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DETECTION, ACTIVISM, AND WRITING:
TABUCCHI'S *LA TESTA PERDUTA DI DAMASCENO*
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Like many of Italy's most significant writers of the past fifty years, (including Carlo Emilio Gadda, Leonardo Sciascia, Umberto Eco, and Dacia Maraini), Antonio Tabucchi exploits the detective genre for a variety of purposes. In his 1997 *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro* Tabucchi draws upon the detective genre in part, at least, to expose and denounce a social problem that knows no national boundaries. Tabucchi's novel is a cautionary tale of police brutality in so-called civilized states. An equally significant and intriguing aspect of the novel, however, is the way in which it explores the nature and value of writing itself. In this paper I will trace the progress of the investigation into a crime which comes to symbolize a larger social ill. At the same time I will look closely at the digressions from the immediate case at hand, the moments in which the status, limits, and utility of writing are explored.

La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro has many of the elements of a classical *giallo* while it departs from key conventions in important respects. The novel opens with the discovery of a corpse by a gypsy encamped on the outskirts of the Portuguese city of Oporto. The distinguishing feature of the corpse is that it is missing a head. This is not merely a macabre variation on the typical "body in the library" conceit which serves to create interest and suspense in the classical *giallo*. As Tabucchi explains in his authorial Note, the headless corpse was inspired by an actual event. "Di reale c'è un episodio ben concreto che ha mosso la fantasia romanzesca: la notte del 7 maggio 1996, Carlos Rosa, cittadino portoghese, di anni 25, è stato ucciso in un commissariato della Guardia Nacional Republicana di Sacavém, alla periferia di Lisbona, e il suo corpo è stato ritrovato in un parco pubblico, decapitato e con segni di sevizie" (239). While the case remained unsolved for some time, Tabucchi attempted to solve the crime in his novel. Inspired by this "fatto di cronaca," Tabucchi weaves a tale of police brutality and of the two men who attempt to expose the guilty party. In keeping with the tradition of the classical *giallo*, the novel traces

the movements not of the professionals, the police force charged to solve the crime, but rather of the amateur sleuths, in this case a young journalist, Firmino, who writes for the Lisbon daily newspaper, *L'Acontecimento*, and a crusading lawyer, Mello Sequeiro, alias Loton.

Firmino is far from the superhuman mastermind of classical detective fiction. The investigation is slow and fitful. Progress is due more to chance than to the intellectual prowess of the sleuth. Firmino has difficulty rising to a series of challenges. He is disoriented navigating the streets of the city of Oporto. When he interviews the gypsy who discovered the corpse, Firmino has difficulty understanding Manolo's dialect. The one piece of information he gleans from the gypsy is the logo on the victim's T-shirt, Stones of Portugal. At first this leads to a dead end. Firmino visits a T-shirt shop but the clerk cannot identify the logo on the shirt. The sleuth is disconcertingly unable to rise to the challenge of decoding the cipher. It is only when Firmino receives an anonymous tip that he is able to trace the shirt to a Stone supplier, Stones of Portugal, and to solve the mystery of the victim's identity. He learns that, following a theft in the store, a young man by the name of Damasceno Monteiro has been missing for five days. The journalist's suspicion that the missing person and the headless cadaver are one and the same is confirmed when the victim's head is discovered in the Douro river and identified by Damasceno's mother.

In short, Firmino is depicted as a reluctant and rather mediocre sleuth. His talents seem to lie in another direction. His true vocation is literary criticism. From the moment he is introduced, the day he returns to his job at the newspaper following a vacation, Firmino is torn between his work and his vocation. He looks longingly at the *Biblioteca Nacional* where he has pursued the initial stages of a research project. "Pensò ai pomeriggi passati nella sala di lettura a studiare i romanzo di Vittorini e al suo vago progetto di scrivere un saggio che avrebbe intitolato *L'influenza di Vittorini sul romanzo portoghese del dopoguerra*"(22). Firmino's desire to pursue literary studies becomes a recurrent motif in the novel. As he arrives in Oporto to investigate the mystery of the headless corpse for his Lisbon newspaper, Firmino indulges again in a fantasy of literary and academic glory. "E pensò come sarebbe stato bello scrivere il suo libro su Vittorini e il romanzo portoghese del dopoguerra, era sicuro che avrebbe costituito un avvenimento nell'ambiente accademico, magari gli avrebbe perfino aperto le porte del dottorato di ricerca" (32). Firmino's interest in *letteratura impegnata* (socially committed literature) introduces the question of the utility of literature and leads into a broader discussion of the value of literature which subtends the entire novel.

The question of “whodunit” is solved midway through the novel when the anonymous tipster requests a meeting with Firmino. The informant tells Firmino that a sergeant in the Guardia Nacional, Titanio Silva, the kingpin of drug distribution in Oporto, has been receiving shipments of heroin in the shipping crates received at Stones of Portugal. Damasceno Monteiro, a stock boy, was caught by Titanio Silva in the act of stealing four packets of heroin. The tipster, a friend of Damasceno Monteiro and driver of the getaway car, informs the journalist that he witnessed the capture of Damasceno Monteiro by the Guardia Nacional. The vicious treatment of the victim by the corrupt sergeant, Titanio Silva, nicknamed Grillo Verde, leaves little doubt in the eyes of the witness that Grillo Verde is the culprit. What remains to be discovered in the second half of the novel is not the identity of the guilty party but whether the guilty will be punished, whether justice will prevail.

The long arm of the law is personified in the character of Mello Sequeiro, aka Loton. Loton, hired by the newspaper to assist the impoverished Monteiro family, is a crusading lawyer, a defender of the poor, the downtrodden, the *emarginati*. His work represents an attempt to make amends for the centuries of oppression and mistreatment of the poor by upper class families like his own, “una specie di correzione tardiva della Storia, un paradossale rovesciamento della coscienza di classe” (111). Unlike Firmino, Loton follows the model of the classical detective in many respects. Nicknamed Loton because of his resemblance to Charles Laughton, he is an eccentric loner, often ruminating on the case and reaching solutions from his armchair. His bursts of investigatory energy are followed by moments of boredom, depression, and *ennui*, the likes of which were first seen in the characters of Auguste Dupin and Sherlock Holmes. From the moment that Firmino goes to meet the obese lawyer in his shabby genteel apartment, Loton begins to play the role of the learned, eccentric mastermind, while Firmino assumes the role of the less-astute, Watson character.

In classical detective fiction, the sleuth entertains his sidekick with fragments of esoteric information. Auguste Dupin, Sherlock Holmes, and Hercule Poirot are each characterized by a quasi-encyclopedic knowledge. In *la testa perduta* Loton, like his predecessors, regales Firmino with information about philosophy of law, ethics, literary criticism, and psychoanalysis. As in the classical *giallo*, the Watson-like sidekick is a stand-in for the reader, who also benefits from the sleuth’s encyclopedic knowledge. The discussions between the two characters appear to be digressions from the case at hand but actually bear directly upon the events that are unfolding.

One of Loton's favorite topics of conversation is the subject of literature and literary criticism. When they first meet, Loton and Firmino discuss not the case at hand but rather Firmino's research interests. When Firmino explains that he has been particularly influenced by Lukàcs, Loton begins to grill the journalist about Lukàcs' work. He reminds Firmino that *History and Class Consciousness*, published in 1923, was undoubtedly influenced by events unfolding in Europe at the time. Loton's comments serve to underscore the fact that Lukàcs' reflectionist theory of literature as a mirror, however complex and distorted, held up to the historical world may also apply to Lukàcs' own work and to literary criticism in general. Firmino explains that he is interested in using Lukàcs to shed light on Vittorini's influence on the second phase of Portuguese neorealism. As a committed activist, Loton might be expected to applaud Firmino's interest in Marxist criticism and politically committed literature. On the contrary, Loton's bemused and somewhat patronizing attitude towards Firmino's project seems to call into question both the value of the kind of "letteratura impegnata" that emerged in Western Europe during the postwar period and the value of politically informed, Marxist literary criticism. Loton, however, is less interested in privileging one literary school or current over another than he is in encouraging Firmino to keep an open mind.

Some of the most engaging pages of *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro* are those in which Loton digresses from the case at hand to discuss literature with Firmino. Throughout the novel and the investigation, Loton attempts to expand Firmino's literary and critical horizons. In answer to Firmino's question "But what do you believe in?" Loton launches into a discussion of his favorite poets and their works. He extols Holderlin's poetry and waxes eloquent on one of Louise Colet's few successful poems, a poem addressed to her lover Flaubert. He agrees with Sartre's reading of Flaubert. He scoffs at the tendency towards over-specialization in literary studies that leaves Firmino speechless before the question "Scusi, giovanotto, ... lei pretende di studiare la letteratura, di volere addirittura scrivere un saggio sulla letteratura, e mi confessa che non sa esprimersi su questo fatto fondamentale, se Flaubert capì o non capì il messaggio cifrato di Louise Colet" (129). Firmino's feeble defense ("Ma io studio la letteratura portoghese degli anni Cinquanta, ... cosa c'entra Flaubert con la letteratura portoghese degli anni Cinquanta?" (129) is summarily dismissed by Loton. Loton's response is to insist that, in literature, everything relates to everything else. "Se lei vuole studiare la letteratura impari almeno questo, a studiare le corrispondenze" (130). The exchange between Firmino and Loton reads almost like a nightmarish Ph.D. quali-

fying exam. Firmino's tunnel vision in defining his research project is a parody of overly compartmentalized sub-specialties in literary criticism.

Ultimately, Loton's entertaining and learned digressions add up to a blanket defense of literature of all kinds, from Flaubert's *Education sentimentale* to the "romanzetti di cattivo gusto" of Flaubert's day, from the surrealists to Gide, from the "letteratura impegnata" on which Firmino conducts his research to the science fiction with which the journalist whiles away his leisure hours. The lawyer clearly identifies with Firmino's youthful enthusiasm for books and encourages him to pursue his ambitions in the field of literary criticism. His frequent challenges to the young man's research project are meant to stimulate rather than squelch his enthusiasm. As Firmino leaves Oporto at the conclusion of their investigation, Loton urges him to go back to his fiancée, an archivist, and to his research on the postwar Portuguese novel. He suggests the question of censorship in literature as a possible new research project for Firmino. As Loton sends the young man off to Lisbon, he alludes longingly to the work of Firmino and his fiancée: "Lavorare con i libri è un bel lavoro" (204). These informal conversations between Loton and his protégée add up to a defense of literature in its entirety.

The lengthy digressions are interspersed with the sleuths' attempts to build the case that might lead to the punishment of the guilty party. Loton advises Firmino to interview first Torres, the anonymous informant and friend of the victim, and then Titanio Silva, the corrupt sergeant. Both interviews are reproduced verbatim as a chapter of the novel, giving the reader a sample of Firmino's journalistic flair. In the second interview, with the alleged culprit, Silva admits that the victim was in the custody of the Guardia Nacional but claims that the victim committed suicide while he and his colleagues were out of the interrogation room making coffee. Titanio Silva is hard pressed to explain why there are cigarette burns on the body of the victim. Silva's contradictory testimony only further incriminates him. The scandal breaks, all of the newspapers pick up the story, and Titanio's involvement as well as the corruption of the Guardia Nacional in post-Salazar Portugal, is exposed. It seems, in short, to be a victory for free press, as Dona Rosa concludes: "Per fortuna c'è la stampa" (182). Firmino's journalistic skill, concerning which he is so apologetic throughout the investigation, is used effectively in the service of a just cause.

The mounting evidence that the victim had been tortured prior to his assassination by the corrupt police sergeant leads Loton to share with Firmino his thinking on the subject of ethics and human rights. In another

er highly relevant digression Loton tells the journalist about Artur London, a Czechoslovakian dissident tortured by the communists, and about Henri Alleg, editor of the *Alger Républicain* from 1950 to 1955, accused by the French of pro-Algerian sympathies and tortured in Algiers to make him denounce other pro-Algerian partisans. As Loton points out, one suffered at the hands of the communists, the other because he was communist. Both Alleg and London chose to write of their ordeals, London in *The Confession* and Alleg in *The Question*. Published in France by Editions de Minuit in 1958, *The Question*, Alleg's account of his detention and torture, sold 150,000 copies in two weeks before being confiscated and suppressed by the French government.¹ As Sartre wrote in the introduction to the English edition of *The Question*, "Torture is neither civilian nor military, nor is it specifically French; it is a plague infecting our whole era. There are brutes East as well as West" (25-26). Sartre's moral outrage, captured in this compelling introduction, is in keeping with Loton's aversion for torture, and for those who would justify its use in the service of the "right" cause. As Loton points out to Firmino, torture cannot be justified by an ideology. "La tortura è una responsabilità individuale, l'obbedienza a un ordine superiore non è tollerabile, troppa gente si è nascosta dietro questa miserabile giustificazione facendosene uno schermo legale, capisce?, si nascondono dietro la Grundnorm" (176). Loton leaves open the question of whether torture can be eradicated or whether it is an innate and ineradicable part of human nature.

It is significant that both London and Alleg, the two victims of torture cited by Loton, took up the pen to bear witness to their ordeals. Indeed, it is because they took up the pen that Loton tells their stories to Firmino. Loton confides to Firmino that he himself once had ambitions to write a treatise denouncing torture. "Molti anni fa quando ero un giovane pieno di entusiasmo e quando credevo che scrivere servisse a qualcosa, mi ero messo in testa di scrivere sulla tortura" (176). Loton has not only chosen action over writing, he also questions the very value of writing. Yet Loton's repudiation of writing in the passage cited above masks a deep-seated ambivalence. While he himself has chosen *praxis* over *poiesis*, he recognizes that both are necessary. He concedes to Firmino: "Non saprei dirle se sia più utile scrivere un trattato sull'agricoltura o rompere una zolla con la zappa" (178). Loton is unquestionably drawn to those who choose the path of writing over action, those who, like Alleg and London, successfully used the pen to focus on the need for all civilized people and nations to denounce torture.

The trial of Titanio Silva is one battle in the war against police brutality, torture, and crimes against humanity. The case against Silva appears to be airtight. As he bids farewell to Loton and prepares to return to Lisbon, the young journalist is, however, cautioned by Loton against unwarranted optimism: “Non si faccia troppe illusioni” (203). He reminds Firmino that the defendant will almost certainly be tried in a military court, even though the crimes of which he is accused have nothing to do with war. The key question is whether justice will be served. This question is answered on the day of the trial of Titanio Silva.

The trial testimony is narrated in a curious fashion. Firmino becomes the *focalisateur*, the eyes and ears through which the reader is informed about the proceedings. The reader learns of the proceedings only after the fact, as the journalist reviews his notes on the return train to Lisbon at the conclusion of the trial. Firmino is an oddly unreliable and distracted narrator. “Di quello che seguì, Firmino riuscì a memorizzare solo qualche frase. Cercava di prestare tutta la sua attenzione possibile ma la sua mente, come priva di controllo, vagava” (210). Firmino’s account of the testimony is fragmented and incomplete. The defense attorney’s case is reduced to a few phrases (“medaglia di bronzo al valore militare,” “alto patriottismo,” “difesa dei valori,” “lotta contro la criminalità,”) in defense of Silva’s record scribbled in Firmino’s notebook.

Loton’s closing argument, like the testimony in Silva’s defense, is reported in a detached, fragmented manner. This time, rather than relying on his notebook, Firmino resorts to a tape recorder. The tape recorder with which he records Loton’s argument only picks up fragments of Loton’s utterance. The reader does not hear Firmino’s immediate account of Loton’s presentation of the case but rather a delayed reaction as the journalist listens to the tape in the train’s restaurant car. The faulty recording begins with the words of the philosopher Mario Rossi: “la domanda che rivolgo prima di tutto a me stesso: cosa significa essere contro la morte?” (213) Loton’s conviction that to be against death is the basis of any humanistic ethic is communicated in half sentences accompanied by lengthy gaps. Firmino repeatedly turns the tape recorder off to comment on the proceedings for the benefit of an off-duty waiter. The tape recorder picks up loosely associated snippets, including references to the holocaust, and to the French surrealists’ denunciation of police brutality. The fact that the phrases are garbled and the transitions unclear makes the occasional clear passage stand out with greater intensity. One portion of the lawyer’s closing argument draws attention to torture as a crime that knows no national boundaries: “leggendo il documento degli ispettori del

Consiglio d'Europa per i diritti umani di Strasburgo incaricati di accertare le condizioni di detenzione di questi nostri cosiddetti paesi civili, un documento agghiacciante sui luoghi di detenzione in Europa" (218). Tabucchi refers to this Council of Europe report on police violence in an interview with the *UNESCO Courier*. The author explains that, while he was initially interested in researching conditions in Portugal, he realized after studying the report that "the situation is much the same everywhere else in Europe, including in countries which seem more democratic. But democracy isn't a state of perfection. It has to be improved, and that means constant vigilance."² The novel was certainly informed by the author's reading of this report and by his heightened sense of need for vigilance.

Despite the disjointed quality of the narrative, the logic of the connection between Titanio Silva's crime and the larger picture, crimes against humanity in all nations and times, rings loud and clear. The lawyer portrays Silva as an all too common example of the lack of juridical control and legal protection in police stations. To help him construct the case for Titanio Silva's guilt even if, as Silva testifies, Damasceno Monteiro had committed suicide, the lawyer cites the case of Jean Amery, the Auschwitz survivor who committed suicide in 1970. If, as seems unlikely, Monteiro had died a suicide and not directly at the hands of the police, his desperate act would have been forced upon him, Loton argues, as a result of the torture he had endured. It is left to the reader to make the connection between Améry's suicide and the possible suicide of Damasceno Monteiro. The closing argument trails off inconclusively as Loton repeats the word "Infamia." Firmino assures the off-duty waiter of the power of the lawyer's closing argument, which has been completely lost on the tape recording.³ "Le assicuro che questo momento nell'arringa era una cosa da far venire i brividi, avrei dovuto stenografarlo" (224). The reader must take on blind faith the assurances of the lawyer's oratorical power.

Why does Tabucchi choose to narrate the account of the trial, and particularly the account of Loton's indictment of torture and crimes against humanity, in this peculiarly fragmented, detached fashion? Perhaps the "static" in the message reflects the author's fear that the message will fall on deaf ears, that civilized people and nations will continue to allow crimes against humanity to be perpetrated in their name. Perhaps, also, the garbled message reflects Tabucchi's misgivings about his own power to wield the pen as a sword.⁴ Ultimately however, the effect is to challenge the reader to fill in the gaps, to forge the connections, to actively engage in the indictment of this crime.⁵

Loton's passionate denunciation of torture and police brutality is to no avail. The guilty party, and the corrupt system he represents, goes unpunished. The only thing that Firmino manages to record fully in the pages of his notebook is the defendant's woefully inadequate sentence: six months suspension for Titanio Silva. The sentence represents a complete defeat of justice, an outcome which Loton had to some degree predicted. It is interesting to contrast the outcome of the fictional trial with the outcome of the actual event that inspired the book. In the interview by Asbel Lopez in the *Unesco Courier* Tabucchi explains that the novel first appeared when the actual crime was still unsolved. The author was criticized by the Portuguese press for his fictional portrayal of police brutality in Portugal. After the publication of the book, however, the crime which inspired Tabucchi's novel was solved, the killer, Sergeant José dos Santos, confessed to the crime and was sentenced to seventeen years in jail. The Portuguese press belatedly marveled at the author's talent for prediction. Tabucchi, however, demurred. "But I don't think I have any particular talent for prediction, because when you have three or four elements in hand, you don't have to be a genius to reach certain conclusions." No God-like mastermind is required to discover the guilty party in a case that was, as Tabucchi points out, all too transparent.

The defeat of justice in the penultimate chapter of the novel is, however, not Tabucchi's last word on the subject. The final chapter of *La testa perduta* tells of Firmino's return to Oporto six months after the conclusion of the trial in response to a telegram from Loton. The lawyer is preparing to appeal the case on the strength of new testimony. It appears that there is an eyewitness, a transvestite named Wanda who maintains that she witnessed the torture and assassination of Monteiro by Titanio Silva. Loton asks Firmino to write up the eyewitness's testimony for his newspaper in order to rekindle interest in the story. The journalist, who has just been awarded a six month scholarship to study in Paris, agrees to set aside his research for a few days to oblige Loton. This time, however, it is the younger man, Firmino, who cautions the mastermind/lawyer: "a quella testimonianza non crederà nessuno" (238). Loton's final word on the subject, "E una persona," argues not only for the credibility of his eyewitness but also for the dignity of man. Although the possibility that justice will be served is remote in this case, Loton's dedication to the cause and his unwillingness to concede defeat gives an optimistic cast to the open-ended conclusion of Tabucchi's novel. It is not only Loton's continuing activism but also Firmino's dedication to the study of literature in all its myriad forms which marks the conclusion of *La testa perduta*. The

benevolent approval with which Loton regards his protégé and his work reflects the sense that political activism and writing may be complementary activities, equally worthy of pursuit.

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NOTES

¹The treatment of Alleg in the hands of the French military forces in Algiers was denounced by many French writers, including Jean Paul Sartre, Andre Malraux, Francois Mauriac, and Roger Martin Du Gard.

²See "Antonio Tabucchi: A Committed Doubter" Interview by Asbel Lopez, *Unesco Courier*, 1999.

³Tabucchi explains in the authorial note that the first lines of Loton's argument belong to the philosopher Mario Rossi.

⁴Angela Jeannet suggests that, on the one hand, the defective tape recording "underlines the reporter's imperfect comprehension of the lawyer's thought; on the other hand, those fragments point to the difficulty of articulating a coherent discourse about justice and opening up a higher vision of it, in the face of the actual state of human affairs" (165).

⁵In "Dialoghi Mancati: Uses of Silence, Reticence and Ellipsis" Marina Spunta points out that ellipsis and reticence are an intrinsic part of Tabucchi's work. She contrasts ellipsis, in which the omissions are not essential for textual cohesion, with reticence, in which information is obscured. In both cases, Spunta suggests, "Tabucchi employs such discourse structure, and in particular the figures of ellipsis and reticence ... in order to involve the reader in decoding the texts" (104).

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