



# L'inconscio

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# l'inconscio letterario

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# **L'inconscio.**

## **Rivista Italiana di Filosofia e Psicoanalisi**

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## Unconscious Motifs and Modes in Tabucchi's *Il gioco del rovescio* and *Notte, mare o distanza*

Veronica Frigeni

Antonio Tabucchi's works are brimming with representations of episodes, themes and images associated with the conceptual constellation and imagery of the unconscious. The latter constitutes a central as well as controversial motif throughout Tabucchi's oeuvre: many of his texts include significant references to Freud's, Lacan's and Jung's theories, although, in most cases, Tabucchi mocks, criticises and undermines the validity of psychoanalysis. For example, the novel *Requiem* subtly and ironically problematizes Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic concepts. Set in a scorching Lisbon, the story is structured as a succession of ghostly meetings. Falling asleep while reading Pessoa's *Livro dos desassossego*,<sup>1</sup> the protagonist

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<sup>1</sup> Meaningfully, the question of the unconscious is central to Pessoa's oeuvre; as Tabucchi writes in *Un baule pieno di gente*: «La poesia di Pessoa è l'analisi più complessa, dolente e tragica ma insieme lucida e impietosa, dell'uomo del Novecento. [...] per non correre il rischio di dare frettolose e forse inutili etichette politiche a un pensiero così controverso, complesso, scomodo e perfino imbarazzante, [...] individueremo [...] l'anti-ragione (vale a dire la liberazione dell'onirico e dell'inconscio) che viene allo scoperto soverchiando la ragione; [...] Perché egli ha capito che in ogni sì, anche nel più pieno e nel più rotondo, c'è un minuscolo no, un corpuscolo portatore di un segno



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. First, the character of the lame lottery-ticket seller reproaches the protagonist – a fictional alter ego of Tabucchi – for having embraced the theory of the unconscious, as:

L'inconscio è roba della borghesia viennese d'inizio secolo, qui siamo in Portogallo e il signore è italiano, noi siamo roba del Sud, la civiltà greco-romana, non abbiamo niente a che fare con la Mitteleuropa, scusi sa, noi abbiamo l'anima. È vero, dissi io, io l'anima ce l'ho, di sicuro, ma ho anche l'Inconscio, voglio dire, ormai io l'Inconscio ce l'ho, l'Inconscio uno se lo prende, è come una malattia, mi sono preso il virus dell'Inconscio, capita (Tabucchi, 1991a, p. 18).

Second, this opposition between a southern penchant for a religious view of the soul and a northern preference for the psychic unconscious gets reaffirmed at the moment when the dead poet Tadeus, a friend the protagonist encounters during his hallucinated wandering across Lisbon, makes it clear how «io ho sempre preferito il materiale all'immaginario [...] anche l'immaginario collettivo, bisogna cantarglielo chiaro al signor Jung, prima dell'immaginario viene la pappa» (*ivi*, p. 45).

Similarly, the novel *Tristano muore* addresses and undermines Lacanian psychoanalysis, perhaps perceived as excessively rigid

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contrario che gira in un'orbita oscura a creare proprio quel *si* che prevale» (Tabucchi, 1990, pp. 21-22).

and dogmatic, for, observing his patient's «spazio onirico», «[il dottor Ziegler cominciava a sospettare un inconscio come un linguaggio, ma con riluttanza, perché non era di quella scuola» (Tabucchi, 2004, p. 52). Meaningfully, Tristano is a dying body slowly being devoured by gangrene, who is administered morphine, and the novel chronicles his physical suffering and psychological hallucination in his final month of agony before death.

Though seemingly critical and sceptical of the value and effectiveness of the psychoanalytic method, Tabucchi undeniably assigns a central place to the role of the unconscious in his narratives.

Still, what notion of the unconscious do readers find in Tabucchi's fictions? In what ways is it narrated? By exploring and addressing such questions, the article intends to argue: first, that Tabucchi's criticism solely addresses a lay understanding of psychoanalysis and of the unconscious as a submerged place of repressed instincts, to which the writer opposes a view of the unconscious as a semiotic one; second, that Tabucchi's own idea and practice of *rovescio* lends a wide spectrum of narrative motifs and strategies to his representation of the semiotic unconscious.

## 1. The Semiotic Unconscious

Tabucchi, as stated, explicitly problematizes the topographical hypothesis of the unconscious, namely an understanding of the latter as a place lying below, under the border of psychic awareness, since not only is the latter an overtly simplistic, amateurish and vulgate definition; but it also undervalues the

novelty of psychoanalysis' contribution to the interrogation of the unconscious. Thus he writes in the short text *Seguendo la cernia*:

Anche se il dottor Freud non ne ha mai indicato l'esatta collocazione geografica, ci pare ovvio pensare che l'Inconscio stia sul fondo. Anzi, nel "profondo". Comunque, nei fondali della coscienza, laddove le acque sono limacciose e torbide [...]. I Padri della Chiesa erano persone originali: elaborarono l'Anima e poi non seppero dove collocarla [...]. Anche il dottor Freud, padre della sua chiesa, ha inventato l'Inconscio, ma non ci ha detto dove esattamente si trovi. [...]. Ma l'Inconscio, o i fondali dell'Io, non lo hanno scandagliato solo Freud e i suoi seguaci. In quelle acque profonde si sono immerse soprattutto gli artisti, e da molto prima che Freud aprisse il suo gabinetto nella sua Vienna elegante e asburgica (Tabucchi, 2011, pp. 281-82).

In particular, despite the fact that the conceptual pair *rimorso/rimosso* travels throughout his fictions and is central to his poetics, Tabucchi resists its overlapping with the unconscious. That of repression, which Tabucchi links to characters' sense of guilt, 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.

As a matter of fact, a more current, sophisticated and professional understanding of the unconscious explains it as «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*» (Civitarese, 2016, p. 92). Nowadays this definition of the unconscious as semiotic 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 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 (Salvatore, 2006, p. 129).

Likewise, as I intend to contend, 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. 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» (Tabucchi, 1991a, p. 18), 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 naïve belief in psychoanalysis as a positivistic science, in opposition to which he elicits and proposes to take into account their ontological scope. 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, as, to him, it 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» (Gambazzi, 1999, pp. 14-27).

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>2</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! (Tabucchi, 2005, pp. 408-09).

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>3</sup> turns into a far too real, mortal blow, that of being hit by a bus:

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<sup>2</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>3</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 (*ivi*, p. 415).

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 scorns 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. But, stating that the unconscious works according to a logic of reversal demands, in Tabucchi's case, a further problematisation and questioning: for, what is the relationship between unconscious reversal and the author's *rovescio*?

## 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» (Alloni, 2008, p. 39). However, 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 his writings metaphorically orchestrate a modality of vision that, collapsing ocularcentric imperatives, produces a different discourse of truth:

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 (Zangrilli, 2015, pp. 9-11).

In particular the article formulates the hypothesis that, in Tabucchi's poetics, it is through the narrative practice of the *rovescio* that the writer tries to make room for the semiotic unconscious.

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» (Tabucchi, 1981, p. 5).

What appears disturbingly 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. He is referring to a process of othering, of investigating how this positive and habitual side can be – and indeed is – uncannily other than itself. Tabucchi's reversal is twice other: it is (first) the ability to look differently at what is (second), at the same time, familiar and unfamiliar, always unsaturated.

How does this relate to the semiotic unconscious? To begin with, the conceptual proximity between the two owes to the fact that both *rovescio* in Tabucchi's definition and the semiotic unconscious, for instance 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.

Additionally, in both cases, the question of (literal and metaphorical) visibility is essential: the unconscious undermines and reverses the subject's vision, burdened and biased by the illusion of consciousness of being a Cartesian master of a geometrical, perspectival optics; likewise, Tabucchi's *rovescio* articulates a specific, unsettling experience of vision. Thus Zangrilli comments: «Infatti il gioco del rovescio [...] vuol essere un gioco del guardare [...] in cui si indugia sulle fisionomie delle

cose per illustrarne le assurdità e per coglierne la vera essenza [...] che inquadra le cose inquietantemente da parecchie posizioni e località [...]» (Zangrilli, 2015, pp. 133-34).

### **3. Motifs and Modes of the Semiotic Unconscious in *Il gioco del rovescio* and *Notte, mare o distanza***

Therefore Tabucchi's texts advance a triangular relationship between the unconscious, the reversal and objects and modes of vision. This is archetypically evident in the short story *Il gioco del rovescio*, the first, eponymous text to be explicitly and programmatically informed by the idea of the reverse, and which contains, in just few pages, twenty verbs of vision. The title of the short story significantly alludes to a game played by Maria:

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 [...] (Tabucchi, 1981, p. 14).

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, especially in relation to Maria's alleged feigning of

identities. Most significantly, the tale is utterly dominated by Maria do Carmo's gaze.

Indeed, my use of the term *gaze* owes to and presupposes Lacan's theorisation of the split between the eye and the gaze in *Seminar XI* (1964), where he describes a separation or schism existing between the subject's vision, burdened and biased by the illusion of consciousness, on the part of the seer, of being a master of a geometrical, perspectival optics, and the fact that, on the contrary, the individual is always looked at from all sides and in advance by a pre-existing watchfulness, which constitutes him, in turn, as subject. For Lacan, the gaze's reversal of the eye establishes, at the centre of this field of scopic tensions, the subject as divided, inhabited and decentred by the otherness of the unconscious. The opacity of the gaze marks the optical failure of the Cartesian consciousness, since the chiasmic rift of vision preliminarily turns, has always already turned, every seer into a seen.

What kind of gaze is, accordingly, Maria's? And in what ways is it represented or, better, performed in its semiotic 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» (*ivi*, pp. 20-21) - 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 Velázquez' painting, *Las Meninas*,<sup>4</sup> 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» (*ivi*, p. 11). 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» (*ivi*, p. 24). 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 of *Las Meninas*, regarding whom Maria would say that «la chiave del quadro sta nella figura di fondo, è un gioco del rovescio» (*ivi*, p. 11).

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

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<sup>4</sup> Significantly, the painting (1656) is structured around the metafictional devices of metalepsis and mise en abyme, as it depicts Velázquez in the act of painting *Las Meninas*.

di un piccolo rimorchiatore» (*ibidem*). 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*» (*ivi*, p. 13); «il suono di una sirena, forse una nave che entrava in porto» (*ivi*, p. 22) 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 momento la sirena fischiò un'altra volta, la nave attraccò, io scesi lentamente dalla passerella e cominciai a seguire i moli» (*ivi*, p. 24).

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, which metaleptically represents the gesture it is performing: the schism between the perspectival eye and the disquieting gazing of the unconscious. The picture produces trompe-l'oeil effects. The technique of trompe-l'oeil defines a narrative distortion of and confusion between different planes - spatial, temporal and ontological. In the tale, Tabucchi creates trompe-l'oeil structures - the painting; but also the protagonist's uncannily disquieting reflection in the train's window - 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.

As a matter of fact, 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» (*ivi*, p. 24). 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 *rovescio* 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 (Žižek, 2006, p. 17).

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» (Tabucchi, 1981, pp. 12-15); 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» (*ivi*, pp. 13-14); 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» (*ivi*, pp. 20-22); 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» (*ivi*, p. 16), which merges optical and temporal illusions, at once offering and dislodging the possibility of a palindromic temporality. 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 a second thematic cluster that Tabucchi adopts in his strategy of the unconscious rovescio, which intermingles dreaming, insomnia and awakening: «Mi svegliò il telefono verso le cinque, o forse non mi svegliò, mi trovavo in uno strano dormiveglia»; «Mi preparai a una notte di insomnia [...] 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» (ivi, pp. 11-24). 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» (ivi, p. 24). For, Tabucchi observes, «non solo la realtà è rovesciabile, ma anche il sogno, affinché vadano l'uno incontro all'altro, entrambi nel loro rovescio» (Tabucchi, 2013, p. 105). 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.

Arguably, Maria's final note, written in block letters, pierces the text as an anamorphic detail. 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 mode of parallax. 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. Thus, despite the narrator's questioning - «tu vedi il rovescio del quadro, che cosa si vede da codesta parte?» (Tabucchi, 1981, p. 24) - 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 unconscious reversal, 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. Ending on the narrator's oneiric de-parture - «mi incamminai verso quel punto. E in quel momento mi trovai in un altro sogno» (*ibidem*) - the text reverses into the unconscious. The short story *Notte, mare o distanza*, part of the 1991 collection *L'angelo nero*, 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. 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» (Tabucchi, 1991b, p. 35). This is also a metaphorical night, the taking place of a temporal dislocation that is revealing of uncanny homelessness, for all the characters feel «un 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» (*ivi*, 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 (*ivi*, pp. 36-39).

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. This confusion between memory and the imagination, which is pervaded by a sense of deception, thus produces *trompe-l'oeil* effects. Significantly, the linguistic transposition of this temporal, deceptive 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» (*ivi*, p. 40). Trying to signify a traumatic episode – «come se quella vicenda dovesse concludersi, sciogliersi, o trovare una piega nella quale nascondere se stessa» (*ivi*, p. 47) Tabucchi recurs to the anamorphic detail of the fish:

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 (*ivi*, p. 39).

Arguably, adopting an anamorphic perspective counterweighs the text's struggle with unconscious repression.<sup>5</sup> In effect, 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 figuratively stands for the mechanism of unconscious repression:

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<sup>5</sup> Meaningfully in *Seguendo la cernia* the fish is defined as «tradito pesce represso» (Tabucchi, 2011, p. 281).

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 Principe Real [...] e da quella distanza era impossibile capire chi si mosse e chi parlò (*ivi*, p. 42).

He – and all characters in the tale – feel guilty, «come se fossero colpevoli, colpevoli di cosa, poi» (*ivi*, p. 47), as he once detached from historic reality rather than openly fighting it, and, at the moment of narration, he is not able to admit it to himself, to let this repressed past enter his consciousness. Finally, the rationale of interruption and repetition – «così, chi stava immaginando i fatti di quella notte, dovette immaginare la scena di nuovo» (*ivi*, p. 44) – driving the story could be interpreted as an example of *déjà vu*. The latter «is the experience of the double par excellence: it is experience of experience as double» (Royle, 2003, p. 183). While the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as «a feeling of having previously experienced a present situation; a form of paramnesia» (*ivi*, p. 172), 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» (*ivi*, p. 173). 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» (*ivi*, p. 183). 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 the fact that to signify reality entails dealing with what is always other than itself. And such an ontological duplicity eventually grounds both Tabucchi’s *rovescio* and the hypothesis of the latter’s convergence with the semiotic unconscious.

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, though critical and sceptical of a lay understanding of psychoanalysis, Tabucchi undeniably assigns a central place to the role of the semiotic unconscious in his narratives. In particular, the article formulates the hypothesis that it is through the narrative practice of the *rovescio* that the writer tries to make room for his view of the unconscious as the ability to see and signify reality from multiple angles, by looking at its untextualised potentialities. Tabucchi’s works thus produce a triangular relationship between the unconscious, the reversal and objects and modes of vision.

This is best illustrated by the short story *Il gioco del rovescio*. In this text, vision is both the main thematic cluster as well as a question of narrative strategies: by inserting trompe-l’oeil, parallax and anamorphic effects Tabucchi’s discourse reflects and refracts Maria’s gaze. Similarly, the tale *Notte, mare o distanza*, while explicitly addressing mechanisms of unconscious repression and signification, articulates, on the diegetic level, anamorphic, trompe-l’oeil and déjà vu motifs which fold back and function also as narrative modes for the protagonist’s

optical unconscious and his attempt to make sense of unwritten detritus from a traumatic, summoning past. For, in the end, the *rovescio* as semiotic unconscious is «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*» (Bellavita, 2005, p. 268).

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## **Abstract**

### **Unconscious Motifs and Modes in Tabucchi's *Il gioco del rovescio* and *Notte, mare o distanza***

By interrogating optical motifs and narrative modes of vision in two short stories, *Il gioco del rovescio* and *Notte, mare o distanza*, the article argues: first, that Tabucchi's sceptical criticism of psychoanalysis solely addresses a lay understanding of the latter and of the unconscious as a submerged place of repressed instincts, to which the writer opposes a view of the unconscious as a semiotic one; second, that Tabucchi's own idea and practice of *rovescio* lends a wide spectrum of narrative images and strategies to his representation of the semiotic unconscious.



**Keywords:** Semiotic Unconscious; Literary Unconscious; Tabucchi; Rovescio; Gaze.