threshold in 'Casta Diva': 'una tela, una specie di enorme finestra a tutto teatro, grazie alla quale, come in certi quadri di Magritte, il fuori sembrava entrare nel dentro e annullarlo'.<sup>687</sup> However, as Tabucchi indicates in 'Come in uno specchio', the uncanny window does not erase the geometrical one: rather, they coexist, 'l'una di fronte all'altra, come in uno specchio [...] l'immagine ritorna invertita, è la stessa ma non lo è, dice la stessa cosa che però è diversa. O dice due cose diverse che però è la stessa'.<sup>688</sup>

Pessoa's heteronym Soares' *Livro do desassossego* centres around a man staring at the window during his insomnias; similarly, Tabucchi's 'Le vacanze di Bernardo Soares' is symbolically enclosed between the initial balcony from which the protagonist awaits his taxi and the twenty windows he counts on the façade of his holiday home and which epitomise 'l'inquietudine che accompagna le mie notti'.<sup>689</sup> An analogous feeling of disquiet pervades 'Una finestra sull'ignoto', where the window, topologically extimate to the house, forms

[U]n quadro naturale nella cui cornice accogli la natura, perché la natura devi lasciarla entrare dalle finestre [...]. L'ideale sarebbe lasciarla, questa finestra, aperta all'aria e ai venti, come se il suo interno senza soluzione di continuità arrivasse all'esterno e lo accogliesse. [...] Pensò a com'era strano guardare la realtà che ci circonda come se fosse a portata di mano e pensò che niente è a portata di mano, soprattutto quello che vedi, e che a volte ciò che è accanto è più lontano di quello che pensi.<sup>690</sup>

Uncanny windows epitomise, therefore, a non-propositional, non-reifying, but poetic vision, which, undoing the opposition between inside and outside, lay bare the topological articulation of Tabucchi's signification. Claiming that 'niente è a portata di mano' has both

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<sup>686</sup> *Si sta facendo*, pp. 218-19.

<sup>687</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>688</sup> *Racconti con figure*, p. 220.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43. As Tabucchi indicates, 'la finestra di Bernardo Soares ha le imposte che si possono aprire nei due sensi, sul fuori e sul dentro' and his gaze 'costituisce la percezione e insieme l'alterazione dei dati dell'esperienza' (*Un baule*, pp. 67-70).

<sup>690</sup> *Racconti con figure*, pp. 63-67.

metaphysical and linguistic bearings, for it refuses a view of the real as something at hand, at man's disposal and thus appropriable for mastery, exploitation and consumption, and which can be linguistically objectified within a representational discourse.

#### 4.3.5 Prophecies

In Tabucchi's opus, the oracular element embodies the possibility of seeing otherwise and on a different plane, a sort of negotiaton with (and negation of) the imperative of actualisation: it foregrounds the role of the unconscious as a semiotic reservoir of possibilia. The ocular therefore is most prominently oracular.

Notably, Tabucchi defines his own poetics in terms of a 'backwards poetics' or divinatory blindness:

La scrittura, a volte, è cieca. E nella sua cecità, oracolare. Solo che la sua previsione non riguarda il futuro, ma ciò che successe nel passato a noi o agli altri e che non avevamo capito che era successo e perché.<sup>691</sup>

Tabucchi's literature shares the seer's vision, the capacity to uncover unfulfilled potentialities. As Dolfi comments,

[Q]uella 'correzione del definitivo' che è negata alla vita, è per eccellenza il compito dell'arte narrativa, che, se da un lato ripercorre la storia, dall'altra può ipotizzare mondi possibili, luoghi alternativi, a quello unico, definitivo, che è il nostro. E questo non solo grazie a una qualche mescolanza tra accaduto e ciò che deve ancora avvenire; ma anche al trascorrere, con l'ausilio del sogno [...] di passato, presente e futuro.<sup>692</sup>

This is something that Tabucchi also explores on the diegetic level. Thus, in the eponymous novel, Tristano evokes the Pizia not to foresee his future but to redeem his past:

[S]ei venuto affinché il tuo vero passato lo dica la mia voce, perché tu non hai il coraggio di farlo, e così affidi a me, che predico il futuro, di predire ciò che essendo già stato non si potrà più cambiare.<sup>693</sup>

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<sup>691</sup> *Autobiografie altrui*, p. 103.

<sup>692</sup> *Tabucchi, la specularità*, p. 20.

<sup>693</sup> *Tristano muore*, p. 154.

Similarly, I would also ascribe to the category of prophecies the letter ‘Il fiume’, included in *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi*, and which prefigures the posthumous novel *Per Isabel* in that it is narrated as a sort of mandala or temporal circling around a central vacuum. The protagonist, having reached a little church in ruins, whose door uncovers ‘[u]na targhetta insensata che diceva: “Scelta vita futura. Entrata Libera”’,<sup>694</sup> decides to enter what might seem nothing more than a game:

Niente ricerca dell’io più profondo, di quello più nascosto negli abissi della nostra coscienza, come vorrebbero certi palombari delle nostre anime. Solo una concentrazione sul ricordo più nascosto, quello che ci rese felici in passato e che vorremmo fosse la nostra vita futura [...]. Perché in quel punto lì sogno e desiderio coincidono, essendo la stessa cosa [...] un momento indistinto, che quelli della metempsicosi, nel loro codice chiamano anàstole, con il quale tutto ricomincia perché il cerchio si chiude e si riapre immediatamente.<sup>695</sup>

However, his mandala, the backward gaze embracing his entire existence, does not contain its beginning except as a hole, since:

[I] segmento della chiesetta dove mi fermai [...] non più percorribile per chi ha scelto di entrare nel cerchio, perché è quel momento speciale (loro lo chiamano “vacuo”) quando non sai esattamente chi sei, dove sei, e perché ci sei [...] quel momento in cui [...] vieni a patti con la mancanza di senso della vita.<sup>696</sup>

Furthermore, if ‘la mescolazione dei tempi è l’arte’ degli indovini, delle cartomanti, che infatti ricorrono spesso nella narrativa di Tabucchi’,<sup>697</sup> this is especially true of three figures: Zelmira, who appears in *Piazza d’Italia*, Miss Scriblerus, from the radio-drama *Marconi, se ben mi ricordo* and Mademoiselle Lenormand, Napoleon’s card reader, in ‘Passato composto’.

As a sort of popular witch and healer, ‘la Zelmira’ incarnates a sphinxian spokeswoman, formulating statements of truth that belong to a different order from that of official, rational accounts. When asked to cure the young Volturino, who ‘cresceva nell’immobilità e nel silenzio, come se conoscesse l’altra parte dei gesti [...] rifiutando il mondo,

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<sup>694</sup> *Si sta facendo*, p. 28.

<sup>695</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-34.

<sup>696</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>697</sup> *Tabucchi, la specularità*, p. 20.

disegnando figure sulla cenere con un bastoncino’,<sup>698</sup> she is the only one to understand his mutism as an experience of (Agamben’s) infancy, as a semiotic quest, thus diagnosing him as a ‘poeta’ afflicted by ‘il Mal del Tempo’.<sup>699</sup> In effect, this correctly describes Volturmo who, despite having become a man, in a gesture that prefigures, to some extent, Capitano Sesto’s small paper-boats in the subsequent novel *Il piccolo naviglio*,

La sera tornava alla sua placenta di cenere, come a un vizio antico, per scrivere segreti [...] piccoli scarabocchi fitti e illeggibili: pagine e pagine che prima di andare a letto lasciava cadere sul fuoco come farfalle.<sup>700</sup>

As for Miss Scriblerus, she is George Orwell’s fortune-teller, who predicts both the disasters of World War II – ‘la mia sfera di cristallo mi parla di un destino collettivo [...] morte e distruzione’<sup>701</sup> – and some pages from the writer’s *Homage to Catalonia*, suggesting how history’s optical and collective unconscious already contains within itself a possible narrative: ‘Noi andiamo sempre alla cieca, perché il destino è cieco, anche se esiste, e noi brancoliamo nelle tenebre. Eppure...’<sup>702</sup> Mademoiselle Lenormand sends a letter to Dolores Ibarurri, even though the Spanish revolutionary will come to life only a century after the prediction:

Le mie carte [...] mi chiedono di leggere la tua vita che ancora non è, e che i molti anni che la separano da questo mio tempo attuale mi lasciano discernere solo per larghi e forse ingannevoli squarci.<sup>703</sup>

Yet, as the fortune-teller remarks, her cards ‘non possono cambiare ciò che, dovendo essere, è già stato’<sup>704</sup>: the impossibility of erasing what has actually taken place is, nonetheless, coupled with the potentiality to signify events in a different mode. In effect, Lenormand’s letter is included in ‘Passato composto. Tre lettere’, alongside Don Sebastiano de Aviz’ letter to Goya and Calypso’s letter to Ulysses; in the latter, in particular, the nymph is shown while despairing over her ‘invalicabile ora’ that denies the potentiality of change, wherein

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<sup>698</sup> *Piazza d’Italia*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>699</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>700</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>701</sup> *Marconi, se ben mi ricordo* (Rome: Rai-Eri, 1997), pp. 29-30.

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>703</sup> *I volatili*, p. 26.

<sup>704</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[C]on un ramo traccio un segno sulla sabbia – come la misura di un vano conteggio; e poi lo cancello. E i segni che ho tracciato e cancellato sono migliaia, identico è il gesto e identica è la sabbia, e io sono identica. E tutto.<sup>705</sup>

This episode is revealing of how the potentiality to be and signify otherwise, in synthesis Tabucchi's narrative mode of the unconscious, disrupts the view of identity as self-confirming sameness, positing the image of the void, of the blindspot – 'La notte guardo gli spazi fra le stelle, vedo il vuoto senza misura; e ciò che voi umani travolge e porta via, qui è un fisso momento privo di inizio e di fine',<sup>706</sup> states Calypso – as what authentically grounds man's ethical dwelling within a meaningful horizon and individuals' need to find a measure, to articulate a possibility of sense.

#### 4.3.6 Insomnia and Dreams

As Dolfi contends,

Il sogno e l'insonnia [...] sono quanto, nella vita cosiddetta reale, appare più libero dai freni inibitori dell'io, dalle leggi esterne della temporalità radicale; quanto può creare i luoghi del rimorso e della nostalgia, della riparazione e dei fantasmi.<sup>707</sup>

The unconscious a-temporal logic structures Tabucchi's dreams and insomnias. An example can be found in *La testa perduta*, where the lawyer Loton meditates about the oneiric disruption of chronological temporality: if 'le insonnie portano fantasmi e fanno rinculare il tempo', it is because the very possibility to think and experience time 'è possibile solo nel sogno [...], in quello spazio incontrollabile che secondo il dottor Freud è l'Inconscio allo stato libero'.<sup>708</sup> Significantly, the attorney narrates a dream that explores the paradoxical, diplopic symmetry of the unconscious: '[a] volte sogno mia nonna [...] quella donna spaventosa che fu il mio incubo da sveglia è entrata nei miei sogni, e c'è entrata bambina [...]. Io so che lei è mia nonna, ma allo stesso tempo è bambina'.<sup>709</sup> A similar scene appears in *Requiem*, where the protagonist dreams about his 'Padre

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<sup>705</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>706</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>707</sup> Tabucchi, *la specularità*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>708</sup> *La testa perduta*, pp. 169-70.

<sup>709</sup> Ibid., pp. 170-71.

Giovane’, ‘vestito da marinaio, avrà avuto vent’anni o poco più ma era mio padre, non c’era possibilità d’equivoco’.<sup>710</sup> The episode originates from the narrator’s own sense of guilt – ‘[m]eno male che mi consoli, padre, dissi, perché non sono soddisfatto di me stesso’<sup>711</sup> – due to the way in which he reacted against the doctor who treated his father’s cancer in the wrong manner, causing him an esophageal perforation: ‘forse avrei fatto meglio a comportarmi in un altro modo, se lo avessi preso a schiaffi [...] invece di prenderlo per il bavero ho scritto un racconto sulla conversazione che avevamo avuto e lui mi ha denunciato [...]’.<sup>712</sup>

As confirmed by Tabucchi’s reflection ‘Un universo in una sillaba. Vagabondaggio intorno a un romanzo’, included in his *Autobiografie altrui*, an (alleged) autobiographic tone informs and shapes the novel’s episode and its narrative modality. The writer’s self-commentary includes three elements that seem to support an interpretation of the novel’s episode in terms of the semiotic unconscious. Firstly, the author himself uncannily experienced what he calls ‘[u]n sogno perturbante. Avevo sognato mio padre. [...] È probabile che il mio incosciente mi restituisse nel sogno la sofferenza che l’atroce degenza ospedaliera aveva inflitto a mio padre e alla quale avevo assistito’.<sup>713</sup>

And secondly, the awareness of

La difficoltà di formulare i sogni in termini narrativi [...] per via di certi salti paralogici, o di certi passaggi brachilogici, o del problema di un tempo vissuto nell’inconscio e impossibile da trasferire in un tempo narrativo; ma soprattutto perché ogni sogno è un’emozione, una sensazione che trova il suo “senso” finché appartiene alla sua specifica “realtà”, e che lo perde quando si tenta di trasferirlo alla realtà dello stato di veglia.<sup>714</sup>

How can a possibility of sense be negotiated, and how can the encounter with a traumatic real that has taken place in the oneiric unconscious be signified? The answer consists in moving the unconscious from the level of what has to be signified to that of signification itself. The unconscious is a semiotic experience, insofar as and to the extent to which it is the experience of a different semiosis. This leads to the third and final point: Tabucchi’s dream occurred in Portuguese, and, after several, failed attempts to transcribe it in Italian, the author realises that ‘se avevo attraversato inconsciamente il fiume per raggiungere

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<sup>710</sup> *Requiem*, p. 59.

<sup>711</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>712</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>713</sup> *Autobiografie altrui*, p. 29.

<sup>714</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

l'altra riva linguistica, non potevo compiere in stato cosciente il percorso inverso'.<sup>715</sup> Tabucchi tries to explain this case of 'alloglossia in letteratura' by recalling a game he used to play with his father, which consisted in calling each other 'pa', bearing in mind that the Italian *pa* means 'dad', while the Portuguese *pá* means 'boy'.<sup>716</sup> However, independently of any presumed autobiographical confirmation, what is really at stake here is that the writer's oneiric heteroglossia, in the novel, functions as and makes possible the experience of the unconscious as uncanny *modus significandi*, inasmuch as it strips language of its representational, propositional function and exposes the simple fact that language exists. This is what Agamben calls 'glossolalia', an experience in which the speaker is not consciously mastering his utterance and where 'we encounter the pure materiality of language away from any possible meaning'.<sup>717</sup>

Tabucchi's nocturnal space articulates an attempt to 'decifrare [...] quanto, in ombra, costituisce delle cose la cifra più propria e essenziale. Che equivale poi a ricondurre tutto verso il sogno [...] e l'insonnia'.<sup>718</sup> Significantly, by inserting nightmares, hallucinations and insomnias throughout his writings, the author establishes an uncanny structure of awakening, for they all occur, either singularly or collectively, as instances of a nocturnal vigilance. The nightmare recounted in 'Un curandeiro nella città sull'acqua' creates an optical field at whose centre lies the narrator, split between being a detached observer of a symbolic reality and being called upon, by the gaze of the real, to participate in the scene:

Di una cosa ero certo: che io potevo vederli, ma non potevo essere visto. C'era qualcosa che mi nascondeva al loro sguardo, una sorta di diaframma o di schermo [...] che mi proteggeva dalla loro vista. Eppure avevo la sensazione di essere esposto in piena luce, seduto in prima fila, come a teatro. [...] Era uno spettacolo, di questo ero certo. Ma quello spettacolo era rappresentato in tutta la sua nuda verità, ed era vero perché era più vero del vero.<sup>719</sup>

It could be possible to rationally explain the nightmare's visual construction in relation to the fact that the protagonist has fallen asleep while watching television – 'ho avuto un sobbalzo e mi sono svegliato. Era notte fonda, e dallo schermo del televisore giungeva solo

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<sup>715</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>716</sup> Ibid., pp. 38-39. As Francese observes, 'writing in a second language helps bring to the fore aspects of [Tabucchi's] own personality that are not part of the conscious ego' ('Fragments', p. 393).

<sup>717</sup> Watkin, p. 29.

<sup>718</sup> *Tabucchi, la specularità*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>719</sup> *Racconti con figure*, pp. 197-98.

quella polverina elettrica di quando le trasmissioni sono finite'.<sup>720</sup> Still, the coincidence between the television screen and the threshold that at once divides and conjoins the sleeping subject with the oneiric scene should be interpreted as the opposition between the reassuring slumbers of a familiar reality and the estranging awakening of the uncanny real.<sup>721</sup> It is in the unconscious, in the optical rationale of the reverie, that Tabucchi locates the possibility to resist man's reification or desubjectification:

Mi sono detto: perché vogliono che io sogni questo sogno? Chi mi obbliga a sognare? Mi sono detto ancora: devi svegliarti, non puoi tollerare che ti si obblighi a sognare un sogno che non vuoi sognare, costoro si sono insinuati nella tua anima, vogliono impadronirsi di te.<sup>722</sup>

Since, Gambazzi comments, '[i]l lavoro onirico è [...] una posizione del soggetto nel 'mondo'[...]', within dreams, 'il 'vedere' del soggetto si forma senza di lui, indipendentemente da lui e, anche, contro di lui': the latter is precisely what happens with Tabucchi's nightmare, where the scene not only looks at the subject but forces him to reciprocate its gaze.<sup>723</sup> Wondering whether it is 'la realtà che si trasforma in un incubo o l'incubo che si trasforma in realtà? L'onirico e il reale a volte si intrecciano',<sup>724</sup> Tabucchi suggests that insomnia is the only way to awaken inside and from a reality turned into phantasmagoria, an apparatus of optical illusions, which imposes upon individuals a forced, though reassuring, slumber, while offering a stock of predefined dreams. Reality wants us not to be able to dream or think, and to live 'in a psychic state [...] unable to differentiate waking from sleeping, dreaming from perceiving'.<sup>725</sup> As Tristano phrases it, reality comes in the guise of

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<sup>720</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>721</sup> Commenting on another version of the same text published in *l'Unità* with the title 'Ho paura di sognare', Surdich observes that '[l]a drammatizzazione onirica [...] esaspera un radicale divorzio dalla realtà, nel momento stesso in cui è proprio la realtà, quella più direttamente storica e politica, a costituire la ragione di impatto e di scontro da cui si sprigiona la violenza dell'incubo' insofar as he identifies in Tabucchi 'la funzione determinante dell'inconscio quale strumento di rivelazione della verità' ('Il principio della letteratura', pp. 26-27).

<sup>722</sup> *Racconti con figure*, p. 198.

<sup>723</sup> Gambazzi, pp. 162-64.

<sup>724</sup> *L'oca al passo*, pp. 118-19.

<sup>725</sup> Thomas H. Ogden, 'On not being able to dream', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 84 (2003): 17-30 (17).



[I]ncubi notturni, ora la voce di pippopippi cominciò a visitargli perfino il rem [...] e gli parlava con una voce flautata o in falsetto, gli pareva il bisbiglio di un confessore che dà consigli attraverso la grata di un confessionale, ricordati di non pensare, lascia che io pensi per te [...].<sup>726</sup>

What Tristano imagines is a quasi-dystopic scenario where:

[P]ippopippi, nel solenne scopo di abolire ogni tipo di pensiero a lui nocivo [...] comincerà gradualmente a espungere dalle sue scatole di vetro ogni immagine portatrice di pensiero, fino a una vostra disassuefazione completa e a una sparizione assoluta di ogni segno significante, perché l'immagine stessa [...] può indurre un pensiero, e il pensiero è pericoloso... e così guarderete unicamente la luce, certe rigature elettriche che tremolano [...].<sup>727</sup>

Tristano speaks of 'intersogni',<sup>728</sup> explaining how:

[M]i pensano loro, davvero, sono pensato, sono loro che mi pensano, e mi pungono [...] Intersogni [...] quasi, ma non proprio, genere ricordi che galleggiano in una loro schiumetta, io sto sul ciglio delle mie nottate, alcuni mi raggiungono e mi pungono, altri mi basta far ciondolare il braccio dalla sponda del letto per pescarne qualcheduno a caso.<sup>729</sup>

Observing his patient's 'spazio onirico', '[i]l dottor Ziegler cominciava a sospettare un inconscio come un linguaggio, ma con riluttanza, perché non era di quella scuola'.<sup>730</sup> While Tristano adds that 'è come se stessi sognando ma sono sveglio, e cominciano ad arrivare ricordi dimenticati da tempo [...] e mi passano davanti agli occhi come se guardassi un film su una parete, e chi proietta quel film sono i miei occhi',<sup>731</sup> the doctor reaches the conclusion that they might 'appartenere all'ordine del déjà vu [...]. Freud [...] ha indagato sul déjà vu nei suoi studi sull'Unheimliche, che voi italiani avete chiamato il

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<sup>726</sup> *Tristano muore*, p. 129.

<sup>727</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134. 'Pippopippi', like the nightmare in 'Un curandeiro', alludes to contemporary Italy and, specifically, to Silvio Berlusconi, then Italian prime minister and media tycoon, owner of the largest media empire in Italy, including Mediaset, the company that produces the three main national commercial channels.

<sup>728</sup> Like Pessoa's Bernardo Soares, Tristano 'non sogna, perché non dorme. Egli "sdorme" [...] frequenta cioè quello spazio di iper-coscienza o coscienza libera che precede il sonno. Un sonno che tuttavia non arriva mai [...] un'enorme insonnia' (*Un baule*, p. 73).

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>730</sup> *Ibid.* Clear allusion to Lacan, for whom the unconscious is structured like a language. This irony reveals Tabucchi's suspicion and criticism of psychoanalysis, when the latter appears too rigid and dogmatic, utterly unable to open up new spaces for meaning creation.

<sup>731</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116-17.

perturbante, perché in effetti il perturbante accompagna spesso il déjà vu, ed è difficile dire se lo segue o lo precede...’<sup>732</sup>

In the end, Tristano realises, in relation to the difficulty of defining his oneiric experiences – ‘Devo aver fatto un sogno, ho sognato di Tristano... o forse era il ricordo di un sogno... o forse il sogno di un ricordo... o forse tutti e due’ – and their optical rationale – ‘ti lascio anche il punto di vista... facciamo così, il punto di vista è mio, anzi di Tristano, perché questa situazione la visse lui, io però l’ho sognata dal mio punto di vista e te la racconto’ –<sup>733</sup> that this uneasiness is due to the fact that ‘il punto di vista appartiene al sogno, nel senso che il punto di vista è il suo, non è né mio né di Tristano, perché ai sogni non si comanda [...] bisogna viverli come vogliono loro, e questo sogno voleva che io sognassi Tristano, e me lo fece sognare così’<sup>734</sup>

#### 4.3.7 Trompe-l’oeil

Used as the optical equivalent of metalepsis, the technique of trompe-l’oeil defines a narrative distortion of and confusion between different planes – spatial, temporal and ontological. It is employed, firstly, to confer depth and reliability upon something that does not actually exist, upon possibilities that are merely virtual, stalling the mastering eye. Tabucchi creates trompe-l’oeil effects and structures that stand on the verge between duplicity and deception, with the intent of questioning and exposing the inherently arbitrary and limited nature of every experience of sense making.

In *Notturmo indiano*

[L]a stessa struttura dei capitoli ricorda gli effetti del trompe-l’oeil: molti episodi iniziano con il discorso diretto tra il protagonista e il deuteragonista [...] e soltanto in seguito, distanziandosi dal dettaglio della scena e mettendo a fuoco all’infinito [...] è ottenuta l’esatta misura della situazione.<sup>735</sup>

The novel builds upon the idea of signifying otherwise by seeing differently: the narrator could be said to overlap with his estranged gaze, as when, staring at the customers of the

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<sup>732</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-22.

<sup>733</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>734</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>735</sup> Ernesto Livorni, ‘Trompe-l’oeil in ‘Notturmo Indiano’ di Antonio Tabucchi’, in *I tempi del rinnovamento. Atti del convegno internazionale: Rinnovamento del codice narrativo in Italia dal 1945 al 1992*, ed. by Serge Vanvolsem and others (Rome: Bulzoni-Leuven UP, 1995), pp. 431-53 (pp. 449-51)

Taj Mahal, he reflects that '[n]on so chi ha detto che nella pura attività del guardare c'è sempre un po' di sadismo [...] e così guardai con maggiore voluttà, con la perfetta sensazione di essere solo due occhi che guardavano mentre io ero altrove, senza sapere dove'.<sup>736</sup> The Jainist prophet that the protagonist encounters at a bus stop on his way to Goa, at first mistaken for a monkey, might be understood as an anamorphic image, which forces the narrator to accommodate his eyes for this vision, as '[d]i umano, in quel viso, restavano gli occhi: due occhi piccolissimi, acuti, intelligenti, che guizzavano inquieti da ogni parte'.<sup>737</sup> Finally, during his stay in Goa, the narrator meets Christine, a photographer of Indian abjection, who is nonetheless driven by the belief that 'bisogna vedere il meno possibile'.<sup>738</sup> The novel delineates a seemingly diplopic narration, intertwined with trompe-l'oeil, since it alludes to a parallelism between Christine's work and the book the protagonist is currently writing – in which 'tutte le cose sono fuori cornice' as 'l'ingrandimento falsa il contesto, bisogna vedere le cose da lontano'.<sup>739</sup>

«Qualche anno fa ho pubblicato un libro di fotografie», disse Christine. «Era la sequenza di una pellicola [...]. Cominciava con una fotografia [...] era un ingrandimento, la foto riproduceva un giovane negro, solo il busto; una canottiera con una scritta pubblicitaria, un corpo atletico, sul viso l'espressione di un grande sforzo, le mani alzate come in segno di vittoria: sta evidentemente tagliando il traguardo, per esempio i cento metri ». [...]

«Ebbene? », chiesi io, «dov'è il mistero?».

«La seconda fotografia », disse lei. «Era la fotografia per intero. Sulla sinistra c'è un poliziotto vestito da marziano, ha un casco di plexiglas sul viso, gli stivaletti alti, un moschetto imbracciato, gli occhi feroci sotto la sua visiera feroce. Sta sparando al negro. E il negro sta scappando a braccia alzate, ma è già morto: un secondo dopo che io facessi clic era già morto ». <sup>740</sup>

On the other hand, Tabucchi's texts frequently incorporate a sort of cinematographic grammar, using interruption, repetition, slow and still motion to express the theatrical functioning of the unconscious *modus significandi*. For example, for the narrator of 'Piccoli equivoci', a journalist attending a trial, the image of the court 'si è dissolta sotto l'immagine di un vecchio passato che per me era il presente, proprio come in un vecchio film [...] altrove abbandonato al ritroso dell'evocazione'.<sup>741</sup> An equivalent blurring between memory and imagination sustains trompe-l'oeil episodes in *Tristano muore*,

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<sup>736</sup> *Notturmo indiano*, p. 37.

<sup>737</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>738</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>739</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104-08.

<sup>740</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101-02.

<sup>741</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 9.

where the schism between the dying man recounting his life and Tristano, the third-person protagonist of the episodes narrated, is enhanced by a cinematic *mise-en-scene* of history. The narration takes a film-like twist each time Tristano recalls and describes the two moments when he made decisions that would utterly change his life, deserting the Italian army in Greece and shooting a German squad to death during the Resistance. As for the former, the protagonist evokes how, having witnessed the brutal murder of a Greek child by the Nazis, he suddenly realised, in a sort of collective staging of an unconscious *après-coup*, that he was nothing but a player in a historical tragedy, in the tragedy of history:

[E] a quel punto dal fondo della piazza sbucò un ragazzo [...] un Tedesco gli andò incontro e gli puntò il mitra [...] tutti guardavano, tutti sapevano cosa stava per succedere, ma nessuno si mosse, nessuno fece un gesto, come se tutti fossero presi in un incantesimo [...] e come per incanto Plaka si animò, e dal nulla sbucarono uomini, perché un inatteso servo di scena come Tristano aveva deciso che era il momento che entrassero in azione le furie vendicatrici della tragedia greca [...] non c'era anima viva, come in certi momenti di sospensione, come un teatro vuoto.<sup>742</sup>

He leaves an empty theatre, similarly to *Piazza d'Italia*, a rotten scenario where history has been robbed of its value. With the second episode, which is to turn him into a hero, the references to cinematographic signification become even more explicit; not only is Tristano identified with the actor Clark Gable, but, also, the story time pauses and narrative time is structured as a (photographic) freeze-frame:

[E] anche Tristano lo vedi come se fosse un altro, quando lui era il comandante Clark [...]. E lui, quel tale giorno, in quell'alba livida, sta aspettando nascosto dietro il masso, ha il fucile mitragliatore puntato, però ti sorride come se ti aspettasse per raccontarti una storiella... e gli sorridi anche tu, e lui è ancora lì, allo stesso posto, in quell'alba livida. Possibile che non si sia mosso? Possibile. Gli uomini non si muovono, restano incantati in tanti momenti fissi, solo che non lo sanno, noi crediamo che sia un *fluire* continuo che via via evapora, e invece no, da qualche parte dello spazio resta quel momento fisso col suo gesto e tutto, come in un incantesimo, una fotografia senza lastra.<sup>743</sup>

[...] [E] tutti i tedeschi sono presi dall'incantesimo, prossimi al sonno e all'oblio, immobili l'uno accanto all'altro come in una foto di famiglia, come in un monumento ai caduti [...]. Tristano, sta lì in piedi allo scoperto, fuori dalla roccia che lo nascondeva, il raggio del sole appena sorto lo investe come si addice alle scenografie dei film a colori per gli eroi'.<sup>744</sup>

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<sup>742</sup> *Tristano muore*, pp. 14-24.

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>744</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

Tristano's life is significantly punctuated by episodes of vision, which define his peculiar approach to life: for example, his headaches are compared to a 'caleidoscopio [...] turbe della visione, della percezione degli oggetti e delle figure con effetti di distorsione o di ingigantimento dell'immagine, che so [...] come si vede in certi documentari'.<sup>745</sup> Likewise, Tristano recalls the afternoons spent with Daphne in his vineyard, when he 'spaziava con lo sguardo e se ne stava appoggiato su una seggiola di tela di quelle da regista cinematografico [...] regista di un cinemascope amaro'.<sup>746</sup> This optical free-motion sharply contrasts with the paralysis of his final days – 'Ma dicevo degli occhi, per fortuna tutto si fa canzonetta quando arriva al punto di vista di uno che può guardare solo il soffitto...'.<sup>747</sup>

That Tabucchi knows and purposely exploits the deceiving effect of trompe-l'oeil is linguistically evidenced by his consistent use of terms such as 'incantesimo' or 'sortilegio'. Alongside the quoted occurrences in *Tristano muore*, where the introduction of the element of the spell additionally serves to emphasise the theatrical effect of memories narrated in still motion, one might mention 'La trota che guizza fra le pietre', wherein the poet explains that if 'pensi a come è possibile che nella vita si possa vivere due volte lo stesso momento, ebbene, è un sortilegio'.<sup>748</sup> Analogously, the term 'incantesimo' also appears in 'Notte, mare o distanza', designating the protagonist's attempt to recreate, through the imagination, an evening of violence in the Salazarian Lisbon:

[L]ui che se ne stava dopo tanto tempo a immaginare quella notte, spingeva i quattro amici all'indietro, come un film proiettato a ritroso [...] nel quale, come in un incantesimo che qualcosa avesse dovuto rompere, si sentivano prigioniere le persone che occupavano quella stanza. [...] E tutto ricominciava, nell'immaginazione di chi immaginava quella notte, come una pantomima o una stregoneria [...].<sup>749</sup>

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<sup>745</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>746</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>748</sup> *L'angelo nero*, p. 99.

<sup>749</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-37.

#### 4.3.8 Déjà Vu and Diplopia

Exploring the bonds between the *unheimliche* and déjà vu, Royle notes that the latter ‘is the experience of the double par excellence: it is experience of experience as double’.<sup>750</sup> While the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as ‘a feeling of having previously experienced a present situation; a form of paramnesia’,<sup>751</sup> and thus as a typology of mnemonic dysfunction, Chambers explains paramnesia either as ‘a memory disorder in which words are remembered but not their proper meaning’ or as ‘the condition of believing that one remembers events and circumstances which have not previously occurred’.<sup>752</sup> Since an element of theatrical split and duplicity is inherent in the rationale of déjà vu, it might also be interpreted as ‘a kind of diplopia’, strengthening ‘the impression that the present reality has a double’.<sup>753</sup> Not only does déjà vu perform a doubling in the chain of our experiences – figuratively, the signifiers of our existential sense making – but it also exposes an ontological duplicity, or, rather, the fact that to signify the real entails dealing with what is always other than itself. Therefore, one might wonder whether it signals ‘the invasion of a dream-state or of a different wakefulness’<sup>754</sup> within one’s familiar reality. Like Tabucchi’s uncanny reversal, déjà vu instantiates the writer’s nocturnal writing, the idea that it is solely on the other(ing) night that authentic vigilance can be grounded, as an estranging blindness and clearing vision. As he writes in ‘Controttempo’:

Fu un lampo [...] quella cosa strana che la medicina non sa spiegare [...] lo chiamano déjà vu, un già visto, non mi era mai successo. [...] Si sentì preso da una vertigine e temette di venirne risucchiato, ma fu un attimo, perché nel dilatarsi quella sensazione subiva una strana metamorfosi, come un guanto che rovesciandosi portasse con sé la mano che lo copriva. Tutto cambiò di prospettiva, in un lampo provò l’ebbrezza della scoperta, una sottile nausea e una mortale malinconia. Ma anche un senso di liberazione infinito, come quando finalmente capiamo qualcosa che sapevamo da sempre e non volevamo sapere: non era il già visto che lo inghiottiva in un passato mai vissuto, era lui che lo stava catturando in un futuro ancora tutto da vivere.<sup>755</sup>

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<sup>750</sup> Royle, p. 183.

<sup>751</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>752</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>753</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>754</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>755</sup> *Il tempo invecchia*, pp. 170-71.

However, Tabucchi mostly deploys déjà vu to (re)present nostalgia, remorse, and a sense of guilt. The letters ‘Della difficoltà di liberarsi del filo spinato’ and ‘Forbidden Games’ demonstrate how Tabucchi’s diplopia combines visual objects and optical narrative modes, producing a diegetic déjà vu which folds back on the narrative level. The first story – a love letter written ‘come se [...] fosse una seduta psicanalitica’<sup>756</sup> – prompts temporal, diplopic effects through the repetition of the diegetic element of the window. The first belongs to the present of the narration,

Questa sera, qui dai miei amici, apro una finestra e mi sporgo. Da tanto tempo desideravo rivedere un temporale estivo, e mi domando se potrà ripetersi nello stesso modo e con le stesse sensazioni che provocò in me in un passato immemorabile.<sup>757</sup>

The second window is part of the narrator’s memory of a summer storm, seen from ‘una grande finestra, che si affacciava su un paesaggio di macchia e di rocce bucate dalle interperie’.<sup>758</sup> Significantly, the narrator tries to relive the past precisely when, experiencing a sort of temporal and optical doubling, he finds himself ‘ancora a guardare attraverso una finestra che dà sul cielo di Parigi’, eventually realising that ‘l’ho rivissuto perché le cose si possono rivivere anche in un istante fuggitivo piccolo come una goccia che [...] dilata l’universo della visione’.<sup>759</sup>

Almost symmetrically, ‘Forbidden Games’ moves from temporal to narrative diplopia: unlike the previous text, here the narrator, again a middle-aged man wandering around Paris, denies the possibility of reliving a past experience – the romantic encounter with his addressee. Yet, asking whether ‘siamo noi che cerchiamo o siamo cercati?’ he accidentally finds someone else’s letter, written in French (and translated in a note), ‘questa lettera indirizzata al se stesso che scrive e con lui a me e a Voi’, which makes him understand how demanding, though pointless, his desire to express his feeling is.<sup>760</sup> Significantly, the letter-within-the-letter device (metalepsis) creates a diplopic reading experience, which is enhanced by Tabucchi’s use of plural languages.

Similarly, the story ‘Anywhere out of the world’ forms a dual diplopia which, endowed with a reverie-like tone, deals with the possibility of understanding the practice of déjà vu as narrative remorse. On the diegetic level, the protagonist happens to find in a newspaper

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<sup>756</sup> *Si sta facendo*, p. 89.

<sup>757</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>758</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>759</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>760</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-45.

a quotation from Baudelaire that used to function as a code message with his beloved and that now, left unexplained, gives rise to an overturning between the supposed rational mastery of his life – ‘sono un volto anonimo in questa moltitudine di volti anonimi, sono qui come potrei essere altrove [...] e questo mi dà un gran struggimento e un senso di libertà bella e superflua’<sup>761</sup> – and the surfacing of a sense of guilt:

E poi, all’improvviso, il cuore comincia a batterti a precipizio [...] il mondo perde i contorni, tutto entra in un’opacità sorda, si spenge tutto, luci, rumori, brusio, è come se un silenzio innaturale e immense avesse paralizzato l’universo, guardi meglio la frase, la rileggi, senti uno strano sapore in bocca, non è possibile, pensi, è un’orribile coincidenza; [...] E per un momento inseguì questa strana idea di una ripetizione, di un doppione della vita [...].<sup>762</sup>

The incorporation of passages from Baudelaire’s *Le spleen de Paris* into the narrative arguably turns intertextuality into a sort of uncanny misrecognition or ‘déjà lu’.<sup>763</sup> However, with hindsight, the text creates a deeper sense of narrative diplopia in Tabucchi’s writings, for, structured as a nocturnal wandering around Lisbon, it anticipates the story ‘Voci portate da qualcosa’, and belongs to the same constellation of texts gravitating around the pair Isabel-Tadeus, in relation to which déjà vu brings remorse to its linguistic verge.

#### 4.3.9 Anamorphosis

Anamorphosis defines an apparently unintelligible or distorted projection or drawing, which demands the observers to shift their perspectives in order to be properly seen and reconstructed: this brings it closer to the modes of diplopia and parallax, respectively. Tabucchi resorts to anamorphic narrative in order to obtain a threefold effect: the interruption, reversal and disruption of pre-existing perspectives and of the representational regime upon which the latter is founded. Anamorphosis is inherent in the *unheimliche*, since it exposes the unfamiliar always already inscribed inside the seemingly familiar; and

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<sup>761</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 72.

<sup>762</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-77.

<sup>763</sup> Similarly, Trentini explains Tabucchi’s inter-textuality in the visual terms of an apparent inner focalisation that eventually turns out to be an external one, insofar as it ‘funge da messa a fuoco del molteplice o del rovescio in un rapporto di star dentro o star fuori della cornice che è la dimensione di chi guarda/legge l’immagine’ (p. 79).



it is strictly intertwined with Tabucchi's own poetics of the uncanny, presupposing and producing the othering of any experience of sense making.

A clue to help comprehend the writer's use of anamorphosis lies in 'La battaglia di San Romano', a story inspired by Paolo Uccello's homonymous painting, which, as Tabucchi glosses in a note, 'conterrebbe la dimostrazione di un gioco prospettico' and 'offrirebbe la rappresentazione non di esseri reali, ma di fantasmi'.<sup>764</sup> In the text, this is evidenced by the narrator's attempt to scientifically decipher 'il quadro pezzetto per pezzetto dividendolo in un fitto reticolato' and taking a picture of each square; an effort, however, that soon comes up against the estranging revelation that 'la crosta della cornice dilatata dall'ingrandimento è un'epidermide piena di cicatrici, fa quasi senso'.<sup>765</sup> This passage might be used as an archetypal exemplification of the writer's anamorphic mode as what simultaneously estranges the texture of reality and elicits a potential articulation of sense – or, rather, a 'quasi senso', which never saturates the holes of the real.

More generally, Tabucchi's anamorphic perspectivism deploys incongruous details to interrupt the flow of reality and trigger an almost epiphanic, de-realising and revealing experience for both the characters and the reader, uncovering the arbitrariness and artificiality of pre-established truths and interpretations. The use of anamorphosis demonstrates literature's attempt to seize and signify what still remains an unfulfilled potentiality, to engage with the other(ing) of reality. An example can be found in *Tristano muore* where, blurring the line between memory and the imagination, the protagonist recounts the moment when, staring at a toad in his garden, he realised that he was the one being looked upon:

[U]n rospo... e quel rospo diventò un cane [...] il mondo cominciò a girare [...] e provò l'ubriachezza di quando si capisce una cosa all'improvviso e ti viene la vertigine [...] grazie Tristano, sei stato proprio un bravo cagnetto da guardia, e ora abbaia se ti riesce e se non ci riesci mordi il vento... Tristano guardava il rospo negli occhi e in quegli occhi c'era scritto tutto, e lui capi tutto.<sup>766</sup>

Looking up at the starry sky immediately after and seeing a communication satellite, a symbol of the optical regime of a saturated ('compatta') reality, Tristano has a sort of uncanny epiphany: 'sai quando la realtà, che è compatta come cemento, quasi per grazia

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<sup>764</sup> *I volatili*, p. 57.

<sup>765</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>766</sup> *Tristano muore*, pp. 131-32.

divina apre una fessura un'istante, tu puoi dare un'occhiata al suo interno [...] è come un piccolo miracolo'.<sup>767</sup> In *L'oca al passo*, published two years after the novel, Tabucchi uses the same image, affirming that '[s]e una volta vi vedeva l'occhio di dio, ora vi vede un occhio fatto di titanio',<sup>768</sup> in order to signify the scopic rationale of reality, which not only wants to be seen, forcing the subject into the position of a spectator of its show, but is also, at the same time, an eye that controls and subjugates the optical field. Spectacularisation and surveillance<sup>769</sup> constitute the two main visual practices that inform the discourse of reality.

Archetypically, in 'Notte, mare o distanza', the anamorphic detail of the fish elicits and makes room for 'uno sguardo con cui *non è possibile identificarsi*, cui bisogna cedere il potere della visione [...] in cui [...] *ciò che non può vedere guarda* [...], *ci guarda perché guarda al nostro posto*'<sup>770</sup>:

E fu a quel punto che arrivò la cernia [...]. Che cosa incongrua, una mano e un muso di cernia dal finestrino di un'automobile nera nella Rua Dom Pedro Quinto in una notte di novembre del millenovecentosessantanove. Ma questo dipendeva dall'immaginazione di chi pensava a come avrebbero potuto essersi svolti i fatti quella notte. Così, a quel punto, la sua immaginazione produceva una cernia.<sup>771</sup>

The text combines several discursive strategies adopted by Tabucchi to articulate the optical unconscious: thus, archetypal of the trompe-l'oeil effect is the confusion between memory and the imagination, which is pervaded by a sense of deception. The latter evolves, precisely, into the impossibility of looking into the eyes of the real, as witnessed by the fact that the protagonist keeps on imagining his role in the past as that of a spectator ideally situated in the blindspot of the scopic field of the narration:

La sua immaginazione, a quel punto, soffriva di una specie di paralisi, o di sonno: una sospensione degli atti o degli eventi che era anche una sospensione e una immobilità di tutti i personaggi di quella scena. E i suoi occhi, che fino ad allora erano stati presenti e partecipi, si allontanavano come se qualcosa trascinasse via il suo corpo [...] e lo trasportasse di peso su una panchina del giardino del Príncipe Real [...] e da quella distanza era impossibile capire chi si mosse e chi parlò [...].<sup>772</sup>

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<sup>767</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>768</sup> *L'oca al passo*, p. 7.

<sup>769</sup> Similarly, in *Sostiene Pereira* the protagonist thinks of a possible coincidence between God and the eye: 'e forse qualcuno ci guarda da un osservatorio infinito' (p. 29).

<sup>770</sup> Bellavita, p. 268.

<sup>771</sup> *L'angelo nero*, p. 39.

<sup>772</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

The rationale of interruption and repetition – ‘così, chi stava immaginando i fatti di quella notte, dovette immaginare la scena di nuovo’<sup>773</sup> – driving the story could be interpreted as an example of déjà vu, while it also accentuates the necessity to shift between different perspectives – parallax views – in order to try to engage with the gaze of the real. This scopie compulsion eventually reinforces the assumption that Tabucchi’s anamorphic perspectivism marks and belongs to the unconscious discourse of truth.

#### 4.4 The Reversal within Tabucchi’s Poetics of the Uncanny

Illuminating how the reversal functions within Tabucchi’s poetics implies considering the abovementioned visual tropes and narrative modes in the light of his understanding of literature as a disquieting, interrogative practice. This section focuses on Tabucchi’s ‘rovescio’ as a form of literary commitment, wherein addressing the unconscious means recognising, making sense of and giving voice to its signifying function. For, in Tabucchi, the unconscious is an experience of truth to the extent to which it moves towards the other, both inside and outside the subject. In effect, in Tabucchi, identity is always a matter of (an encounter with) alterity. This can be an internal or external other. In the former case, the focus will be on the individual unconscious, in the latter on the collective one. In both cases, however, this movement towards the other premises on the critical belief that ‘any state of sameness [i.e. identity formation] actually requires difference to structure itself’.<sup>774</sup> It is precisely for this reason that Tabucchi uses narrative and rhetorical strategies based on visibility, which problematise and represent: how I see myself and the other and vice versa; how I see myself from the point of view of the other; how I see myself in the other; and, symmetrically, how I see the other in me.

But, meaningfully, addressing the collective other, Tabucchi’s writing introduces a further level of enquiry: that is, how ‘identity politics’ theoretical success (the realization that difference grounds sameness) belies its inevitable social or political failure’.<sup>775</sup>

For, on the one hand, identity formation, especially the collective one, implies a certain degree of conflictuality with who(m) is other, different:

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<sup>773</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>774</sup> Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid.

The construction of identity [...] involves the construction of opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their difference from ‘us’.<sup>776</sup>

And, on the other hand, every discourse about otherness runs the risk of silencing and ‘appropriating the subaltern’s voice’.<sup>777</sup> This is best illustrated by Tabucchi’s *Gli Zingari e il Rinascimento: Vivere da Rom a Firenze*. The latter is a non-fiction text originally published in the German edition of *Lettre International* and that was set to be included in the volume *Dieci scrittori osservano una realtà di fine millennio*. It denounces the poor conditions affecting the Roma living outside of Florence. However, the committed facet of the text lies more deeply in its narrative mode as well as in its underlying, epistemological approach. In an attempt to articulate a visual exploration of what metaphorically constitutes an unconsciously split-off part of the city – the gypsies – Tabucchi decides to engage with the estranged awakening of an all-too-familiar reality. As a hybrid work, a sort of literary translation of an anthropological piece of fieldwork, it might be interpreted as an example of the parallax view, insofar as the narrator Tabucchi at once doubles, reverses and shifts the reader between his own and his anthropologist friend Liuba’s perspective. As he asserts in the preface:

Più che ‘reportage’, questo testo avrebbe dovuto chiamarsi ‘reportage di un reportage’. Esso nasce infatti da un diario che ho tenuto accompagnando una persona che teneva un diario su ciò che era venuta a vedere a Firenze e alla quale ho fatto in qualche modo da guida durante il suo soggiorno. [... Esso è] il risultato di una serie di appunti nati *osservando una persona che osservava una realtà che conoscevo già (o ritenevo di conoscere) ma che vedevo con occhi diversi perché per la prima volta la guardavo attraverso gli occhi di un altro*.<sup>778</sup>

What is more, recalling Tristano’s meditation on the relationship between the focal length of an optical instrument and its ability to really measure or signify the real, we read:

[I]l progetto di reportage che presentai inizialmente era assai lontano, almeno nel soggetto, da questo scelto in seguito. Forse ricordando un sogno infantile, quando nelle notti d’estate, guardando con mio nonno il cielo stellato immaginavo che da grande sarei diventato astronomo, e allo stesso tempo consapevole che la vita mi aveva invece portato a guardare ad altezza d’uomo, avevo

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<sup>776</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), pp. 331-32.

<sup>777</sup> Silvia Ross, ‘Roma Alterity in Florence: Tabucchi’s *Gli Zingari e il Rinascimento* (1999)’, in *Identity and Conflict in Tuscany*, ed. by Silvia Ross and Claire Honess (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2015), pp. 73-83 (p. 76).

<sup>778</sup> *Gli Zingari*, p. 7, italicised.

presentato un progetto che si chiamava *Osservare gli osservatori*. Era una maniera, a me più consona, di guardare di sbieco il cielo osservando coloro che hanno dedicato la loro vita a osservare il cielo.<sup>779</sup>

Nonetheless, the same rationale informs both the original and the actual reportage, which forms, albeit metaphorically, a descent *ad Inferos*, as it is the author himself that adopts Orpheus' gaze:

Quando a Firenze, dove vivo per alcuni mesi all'anno, venne a trovarmi una persona che per motivi professionali doveva studiare gli Zingari qui rifugiati, capii che senza andare sulle Ande o sul Monte Rosa, grazie al telescopio di un altro osservatore potevo osservare un microcosmo che in fondo va ben al di là dei suoi stessi confini. E che forse potevo capire meglio, attraverso una lente diversa, una realtà che credevo di conoscere già.<sup>780</sup>

As Ferlito comments, the

[C]rucial question Tabucchi's text implicitly raises: namely, how oppositions are made, sustained and represented [...] weaves together seemingly unrelated worlds by shuttling his readers (and Liuba) between past and present, periphery and center, places and non-places until different places and spaces emerge as inseparably linked to and formative of each other.<sup>781</sup>

The use of an estranged, almost anamorphic viewpoint explains the text's hybridity: the textual oscillation 'between a journalistic tone and the more intimate and spontaneous tone of a private journal and/or travel account'<sup>782</sup> intentionally mirrors and performs a visual modality of signification based on field (and defamiliarised) observations both of the Roma inhabiting the outskirts of the city – the stated content of the story – and of how their identity as other is discursively structured, that is, which mechanisms of linguistic repression confine the gypsies to the city's collective unconscious. The latter point – Tabucchi's attention to the way in which the Roma's otherness is textually constructed – not only constitutes the central issue tackled in the reportage, but also affects and gives shape to the narration itself. Juxtaposing in a montage-like structure newspapers articles, historical and academic sources alongside personal impressions, Tabucchi foregrounds the storytelling motif, in order to dislodge the stereotypical, symbolic narratives of Florence.

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<sup>779</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-8.

<sup>780</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>781</sup> Susanna Ferlito, 'Between Fiction and Ethnography: Tabucchi's *Gli Zingari e il Rinascimento*', *Forum Italicum*, 39.2 (Autumn 2005), 461-80 (461).

<sup>782</sup> Ibid., 462.

On the one hand, he consistently alludes to a possible convergence between the uncanny and the town's beauty, namely the de-realising effect it traditionally generates in the tourist, known as Stendhal's syndrome – Florence offers an exemplary illustration of how 'lo stesso sentimento di *Unheimlich* può provenire da una eccessiva bellezza alla quale non siamo abituati'.<sup>783</sup>

On the other hand, however, the writer points to the fact that such an uncanny feeling derives from and asks for a different semiotic experience: it is Florence itself that has to come to terms with its own identity. This is why, reversing the scopic field<sup>784</sup> dictated by the media – '[i] giornali osservano ma c'è chi osserva i giornali'<sup>785</sup> – Tabucchi attempts to expose and undo the rhetoric that still holds the city in a sort of collective, urban phantasmagoria. It is as if Liuba's anthropological field had become, from the writer's perspective, a theatrical scenario in which the city's identity, its sense of the proper, is disturbed to the point that it is the very possibility of a conscious, official storytelling that is called into question.<sup>786</sup> For, in Tabucchi, before and beyond addressing a 'return of the repressed', making sense of the unconscious means becoming aware of its signifying function. In Tabucchi's reportage, Roma immigrants are not only characters but also, more importantly, narrators of the(ir) own story:

'Raccontatela voi la storia', dico alla famiglia. Si consultano nella loro lingua. Il padre non parla italiano (o finge, questo non l'ho mai capito). L'italiano della madre è stentato. Tocca a Cerim. Ed ecco la storia. [...] Ma te sai meglio di me, Tabucchi... Perché non racconti te? [...] [I]o non ho più voglia di raccontare... E, insomma, mi sento anche un po' triste'.<sup>787</sup>

In the paragraph following the quote, entitled 'Tabucchi continua', despite being moved by Cerim's emotional narration, the author assumes the role of the storyteller, both for Liuba

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<sup>783</sup> *Gli zingari*, p. 57.

<sup>784</sup> It is not by chance that Tabucchi initially reproduced the traditional representation of Florence and the scopic structure underlying it: 'Liuba non è mai stata a Firenze. Ho pensato che uno sguardo panoramico sulla città fosse indispensabile. Mi è venuto in mente che la collina di Bellosguardo poteva essere il luogo adatto' (ibid., p. 12). The familiar narration inherent in the panoramic view of Belloguardo is somehow reinforced by another visual trope that Tabucchi repeatedly and ironically mentions in his text, an exhibiting of Elton John's glasses.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>786</sup> 'When one thinks of Florence, one thinks of images of monuments and cupolas as seen from an elevated view point - a view which leads to contemplation and serenity. [...] Tabucchi [...] doesn't undermine it by focusing only on the "other" reality: the conditions of absolute and abject poverty of the Roma living at the periphery of Florence, but by working to undermine the postcard image of Florence' (Ferlito, 467).

<sup>787</sup> *Gli Zingari*, pp. 37-38.

and the other characters and for the reader alike, of the dramatic episodes experienced by the Krasnich family, glossing that ‘Liuba è venuta apposta per sapere e io sono qui apposta per raccontare’.<sup>788</sup> Tabucchi’s uncanny writing begins when he encounters not a different meaning but a demand for and a diverse modality of creating meaning. In the light of Tabucchi’s topological realism, gypsies inhabit the ‘altrove’ that reverses the familiar ‘dove’. Roma have been culturally – and socially and politically – repressed precisely because, extimate to the city, external and yet at its core, they lay bare the fallacy of its representational strategy – and the fact that it has one. They embody the other by asking to see differently. It is the form, not the content, that makes Tabucchi’s text disturbing.

Yet uncanny experience is also, always, an experience that reveals the uncanniness of men’s status as producers of sense. In the story, this ‘statuto poetico’ is disguised as a question: ‘Perché non racconti te?’ the text asks the reader. Postulating a mutual interaction between observation and narration, between the gaze and the word, Tabucchi lends the young gypsy Cerim – a synecdochical character standing for the Roma as a whole – his authorial voice: it is at this point that the uncanny strategy of signifying the other fades into the act of signifying *for* the other. And it is to the uncanny as a testimonial paradigm that the discourse will now turn.<sup>789</sup>

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<sup>788</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

<sup>789</sup> My interpretation of Tabucchi’s testimonial voice as what lets the other speak goes against Ross’ analysis that Tabucchi’s *Gli Zingari* ‘risks the complete erosion of the voice of the Other’ because a too large part of the text ‘is devoted to a (well-founded) condemnation of Florence’s local government’ rather than to the actual Roma community and since Tabucchi, ‘while feeling compelled to communicate Cerim’s story, uses his authority as writer to speak for the Roma Other’ (Ross, pp. 73-81). I believe Ross’ reading is too narrow and reductive as, focusing on a single text, it fails to assess Tabucchi’s relationship with the other within the wider perspective of the writer’s poetics.

To summarise:

- Tabucchi addresses and adopts in his writings a semiotic view of the unconscious in opposition to a formulation of the latter as an obscure (improper) meaning to be decrypted or (solely) as a reservoir of repressed contents.
- This implies that the unconscious is seen as ‘a specific form of semiotization of the experience’.
- Within Tabucchi’s poetics of the uncanny, unconscious semiosis constitutes the other that reverses familiar processes of sense making. This is why it has to be read in relation to the writer’s idea of ‘rovescio’.
- Accordingly Tabucchi’s attempt to signify the other (the unconscious) as an experience that reverses the familiar – both on individual and collective levels – is analysed by interrogating all those diegetic motifs and rhetorical strategies through which his narrative produces an uncanny gaze that questions and withdraws pre-existing precepts and visual practices, seeking a different logic of sense making.
- Eventually, the ethical dimension of Tabucchi’s exploration of unconscious semiosis is addressed by considering the role played by visibility in the process of identity construction.



## Chapter 5

### 5.1 Signifying *For* the Other: Testimony, Literature, the Uncanny

My thesis formulates the following main hypothesis: Tabucchi's literary opus can be defined as a poetics of the uncanny, in relation to his view of literature as an interrogative and disquieting quest for sense. For Tabucchi, literature responds to human beings' need for meaning – namely the need to assign meaning to every experience and existence, though in an unsaturated manner. This is cognate with Agamben's semiotic understanding of the *unheimliche*. Tabucchi's work therefore is uncanny since it explores and produces a specific, unfamiliar modality of signification. In the previous chapters I examined the way in which Tabucchi's texts question, disturb and problematise familiar discursive practices (playing with rather than by their rules) while they make room for a different textual matrix, a different experience of semiotisation (the unconscious as other and as reversal). But, signifying *otherwise* and signifying *the other* lead Tabucchi to the final gesture of his poetics of the uncanny: signifying *for* the other. Accordingly the present chapter addresses the modes in which, by producing an uncanny experience of sense making, Tabucchi's texts are committed to giving a voice to voiceless individuals, to their neglected and unspoken narratives.

In particular, as, in his fictional texts and commentaries alike, this process occurs and is problematised essentially through the theme of testimony, its exploration requires a preliminary clarification as to what exactly witnessing is and how it relates to the uncanny, as well as an introductory description of what distinguishes its literary occurrences.

My theoretical framework is based on an articulation of Agamben's and Felman's analyses of the reciprocity between testimony and (tentative) symbolisations of traumas. In particular, dealing with the first question, – what does it mean to bear witness and how does it work? –, I intend to adopt the main tenets of Agamben's theory of witnessing. For, inasmuch as the latter are developed within the philosopher's wider theorisation of post-nihilistic language and semiosis already discussed in chapter 1, they illuminate its uncanny entailing. In his 1998 volume *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, Agamben engages with 'l'aporia di Auschwitz' that is 'la stessa della conoscenza storica: la non coincidenza fra

fatti e verità, fra constatazione e comprensione'.<sup>790</sup> If historical understanding requires testimony, how and to what extent does it become a modality of signification? In what ways and for what reasons can we make sense of Auschwitz by testifying to it? Aiming at isolating the rationale inherent in any act of witnessing, Agamben first traces the etymology of the word 'testimone':

In latino ci sono due parole per dire il testimone. La prima, *testis* [...] significa etimologicamente colui che si pone come terzo (*\*terstis*) in un processo o in una lite tra due contendenti. La seconda, *superstes*, indica colui che ha vissuto qualcosa, ha attraversato fino alla fine un evento e può, dunque, renderne testimonianza.<sup>791</sup>

While 'testis' implies a certain detachment and neutrality and is directed towards producing/obtaining a judgment, 'superstes' involves the radical, personal experience and narration of a different kind of truth (and not of a different truth). For Agamben, every testimony about Auschwitz 'contiene una lacuna [...] un intestimoniabile, che destituisce l'autorità dei superstiti'.<sup>792</sup> This is because, as written by Primo Levi, whom Agamben quotes:

[N]on siamo noi, i superstiti, i testimoni veri. Noi sopravvissuti siamo una minoranza anomala oltre che esigua: siamo quelli che [...] non hanno toccato il fondo. [...] [S]ono loro, i 'musulmani', i sommersi, i testimoni integrali, coloro la cui deposizione avrebbe avuto significato generale. [...] Parliamo noi in vece loro per delega.<sup>793</sup>

As Agamben comments, '[c]hi si assume l'onere di testimoniare per loro, sa di dover testimoniare per l'impossibilità di testimoniare'; from this, it follows more generally that 'la testimonianza è l'incontro tra due impossibilità di testimoniare', since 'la lingua, per testimoniare, deve cedere il posto a una non-lingua, mostrare l'impossibilità di testimoniare'.<sup>794</sup> Witnessing for the other pushes signification to its limits to the point to which it others or estranges itself: 'nella testimonianza il posto vuoto del soggetto diventa la questione decisiva'.<sup>795</sup> Thus, the philosopher situates such a paradoxical statement in the broader context of his post-metaphysical philosophy, as a non-coincidence between the

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<sup>790</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz: l'archivio e il testimone* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>791</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>792</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>793</sup> Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), pp. 64-65, quoted in Agamben, p. 31.

<sup>794</sup> *Quel che resta*, pp. 32-36.

<sup>795</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

speaking and the living being, between he who survives and is able to bear testimony to the one who has died and will no longer enter language as subject: in the end, ‘la testimonianza ha luogo nel non-luogo dell’articolazione’, while ‘soggetto della testimonianza è quello che testimonia di una desoggettivazione’.<sup>796</sup> In the act of witnessing, the potentiality to speak finds its enabling condition and its limit in the (other’s) impossibility to testify. Witnessing implies speaking the discourse of the other, for the other and on his behalf. Inherent to testimony is, therefore, an experience of de-subjectification,<sup>797</sup> which, for Agamben, also explains the feeling of shame experienced by the witnesses.<sup>798</sup>

Indeed, the logic of witnessing is inherently uncanny – ‘quite unfamiliar and estranging’<sup>799</sup> – to the extent to which and because it entails a disjunction within and between the subject(s), hence structuring a discourse that is always already inhabited by the mute voice of the other. As the Real is that which cannot be symbolised and yet, seemingly paradoxically, underpins any attempt at uncanny signification, likewise a ‘testimonial text [...] is the evidence of the impossibility of making experience speak’.<sup>800</sup> Significantly, observing that witnessing constitutes ‘a crucial mode of our relation to events of our time’,<sup>801</sup> Felman describes its functioning in terms of an unconscious realisation of truth, namely ‘not as a statement of but as a mode of access to that truth’<sup>802</sup>: the witnesses’ discourse does not produce ‘a completed statement, a totalizable account’ as ‘[i]n

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<sup>796</sup> Ibid., pp. 112-21.

<sup>797</sup> This is a dual de-subjectification, that of the one for whom (on behalf of whom) the speaking witness bears testimony and that of the witness himself. In the first case, the prefix ‘de-’ signals a deprivation and a negation of subjectivity due to the (actual or metaphoric) exclusion from language; in the second case, the prefix ‘de-’, similarly to that which has been observed for the ‘un-’ of ‘uncanny’, alludes to a modification, a withdrawal which is also a grounding, an opening that literally means making room for the other within one’s subjectivity.

<sup>798</sup> As for shame, which Agamben links to the deprivation of self-sovereignty experienced with de-subjectification, it is a key manifestation of the sense of guilt that affects Tabucchi’s witnesses; by way of example, the narrator in *Piccoli equivoci* suffers from ‘una grande stanchezza e una specie di vergogna’ (p. 16). While Tabucchi’s characters are not guilty, their capacity to *feel* guilty is what produces shame.

<sup>799</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>800</sup> Shari Goldberg, *Quiet Testimony: A Theory of Witnessing from Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 68.

<sup>801</sup> *Testimony*, p. 5.

<sup>802</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

testimony language is in process and in trial’, originating from and revealing a ‘crisis of truth’.<sup>803</sup>

Furthermore, witnessing is a dialogic performance in a dual sense, since it presupposes an originary moment in which the witness sees and listens to the voice of the one(s) for which he testifies, as well as demanding a third auditor to which the testimony is then given. While listening might be grasped as a moment of world- and self-withdrawal, bearing witness marks a shift toward what I called the moment of uncanny decidability, a move from being *responsive to* towards being *responsible for* the other.

Examining literary testimony implies asking how it is possible to signify for the other by expressing ‘an utterance that signifies although and because it has no possibility of statement’.<sup>804</sup> Felman, in her work *The Juridical Unconscious*, argues that literary witnessing constitutes a unique way to negotiate meaning in the face of traumas; in particular, she contends that what distinguishes legal from literary justice is precisely the different mode through which the two engage with the quest for and narration of a disturbing truth:

Literature is a dimension of concrete embodiment and a language of infinitude that, in contrast to the language of the law, encapsulates not closure but precisely what in a given legal case refuses to be closed and cannot be closed. It is to this refusal of the trauma to be closed that literature does justice.<sup>805</sup>

A trial and a literary text do not aim at the same kind of conclusion, nor do they strive toward the same kind of effect. A trial is presumed to be a search for truth, but, technically, it is a search for a decision and thus, in essence, it seeks not simply truth but a finality: a force of resolution. A literary text is, on the other hand, a search for meaning, for expression, for heightened significance, and for symbolic understanding.<sup>806</sup>

## 5.2 Literature’s Sense of Guilt: Tabucchi Between Confession and Testimony

Within Tabucchi’s poetics of the uncanny, the dual de-subjectification that Agamben identifies at the core of testimony, is structured in terms of a mutually shaping articulation

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<sup>803</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>804</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>805</sup> Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 9.

<sup>806</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55.

of narrative silences and voices. It is solely in the hiatus between the taking place of language and its impossibility on the part of those who have been empirically dispossessed of their voice, that Tabucchi's testimony comes forth. It is not a gesture of appropriating or imparting a voice onto theirs; rather, as suggested, it is a matter of embodying them. Tabucchi makes the other's silence talk, out of and by virtue of its muteness. To him, a voice always implies a unique, irreplaceable body and the latter equals life.<sup>807</sup>

Despite the gap ideally separating the two, every act of testimony in Tabucchi's writings also occurs as and as a consequence of a moment of confession: this is due to the writer's deep-rooted sense of guilt and shame, to his feeling 'colpevol[e] per questa insufficienza della letteratura [...]',<sup>808</sup> and the fact that 'gli scrittori provano spesso il bisogno di giustificarsi, come se l'osservazione della vita desse un senso di colpa'.<sup>809</sup>

Adopting Agamben's distinction between the witness as 'terstis' and as 'superstes', it could be contended that Tabucchi feels the urgency to move from the former to the latter, from occupying the position of an external observer towards being the agent, the subject undergoing the experience that needs to be witnessed. This is strictly related to the abovementioned intermingling of voice and body, as, in moving from one form of testimony to the other and between the two, the writer tries to deal with the problem of how to make the case, how to clear the ground for a corporal, first-hand experience of the real within and through literary writing. This results in a topological interplay of confession and testimony, remoteness and proximity, as a consequence of which Tabucchi's testimonial agency might seem to dwell in a somewhat 'nearing distance'. Confession is Tabucchi's mode of acknowledging and working through the limits of literature, its (im)possibility – Agamben's 'impossibilità di testimoniare' – to make room for such a personal, direct involvement. Still, only when and precisely because he recognises literature's fault – at once the reason and the object of his confession – can Tabucchi act as a witness: hence, his secularised confession marks a sort of inner divide for testimony, as acknowledging this sense of guilt, the author experiences that positive de-

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<sup>807</sup> Thus, in Tabucchi, the body has a dual value: ontological, since it marks the irreducible presence of a human being; political, as the taking-place of a dialectic between dehumanising power (e.g. torture) and ethical resistance.

<sup>808</sup> Schwarz Lausten, p. 133.

<sup>809</sup> *La gastrite*, p. 59. Likewise, in *Requiem* Tabucchi writes that 'siamo tutti colpevoli [...] di essere nati, forse, e delle cose che sono successe in seguito, siamo tutti colpevoli' (p. 122). A sense of guilt that, however, positively enables the writer to transform his condition of detachment into an opening towards the others.

subjectification which can allow him to become, in turn, the subject witnessing for the other.

Tabucchi dramatises this topological tension and interplay between confession and witnessing in the short story 'Racconto dell'uomo di carta', where, as the title suggests, the narrator can speak his testimony solely when he has seemingly retreated from his bodily identity: 'Sono un uomo di carta. Per sfuggire al mondo sono diventato di carta ma ho imprigionato il mondo dentro la carta per raccontarlo'.<sup>810</sup> Still, in Tabucchi, being in the flesh and being made of paper do not stand as opposite poles of an irreconcilable dichotomy; rather they mark the two terms of an on-going interaction, articulating a counter-turning motion which alone allows for the potentiality to testify:

Cerco qualcuno che mi ascolta. C'è qualcuno che mi ascolta? Ehi, dico a tutti voi, volete ascoltarmi? Sono il Testimone, volete ascoltarmi? [...] io sono il Testimone. Ma vi chiedo cos'è il testimone? [...] un ectoplasma che assomiglia all'aria, della sostanza d'aria è fatta la tempesta, il suono della voce svanisce nell'aria e nell'aria si trasforma in nube, in nebbia, in niente. Anch'io vorrei un testimone.<sup>811</sup>

Why is the narrator-witness mute? Why is he demanding to be listened? To answer the first question, it is important to consider the setting of the short story, as the Argentine military regime and the tragedy of the *desaparecidos* situate the narrative in a specific historical context: '[L]ei non è un cittadino, lei è un anonimo, lei è folla, e nella folla lei sparirà'.<sup>812</sup> Nonetheless, the latter is subsumed by and transcended into a kind of archetypal demonstration of Tabucchi's testimonial mode: 'Ma io sono un uomo di carne. Di ferro sono gli eroi. Gli uomini di ferro schiacciano gli uomini di carne. [...] E l'uomo di carne, schiacciato sotto la pressa di ferro, diventa un uomo di carta'.<sup>813</sup> On this point, Zangrilli comments, the story might be read as a

[M]etafora dello scrittore (-intellettuale) che vive nel mondo dei libri, ma senza mai smettere di osservare la realtà circostante [...] un 'testimone' scomodo perché agita le acque, scuote lo status quo, crea problemi perché [...] rappresenta l'imperativo di comunicare un messaggio, di risvegliare la coscienza.<sup>814</sup>

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<sup>810</sup> *Racconti con figure*, p. 74.

<sup>811</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>812</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>814</sup> Zangrilli, pp. 295-97.

This also responds to the second question, since the narrator's request for attention denotes how, through confession, the writer becomes a witness to himself, to his possibility to testify for the other. Solely when he has lost his body – and significantly he maintains that '[i]l mio corpo è la mia patria'–,<sup>815</sup> can and does he embody an intention to signify. Losing his body and his name – the police calls him 'anonymous', literally without a proper name – the narrator undergoes an experience of de-subjectification, which, in turn, subjectifies him as the witness with a capital letter. He cannot but be the witness; this is his new body, where he can feel at home in being detached from himself.

Significantly, the story recounts the protagonist's attempt to phone 'la signora Storia' in order to tell her about those episodes of violence happening under the regime: symbolically, it is literature's attempt to bear witness – 'la mia piccola barchetta di carta si mise a navigare senza bottiglia'<sup>816</sup> – despite and in the face of mute oblivion. The fact that the phone call is answered by a neutral voice working 'alle Informazioni' might suggest that, in order to testify in the court of history, and in order to engage with the traumatic real, the writer has to negotiate his narrative of truth with the other apparatuses and producers of discursive practices, and that he needs to question any modality of signification upon which reality is funded. This might also explain the metaphorical presence of the elephant, as the narrator's capacity to communicate with the animal and to share with it an experience of survival illustrates the rationale of literary testimony itself: being a 'superstes', bearing witness to and for whom has no voice:

Poi trovai un elefante [...] allorché arrivò un tipo travestito da vescovo, con un cappotto di cuoio nero come quello della Gestapo. Apri il cappotto e mostrò la luger che teneva sotto l'ascella [...] sono un parà privato, lavoro per la chiesa della diffamazione, trasformo l'oro in merda, so tutto di voi, so tutto di te, so tutto di tutti: mani in alto. Quel miserabile credeva di sapere tutto [...] [m]a non conosceva la lingua degli elefanti. Cosa devo fare?, mi sussurrò l'elefante con la proboscide all'orecchio. Colpisci forte, dissi io, o lui o noi, è una questione di sopravvivenza.<sup>817</sup>

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<sup>815</sup> *Racconti con figure*, p. 70.

<sup>816</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>817</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73. The elephant, an archetypal symbol of vast and reliable memory, is a recurrent motif in Tabucchi's testimonial writings; for instance, Tristano observes how, to narrate a life, '[c]i vorrebbe una memoria d'elefante, ma noi uomini non ce l'abbiamo, forse un giorno la inventeranno elettronica' (*Tristano muore*, p. 10). Additionally, he compares his final witnessing to the elephants' funeral rite: 'Quando un elefante sente che è arrivata la sua ora si allontana dal branco, [...] sceglie un compagno che vada con lui, e partono [...] finché il moribondo non decide che quello è il posto per morire, e fa un paio di giri tracciando un cerchio, perché sa che è arrivato il momento di morire, la morte se la porta dentro ma ha bisogno di collocarla nello spazio, come se si trattasse di un appuntamento, come se desiderasse guardare la morte in

What makes the writer's body, then? And how can it embody the voice of the other? On one level, it might be argued that, as Tabucchi's literary corpus is composed of his texts, he purposively explores the role of his body by foregrounding his characters' corporeity. In particular, as I will contend in my analysis of *Sostiene Pereira* and *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro*, this perspective offers some original insight into the bond that joins testimony, body and repentance, which the writer thematises through the figures of Pereira and the lawyer Loton. However, Tabucchi embodies the other at a deeper level, when the text itself, through its narrative and linguistic structure, performs and incorporates the gesture of a speaking being: in the following section, by reading some of his fictions, I will argue that the use of features such as repetitions and ellipses, or the loose juxtaposition of irregular paragraphs, all serve to create the impression of a wounded body. In the end, it is the text itself that is metaphorically tortured.

This is evident also in 'Racconto dell'uomo di carta': first, as introduced in the title, the body constitutes the main motif of the story, from the urgency of witnessing a case of brutal torture suffered by the narrator's neighbour

E che sarà del mio corpo?, chiese il vicino. Non ti preoccupare del tuo corpo, pensa alla tua anima, pensa alla tua patria, risposero quelli. Ma la mia anima è il mio corpo, la mia patria è il mio corpo, disse il mio vicino. [...] L'ultimo ricordo [...] è la sua voce che gridava, mentre la macchina si allontanava nella notte: il mio corpo!<sup>818</sup>

or the tentative description of what makes a body – 'Come se un corpo fosse incomprensibile. [...] Come spiegare un corpo?'<sup>819</sup> – to the image of the hand holding a pen, a metonymy for the gesture of writing, which incarnates the sole possibility of salvation:

[M]a io speravo nelle mani che mi avrebbero afferrato. Quali mani? [...] L'ho trovato, ho trovato una mano, una mano umana, pollice, indice, medio che reggono un lapis o un pennello. [...] Ci saranno due mani e un solo dito che di una folla sappiano fare un individuo? Un individuo che rappresenti la folla? Tutta la folla, ciò che siamo, noi, l'umanità intera?<sup>820</sup>

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faccia, fuori da lui [...] il suo è un circolo immaginario, naturalmente, ma gli serve per geografizzare la morte, se posso dire così [...] E questo in qualche modo c'entra con quello che ti ho chiamato a fare' (pp. 10-11).

<sup>818</sup> *Racconti con figure*, p. 71.

<sup>819</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>820</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-77.



Second, focusing on the narrative texture, what comes to the fore is the story's peculiar structure, as, unlike the other texts included in the collection, it is divided into eleven paragraphs of different length, and each part is numbered and introduced by a citation in italics,<sup>821</sup> separated from the *body* of the text. Graphically, the use of disjointed and interrupted textual fragments might be said to compose an irregular, narrative tempo, as if the text itself were struck by the same blows suffered by the bodies in the story and, like them, brutally dis-articulated, as well as pointing, through the element of asyndeton, to literature's urgent need and im-possibility to testify. Yet, this is an im-possibility that, as previously discussed, defines a positive grounding: arguably, this is why Tabucchi inserts intertextual quotations to enhance the writer's de-subjectification, visualising his making room for the testimony of the other. Intertextual references create an echo-effect in the writer's voice that reinforces the ethical and collective dimension of his gesture, disrupting any binary opposition between the I and the other. Furthermore, this accentuates the meta-historical value of literary witnessing, namely the fact that, rather than occurring solely as the account of a subjective experience, it forms an attempt to expose the limits of existing narrations and symbolic appropriations of such historical episodes, to engage with the discursive construction and dissemination of traumas.<sup>822</sup>

### 5.2.1 Witnessing (as) Tabucchi's Uncanny Commitment

Functioning in accordance with the counter-turning motion between semiotic defamiliarisation and ethical commitment upon which Tabucchi's uncanny is founded, and by virtue of its being enmeshed with the writer's confession of his own sense of guilt, witnessing may be credited as being the only possible form of agency that is coherent and consistent with Tabucchi's view of 'impegno'. To stay with the legal framework, in fact,

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<sup>821</sup> Significantly, three citations are from Wislawa Szymborska's 1986 poem *Tortures*.

<sup>822</sup> As Meel argues, it is not solely a matter 'of bearing witness to specific events and experiences, but also as an ongoing struggle over representations of the past. [...] Historical trauma is not grounded in memory traces but in the interpretation of what may be "forgotten" in the texts of mass media, academic criticism, psychoanalysis and critical theory itself'. Allen Meek, *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories and Images* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 1. Similarly, Zangrilli suggests that, in Tabucchi's case, 'la missione del mondo mediatico [...] deve consistere nella ricerca della notizia concreta e giusta, della verità più scomoda, nell'altruismo inteso come una sorta di voce potente che grida e denuncia per coloro che non hanno voce. Schierarsi a favore degli inermi del presente e del passato [...] per l'autore vuol dire testimoniare, rappresentare come nella storia e nei suoi tempi i valori umani e civili vengono soppressi, annullati' (pp. 243-71).

one could notice that, no longer occupying the role of legislator, the writer can and intends to be an accuser and a member of the (popular) jury.<sup>823</sup>

On the one hand, this is due to Tabucchi's concerns with the present situation and to what he considers (his) literature's specific mode of signification; as he declared in an interview:

[T]he Italian and the European reality has always captured my attention. I have spoken of fascism, of terrorism, of the 'pentiti' [...], of the judicial inquiries. But I have done this *in my own way*, that is, *as a writer*, one who interprets. In this respect *literature distinguishes itself from journalism*: it doesn't limit itself to reporting the facts; it lives them.<sup>824</sup>

On the other hand, the judicial metaphor aptly describes the intellectuals' role in the passage from modernity to postmodernity. Adopting the distinction between legislator and interpreter theorised by Bauman, I follow Ceserani in assigning Tabucchi to the second category.<sup>825</sup> For, while the term legislator defines the modern intellectual who used to act as a spokesperson for an ideological view of history, society and, in broader terms, of reality itself, the interpreter is the intellectual 'condannato al confronto e al conflitto delle interpretazioni',<sup>826</sup> who engages with and comes to terms with the void of the real, articulating unsaturated possibilities of sense.

Truly, Tabucchi is aware that, from Pirandello's 'la vita, o si vive o si scrive' onwards,<sup>827</sup> '[I]a società italiana non ha mai del tutto accettato gli scrittori e ha cercato in tutti i modi di suscitare in loro un sentimento di colpevolezza [...] vivere o scrivere, come se fossero due

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<sup>823</sup> Hence, admitting his own guilt through confession, Tabucchi accepts to speak – and become, at that very moment, the speaker of – a discourse of truth irreducible to any reassuring and practical resolution, which disrupts the dichotomy between truth and lies, articulating, in its place, the grey zone of fictional truth. This is a zone that he frequently theorises also in his texts, from 'Un confessore, pensò, ci sarà in quella chiesa un confessore? [...] Sono io, avrebbe detto, sono un poeta, la poesia è menzogna, ho mentito per tutta la vita, tutta la scrittura è menzogna, anche le cose più vere, mi assolve, per favore, non ho fatto altro che mentire' (*L'angelo nero*, p. 103) to the claim, advanced in *Requiem*, that 'la verità suprema è fingere' (p. 124).

<sup>824</sup> Botta, 'An interview with Antonio Tabucchi', 439, italicised.

<sup>825</sup> The opposition between the intellectual role in modernity and in postmodernity defined in terms of the difference between legislator and interpreter comes from Bauman. Zygmunt Bauman and K. Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

<sup>826</sup> Ceserani, 'Intellettuale liquidi o in liquidazione?', p. 39. As Poggi observes, '[w]hile an entire culture of amnesia and désengagement was on the rise, Tabucchi used fiction to address the most difficult and intractable kind of past, the past which exists and resists in the form of ghosts, nightmares, traumas, regret and guilt': therefore his form of ethical commitment can be understood as a form of response and resistance to the 1980s dominant 'individualistic hedonism' and to the latter's view of literary commitment as 'playfully archival', which uses history solely as a 'cultural playground' (406-18).

<sup>827</sup> Luigi Pirandello, *Carteggi inediti*, ed. by Sarah Zappulla Muscarà (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980), p. 82.

cose molto diverse. [...]'.<sup>828</sup> Yet, as previously discussed, he works through and eventually rejects this opposition, turning literature's apparent helplessness into its greatest possibility of sense making: 'Perché mettere una "o" tra queste due parole? [...] Non esiste una dicotomia tra entrambe come si voleva che fosse, proteggendosi dietro criteri di aberrante pragmatismo'.<sup>829</sup>

What literary commitment is possible in the current Italian scenario? And to what extent is the gesture of bearing witness intelligible in terms of an ethically committed practice?

In answering the first interrogation, I make reference to *La gastrite di Platone*,<sup>830</sup> wherein Tabucchi explicitly deals with the issue and identifies a peculiar model of literary commitment. Not only does he disentangle the notion of intellectual function from that of the intellectual figure, reconfiguring the former in terms of a possible tool at the disposal of writers, artists and even citizens<sup>831</sup>: 'è a suo modo un intellettuale [...]chi] usa l'intelletto

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<sup>828</sup> 'La letteratura come inquietudine', p. 24. Similarly, Magris writes of a sense of guilt that 'non riguarda moralisticamente il singolo individuo [...] bensì la condizione storica generale [...]. L'individuo prova il sentimento di vivere in un mondo caduto e avverte questo suo stesso sentimento come colpevole' (p. 7).

<sup>829</sup> 'La letteratura come inquietudine', pp. 24-25. As Burns observes, for Tabucchi literature 'has the potential to mediate powerfully in this relationship between hegemonic discourses and the individual subject [...] he seems to see writing and reading literature as modes of seeking meanings in, and thereby improving, the human condition' (*Fragments of Impegno*, p. 61). In a similar vein, Francese argues that 'Tabucchi's commitment is defined by his opinion that literature must ask precisely those questions that society is not yet prepared to answer. Literature does not exist for the present but *as witness to the present*' (*Socially Symbolic Acts*, p. 6, italics in the text). Thus, Tabucchi overcomes both modernist ineptitude (writing about living instead of living) and its postmodern radicalised version (writing about writing).

<sup>830</sup> *La gastrite di Platone* originates as Tabucchi's reaction to Eco's article 'Il primo dovere degli intellettuali: Stare zitti quando non servono a niente', which appeared in *L'Espresso* on 24 April 1997: as Tabucchi explains, 'Eco, affidando all'intellettuale esclusivamente la gestione della cultura [...] e fondandosi su due imperiose asserzioni (la prima, che quando la casa va a fuoco l'unica cosa sensata che l'intellettuale possa fare è chiamare i pompieri; la seconda, che sia vano fare opera di convincimento su sindaci impermeabili a maniere di civile educazione e dunque più utile per l'intellettuale scrivere dei manuali ad uso dei nipotini di tali sindaci [...]) tracciasse dell'intellettuale un profilo eccessivamente malinconico [...] Solo che non è compito del capitano dei pompieri [...] individuare chi collocò l'ordigno [...] nell'eventualità che il risultato dell'inchiesta lasci ragionevoli dubbi [...] che facciamo: archiviamo?' (Ibid., pp. 15-17 and p. 40).

<sup>831</sup> Tellingly, Tabucchi's detectives are never professional ones: they are writers, journalists, or even a doctor in the case of Spino, who improvise their quests. This element reinforces the idea that his detections are ontological rather than epistemological and that their methodology is based on a sort of 'literary intuition and a-logical insight', namely on the possibility to make constellations of sense based on a-causal correspondences rather than on consequential ties. It is not fortuitous that Tabucchi dedicates *La gastrite* to Sciascia and Pasolini, for he sees in them the perfect actualization of literature's practice of truth.

a sua metodologia. E costui naturalmente si inquieta'.<sup>832</sup> In addition, Tabucchi explains what he means by 'intellectual function' and, recounting Eco's opinion that 'gli intellettuali, per mestiere, le crisi le creano ma non le risolvono', he reverses it through his own assertion that 'l'ipotetica funzione dell'intellettuale non sia tanto creare delle crisi, ma *mettere in crisi*'.<sup>833</sup> The etymological meaning of crisis – a judgement resulting from a trial – reinforces the understanding of Tabucchi's commitment as the act of putting dominant and familiar narratives on trial, retaining the whole judicial resonance of the term: 'se è vero che una giusta condanna dei giudici è necessaria, è anche vero che essa non spiega nulla'.<sup>834</sup> In effect, the focus on law and justice also shapes the structure of the text, which is explicitly defined as a 'testimonianza'.<sup>835</sup> Three features should be considered in this regard. First, there is the epistolary form – the volume is made up of two letters sent by Tabucchi to Adriano Sofri, the latter's reply, and, in the central part, a conversation between the author and his French editor Bernard Comment, to whom Tabucchi also directs the concluding epistle, deciding to 'incrostare in questa lettera due brani di lettere (qui l'epistolarità del tutto sale di esponente) che estraggo dal Corriere della Sera,<sup>836</sup> and, finally, a hypothesised letter that, Tabucchi suggests, someone in the future may send to the widow of the anarchist Pinelli, in order to tell her the truth about her husband's death.<sup>837</sup> Secondly, the choice of the recipient (Sofri) gives Tabucchi the opportunity to proceed along the dual tracks of historical contingency and the meta-historical exemplum: what Sofri's unfair condemnation – 'un errore giudiziario o una devianza giuridica' –<sup>838</sup> incarnates is the blind functioning of law, 'persino il Diritto soffre di stomaco',<sup>839</sup> which

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<sup>832</sup> *La gastrite di Platone*, p. 25.

<sup>833</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>834</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>835</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. Tabucchi ascribes to the intellectual a 'funzione conoscitiva [...] percorrere il discorso al rovescio con una logica che non ubbidisce a una sequenza conformista della realtà, e che ha uno statuto agnitivo' (p. 28).

<sup>836</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>837</sup> Significantly, however, this last letter would be merely a fictional creation by a writer who may decide to investigate the story: 'E può darsi, chissà, che uno scrittore un giorno abbia voglia di scriverla. Una vicenda come questa offre una vasta gamma narrativa [...] Prova a immaginare [...] La donna sta aspettando da trent'anni una lettera che le rechi la spiegazione della morte di suo marito, che nessuno ha mai saputo o voluto spiegare. [...] Ma: cosa dice quella lettera? E soprattutto: *chi* la sta scrivendo?' (*Ibid.*, pp. 83-84, italics in the text). That Tabucchi ends this volume with a question(ing) of identity perfectly suits his theoretical meditation upon the intellectual function as a disturbing approach that anyone, especially the reader, can and should adopt.

<sup>838</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>839</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

‘assume una dimensione più vasta: è davvero il perturbante di freudiana memoria, un *Unheimlich* non più desunto da un racconto di Hoffmann, ma dalla Storia’.<sup>840</sup> And finally, Tabucchi purposively appropriates the language of the court in this book – thus, in the prologue ‘si giustifica questa Gastrite’,<sup>841</sup> while in the third part he writes that ‘l’interpellato rispose, venendo doverosamente verbalizzato agli atti della presente Gastrite’.<sup>842</sup> Arguably, this is a text about the function of literary witnessing as a disturbing modality of knowledge and sense making that is articulated in the form of a testimony. This convergence between form and content is revealing of the communicative urgency of the writer in the act of bearing witness – recalling ‘l’uomo di carta’ when he exclaims, ‘C’è qualcuno che mi ascolta? [...] Sono il Testimone, volete ascoltarci?’

Tabucchi responds to the second question concerning the connection between witnessing and commitment most effectively in *L’oca al passo*, where he introduces and reflects upon the element of testimony in several key places. Already the subtitle, ‘notizie dal buio che stiamo attraversando’, alludes to the role of the writer as witness and, recalling Agamben’s classification, as *superstes*, since Tabucchi can witness the darkness of the present only because he is experiencing it and struggling to survive it. Likewise, in the prologue Tabucchi quotes Pasolini’s ‘Io so’, but turns it into ‘io non so se so’<sup>843</sup>: this accentuates his distance from a ‘culto dell’evidenza [...] della testimonianza oculare’,<sup>844</sup> in favour of ‘un modello interpretativo molto più attrezzato, proprio in virtù della sua indeterminazione, a decifrare la complessità del reale di quanto non si dimostrino le garanzie di veridicità ostentate dal paradigma della testimonianza oculare’.<sup>845</sup> Mis-appropriating Pasolini’s claim, consequently to his inhabiting a radically changed historical context, Tabucchi embarks upon a different pathway to testimony. As Antonello comments:

Ripartire da quel ‘io so’, significa con enfasi diverse affrontare il problema del rapporto tra verità storica e il suo carattere testimoniale e probatorio. [...] Quello che va allora ricercato è una forma di

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<sup>840</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>841</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>842</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>843</sup> Ibid. Here, Tabucchi ironically dismisses any certain possession of knowledge in favour of a generative doubt.

<sup>844</sup> Arturo Mazzearella, *Politiche dell’irrealtà. Scritture e visioni tra Gomorra e Abu Ghraib* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2011), Amazon Kindle e-book (Preface, para. 2, location 27).

<sup>845</sup> Ibid., (Chapter 1, para. 27, location 190).

giustizia etica e memoriale, [...] un tentativo di trovare un rapporto di comprensione de-ideologizzato con la realtà, aggiornato da un supplemento etico.<sup>846</sup>

Tabucchi examines the mutual relationship between literary writing and the present scenario in the article ‘Il silenzio è d’oro’, which is included in the collection. In particular, he denounces how ‘[i]n Italia è in atto una dittatura della parola. [...] Perché la parola è d’oro. E la possiede una sola persona, un uomo politico che è contemporaneamente il capo di un governo e il padrone di quasi tutti i media che trasportano la parola’.<sup>847</sup> To (Berlusconi’s) linguistic regime, he counters the belief that ‘[l]a fonazione, cioè la favella, è la facoltà di cui la natura ha dotato gli uomini affinché si distinguano dagli animali’, from which he derives his own mode of commitment: ‘[i]o parlo perché sono uno scrittore. La scrittura è la mia voce. Uno scrittore che non parla non è uno scrittore. Non è niente’.<sup>848</sup> Lastly, Tabucchi explains how the volume itself is structured in such a way as to embody his voice. Hence, inasmuch as they presuppose a reciprocity, or a dialogical responsibility, his appeals to Ciampi scattered throughout the text follow the same logic of testimony – ‘La democrazia significa anche reciprocità: Lei è il garante della mia Costituzione, io ne chiedo conto. E dunque a mio modo divento garante di ciò che Lei deve garantire. Altrimenti, come diceva Paul Celan, chi testimonia per il testimone?’ –.<sup>849</sup> This also distinguishes literature from mass media:

[l]a parola invece è alata [...] non è imprigionata in un tubo catodico, sfugge ai palinsesti, ai talk-show imbalsamati, alle conferenze stampa di ministri e generali. La parola è voce. E la voce è imprendibile, clandestina. Si sparge e si diffonde. [...] La parola si oppone alla lingua corrente.<sup>850</sup>

In the end, although it is important to discriminate whether it is the author Tabucchi, as in the case of articles, interviews and non-fictional books, or the fictional figure of the narrator that acts as a witness and confessor, thus separating his view of literature as testimony from the judicial episodes included within his literature, what will emerge, looking more closely at his texts in the following section, is a strong correspondence between the two planes.

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<sup>846</sup> Antonello, pp. 120-21.

<sup>847</sup> *L’oca al passo*, p. 29. Clearly, Tabucchi’s polemical target is Berlusconi.

<sup>848</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>849</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>850</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-21.

### 5.3 Tabucchi's Testimonial Fictions

In this section, I intend to analyse a number of texts that all explore the nexus between testimony, literature and trauma. The novels *Il piccolo naviglio*, *Sostiene Pereira*, *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro* and *Tristano muore*, and the short story 'Piccoli equivoci senza importanza' have in common a series of recurrent elements and modes that clearly illuminate Tabucchi's use of the uncanny as a form of testimony.

In particular, I advance a dual hypothesis: first, that characters in Tabucchi's fictions follow a somewhat chronological progression from passivity to activity, from being Agambenian 'terstis' to being 'superstes'. This might be said to mirror the writer's redefinition of literary commitment as a sort of 'ethical disquiet', resulting from his shift from the initial confession of a guilty externality to the testimony of an engaged outwardness.<sup>851</sup> And second, that, in accordance with Tabucchi's view of literature as a form of depoliticised commitment, the character's testimonial agency departs from – and, with *Tristano*, regrets<sup>852</sup> – institutionalised actions or 'political militancy'<sup>853</sup> in favour of turning into producers and narrators of (unsaturated) meaning themselves.

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<sup>851</sup> This biographical movement from being an observer to being a direct witness of present reality is evident, from the late 90s, in the publication of non-fictional texts such as *La gastrite di Platone* (1998), *Gli Zingari e il Rinascimento* (1999) and *L'oca al passo* (2001). However, the interplay of confession and testimony finds no definitive resolution or arrangement in Tabucchi's poetics. As he writes in the preface to the posthumous *Per Isabel*, '[p]otrà sembrare curioso che uno scrittore, passati i cinquant'anni e dopo aver pubblicato tanti libri, senta ancora il bisogno di giustificare le avventure della sua scrittura. [...] Probabilmente non ho ancora risolto il dilemma se si tratti di un senso di colpa nei confronti del mondo o di una più semplice mancata elaborazione del lutto' (pp. 11-12). Tabucchi's preface is meaningfully entitled 'Giustificazione', which, Ceserani suggests, is a 'termine che di solito si usa per spiegare una colpa, che qui sarebbe quella di essersi abbandonato all'avventura della scrittura [...] in un tempo storico che [ha] perso i punti di riferimento'. Remo Ceserani, 'Qualche altra riflessione su *Isabel*', in *Tabucchi postumo. Da Per Isabel all'archivio Tabucchi della Bibliothèque nationale de France*, ed. by Thea Rimini (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 59-67 (pp. 60-66). This biographical and narrative tension towards active agency might be read, significantly, through the gradual de-centring of the narrating I taking place in Tabucchi's fictions. As Francese observes, while his texts from the 80s are characterised by an 'acquisition of self-understanding through empathy for the other' (*Socially Symbolic Acts*, p. 178), in the following decade Tabucchi's protagonists begin to explore their subjectivity and social dimension by looking at themselves from the perspective of the other – which might also be another, posterior myself, as in the case of memorial writing. For Francese, this entails a shift towards a future-oriented or posthumous practice of literature, wherein the latter becomes 'a tool for looking at our present from the perspective of the future' that 'offers a testimony of the present for posterity' (*ibid.*, p. 6 and p. 190).

<sup>852</sup> Undergoing an experience of world-withdrawal and revelation, an uncanny clearing and de-saturation, *Tristano* realises how his political commitment during the Italian Resistance has led to the affirmation of an

Addressing my twofold hypothesis, I will discuss the intertwining of witnessing and confessing, the separation of justice from law, the nexus between torture and the bodily dimension, and the centrality of the voice and of the unconscious. At the narratological level, moreover, I will focus on the reduction of the narrator to a mere recorder of the other's voice in the light of a more general blurring of mimesis and diegesis, together with the use of repetitions, ellipses and disjointed tenses.

### 5.3.1 Testimony and Confession in *Il piccolo naviglio* and 'Piccoli equivoci'

The court episode in *Il piccolo naviglio* almost constitutes a narrative hapax in Tabucchi, as it is a peculiar case in which the protagonist is also the accused.<sup>854</sup> Capitano Sesto is deemed responsible for distributing 'materiale offensivo'<sup>855</sup> and arraigned for having accused, in turn, a group of policemen of Ivana's murder; eventually, he will be condemned to a criminal asylum.

Reading the narration of the trial, through Sesto's memory of it, what immediately emerges is the character's detachment from the events actually taking place;<sup>856</sup> as the narrator

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illusory freedom granted by the apparatus of the media: 'Scrittore, lo sai per chi combatté Tristano? [...] un giorno Tristano se ne accorse, così, ebbe un lampo di intuizione [...] sai, quando la realtà che è compatta come cemento, quasi per grazia divina apre una fessura un istante, tu puoi dare un'occhiata al suo interno [...] Tristano capì per chi aveva lottato, per chi aveva combattuto, per chi aveva ucciso, per chi aveva rischiato di essere ucciso... [...] Per pippopippi' (*Tristano muore*, p. 128). Repentance is prefigured in what Tristano initially tells the writer he has called to his bedside to narrate his life, '[t]i devo confessare una cosa ... dopo che ti avevo chiamato mi sono pentito di averti chiamato' (ibid., p. 11), and which casts a somewhat judicial as well as religious (though secularised) undertone upon the protagonist's testimony.

<sup>853</sup> *Socially Symbolic Acts*, p. 160. For both the characters and Tabucchi, being an active witness means being Agambenian contemporaneous, that is, being separated from and yet ultimately leaning towards the historical situation they inhabit. As Francese comments, Tabucchi and his characters find themselves in a sort of 'proximity at a distance' (ibid.), an uncannily structured, topological negotiation of sense with reality. Similarly, Tabucchi affirms that the committed writer '[r]itirandosi dal politico, non se ne distacca, ma cerca di conservare questo spazio di ritirata e questo sforzo di ritiro per profittare di questa prossimità che lo allontana al fine di installarvi (installazione precaria) come una sentinella' (*La gastrite*, p. 39).

<sup>854</sup> Another accused, the lover and murderer of the woman from Porto Pim appears in the eponymous story. The trial is briefly alluded to in the closing of the text, which nonetheless brings to the fore the centrality of the voice. He is a singer and, in a way, his songs bear witness to the other that he has both silenced and now remembers.

<sup>855</sup> *Il piccolo naviglio*, p. 192.

<sup>856</sup> Thus, recalling that which was analysed in chapter 4, the episode assigns a positive value to the oneiric dimension – comprising daydreams, hallucinations or actual dreaming – in that it constitutes a potential



clarifies, the protagonist's memory turns the hearing into a sort of reverie, for: 'È curioso come la memoria riesca a deformare la realtà [...] quando fu una realtà impietosa e tagliente, che ci aggredì e ci fece vivere con crudele completezza, senza lasciarci tregua'.<sup>857</sup>

However, it is not just the mnemonic filter that superimposes a dreamlike quality onto the episode; it is the way in which Capitato Sesto lived the trial. For instance, it is stated that 'ne aveva approfittato per schiacciare un pisolino'<sup>858</sup> conferring fantasmatic qualities upon the episode, as if he had experienced the trial unconsciously, closing it off to the recording and integrating activity of consciousness. Sesto's removal from reality should be understood according to Tabucchi's modality of oneiric awakening: for the protagonist, falling asleep constitutes the only way he has to detach himself from a 'stupido spettacolo allestito nell'aula',<sup>859</sup> hence something that demands to be watched and which forces him into the position of a passive spectator (which the writer tries to overcome in his gesture of confession). Yet actual slumber is not the only defence adopted by the protagonist: even when awake, during the trial, Capitano Sesto experiences a dreamlike, almost hallucinating state. Still, this is not only intended to denaturalise the discourse of law. On the contrary, it also signals, and more radically, his attempt to cope with the trauma of Ivana's murder. Thus, seeing 'uno spettacolo minuscolo [...] una famiglia di tarli'<sup>860</sup> surfacing from the wooden bench where he is sitting, Sesto hallucinates about a group of worms moving around on Ivana's corpse: 'Sesto non poteva sopportarlo, non poteva tollerare ancora, doveva intervenire, doveva gridare! [...] volle gridare qualcosa, ma non riuscì a liberare il più piccolo suono'.<sup>861</sup> However, it is precisely such an impossible scream that will become his final accusation.

Indeed, silence and ellipses characterise his role as witness: noticeably, Tabucchi articulates a sharp contrast between the absence, from the narration, of Sesto's testimony, which is said to develop 'per rigore filologico',<sup>862</sup> and, on the other hand, the 'Deposizione di Mastrangelo dottor Salvatore, commissario di Pubblica Sicurezza', which is reported in its entirety to expose the redundancy and obtrusiveness of bureaucratic language. When

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awakening from the anesthetic slumber of familiar reality. Being able to dream means being able to estrange and expose pre-existing networks of significance and clearing a space for free agency – i.e. thinking.

<sup>857</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>858</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>859</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>860</sup> Ibid.

<sup>861</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>862</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

Capitano Sesto acknowledges them to be ‘dichiarazioni [...] per quanto espresse in maniera ridicola, erano fedeli ai fatti accaduti’,<sup>863</sup> it is the problem of truth that is foregrounded. Is (judicial) truth simply a matter of factual accuracy? And, more importantly, is it enough to consider only raw facts? Is this the (only) truth? Clearly, Tabucchi’s answer is negative.

On the other hand, the oneiric dimension also serves to introduce another crucial element: that of corporeity and, specifically, animality, for the trial is compared to ‘un incubo popolato di bestie, come la rappresentazione di uno zoo macabro e grottesco’.<sup>864</sup> Peculiarly, here Tabucchi reverses the positive value he confers upon the bodily dimension elsewhere, since Sesto uses animal metaphors to expose at once the brutal violence of law and of the process as a complacent farce: if, looking at the judge, it was ‘impossibile dire se fosse un gorilla travestito da giudice oppure un giudice travestito da gorilla’,<sup>865</sup> he certainly asserts that ‘[I] avvocato di parte civile aveva una testa equina’, recognising that he was surrounded by ‘due cani mastini vestiti da carabinieri’.<sup>866</sup> This use of zoological images reaches its climax in Sesto’s final deposition:

Io qui presente Sesto Degli Angeli, [...] dichiaro pubblicamente, in questo sudicio tribunale, di essere stato offeso e avvilito da una legge subdola e asinina che non riconosco, ma che disprezzo e derido. Dichiaro inoltre di essere stato giudicato da un gorilla e da un equino travestiti da giudici, o da due giudici travestiti rispettivamente da gorilla e da equino; il che è un doppio travestimento essendo costoro in realtà due vermi.<sup>867</sup>

However, animality is also realistically alluded to by the narrator, at the moment when the commissar denies that Capitano Sesto ‘durante il tragitto sia stato fatto segno di percosse da parte degli agenti’,<sup>868</sup> and which sounds like a reversed, silenced confession or *excusatio non petita*. Metaphorically, it is as if the commissar were refusing to take responsibility for the testimony he is making, thus collapsing it from the inside. Conversely, for Tabucchi torture constitutes the most prominent uncovering of the bodily dimension that underpins the functioning of justice, testimony and any ethical gesture: reduced to a body to be wounded – and this might also explain the insistent image of Ivana’s corpse, which haunts Capitano Sesto’s thoughts – the protagonist completes his

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<sup>863</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>864</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>865</sup> Ibid.

<sup>866</sup> Ibid., pp. 190-91.

<sup>867</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>868</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

process of de-subjectification, which is essential to testimony, and enters a bodily dimension. In the end, Sesto's body constitutes his real voice, and the act of falling asleep is his real act of witnessing, for the body inscribes a space of alterity that is internal to and disrupting of existing practices of meaning. Being able to dream, Sesto articulates a different kind of truth, issuing from the unconscious.

I have already discussed the short story 'Piccoli equivoci senza importanza', pointing out the intertwining of ludic elements and the theme of alienation and a sense of guilt. The latter, having introduced Agamben's and Tabucchi's conceptualisation of witnessing, could now be interpreted as a sort of secular confession, wherein the narrator, a journalist, struggles to overcome his role as a mere observer – as a witness qua 'terstis':

[E] anch'io, che ero venuto col mio blocchetto per gli appunti, anche il mio semplice guardare loro che recitavano la loro parte, anche questa era una parte, e in questo consisteva la mia colpa [...] perché non ci si sottrae a niente e si ha colpa di tutto, ognuno a suo modo.<sup>869</sup>

The protagonist seems to have always been the third party – and detached spectator – in relation to his longtime friends Federico (now the judge) and Leo (the accused): for instance, this is evident in how he remembers Maddalena, the girl they were all in love with, and who, however, was interested only in the narrator's friends:

[C]osì io gli ho rimesso il disco, se lo meritava il Leo di ballare con Maddalena [...]. E così è cominciato il processo, con il Leo e Federico che ballavano a turno con la Grande Tragica guardandola perdutamente negli occhi, entrambi facendo finta che non erano affatto rivali, [...] io compreso, naturalmente, che mettevo il disco come se niente fosse.<sup>870</sup>

What the speaking I aims at is becoming a 'superstes', and it is exactly in this light that one may read his remembrance of their youth spent together. However, he is – and has always been – stuck in the external role of the observer: in the tragedy they all performed at school, unlike the others, he was not part of diegesis, occupying the role of the narrator. Then, when Maddalena undergoes surgery for breast cancer, he is able only to stare at her breast; yet, unable to comfort her, he blames Federico for not being at her side. And finally, he now hallucinates about seeing his friends on a raft – 'ma tutti e tre avevano una fissità immobile, e ho capito che erano immagini di gesso [...]'. E non ho detto niente,

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<sup>869</sup> *Piccoli equivoci*, p. 16. Tabucchi's sense of guilt follows from passivity, an incapacity to choose and act.

<sup>870</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9-10.

naturalmente' –.<sup>871</sup> The fact that he is an external 'terstis' is expressed also on the linguistic level, through the repetitions of terms and metaphors such as 'immagine', 'film', 'il tempo ha barcollato e [...] galleggiando in una pozza di anni è affiorato il viso di Maddalena', 'fingere [...] la parte', 'commedia che ci stavano giocando', 'le parti erano assegnate ed era impossibile non recitarle', all alluding to an experience of visual estrangement.

Comparing this short story to Capitano Sesto's trial, the two texts share, significantly, the dual focus on oneiric detachment from reality and on animality (or the body, more in general):

on the one hand, law is depicted as a *dispositif* – capable of turning, in the case of Leo, who completely makes up the episodes for which he is accused, the act of confession into mere fiction too – in relation to which the oneiric state represents a possibility of profanation and awakening:

Li ho guardati sedersi, come assistendo a un rituale incomprensibile e lontano ma proiettato nel futuro, e l'immagine di quegli uomini gravi si è dissolta sotto l'immagine di un passato che per me era il presente, proprio come in un vecchio film [...] ero ormai altrove, abbandonato al ritroso dell'evocazione.<sup>872</sup>

On the other hand, the focus on animality once again accentuates the brutality and violence, both physical and symbolic, intrinsic to the functioning of law: 'il Leo, seduto dentro quella grande gabbia come un animale pericoloso'.<sup>873</sup> Yet, similarly to Capitano Sesto, the image of the body – in particular of Maddalena's breast, as 'anche se dentro erano malati, non me ne importava niente, perché tanto c'è sempre una malattia dentro tutti noi'<sup>874</sup> – introduces a more authentic, if not innocent, dimension of life, which tries to simplify and eschew the imprisoning webs of reality: 'ci ho immaginati tutti quanti seduti su una foglia [...] perché i nostri organismi erano diventati microscopici e mononucleari, senza sesso, senza storia e senza ragione'.<sup>875</sup>

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<sup>871</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

<sup>872</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>873</sup> Ibid.

<sup>874</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>875</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

### 5.3.2 From ‘terstis’ to ‘Superstes’: Pereira, Loton, Tristano

The passage from ‘terstis’ to ‘superstes’, so longed for in ‘Piccoli equivoci’, finds its accomplishment in the novel *Sostiene Pereira*, which is both the recounting and the performance of such a gesture of witnessing: the novel is a prolonged speech act, for which one reads Pereira’s actions before and inside his words. Indeed, Pereira’s pathway to testimony does not occur as an external, factual change,<sup>876</sup> for the protagonist is already a survivor, albeit unknowingly. On the one hand, this element can be linked to the central theme of death:

Da quando era scomparsa sua moglie lui viveva come se fosse morto. O meglio: non faceva altro che pensare alla morte, alla resurrezione della carne nella quale non credeva e a sciocchezze di questo genere, la sua era solo una sopravvivenza, una finzione di vita.<sup>877</sup>

The protagonist’s obsession with death engenders and defines a process of mournful de-subjectification, which, as seen, is inherent to testimony; in order to testify, to speak for the others, Pereira has to uncannily become other, a ‘stranger to himself’. On the other hand, however, Pereira’s posthumous condition, namely the fact that he has to survive himself to bear witness, reflects that of the intellectuals during Salazar’s regime:

La signora Delgado [...] disse: e allora faccia qualcosa. Qualcosa come?, rispose Pereira. Beh, disse la signora Delgado, lei è un intellettuale, dica quello che sta succedendo in Europa, esprima il suo libero pensiero, insomma faccia qualcosa.<sup>878</sup>

The encounter with the young Monteiro Rossi and Marta, opponents of the regime, triggers and speeds up the protagonist’s movement of de-subjectification and the consequent shaping of his identity as a witness: as Pereira observes, if Monteiro and Marta were right in calling for a direct engagement against Salazar’s fascism,

[L]a mia vita non avrebbe senso, non avrebbe senso aver studiato lettere a Coimbra e avere sempre creduto che la letteratura fosse la cosa più importante del mondo, non avrebbe senso che io diriga la pagina culturale di questo giornale del pomeriggio dove non posso esprimere la mia opinione e devo

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<sup>876</sup> This does not diminish the role and the importance of the novel’s conclusion, with Pereira’s denunciation of Monteiro Rossi’s murder and his clandestine departure to Paris; on the contrary, the latter constitutes the external realisation of a movement which is initially and necessarily inner to the character himself.

<sup>877</sup> *Sostiene Pereira*, p. 15.

<sup>878</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

pubblicare racconti dell'Ottocento francese, non avrebbe senso più niente, ed è di questo che sento il bisogno di pentirmi, come se io fossi un'altra persona e non il Pereira che ha sempre fatto il giornalista, come se io dovessi rinnegare qualcosa.<sup>879</sup>

Hence, Pereira's preoccupation with death, his inhabiting a paradoxical place beyond death, performs and embodies what Ferroni has termed the 'condizione postuma della letteratura',<sup>880</sup> which designates the literary functioning in terms of temporal belatedness. This is an idea Tabucchi acknowledges and shares, since he perceives in it the suggestion of a critical approach towards the real that only an (apparent) detachment allows:

Sono d'accordo con Giulio Ferroni, la letteratura è sempre postuma [...]. Il sentirsi contemporanei all'unisono rispetto a ciò che viene detto in un'opera d'arte rischia di ridursi a una sorta di falsamento della realtà, mentre la postumità richiede un ripensamento.<sup>881</sup>

Meaningfully, for Ferroni, in Tabucchi's novel:

La voce narrante è sempre voce di un altro ed è sempre postuma, si accanisce da dopo a ritrovare le ragioni di una dissolvenza, interroga le altre voci, le immagini e i fantasmi che sorgono nella tensione del 'dopo', la passione per la vita e il rimorso che si svolge dal perdersi stesso della vita [...] entro una scrittura che continua a cercare, come a voler ritrovare un centro perduto, e incessantemente ritrova quel residuo, quel poco che resta.<sup>882</sup>

In a way, therefore, it could be argued that Tabucchi lends the character his own theoretical concerns and vocabulary, for Pereira describes the movement of becoming aware of his condition as a survivor-surperstes in terms of a sense of guilt and repentance:

[F]orse farei meglio a parlarne con il mio amico padre Antonio, che è un sacerdote, però forse lui non capirebbe, perché ai sacerdoti bisogna confessare le proprie colpe e io non mi sento colpevole di niente di speciale, eppure ho desiderio di pentirmi, sento nostalgia del pentimento.<sup>883</sup>

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<sup>879</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>880</sup> For Ferroni, 'postumo' means 'un di più, un oltre, una dimensione estrema, in cui nello stesso tempo qualcosa sopravvive, in cui, nel segno della fine, si dà come una continuazione, un'eredità'. Giulio Ferroni, *Dopo la fine: una letteratura possibile* (Rome: Donzelli, 2010), p. 15. Posthumous literature is inherently testimonial for it is oriented by 'un principio di sopravvivenza oltre la fine [...] sopravvivenza delle possibilità che il passato stesso non ha realizzato [...]' (ibid., pp. 135-36).

<sup>881</sup> Tabucchi, 'Catullo e il cardellino', *Micromega*, 2 (May-June 1996), 121-125.

<sup>882</sup> Giulio Ferroni, 'Isabel e la passione postuma della scrittura', in *Tabucchi postumo*, pp. 37-46 (p. 39).

<sup>883</sup> *Sostiene Pereira*, p. 121.

Padre Antonio is an essential figure for understanding Pereira's testimony, as he is already conscious of the fact that the protagonist inadvertently occupies the role of witness, for which no confession is either possible or required: 'la prossima volta mi verrò a confessare. Non ne hai bisogno, replicò padre Antonio, prima vedi di commettere qualche peccato e poi vieni'.<sup>884</sup> This is reinforced by the priest's comment, about the French catholic writer Bernanos, that 'il Vaticano non lo può sopportare perché lui è un vero testimone'.<sup>885</sup> Thus, it is religion itself that secularises Pereira's confession, showing how his personal need for repentance hides a civil dimension.<sup>886</sup>

Alongside religion, the psychological perspective seems pertinent in analysing Pereira's act of bearing witness. Exemplarily, dottor Cardoso explains Pereira's existential crisis in terms of the emergence of a new hegemonic-I within his personality:

[L]ei è in conflitto con se stesso in questa battaglia che si sta agitando nella sua anima, lei dovrebbe abbandonare il suo superego [...]. E di me cosa resterebbe?, chiese Pereira, io sono quello che sono, con i miei ricordi [...]. [L]ei ha bisogno di elaborare un lutto, ha bisogno di dire addio alla sua vita passata, ha bisogno di vivere nel presente [...] la smetta di frequentare il passato, cerchi di frequentare il futuro.<sup>887</sup>

Also in this case the protagonist is diagnosed with a mournful estrangement from the present, and, at the end of his talk with the doctor, Pereira is left feeling 'una grande nostalgia di una vita passata e di una vita futura'.<sup>888</sup> Nonetheless, *saudade*, which Tabucchi defines as a blending of remorse and nostalgic longing for the possible, describes both Pereira's illness and his unique possibility of finding a cure (an existential and ontological sense). During an interview, Tabucchi explicitly established a comparison between *saudade* and Pereira's interplay between passivity and activity as well as his final orientation towards the latter: 'La saudade può essere nostalgia del futuro, un desiderio del

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<sup>884</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>885</sup> Ibid.

<sup>886</sup> Significantly, Klopp observes how many characters in Tabucchi's work, which is informed by a 'Western, post-Christian imagination', although 'reluctant to acknowledge that they are sinners in a traditional sense [...] are frequently driven to make confession in an attempt to obtain some sort of, if not absolution, then at least peace of mind'; however, Klopp adds that in Tabucchi's fictions 'old-time religious categories such as "sin", "confession", "Hell", "angels", and "the soul" have become such clichés that they cannot help but be regarded with suspicion and within quotation marks that point up their hypothetical or fictional nature'. Charles Klopp, 'Antonio Tabucchi: Postmodern Catholic Writer', *World Literature Today*, 71. 2 (Spring 1997), 331-34.

<sup>887</sup> Ibid., pp. 157-58.

<sup>888</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

futuro, e inoltre nostalgia per le cose che avrebbero potuto essere e non sono state. È un po' come il desiderio di pentimento di Pereira'.<sup>889</sup>

Melancholic *saudade* moves Pereira to action exactly at the moment when it shifts from being a nostalgia for the past to a future-oriented desire to give (different) forms to the present and the future. As Francese comments, *saudade* 'sparks Pereira's desire to rectify his inactivity in the past and to inhabit the future by engaging posterity in dialogue' and this 'enables Tabucchi's reader to imagine a new social and moral order' given that what 'we visit through his prose, provoke a desire for what never was, but still might be: for feasible, attainable utopias, a new social and moral order to be realized in the future'.<sup>890</sup>

For, what Pereira 'sostiene' is,<sup>891</sup> first of all, his capacity to process mourning, to cope with actual loss (the deaths of his wife and Monteiro), to sustain a factual void – and this is what makes it unsustainable to his adversaries, who are, in turn, incapable of tolerating or dwelling within unsaturated forms of sense. Violence, both physical and psychological, in fact denotes an inability to think, to signify raw emotions, an impossibility to draw limits and sustain gaps, and hence to accomplish an authentic process of subjectification. Violence affects the victim as much as the perpetrators, who are petrified in a role lacking any subjective identity. However, recalling Agamben's peculiar definition of melancholia, Pereira's mourning is also melancholic (*saudade*) to the extent to which at the moment he questions and withdraws familiar narratives of meaning – of his life, of the historical context, of human beings – the protagonist opens up a gap that underpins a different modality of signification. His testimony, similarly to Tabucchi's *Requiem*, is a countermourning gesture, which appropriates and bears a semantic vacuum. What Pereira calls into question and repents is not the letting go of a sense that was not there in the first place and therefore cannot be properly lost. Rather, starting to enquire about what is (or could be) the sense of his life, the character asks the question that is central to Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny, i.e. in what ways it is possible to make sense of one's life, hence shifting from the plane of substantive meanings to that of their production.

Comparing *Sostiene Pereira* to the court narrations of *Il piccolo naviglio* and 'Piccoli equivoci', some recurring elements emerge. The theoretical couple of sleep/awakening also appears in the novel: significantly, Pereira's publisher affirms that 'siamo noi che dobbiamo essere vigili, [...] noi giornalisti che abbiamo esperienza storica e culturale, noi

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<sup>889</sup> Petri, 72. Significantly, Pereira lives at 'Rua da Saudade 22'.

<sup>890</sup> *Memory and Nostalgia*, 919-30.

<sup>891</sup> The verb 'sostenere' also carries the judicial value of a deposition, although it remains unclear whether Pereira is witnessing in front of the fascist police.



dobbiamo sorvegliare noi stessi’ adding that ‘la polizia ci protegge, vigila sui nostri sonni’.<sup>892</sup> Interestingly, the image is reversed by the executor of Monteiro Rossi, who contends that ‘anche la nostra polizia la notte dorme, sa, la nostra è una polizia che ci protegge tutto il santo giorno, ma la sera va a dormire perché è esausta’.<sup>893</sup> In both cases, sleeping figuratively stands for passivity, while both Pereira’s publisher and Monteiro’s murderer encourage a somewhat faulty form of vigilance, since it aims to reinforce reality’s slumber rather than awaken to a different possibility of sense making.

Likewise, the physical dimension permeates the narration throughout, in relation both to Pereira’s body – already on the first page it is said that ‘era grasso, soffriva di cuore e aveva la pressione alta’, and this is intended to emphasise the bodily facet of testimony – and to Monteiro Rossi’s deadly torture, what reduces him to bare life. Once again, torture signals the violence underpinning the functioning of law, as well as the vulnerability of those who oppose and bear witness against it. From this point of view, Marta’s physical transformation is archetypical – ‘doveva essere dimagrita di almeno dieci chili. Le sue spalle, che Pereira ricordava dolci e tonde, mostravano due scapole ossute, come due ali di pollo’<sup>894</sup> – since it clearly denounces the political context inside and in opposition to which Pereira’s testimony arises.

Finally, there are two other elements to consider in the novel’s patterns of testimony. First, the centrality of the paedagogical metaphor: while Tabucchi, in *La gastrite*, denies any pedagogical interest for the writer’s disturbing function, in *Sostiene Pereira* education is referred to as an essential element, albeit in a distorted form, of the totalitarian reality, as well, more plainly, as a potential space for profanation. On the one hand, Monteiro’s killers declare that they have come to Pereira’s house in order to ‘dare una piccola lezione a un giovanotto che sta in casa sua, una persona che ha bisogno di una piccola lezione perché non conosce quali sono i valori della patria’.<sup>895</sup> On the other hand, Pereira manages to avoid censorship by publishing in his journal the translation of Daudet’s ‘La dernière classe’, which tells the story of a teacher who, right before being exiled from his country, occupied by the German army, writes on the blackboard, during his final class, ‘vive la France’, to the applause of all the inhabitants of the village. As dottor Cardoso observes,

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<sup>892</sup> *Sostiene Pereira*, pp. 168-69.

<sup>893</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>894</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>895</sup> *Sostiene Pereira*, p. 194.

[T]utti i giorni, prima di uscire, le bozze del suo giornale passano attraverso l'imprimatur della censura preventiva, e se c'è qualcosa che non va stia pur tranquillo che non viene pubblicato, magari lasciano uno spazio bianco, mi è già capitato di vedere i giornali portoghesi con degli ampi spazi bianchi, fanno una grande rabbia e una gran malinconia [... eppure] lei ha potuto scrivere viva la Francia [...] anche se per interposta persona.<sup>896</sup>

In the end, one may contend that the whole of Pereira's testimony is articulated 'per interposta persona'. Although reduced to a mere ear, there is, in effect, a narrator. As will be the case with *Tristano muore*, in *Sostiene Pereira*, too, Tabucchi recurs to a 'minimal nature of the diegetic voices, which are either reduced to the verba dicendi or sentiendi, or more often omitted'.<sup>897</sup> The narrator here is the listener – like padre Antonio and dottor Cardoso, but also the doorkeeper Celeste, who works as a delator for the regime, on the diegetic level –, the primal recipient of Pereira's testimony, which makes the latter possible. Arguably, he functions as a sort of ideal or first reader, creating and occupying a space of mutual participation and co-creation of meaning. For, as Felman points out, 'trauma cannot be simply remembered, it cannot simply be "confessed"; it must be testified to, in a struggle shared between a speaker and a listener'.<sup>898</sup> This explains Tabucchi's title, as Pereira's cannot be (solely) a confession, in that it merges individual and collective planes. In a way, the novel is nothing but the acoustic recording of a voice. And this is evident in the linguistic texture, in the body of the text itself. The repetition of the phrase 'sostiene Pereira' performs a sort of linguistic belatedness, the working through of his posthumous condition. It is a novel in the present tense – as *Tristano muore* will be – since it is entirely based on the counter-turning motion of approaching and moving away from the real.

Yet, this is the uncanny present: I believe that linguistic repetition is intended to express the fact that Pereira's testimony is taking place at the very moment the story is narrated, aiming to create and perform the effect of an experience in fieri, and thus turning the simple present into the present participle. This is precisely the disjointed temporality of the uncanny, for, Weber observes,

The linguistic tense in which this convergence of being and unbeing tends to articulate itself is that of the present participle [...] is in the *uncanniness of the present participle*, in which the part is

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<sup>896</sup> Ibid., p. 129 and p. 155.

<sup>897</sup> Marina Spunta, *Voicing the World: Writing Orality in Contemporary Italian Fiction* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 140.

<sup>898</sup> Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 16.

brought before our eyes and ears as a reiteration that is forever incomplete, never coming full circle, always open to change.<sup>899</sup>

This could also be read in terms of a sort of self-quotation without quotation marks, which does not produce a return of the same, but rather predicates on the open potentialities of iterability; for, Agamben notices, ‘la ripetizione restituisce la possibilità a ciò che è stato, lo rende nuovamente possibile [...] La memoria restituisce al passato la sua possibilità’.<sup>900</sup> Similarly, narrative silence and omissions occur as a void within communication that is nonetheless capable of producing sense. Recalling Felman’s explanation, a ‘testimonial text [...] is the evidence of the impossibility of making experience speak’,<sup>901</sup> and so the witnesses’ discourse does not produce ‘a completed statement, a totalizable account’.<sup>902</sup> This is why I do not agree with Spunta’s interpretation that ‘[w]ith his reticent attitude Pereira is the epitome of non-commitment, which is used by the author to portray political silence’.<sup>903</sup> On the contrary, verbal and non-verbal silence describes Pereira’s negotiation of and coming to terms with the urgency of speaking for the others.<sup>904</sup>

In the subsequent novel *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro* the tension between possibility and impossibility which lies at the core of witnessing is introduced already in the epigraph: ‘Il marziano mi ha incontrato per strada/ e ha avuto paura della mia impossibilità umana./ Come può esistere, ha pensato tra sé, un essere/ che nell’esistere mette un così grande annullamento dell’esistenza’.<sup>905</sup> Tabucchi’s quote from Drummond de Andrade’s 1962 poem *Science Fiction*<sup>906</sup> clearly anticipates the main theme of the story:

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<sup>899</sup> *The Legend*, pp. 24-29.

<sup>900</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘Il Cinema di Guy Debord’, in *Guy Debord (contro) il cinema*, ed. by Enrico Ghezzi and Roberto Turigliatto (Milan: Il castoro/ La biennale di Venezia, 2001), pp. 103-07 (p. 105).

<sup>901</sup> Goldberg, p. 68.

<sup>902</sup> *Testimony*, p. 5.

<sup>903</sup> Spunta, p. 158.

<sup>904</sup> Goldberg, in her *Quiet Testimony*, distinguishes between taciturn and stone-silence. The former ‘withholds and refrains [...] but it always retains the right to enter the realm of speech again’, while the latter ‘is total’, and defines ‘the silence of the voiceless’. Pereira’s reticences and omissions belong to both types, as on the one hand he never loses his capacity to speak, but, on the other hand, his voice tries to bring to signification those who have been dispossessed of their voice – Monteiro, and, more generally, all the intellectuals and opponents to Fascism (pp. 93-94).

<sup>905</sup> *La testa perduta*, p. 7.

<sup>906</sup> Significantly the protagonist of the poem follows the martian as he needs him to be his witness: ‘Il marziano si è allontanato, l’ho seguito./ Lo volevo come testimone./ Ma, rifiutando il colloquio,/ si è disintegrato nell’aria costellata di problemi./ Sono rimasto solo in me, da me assente’. Carlos Drummond de

that of torture, or, more generally, of the violence, either physical or verbal,<sup>907</sup> that men impose upon themselves. On the one hand, the protagonist is a journalist, and when recounting Monteiro's murder he struggles with the principles of news values and with the spectacularisation and voyeurism inherent to the media, which constitute a form of verbal 'violence'. However, perhaps as a consequence of his also being a literary scholar, Firmino shows himself to be caring when it comes to the other's vulnerability. This is due to the ethical, committed function Tabucchi assigns to literature that, unlike the 'informazione indifferenziata' provided by mass media, entails an attentiveness and opening up to and for what and who is other.<sup>908</sup>

This is evident when, during his interview with Manolo, the man who discovered the severed head at the beginning of the novel, Firmino decides not to record the gypsy's voice – '[f]orse perché [...] [g]li piaceva quell'espressione dura e insieme sperduta, a suo modo disperata, e la voce di quel vecchio gitano non meritava di essere rubata da un aggeggio elettronico giapponese'.<sup>909</sup> Significantly, this encounter is characterised by a serious linguistic gap between the two characters, as Manolo speaks only the Romani language; yet, this hiatus does not compromise the effectiveness of Manolo's testimony: 'Il Manolo [...] si spiegava abbastanza bene, e per le parole in *geringonça* pazienza, Firmino non le decifrava ma dal filo del discorso riusciva a intuirne il significato'.<sup>910</sup> Rather, the title Firmino subsequently chooses for his article explicitly acknowledges the linguistic agency or role of the gypsy's voice: 'Vedeva già il titolo: *Parla l'uomo che ha trovato il cadavere decapitato*'.<sup>911</sup> This situation is then reversed, as it is Firmino that experiences, in turn, an (im)possibility to speak and to be understood: when he has to inform Damasceno's mother about her son's murder, Firmino only manages to 'balbettare che era un giornalista'.<sup>912</sup>

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Andrade, *Sentimento del mondo. Trentasette poesie scelte e tradotte da Antonio Tabucchi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1987), p. 109.

<sup>907</sup> The two converge in Tabucchi's representation of the policemen responsible for Damasceno's murder for, alongside the physical humiliation and annihilation of Monteiro, they show linguistic aggressiveness in their attempt to exclusively shape and appropriate judicial truth: for example, the commissar states that '[i]o sono un poliziotto, una autorità dello stato, vuole mettere in dubbio le mie parole?' (Ibid., p. 192).

<sup>908</sup> 'Con l'informazione indifferenziata si è persa una scala di valori etici che costituisce l'anima della letteratura [...]. La letteratura [...] deve configurarsi proprio come informazione differenziata, non deve dunque competere con i mass media ma deve proporre delle questioni, deve porre delle domande ('Il mio tram', p. 59).

<sup>909</sup> *La testa perduta*, p. 43.

<sup>910</sup> Ibid.

<sup>911</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>912</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

Furthermore, the novel itself seems to enhance the protagonist's act of bearing witness to Manolo's voice, as the Gypsy issue is frequently brought to the fore: for instance, during the encounter with the journalist, Manolo recounts the episodes of discrimination suffered by the Roma in Portugal – 'Manolo lo guardava con gli occhi interrogativi, come se aspettasse da lui una soluzione [...] Firmino abbassò lo sguardo, quasi come se fosse responsabile di quello che stava succedendo al popolo del Manolo'.<sup>913</sup> Similarly, while having lunch in a restaurant, Firmino meets a young waiter who overtly condemns racist violence and asks him to sign a petition promoted by the association 'Diritti del cittadino'.<sup>914</sup> And still, the Roma issue constitutes merely a contingent example of a wider ethical concern permeating the narrative: to some extent, there is a circularity that connects Drummond de Andrade's quote with the novel's conclusion, namely with the introduction of the character of Wanda. The latter is '[u]n travestito [...] ospedale psichiatrico, schedato per prostituzione'<sup>915</sup> who was an eyewitness to the torture suffered by Damasceno at the police station. (S)he embodies the subaltern, a silenced voice who uncannily inhabits and problematises the threshold between humanity and dis-humanity; yet, as the lawyer Loton reminds Firmino, Wanda '[è] una persona [...] prima di tutto è una persona',<sup>916</sup> an observation that resonates with Tabucchi's exploration of creaturalty within testimony. The bodily dimension is essential to uncanny testimony because it is first and foremost in the body that each individual is 'written' and seized by familiar discourses and pre-given meanings; it is in and through the body that men are saturated, removed from their intrinsic potentiality for (subjectifying) sense making.

Loton is probably the closer character to Tabucchi's civic and ethical concern – 'quando credevo che scrivere servisse a qualcosa, mi ero messo in testa di scrivere qualcosa sulla tortura' –,<sup>917</sup> considering that he works for 'una specie di correzione tardiva della Storia',<sup>918</sup> which corresponds exactly to literature's function for Tabucchi. Still, while the author places the exploration of legal procedures at the core of his diegesis, Loton goes the other way around, bringing literature within law, for, he comments quoting Jouhandeau,

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<sup>913</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>914</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>915</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>916</sup> Ibid.

<sup>917</sup> *La testa perduta*, p. 176.

<sup>918</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

[P]oiché l'oggetto intrinseco della letteratura è la conoscenza dell'essere umano, e poiché non c'è luogo al mondo in cui la si possa studiare meglio che nelle aule di tribunale, non sarebbe auspicabile che fra i giurati ci fosse sempre, a norma di legge, uno scrittore?<sup>919</sup>

Applying literary approaches to the analysis of legal justice, Loton exposes the latter's fictional and discursive nature. In particular, he demonstrates how law, for instance in distinguishing between truth and falsity, guilt and innocence, is informed by a precise metaphysical stance: 'Non so se si è reso conto che il mondo è binario, la natura corre su strutture binarie, o almeno la nostra civiltà occidentale [...] da cui discende verità o menzogna, per esempio [...]'.<sup>920</sup> This reaches its climax when Loton explains how legal justice itself is nothing but a nihilistic, metaphysical model and *modus significandi*: this is what is called the Grundnorm, 'norma base [...] situata al vertice della piramide, è una norma base rovesciata [...] una proposizione normativa [...]. Se vuole è un'ipotesi metafisica [...] è veramente una cosa kafkiana, è la Norma che ci invischia tutti quanti'.<sup>921</sup>

Similarly to the other texts examined in this chapter, the body constitutes a central element also in *La testa perduta*. First, the title itself acknowledges such a centrality through the image of the severed head. Interestingly, Tabucchi has declared that the original title he had in mind was 'La testa tagliata',<sup>922</sup> and the fact that it later became a missing head foregrounds the detection pattern inside the plot, while it shifts the novel from being a pulp-noir story towards being a legal narrative. This entails that the question asked by the novel moves from the epistemological 'who did it?' to the ethically based 'who lost it?' Or, to put it otherwise, the focus shifts from murder to torture.<sup>923</sup> In effect, and this is the

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<sup>919</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>920</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>921</sup> Ibid., pp. 114-15.

<sup>922</sup> As Surdich observes, '[c]hi possiede la prima edizione del romanzo, quella uscita da Feltrinelli nel marzo del 1997, noterà che nel bollino SIAE [...] il titolo del libro è: *La testa tagliata di Damasceno Monteiro*. Insomma, sembra che fino all'ultimo Tabucchi sia stato indeciso e solo alla fine, col bollino SIAE ormai pronto, abbia mutato il titolo del testo, sostituendo il termine più concreto e orrido 'tagliata' col più esistenziale 'perduta'. Luigi Surdich, 'Tabucchi, io ricordo...', in *I 'notturni'*, pp. 405-22 (p. 410).

<sup>923</sup> Significantly, from a psychoanalytical perspective, the severed head symbolises an impossibility to think, to produce and articulate meaning. See: Giuseppe Civitarese, *Perdere la testa. Abiezione, conflitto estetico e critica psicoanalitica* (Florence: Clinamen, 2012). In *Tristano muore* Tabucchi outlines a similar image, as the protagonist uncannily realises how reality subjugates and alienates individuals, detaching them from their capacity to think: '[g]li pareva il bisbiglio di un confessore che dà consigli attraverso la grata di un confessionale, non pensare, ricordati di non pensare, lascia che io pensi per te, Tristano, hai combattuto per la libertà e ora essa è arrivata, è essere affrancati dal pensiero, è il non pensare più... la vera libertà è essere

second element related to the body, torture forms the basis of Loton's principal argument in his accusation of the policemen. In particular, he brilliantly confutes their defensive strategy – Damasceno killed himself when left alone in a room at the police station – arguing that if they did not kill him, he must have decided to commit suicide because of the torture he had suffered. In the face of the authorities' denial, Loton finally contends that, even when admitting Monteiro's suicide, the severing of the head and the traces of cigarette burns on his corpse prove that he was tortured post-mortem. More broadly, torture is identified as the threshold between individual and collective responsibility, between humanity and de-humanisation within law:

[H]o la mania di fissare i nomi dei torturatori, chissà perché ho l'impressione che fissare i nomi dei torturatori abbia un senso, e sa perché?, perché la tortura è una responsabilità individuale, l'obbedienza a un ordine superiore non è tollerabile, troppa gente si è nascosta dietro questa miserabile giustificazione [...] si nascondono dietro la Grundnorm.<sup>924</sup>

And, in his final summation, Loton mentions, among others, Kafka's *Penal Colony* and Améry's testimony on the Holocaust, eventually asking himself and the jury 'ma cosa vuol dire sopravvivenza',<sup>925</sup> and thus also questioning and problematising the role of and reason behind the witness. In a way, discarding his literary interest to become a lawyer, Loton has experienced and accomplished the passage from being an external observer – 'terstis' – to being an internal witness – 'superstes'. Arguably, the desire and the urgency to be within the law in order to estrange and deconstruct it, they are alluded to and enhanced by Loton's physical appearance. He is – as the third element related to the bodily dimension in the text – obese, like Pereira. In the lawyer's case, this has a positive value inasmuch as, Mauri observes, it relates to his ethical and judicial commitment, as Loton 'con il suo grande corpo fa da scudo ai corpi disarmati dei poveri che assiste gratis, perché è benestante e si sente un po' missionario'; but his body might also stand for the judicial principle of *habeas corpus*, 'formula giuridica medioevale che riguarda appunto la garanzia di libertà individuale, di 'possesso' del proprio corpo'.<sup>926</sup>

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pensati' (pp. 129-30). That Tabucchi's characters testify (against) a physical and symbolic violence whose aim is the abolition of the act of thinking may also derive from Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil', which she defines as 'a curious, quite authentic inability to think'. Hanna Arendt, 'Thinking and moral considerations: a lecture', *Social Research*, 38 (Fall 1971), 417-46 (417).

<sup>924</sup> *La testa perduta*, p. 176.

<sup>925</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>926</sup> Paolo Mauri, 'La testa tagliata di Tabucchi', *La Repubblica*, 12 March 1997, p. 34.

On the contrary, Pereira's obesity is negatively connoted; thus, the way he tries to deal with his bulk is revealing of an inner shift from binge eating as an incapacity to draw limits and to avoid saturation towards being on a diet as a metaphorical attempt to sustain and metabolise a void.<sup>927</sup>

Fourth, alongside Loton's bulk and Monteiro's corpse, the reader also encounters another body, that of the text. Why is Loton's final accusation full of ellipses, visually marked by long sequences of suspension points? It is not that what he says is ineffable. Rather, these are visual wounds, a visual silence. They are disturbing, an authorial aposiopesis or recitence. Significantly, not only is the transmission of the text disturbed – Firmino's recorder was too far from Loton to clearly register his speech – but the journalist himself experiences an oneiric detachment from the trial:

Di quella giornata Firmino avrebbe poi ricordato soprattutto le sensazioni fisiche, precise e insieme quasi estranee, come se non lo riguardassero, come se una pellicola protettiva lo isolasse in una specie di dormiveglia [...].<sup>928</sup>

This twofold interruption, both a diegetic and verbal silence, confers

[A]lla scrittura, proprio in virtù della vaghezza documentaria, il carattere di testimonianza e, dunque, di verità. [...] La conoscenza è provocata dai vuoti, ovvero dall'interpretazione del lettore, che connette quel che non appare immediatamente connesso. Lo stile lacunoso è una dimostrazione esemplare di quello che la letteratura fa e deve fare: avvenire, non semplicemente parlare di avvenimenti.<sup>929</sup>

Ellipses and suspension points do not attest to a difficulty in verbalising on the part of either the lawyer or Firmino; instead, they express a literary failing, or, better, a withdrawal, which is, nonetheless, revealing. And this is what eventually changes the text from being the narrative of a trauma to being traumatic narrative itself.<sup>930</sup>

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<sup>927</sup> As for Pereira, obesity negatively alludes to his inability to cope with and sustain the void left by his wife's death. However, after meeting Dottor Cardoso he goes on a diet and actually manages to lose some weight: 'quando abbandonò la clinica, per prendere il treno per Lisbona, si sentiva tonificato e in forma, e era dimagrito quattro chili' (*Sostiene Pereira*, p. 131).

<sup>928</sup> *La testa perduta*, p. 207.

<sup>929</sup> Gardini, (Part 1, chapter 6, para. 7, location 1045; Part 2, chapter 2, para. 5, location 1703).

<sup>930</sup> I believe that it is only because it moves from being the account of a traumatic episode to incorporating the traumatic dimension within the text itself that Tabucchi's novel mostly develops its performative component. And this is exactly what allowed Tabucchi to narrate the evolution of the story before it was factually confirmed: as he explains in the concluding note, '[d]i reale c'è un episodio ben concreto che ha



The novel *Tristano muore*, similarly to *Sostiene Pereira*, is developed entirely in the form of a confession and testimony, for Tristano has to come to terms with the fact that his sense of guilt and responsibility, and individual and collective memory are strictly intertwined. Also in this case the narrator is nothing more than a mute recorder who nonetheless makes it possible to trigger and realise the communicational logic inherent to testimony.<sup>931</sup> Yet, more explicitly than in *Sostiene Pereira*, the protagonist himself is first a listener: indeed, throughout his soliloquy Tristano is haunted by and speaks for several inner voices:

Ma quella voce esiste davvero? Tristano l'ascolta, ricorda quello che ha letto nei padri della chiesa, è una voce interna, non può venire da fuori, la sente solo lui, i padri della chiesa le chiamavano voci degli angeli, le possono sentire solo coloro che le possono sentire o che vogliono sentire quello che desiderano sentire [...].<sup>932</sup>

Dicevo che cominciarono ad arrivarli lettere. O meglio, erano voci, arrivavano sotto forma di voce, anche se lui le vedeva scritte, poteva leggere la calligrafia di ciascheduna nell'aria [...].<sup>933</sup>

In this respect, Ceserani observes how 'Tristano parla in prima persona e lo scrittore riferisce le sue parole, ma continuamente lo trasforma in personaggio, passando alla terza persona'.<sup>934</sup> In a text that Tabucchi calls 'il ritratto di una voce',<sup>935</sup> the silent scrivener echoes and doubles Tristano's own lacunae and reticence and this aspect acquires a twofold value: it warns the reader about the character's reliability, while aiming at representing writing and the literary discourse in terms of a process of interrogation and a self-estranging *modus significandi*.

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mosso la fantasia romanzesca: la notte del 7 maggio 1996, Carlo Rosa, cittadino portoghese, di anni 25 è stato ucciso in un commissariato [...] e il suo corpo è stato ritrovato in un parco pubblico, decapitato e con segni di sevizie'. (*La testa perduta*, p. 239.) Yet, the plot of the novel prefigures and anticipates the actual solution of Rosa's murder, fostering the impression that, as Mauri puts it, '[l]a verità, già scritta in un libro, è diventata realtà' (quoted in Brizio-Skov, p. 169).

<sup>931</sup> Francesce aptly talks of '*dialogo mancato* [...for] [t]he writer never speaks nor is his presence ever corroborated in any way' (*Socially Symbolic Acts*, p. 209).

<sup>932</sup> *Tristano muore*, p. 48.

<sup>933</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>934</sup> Remo Ceserani, 'Tabucchi all'ombra di un eroe tradito', *Il Manifesto*, 24 February 2004.

<sup>935</sup> Tabucchi, 'Una conversazione intorno a *Tristano muore*', in *Parole per Antonio Tabucchi*, pp. 77-88 (p. 87).

Moreover, unlike Pereira's initial intellectual detachment, Tristano has always been – at least in the story recounted – an active protagonist of Italian history.<sup>936</sup> How, therefore, can his sense of guilt be explained? On the one hand, there is the character's resentment towards some attempts to re-frame Italian Resistance as a war of liberation rather than as a civil one: hence, Tristano feels (is) guilty to the extent to which he cannot articulate a proper narration of the past.<sup>937</sup> On the other hand, more deeply, Tristano feels guilty because he no longer holds the meaning of such past: hence, not only does he struggle with the necessity to formulate a proper and adequate testimony of history – more of an epistemological concern – but he also engages with the (ontological) questioning of such historical reality, asking not how to bear witness but whether this makes sense at all. Francese argues that Tristano's is 'a falsified historical testimony'<sup>938</sup>: surely it is so in terms of historical accuracy, yet the protagonist's narration cannot be reduced to it, as it is a search for a different kind and order or truth, which is not factual. As Tabucchi explains, the real question driving Tristano is 'ma valse la pena?'<sup>939</sup> This is why the character might be considered as a sort of fetishist or melancholic of truth, where the latter approach, stemmed from his being torn by a dichotomy between 'contemporaneous disavowal and acknowledgement of the reality of the death' of his parents,<sup>940</sup> is mirrored in and eventually affects and shapes his attempt to come to terms with and to signify personal and collective trauma. Tristano oscillates between a somewhat mythical attachment to the memory of his killing of the Germans' squad, which made him a hero of the Italian Resistance, and the disillusioned, disenchanting awareness of the political scenario that this episode has led to. Like Pereira, his testimony is melancholic to the extent to which it does not account nor mourn for a lost sense (of his life and of his country); rather, asking if it was worth it all along, Tristano's testimony questions the ways in which his life can be made meaningful: through political action, remembrance or writing it down. Indeed, it is this the third option that turns him into an uncanny 'superstes'.

Accordingly, in the novel, Tristano experiences both depersonalisation and derealisation, through physical suffering and psychological hallucination in his final month of agony

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<sup>936</sup> This is why he reproaches the writer, claiming that 'voi scrittori vi vedete sempre in una luce futura, come postumi, e pensavo al meccanismo che hai messo in moto quando mi hai raccontato in prima persona, come se Tristano fossi tu ... mi avevi già affidato al futuro' (*Tristano muore*, p. 55).

<sup>937</sup> On Italian Resistance as a 'civil war' see: Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

<sup>938</sup> *Socially Symbolic Acts*, p. 209.

<sup>939</sup> 'Una conversazione intorno a *Tristano muore*', p. 81.

<sup>940</sup> *Socially Symbolic Acts*, p. 214.

before death. However, these episodes of self- and world-withdrawal do occasion, in turn, a moment of revelation, for the protagonist comes to realise that every decision he makes would have an after-effect that still lives on in history,<sup>941</sup> and that, in the end, history itself is nothing but a form of survival. ‘Chi testimonia per il testimone?’ reads the quote from Celan that Tabucchi includes in the epigraph,<sup>942</sup> and which, with Agamben, might be rephrased as ‘cosa significa essere soggetto di una desoggettivazione? Come può un soggetto dare conto del proprio dissesto?’<sup>943</sup> Tristano’s reflection on testimony and his emerging as a subject thereof touches upon three main threads of thought: the value of literature as a mode to bear ethical and ontological witness; the role of the voice, as that which guarantees the nexus between human life and testimony;<sup>944</sup> and, finally, the nonlinear temporality of trauma, which defines history in terms of survival.<sup>945</sup> Concerning the first element, it is important to observe that the frequent apostrophes to the writer expose a certain uneasiness towards literature: on the one hand, Tristano fears literary mediation as a sort of opaque distancing from the truth of life:

Tu intanto ascolta e scrivi [...] [t]i devo confessare una cosa... dopo che ti avevo chiamato mi sono pentito di averti chiamato [...] forse perché non credo nella scrittura, la scrittura falsa tutto, voi scrittori siete dei falsari. [...] E invece ho voglia di scrivere, cioè... parlare... scrivere per interposta persona, chi scrive sei tu, però sono io’. ‘[M]i stai scrivendo [...] [l]e cose appartengono a chi le dice o a chi le scrive?’<sup>946</sup>

This is a filter that adds to his own lack of sincerity and transparency at some points in the story: ‘come vedi sono onesto, ti confesso che me lo sto inventando’.<sup>947</sup> Significantly, however, Tristano acknowledges that he decided to offer his final confession to the writer

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<sup>941</sup> ‘Vorrei cercare di cominciare dal principio, ammesso che il principio esista, perché... dove comincia la storia di una vita [...] uno fa una cosa, e quella cosa che fa determina il corso della sua vita, ma quell’azione che compie è difficile che nasca per miracolo, era già dentro di lui, e chissà come era cominciata...’ (*Tristano muore*, p. 12).

<sup>942</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>943</sup> *Quel che resta*, p. 135.

<sup>944</sup> ‘Forse, sintetizzando molto, è il ritratto di una voce. [...] La voce è il respiro, come dicono appunto i fonologi e i linguisti: la frase pronunciata oralmente è un sistema biologico che, come qualsiasi altra creatura, ha una nascita, una crescita, una stabilizzazione, una decrescita e una morte. [...] Quindi, il parlare è, se tu vuoi, simbolicamente la vita’ (‘Una conversazione’, p. 87).

<sup>945</sup> For, Tristano contends, ‘ti sto insegnando che il tempo dell’orologio non va di pari passo con quello della vita’ (*Tristano muore*, p. 81).

<sup>946</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11 and 82.

<sup>947</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

because of the latter's ability to testify, to make sense of and render justice to the Italian post-war Resistance:

[I]l tuo libro mi è piaciuto, davvero, è la più bella testimonianza su quel periodo eroico [...] Testimonianza per modo di dire, perché tu non potevi esserci, ma è come se ci fossi stato, testimone di un clima, di una scelta, di una posizione etica. [...]  
Che curioso, tu, in poche pagine, sei riuscito a essere ciò che una persona vera non fu mai in tutta la vita [...] la verità si scrive e si sottoscrive.<sup>948</sup>

In a way, Tristano eventually recognises that literature works on a different plane from official historical accounts in its search for truth; and still, it is precisely this belonging to the domain of potentiality rather than of actuality that prevents writing from being caught in a sterile, superficial ritual, which has also affected the functioning of justice:

[E] processi tutti uguali a imputati tutti uguali, nel senso che non c'erano, gli imputati, c'erano i processi ma mancavano gli imputati, è curioso, no? ma in una democrazia è importante il fuori, mica il dentro, quello che conta è il rituale, poi se non ci sono gli imputati che ti frega?<sup>949</sup>

This reinforces the assumption that, for Tabucchi, the ethical value of literary testimony differs from and denaturalises the form of legal truth.

Secondly, the novel brings to its climax the reflection and dramatisation of the mutuality between voice and creaturality, which, for Tabucchi, forms the basis of every act of testimony. Interestingly, Tristano's grandfather used to tell him, when he was just a child, that 'la vita è fiato, ragazzino, in principio era il verbo, e i preti chissà cosa si son creduti, ma il verbo è fiato, ragazzino, nient'altro che respirazione'.<sup>950</sup>

The presence of the voice is the only trace, for the reader, that Tristano is still alive and bearing witness to his life precisely in the moment when he is preparing to abandon it:

Sei venuto qui a raccogliere una vita. Ma sai cosa raccogli? Parole. Aria, aria, amico mio, le parole sono suoni fatti d'aria. [...]  
E invece il mondo è fatto di atti, azioni ... cose concrete che però poi passano, perché l'azione, scrittore, si verifica, succede [...] E per restare ci vogliono le parole che continuino a farla essere, che la testimonino. [...] Il verbo non è al principio, è alla fine, scrittore. Ma chi testimonia per il testimone? Il punto è questo, nessuno testimonia per il testimone. [...] ... Ma nonostante quello che dicevo prima, su di te ho un vantaggio, amico, io sono voce, e la tua è solo scrittura, la mia è voce

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<sup>948</sup> Ibid., pp. 12 and 91.

<sup>949</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>950</sup> Ibid., pp. 40-41.

... la scrittura è sorda... questi suoni che ora senti nell'aria sulla tua pagina moriranno, la scrittura li fissa e li uccide [...] la scrittura è una voce fossile [...] il simulacro di una voce... e invece quello che ti sto dicendo [...] queste parole sono vive, perché sono il mio respiro, finché c'è... la voce è respirare, scrittore, mettiti in ascolto.<sup>951</sup>

On the discourse level, Tabucchi uses ellipses and blank spaces between irregular paragraphs as if his writing were capturing and moving alongside the waveforms of Tristano's voice. After all, he is (also) a dying body slowly being devoured by gangrene, who is administered morphine, and this slow process of physical de-subjectification – matched by his becoming a subject of testimony – is mirrored in the body of the texts, in its losing and loosening of syntactical and thematic connections.

The element of the voice (or lack thereof) also embodies and epitomises the dichotomy between the discursive, familiar screen of reality and the wound of a traumatic real; in particular, the former is peculiarly compared to 'il bisbiglio di un confessore che dà consigli attraverso la grata di un confessionale, non pensare, ricordati di non pensare [...]',<sup>952</sup> thus stressing the nexus between the slumber anaesthetising individuals and their sense of guilt and proclivity to admit their faults. Trauma is alluded to through 'la sofferenza delle creature che non hanno voce, che poi siamo tutti noi, o quasi'.<sup>953</sup> Hence, the protagonist tells the writer,

Dunque, se un giorno una di quelle creature che guardi alla tivù del tuo salotto, una di quelle creature ridotte pelle e ossa, con la pancia come un tamburo e gli occhi pieni di mosche uscite dal televisore e si materializzasse davanti a te, sai cosa dovresti dirle [...] Gli devi dire, parla, amico, parla, tu sei un uomo libero, la tua parola è sacra e nessuno può distruggere la tua parola, e questa è la vera libertà. [...] [P]arla, la mia civiltà te lo permette, tu sei qui per parlare, devi parlare, apri la bocca, scaccia le mosche dalla bocca e parla.<sup>954</sup>

As for the third element, namely the temporal functioning of history as such as a sort of uncanny survival, similarly to *Sostiene Pereira*, as the title suggests, *Tristano muore* is a novel entirely developed in the present tense. Yet it is, once again, an uncanny one, in that it entails a non-coincidence with the historical phase that the protagonist inhabits, which makes it possible for him to topologically renegotiate his position as subject: like Pereira, Tristano is posthumous to himself. This is why his actual death lies outside the plot; in a

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<sup>951</sup> Ibid., p. 118 and pp. 155-56.

<sup>952</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>953</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>954</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

way, it is as if he had begun to die the moment he decided to rebel, in Greece, against Fascism, and which marks the chronological starting point of his entire story. One should also consider, from this perspective, the (apparent) oxymoron of the title and the subtitle *Tristano muore. Una vita*, as Tristano dies in life, i.e. he becomes a witness only because he survives, and he moves after and beyond life in the approaching of death. As a superstes, he outlives himself and can now become a witness.

#### 5.4 From Testimony to Testament

During his final months, Tabucchi was working on a new text that, as the widow Maria José de Lancastre explains in the introduction to the posthumous publication of the incomplete draft,<sup>955</sup> was based on the memory of a writer's friend who, during Salazar's regime, was a student in linguistics. One day, her professor decided to organise a trip to do some fieldwork in order to study a number of almost forgotten properties of the Portuguese language; yet,

[M]entre interrogavano un'anziana donna [...] si cominciarono a sentire delle grida terribili nel villaggio – grida di donne disperate, acutissime e quasi inumane, in un coro da tragedia greca, che penetravano negli animi come ferro rovente. Si seppe subito che la causa era stata l'arrivo di un telegramma che comunicava la morte in guerra (la guerra coloniale in Africa) di un giovane del villaggio, forse l'ennesima morte. [...] La vecchia era la nonna del ragazzo morto e, nonostante tutto, continuò a sillabare vocaboli dentro il registratore.<sup>956</sup>

There is an uncanny coincidence between the old lady that keeps pronouncing obsolete sounds on the recorder machine, and this writing that survives Tabucchi's own voice, functioning as a sort of final witnessing or testament. And, in effect, the text, which stops before the diegetic recording process begins, is entirely developed around the relationship between body and language. Thus the narrator establishes a difference between the two, for 'la lingua galleggia su queste miserie umane, la lingua è leggera, è fatta di parole, sono aria, l'aria non ha niente a che vedere con le sofferenze del corpo, le piaghe e il sangue. [...] La lingua no, non la puoi torturare'.<sup>957</sup> Nonetheless, he then observes how, to become individual experience, to practically enter language and constitute himself as a subject,

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<sup>955</sup> Clearly, it is essential to stress that posthumous works are published without the author's imprimatur.

<sup>956</sup> *E finalmente arrivò il settembre* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2015), Amazon Kindle e-book (Preface, para 3, location 9).

<sup>957</sup> *Ibid.*, (Chapter 1, para 3, location 48).

man needs to physically articulate his own voice, thus crossing the threshold between the two:

Bisogna che delle persone, uomini e donne, e bambini, le parlino con delle corde vocali che sono gli strumenti della fonazione, e che le formulino con la glottide, che è fatta di mortale cartilagine, creature come te e come me, che oggi siamo e domani non siamo più, perescibili, mortali e vulnerabili.<sup>958</sup>

Yet Tabucchi's text, exploring an attempted *experimentum linguae*, also contains an oblique reflection on the role of testimony as historical survival. First, the fieldwork takes place in what is defined as 'un villaggio di sopravvissuti',<sup>959</sup> people who are disconnected from and have outlived history and their own existence, who have collapsed and exited chronological time, inhabiting the fissure opened up between their lives and the historical context to which they should belong. Furthermore, if, as Firmino in *La testa perduta* demonstrates, even language can be an instrument of subjugation, this text describes – but fails at – an almost violent appropriation of the other's voice: 'noi raccoglievamo le voci per studiarle'.<sup>960</sup> This ultimately confirms the value of these voices as, perhaps, a final space of resistance, of difference and uncanny semiotic opening within the taking place of language – and of literature – itself.

Remaining incomplete, the text cannot capture and objectify the other's voice, which is brought to its linguistic, literary verge only in the form of a nonsaturated potentiality. Tabucchi's writing, once again following in Orpheus's footsteps, can testify to and for the other, to the extent to which it produces and signifies the other's withdrawal. Death opens up his and the other's voice to the space of a potential intention to signify that survives its own (impossible) actualisation.

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<sup>958</sup> Ibid., (Chapter 1, para 3, location 58).

<sup>959</sup> Ibid., (Chapter 3, para 4, location 130).

<sup>960</sup> Ibid., (Chapter 3, para 4, location 135).

To summarise:

- Testimony is the way in which Tabucchi and his characters try to signify *for* the other, i.e. to give voice to who has been denied the possibility to speak.
- Testimony is also, always, a moment of confession, as Tabucchi and his characters try to move from being detached observers toward being actively involved witnesses. Thus, testimony takes place in a sort of critical distance from and defamiliarisation of reality.
- As such, testimony is the only form of ethical commitment available to postmodern literature.
- Central to Tabucchi's testimony is the motif of the body, either positively (as what stands for the unique voice and presence of the other, the author or the text) or negatively (as the symbol of judicial and political torture).



## Conclusion

This research project forms an interrogative journey that departs from familiar theorisations of the uncanny and proceeds to delve into Agamben's philosophy in order to present a reading of Tabucchi intended to describe and circumscribe, topologically rather than chronologically, how and why certain narrative modes and motifs appear in his texts. However it cannot reach a definitive conclusion. How, then, can we balance the opening force inherent in the uncanny with the opposite movement of a conclusion that, by definition, encloses precisely by leaving something out? If, as Royle contends, every text about the uncanny has always already started, so to speak, and a preface is therefore both 'part of and separated from [...] what follows',<sup>961</sup> one might also 'conclude' that every discourse about the *unheimliche* has always already ended. For, having already moved somewhere else, it never reaches its conclusion; it has no proper end, at most it can be said to have an end-ing.<sup>962</sup> The *unheimliche* is extimate to its own conclusion.

Although the question of the uncanny in Tabucchi has no closure – one can never really pin down exactly what the uncanny *is* in and for the writer, but solely follow and trace *how* it is produced and articulated in, through and by his texts – it somehow fulfils itself, as unveiling 'the unanswerability of the question of the uncanny is the answer to that question'.<sup>963</sup> That is, investigating the enabling conditions, limits and extent to which it is possible to talk about a poetics of the uncanny in Tabucchi's works, tracking its movements and configurations, rather than providing an ultimate, neat definition of the concept or a catalogue of its manifestations, is the kind of critical response the *unheimliche* itself demands. The uncanny is, topologically speaking, a field of tensions, an interplay-ing of different lines of force, and not a gradual, but linear saturation of sense.

Withy observes, however, that

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<sup>961</sup> Royle, p. vii.

<sup>962</sup> There is thus a quest(ion) of sense in Tabucchi as well as another, parallel one – this research project – surrounding the writer's poetics. It is no coincidence that the terms 'quest' and 'question' have the same etymological root: the Latin verb 'quaero' meaning to ask, to search for information. For, both in Tabucchi's work and in my journey around and through his texts, moving takes the form of an interrogation and going forward signifies opening up further critical perspectives.

<sup>963</sup> Withy, p. 240.

[C]laiming that a question cannot be answered is not sufficient; we have yet to pose the question of the uncanny and to get clear on precisely what is question-worthy in it. In pursuing the question worthiness of uncanniness we seek not an answer but a better understanding of the question and its force as a question. The goal is to make uncanniness intelligible as unintelligible. [...] The closure of the investigation of uncanniness must thus be the openness of a question.<sup>964</sup>

This is why, to end this enquiry into Tabucchi's poetics, I will try to explain why an investigation into the author's uncanny is worthwhile, as well as illuminating some possible directions its further questioning might take. In effect, existing literature, despite having detected a presence of the Freudian *unheimliche* in the writer – even an 'assedio del perturbante' –, <sup>965</sup> has not developed this observation into a wider reading and problematisation of Tabucchi's poetics.<sup>966</sup> It has been my aim in this thesis to fill this gap, through a comprehensive analysis of Tabucchi's works and a descriptive interpretation of

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<sup>964</sup> Ibid., pp. 204-05.

<sup>965</sup> Giorgio Bertone, 'Antonio Tabucchi: Il viaggio, il tempo. Ipotesi costruttive (appunti provvisori e non rivisti)', in *Antonio Tabucchi narrateur. Actes de la journée d'études (Paris, 17 novembre 2006). Nouvelle édition revue et augmentée du texte inédit de la première leçon du cours donné par Antonio Tabucchi au Collège de France en 2003* (Paris: Cahiers de l'Hôtel de Galliffet, 2012), pp. 73-97 (p. 90).

<sup>966</sup> Dolfi sees in Tabucchi, 'sulle copertine dei suoi romanzi, l'apparizione di quella che con un termine freudiano si potrebbe chiamare *Das Unheimliche*, l'*inquiétante étrangeté* [...] inquietante estraneità [...] distinguishing] [i] luoghi, i personaggi, gli oggetti' in his texts (*Tabucchi, la specularità*, pp. 211-14). For the scholar, this points to Tabucchi's ability to reveal 'il senso nascosto delle cose mettendo in azione quella che con Freud vorrei chiamare l'*unheimliche*, l'*inquiétante étrangeté*, quella sensazione perturbante e irrisolta che porta alle soglie di una possibile verità senza mai rivelarla' (*Gli oggetti*, p. 59). Burns retrieves in Tabucchi's stories about childhood traumas, such as 'I pomeriggi del sabato', 'something precisely *unheimlich* [...] wherein] domestic security was ruptured by the intrusion of behaviour which was unfamiliar' (*Fragments of Impegno*, p. 64). Analogously, Palmieri ascribes to 'I pomeriggi del sabato' a 'connotazione [...] inquietante e perturbante [...] nel senso del perturbante freudiano' (*Piccole finzioni*, p. 157). Both Amigoni and Lazzarin associate the presence of the Freudian uncanny in Tabucchi's work with the genre of the fantastic: if Ferdinando Amigoni, in *Fantasma del novecento* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2004, pp. 141-45), considers the uncanny solely as a thematic repertoire, Lazzarin describes it as the principle underpinning the practice of 'rovescio', which constitutes Tabucchi's 'legame fra il narratore fantastico e lo scrittore impegnato' (14). In *La quête de la vérité dans 'Il se fait de plus en plus tard' d'Antonio Tabucchi* (Paris: Le Manuscrit, 2005), Margaux Kobialka compares the tension in Tabucchi's writing between realism and the emergence of a disquieting, unreal dimension to the Freudian *unheimliche* (p. 10). Significantly, while Burigana reads Tabucchi's opus as 'un'immersione rapida nell'inquietante', recognising, although very briefly, that 'essere inquieti vuol dire ricercare. E la poetica dell'Inquietudine è l'unica poetica che si può avere oggi' (*Piccole finzioni*, p. 156), Pucci highlights the presence, specifically in Tabucchi's 1980s fictions, of an 'uncanny and haunting past' (409) through which the writer refuses and resists the cultural 'anything goes' characterising the decade.

his poetics. The main risk inherent in this critical study might seem to be that of imposing a strong interpretative hypothesis upon the physiognomy of the writer's works. However, keeping with the spirit of the uncanny, the analysis is intended to be unsaturated and open-ended. To this end, I have tried, on the one hand, to combine a theoretical reflection with close reading, attempting to isolate the dominating pathways, recurrent features and structuring modes in Tabucchi, with an investigation of major and lesser-known fictional, hybrid and theoretical texts. On the other hand, however, there is more to be investigated and pursued still, and the present journey around and into Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny elicits and paves the way for further research.

### Answers to Be Questioned

The introduction argued that exploring Tabucchi's uncanny poetics was a legitimate and necessary task. In hindsight, I would add that the mode in which this thesis engages with the topic is also intended to be original, comprehensive and consistent: it is original because it is largely based on a theoretical tool, Agamben's conceptualisation of the uncanny, which finds its first systematic elaboration and discussion here; and it is comprehensive and consistent since Tabucchi's uncanny is addressed as (a matter of) poetics, thus in an attempt to encompass all its manifold occurrences within and through the writer's fiction and non-fiction writings.

The present research project takes its cue from the observation of two undisputable, interrelated facts. First, the uncanny is present; there is a presence of the uncanny in the works of Tabucchi. Second, this is not necessarily and solely equivalent to Freud's *unheimliche* – and this is where/why Agamben comes in. To begin with, there are three different levels or dimensions in which the uncanny comes to be present in Tabucchi's opus. The first is of a diegetic nature (the uncanny *in* Tabucchi), as characters undergo experiences of sense-withdrawal and revelation. One might think, for example, of Capitano Sesto and Tristano, to whom the uncanny generates an estranging possibility of unsaturated signification, fracturing the thick density of familiar reality and orienting them towards narrative activity. Next we have the textual or narrative level (the uncanny *through* Tabucchi), on which the *unheimliche* functions as the movement that each time structures his texts as a play, reversal or testimony. Lastly, one finds a theoretical reflection on the concept in the writer (the uncanny *and* Tabucchi), where 'Inquietudine' emerges as an idiosyncratic, ineluctable figure and (literary) style of the past century.

A discussion of poetics, therefore, explains the manner in which I have tried to gather and bring these three dimensions into correlation and mutual dialogue, illuminating how one resonates with(in) the other, and showing how the uncanny constitutes at the same time the content, form and function of Tabucchi's writing. For, what forms the basis of and binds this threefold articulation of the *unheimliche* is a communal view of literature as an interrogative mechanism of sense making.

This re-thinking of literature as a distinctive practice for producing meaning is implicit in the question (which he calls 'interrogazione metafisica' or 'desiderio metafisico' or 'necessità religiose') Tabucchi asks throughout his opus, and which he posits to the reader. This is a quest(ion) of sense: in what ways is it possible to live authentically, to live a meaningful life? Or, to put it otherwise, what is the sense of one's existence?

From Spino's interrogation 'Piangi? Chi era Ecuba?',<sup>967</sup> to the narrator of 'Il gioco del rovescio' asking Maria do Carmo 'tu vedi il rovescio del quadro, che cosa si vede da codesta parte?',<sup>968</sup> and Tristano wondering doubtfully whether if it was worth it, from the ash circles traced by Volturmo in Tabucchi's debut novel *Piazza d'Italia*<sup>969</sup> to those drawn in the sand in the posthumous *Per Isabel*, his characters experience episodes of world- and self-withdrawal. Such experiences nonetheless function as ontological epiphanies within diegesis and as clues to Tabucchi's poetics, reminding us that he explicitly describes his own writing as disquieting and interrogative. Characters see how the sense of life lies in how one makes sense of it, and, consequently, their – and the text's – playing, dreaming, and witnessing come to the fore as gestures, forms and formulations of the *unheimliche*, mechanisms of meaning creation rather than meanings in themselves. Yet this is precisely what the uncanny is about: it disturbs signs and signification, albeit in order to articulate a diverse semiosis.

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<sup>967</sup> *Il filo*, p. 97.

<sup>968</sup> *Il gioco*, p. 24.

<sup>969</sup> 'Volturmo continuò a crescere acquattato nel buio della sua prigione, rifiutando il mondo, disegnando figure sulla cenere con un bastoncino' (*Piazza d'Italia*, p. 23). Similarly, in *Per Isabel* 'il Violinista Matto [...] prese il suo archetto e disegnò sulla sabbia un piccolo cerchio' (p. 114). What is the sense and significance of this gesture? A possible answer might be found in the following passage from *Tristano muore*: 'La vita non è in ordine alfabetico come credete voi [...] è un mucchietto di sabbia, e qual è il granello che sostiene l'altro? [...] [P]erché quel mucchietto non ubbidisce alle leggi della fisica, togli il granello che credevi non sorreggesse niente e crolla tutto, la sabbia scivola, si appiattisce e non ti resta altro che farci ghirigori col dito [...] e poi un giorno il dito si ferma da sé, non ce la fa più a fare ghirigori, sulla sabbia c'è un tracciato strano, un disegno senza logica e senza costruito, e ti viene un sospetto, che *il senso di tutta quella roba lì erano i ghirigori*' (p. 139, italicised).

Wondering what is the sense of one's existence, for Tabucchi, signifies questioning the manners in which it can be made meaningful, exploring the mode in which human beings can become creators of meaning. This question is twice uncanny: first because it is about man's uncanniness, in that it reveals how the essence of human beings is that of producing sense, although poetically, that is in a non-consequential, interrogative, unsaturated mode; and second since it is uncannily formulated: its answerability coincides with the interrogative gesture. In a way, Tabucchi answers it by paraphrasing it: he gives no solution, because it is a question that cannot and does not aim to have one. One can live authentically, experience a life full of sense, solely when and to the extent to which one questions the way in which it can be signified. Clearly, one way to do so is through literature. For, literature, questioning pre-given meanings and familiar practices of signification, at the same time posits itself as a unique sense making discourse.

As for the second element from which this research issues, the fact that Tabucchi's uncanny is not reducible to the Freudian one is pivotal to understanding the reasons and consequent significance of reading the writer's poetics alongside and through Agamben's thinking on the uncanny. Using Agamben to examine Tabucchi has an inner justification in the latter's work as well as an outer one.

First, both in his fictional and more speculative texts, Tabucchi tries to focus, isolate, observe and describe this 'Inquietudine', the pervasive presence of which he perceives in his writing as well as in the literary style, moods and reflections of the past century. However, both his narrative and his theoretical analyses reveal how the writer's efforts to pursue clarity and exactitude ultimately result in a movement that enlarges, multiplies and connects, in a sort of critical constellation, terms, motifs and intuitions as distinctive as those of the reverse, the *saudade*, the sense of guilt, play, and so forth. In his attempt to domesticate his uncanny (and that of others), Tabucchi comes to realise that this cannot be done, let alone straightaway and linearly. This is why, although he explicitly recognises in (his reading of) Freud an essential source for every discourse about the uncanny, Tabucchi feels compelled to expand the space and magnify the angle of his perspective on the subject. Pessoa, nocturne, absurdist literature and all those other images and figures Tabucchi introduces into his reflection, are revealing of how, for him, the *unheimliche* is not reducible to a catalogue of themes or forms. Tabucchi demands and incessantly seeks a different (non)conceptualisation of the uncanny, whose effects and manifestations he detects and produces in his own literary experience.

Second, although Agamben moves from and inside a philosophical concern and dimension, he reaches an understanding of the uncanny, and of the literary uncanny, which noticeably

converges with Tabucchi's thought and helps to illuminate the complexity of the latter, in particular the worldview underpinning Tabucchi's poetics. Using Agamben in reading Tabucchi lets emerge a philosophical enquiry within his works that would remain otherwise overlooked. Tabucchi's philosophical enquiry is precisely the uncanny emergence of signification itself in literature (the uncanny as poetics), in relation to the ontological (or metaphysical) view of men as creators of sense.

As already stated, at present, it is possible to prove neither a direct influence of Agamben's texts – especially of *Stanze* – on Tabucchi nor the fact that the writer knew or directly read the philosopher. Nonetheless, it is no small coincidence that, working on a short story about Walter Benjamin in his final months, provisionally entitled 'Il piccolo gobbo', Tabucchi kept on his workstation, as a daily presence, the latest version of Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, which was based on the manuscripts Agamben himself had discovered at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France ('BNF'), and which, therefore, evidences a somewhat cultural and theoretical proximity.<sup>970</sup>

It is possible to read solely the initial page of Tabucchi's draft, which stages the encounter, taking place at the BNF, between Benjamin and the fictional character Archibold, who introduces himself as the 'Direttore della Biblioteca Universale [...] Vengo da Auschwitz. È un luogo in cui mi hanno fluidificato. Per questo ho assunto il compito di Direttore della Biblioteca dell'Universo'.<sup>971</sup> The reference to Auschwitz might suggest a further, ethical development of the story, perhaps in the form of a testimony, in which literature becomes a sort of meta-archive – a 'Registro dei Registri',<sup>972</sup> as Archibold calls it – for what cannot be finally archived, an unlimited clearing for signification. However, what is most relevant is that, in the draft, Tabucchi sketches two of his most effective, idiosyncratic uncanny figures: Archibold is described as 'un ometto dall'aspetto buffo, vestito in maniera stravagante, con [...] una bombetta foderata di tela cerata che aveva posato sul tavolo e sulla quale ~~faceva~~ [sic] disegnava con l'indice dei ghirigori',<sup>973</sup> thus repeating the same gesture made by Volturino, the fiddler or Tristano, and which, as aforementioned, epitomises the occurrence of uncanny sense making; as for Benjamin, facing his unexpected guest, he undergoes an experience of sense- and self-withdrawal:

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<sup>970</sup> 'Dossier Antonio Tabucchi', ed. by Sandra Teroni, *Genesis*, 37 (2013), pp. 189-99. Agamben is, in effect, one of the most important scholars of Benjamin and his Italian editor.

<sup>971</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>972</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>973</sup> *Ibid.*

L'aria di curiosità di Ben si era trasformata in una stupefazione infantile. Raramente, nei momenti più forti di estraneità da se stesso, le sue labbra carnose si allontanavano [sic] distaccavano l'una dall'altra creando sul suo volto quell'espressione di bambino che sta sognando da sveglio; ma ora quell'espressione congenita era emersa tutta, era uno sbigottimento.<sup>974</sup>

Interestingly, the quote includes a semantic cluster of expressions – ‘stupefazione infantile’, ‘estraneità’, ‘sognando da sveglio’, ‘sbigottimento’ – which may all be ascribed to Tabucchi's poetics of the uncanny. This is revealing of two things: a pivotal, proven commonality of interests, sources and readings between Tabucchi and Agamben; and a concern with the *unheimliche* that was far from over in the latest, still unpublished writings by Tabucchi.

### Questions to Be Answered

As suggested above, exploring Tabucchi's uncanny poetics is a journey *in fieri* with no end in sight. In particular, I think this study opens up two main possible routes for further research and analysis: one is internal to the writer, and is linked to the number of his still unpublished works, which would shed innovative light on his poetics and literary figure; the other is somewhat external, as it might call into question all the authors, concepts and motifs Tabucchi discusses and touches upon in his theoretical problematisation and fictional articulation of the uncanny.

This thesis opened with the following questions: what does it mean to talk about a poetics of the uncanny within Tabucchi's oeuvre? To what extent, on what conditions and in what ways is it possible to do so? In the end, what I have tried to demonstrate is that, far from being two disjointed interrogations, these questions answer each other. For, talking about a poetics of the uncanny in Tabucchi means recognising, within his writing, a question, a search for and an interrogation of sense; yet this act of recognition, or critical response, can take place solely as a quest(ion) of sense itself. Inquiring into the meaning of Tabucchi's literary experience ultimately implies and demands a reflection on the ways in which it can be signified. Tabucchi's literature is uncannily interrogative and disquieting because it intends and wants its question to become ours.

And this is a question that should never cease to be asked.

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<sup>974</sup> Ibid.

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