Ethics and Aesthetics of Memory in Antonio Tabucchi’s short story Notte, mare o distanza

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Taking the lead from a close reading of Antonio Tabucchi’s short story, the aim of this article is to investigate in what way and to what degree it succeeds in delineating both an ethics and aesthetics of memory. Memory constitutes, in fact, the skeleton of Notte, mare o distanza,¹ in which, in a sort of slow motion, ‘come in un film proiettato a ritroso [like in a movie projected backwards]’,² the narrator returns several times to a disturbing episode of the past. Shock and the impossibility for the conscience to interiorise it, both suggest how the short story unfolds in the modality of a fantasy, materialising at an unconscious level.

The narrator recounts a night of violence that occurred during António de Oliveira Salazar’s dictatorship in Portugal. Following an evening of wine and poetry spent at the middle-aged poet, Tadeus’ house, four young friends - Luisa, Tiago, Michel and Joana – are stopped and searched by the regime’s secret police on their way home. The police intend to teach the group ‘political lessons’, beginning with the duty of loving one’s own country. The policeman’s lecture reaches its climax in the arrogant recollection of unspeakable atrocities he himself committed in the Portuguese colony of Angola. Indeed, as we shall see, despite providing cruel details relating to event, the storyteller creates a surreal sensation, always interrupting the flow of his recollection when his proximity to the trauma becomes unbearable. Thus, memory offers the only authentic way to cope with and to take hold of a disturbing experience. It unfolds a modality of experience, blending raw facts and subjective illusions, which demands, accordingly, further investigation. Ergo, the first step of the paper will be to examine Tabucchi’s peculiar understanding of memory and of his interplay with the concepts of potentiality and imagination. Subsequently, the focus will shift onto those images, strategies and fictional tools that give the writer the opportunity to arrange a sort of short-circuit between the ethical and the aesthetical side of the mnemonic experience in the short story.

On the one hand, I will observe how Tabucchi employs the Freudian uncanny – specifically the concept of déjá vu – as a method to deal with a reality uncannily traumatic in itself. The ethical value of such an approach is revealed in the fact that for Tabucchi, memory allows for the narration of what might have taken place, of those potentialities of meaning that were not lived out in the past. In the light of this, availing myself of Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of historical time, I will argue that memory and imagination, by contaminating one another, become the narrative tools the writer utilises in order to retrieve and fulfil unsolved potentialities of the past. Memory in fact retrieves not only what actually occurred, but also what might have happened.

On the other hand, I will posit the necessity to consider memory as the fundamental kernel of Tabucchi’s overall poetics. In this sense, triggered by a reflection upon Martin Heidegger’s understanding of Anaximander’s saying, it is explainable why Tabucchi regards, in his words, poética a posteriori as the only legitimate poetics; ‘la previsione del passato che si realizza postumamente’,³ a sort of future ghostly premonition of the past. Benjamin himself talked of the difference between prediction and prophecy; while the former is characterised by being future-oriented, the latter is defined in terms of a quotation of the past without quotation marks. This creates, as anticipated, a peculiar interference between aesthetics and ethics of memory, insofar as quotation represents, for Benjamin, the narrative form proper to his materialistic –and ethical – view of history. Finally, I will examine the narratological devices Tabucchi adopts in order to orchestrate a dialogue between memory and the possibility of literature.
Memory constitutes a consistent and substantial dimension within the entire oeuvre of Tabucchi. As Schwarz Lausten argues:

La memoria sembra sostituire l’essere stesso per diventare addirittura la condizione della conoscenza e dell’esistenza. È come se per mantenere un sentimento di sé fosse necessario confermare l’esistenza di un passato vissuto: l’io dei racconti di Tabucchi sembra dire ‘ricordo dunque sono’ o ‘ricordo dunque sono stato’ […]

Memory seems to have substituted being itself, thus becoming the grounding of both knowledge and existence. It is as if, in order to preserve a feeling of oneself, it were necessary to confirm the existence of a lived past: the ‘I’ in Tabucchi’s short stories seems to say ‘I remember therefore I am’ or ‘I remember therefore I have been’ […]

Memory circumscribes the ontological perimeter of Tabucchi’s own ontology. The latter is developed by the writer in a way that evocatively resonates in Giorgio Agamben’s speculation about the notion of potentiality. According to Agamben, potentiality designates a mode of existence that cannot be wholly attributed or reduced to actuality:

The first point that must be made about potentiality is its constitutive co-belonging – and ultimate identity – with impotentiality. […] Thus, potentiality as such must pose some resistance to or independence from actualisation, and this resistance or independence is the potentiality not to pass over into the act. This potentiality-not-to is what Aristotle calls adunamia or impotentiality. To avoid an easy misunderstanding, it must always be kept in mind that in Agamben’s usage ‘impotentiality’ (impotenza) does not mean inability, impossibility or mere passivity, but rather the potentiality not to (be or do), which is the constitutive counterpart to every potentiality to be or do. […] Potentiality and impotentiality are not in fact opposite or contradictory to one another; rather, they co-exist, indeed are one and the same, on the plane of potentiality or future contingency (where the principle of non-contradiction does not apply).

The fact that Agamben’s theorisation of potentiality collapses the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction is of extreme significance in relation to Tabucchi’s treatment of memory, insofar as for the writer, it is the gesture of remembrance to preserve the possibility of what might have occurred if those constructed facts were, instead, actually lived out.

The mnemonic experience presupposes a conception of experience freed from the constraint of actualisation. Such an assumption equally implicates a different understanding of history and of historical time. Relating to this, it is my contention that Tabucchi’s conceptualisation of memory can be fully grasped only if one frames it through Benjamin’s philosophy of time. According to Benjamin any historical experience entails the existence of a deep mutuality between configuration and legibility of time. In a sense, every form of time implicates a modality of legibility that is also politically connoted. On a theoretical level this is what explains the nexus between a teleological narrative of history and reactionary, bourgeois political position. Moving to a specific survey of Notte, mare o distanza this becomes evident in the opposition between two antithetic forms of remembrance, namely between the narrator’s wavering account, which establishes a mnemonic modality dis-charged of any teleological narrative, and the policeman’s testimony that finds legitimation in an understanding of history qua cause-and-effect process.
Furthermore Benjamin theorises, before Agamben, the centrality of the mode of potentiality and its correlation to his distinctive philosophy of time. The notion of potentiality postulates a whole new conception of time, framed in qualitative terms, within which time is to be conceived no longer as the continuity of a ‘mere becoming’, rather as an ‘infinite process of fulfilment’. Accordingly, possibility describes no more a lack but a surplus over factuality.

This same principle theoretically grounds Tabucchi’s short story, in which by confusing actuality and potentiality, memory also becomes a possibility to fulfil the past by contaminating itself with imagination. Indeed, ‘immaginava [he imagined]’ is the opening verb in Notte, mare o distanza. The two faculties of memory and imagination are not at odds. On the contrary, following the author’s reasoning, it turns out that they can mutually enhance one another. Such reciprocity is achievable insofar as we observe, in Tabucchi’s text, a resemanticisation of the concept of remembrance; no longer gesturing univocally towards an actualised past, rather wavering across its plural, possible arrangements. How then, does memory work according to Tabucchi?:

‘Evocare’ significa ‘richiamare alla memoria’, è una parola che viene dal latino ex vocare, cioè ‘chiamare fuori’: ed è noto che la memoria passa attraverso le nostre attività sensoriali. La realtà […] può ripresentarsi dopo anni grazie ai sensi che la percepirono: la vista, l’udito, il tatto, l’olfatto, il gusto. Evidentemente essa non si ripresenta in quanto ‘Principio di realtà’, bensì attraverso il nostro ‘vissuto’. […] In particolare, la letteratura ci insegna come una facoltà sensoriale possa scatenare la memoria, fino a costituire talvolta il punto di partenza dell’opera.

‘To evoke’ means ‘to remember’, it is a word derived from the Latin ex vocare, namely ‘to call out’: it is known that memory advances through our senses. Reality […] can represent itself after years thanks to those senses that perceived it: sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste. Clearly it does not return as a ‘Reality principle’, rather mediated through our ‘past’. […] In particular, literature teaches us how a sensory perception might trigger memory, up to the pint of becoming, at times, the starting point of a literary work.7

In a sense, Tabucchi’s conceptualisation of memory overlaps with his thinking of the so-called saudade. A Portuguese term signifying a feeling of nostalgia and remorse not only for what has occurred in the past, but also for what never took place, preserving itself in the virtual realm of the possibilities. Additionally, the mnemonic experience is connected, for Tabucchi, to the literary concept of the reverse. After all, memory seems to be capable of revealing the disquieting value of literature, lying at the core of what I suggest calling the ‘uncanny poetics’ of Tabucchi.

The multiplication of historical and visual angles constitutes a peculiar feature of Tabucchi’s poetics. By the term ‘reverse’ he means the possibility implicit to literature of looking at one situation from multiple angles; of dwelling in the hidden side of things and of life. However, what should be stressed is the way in which such narrative modalities combines with an ethical possibility of memory. It is my contention that what the writer orchestrates in terms of a formal game of plural perspectives –in a sense, a spatial backwards – constitutes, instead, the kernel of what Remo Bodei identifies as Tabucchi’s ‘civic geometry’:

Story-telling has a civil function even when it is not recognisably political […] in reshaping the situations in such a way to allow us see what could be in what is not.8

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Literature, therefore, occurs as a possibility of knowledge of traumatic memories, to be intended as an anti-logic rather than an anti-logic:

What interested me the most [...] was the reversibility of Time. Reading reality backwards, exchanging the axes cause-effect was tempting. And if to the reversibility of Time one substitutes that of History, than reading becomes even more interesting and it can have surprises in store, especially when the causes are shrouded in mystery. [...] It is really the Freudian Uncanny, no longer derived from a tale of Hoffmann, but from History.  

As previously indicated, Tabucchi defines the mnemonic experience through evocation. Yet recalling past episodes is only a partial explanation of such an expression. Thus, the author describes the other component of evocation; the one pointing towards the ethical implication of memory, in the following way:

I have already claimed that the etymology of the word ‘to evoke’ is ex vocare. Still, we know that ‘to evoke’ means also to recall someone from the realm of the dead, through extrasensory powers. [...] If ‘evocation’ has the capacity to call dead people back, if thanks to extrasensory powers it mysteriously brings them back to us, it is so because, apart from ‘evocation’, it also means ‘convocation’. [...] The voice of poetry is able to establish a dialogue with the ghost.

Two comments should be made. Firstly it should be taken into consideration the fact that Notte, mare o distanza is included within an anthology of short stories, bound up with the dual theme of memory and remorse. As Joseph Francese maintains, the entire collection portrays ‘heteronymic manifestations of [...] repressed traumata’. Anna Dolfi explicitly labels the story in terms of the Freudian uncanny. There is a twofold reason to share the scholar’s categorisation: firstly the aforementioned traumatic implication of the historical episode chronicled by the narrator; then the enclosure of the surrealist detail of the grouper in the narration. By performing a gesture conjoining intertextuality and metafictionality, Tabucchi introduces in the evocation of the night of violence, such estranging elements. On the one hand, Tabucchi derives this dreamlike image of the fish from a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, ‘The Temptation of St Anthony’. On the other hand, he readapts a reference already adopted in his1991 novel Requiem:

E fu a quel punto che arrivò la cernia. [...] Che cosa incongrua, una mano e un muso di cernia dal finestrino di un’autobus 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.

And it was at that point that the grouper arrived. [...] What an incongruous thing, a hand and a grouper’s face appearing from the window of a black car in Rua Dom Pedro Quinto, in a 1969 November’s night. But this depended upon the imagination of who imagined how things might have gone that night. Thus, at that point, his imagination produced a grouper.¹³

Like in in Expressionist literature, Tabucchi utilises defamiliarising tools in order to experience and recall an uncanny reality. Ultimately, in the story the uncanny precedes memory itself. Relating to this, as Dolfi suggests, are the several attempts to remember, to narrate what might have happened, which turn out to be an impossible desire to grasping the Unheimliche of the real. Therefore, according to Dolfi, the narrator draws from a sort of anthropological, unconscious memory.

The additional aspect I intend to accentuate within Tabucchi’s thinking about the logic of evocation is the fact that he posits a fundamental interdependence between the functioning of memory and the summoning of the dead. In an interview entitled ‘The Deconstruction of Actuality’, Jacques Derrida describes his notion of the event qua opening to the other, qua rupture of any expectation, precisely in terms of ‘performative summoning’.¹⁴ For the event to occur, it must be called. Still, for Derrida, this summoning applies not only to what is still to come, but also to what has already taken place. Thus, he concludes, ‘it must be possible to summon a spectre [...] there may be something of the revenant, of the return, at the origin of every come hither’.¹⁵ What Derrida’s reflection gives us is another perspective from which to consider the intermingling between memory and potentiality at work within Tabucchi’s oeuvre. To summon the event as a ghost or to recall the dead or what has yet to come, eventually extends the possibilities, the multiple configurations of the past. Here literature becomes a mnemonic exercise capable of imposing the temporal dimension of futurity to its own content. Also, memory qua evocation, i.e. qua calling of the dead, originates as a reply to a more original appeal. Thus Tabucchi writes in the forward to the collection, L’angelo nero, that ‘quello che è stato torna, bussa alla porta, petulante questuante, insinuante. [what has been returns, knocks at the door, petulant, demanding, insinuative]’.¹⁶ Likewise, in a 1992 interview he affirms that:

In my opinion it is imperative that we talk with the dead because this means talking with our memory. [...] I believe that literature is this as well: a form of memory; a long term memory with respect to the short term memory that characterises our times.¹⁷

In the exergue of the short story Notte, mare o distanza Tabucchi inserts a quotation from Anaximander, which runs like this:

[…] And from what such things arise, to that they return when they are destroyed, for [...] they suffer punishment and give satisfaction to one another for injustice.¹⁸

The most eminent meditation about this fragment is the one formulated by Heidegger in his 1946 commentary.¹⁹ Here the German philosopher advances an interpretation of being freed from metaphysical oblivion, which is characterised as a wavering, a lingering between hiddenness and unconcealment. To be able to perceive, to take hold of being, individuals need to dismantle their traditional vision as a prisoner of forgetfulness, and embrace a new optical possibility entrenched in remembrance. This sight resembles, according to Heidegger, that of Calchas, a seer in Greek mythology, which is not—as ordinarily misperceived - unavoidably engaged with the future, but rather sunk into the abyss of recollection.
Anaximander’s saying implicates, therefore, a different understanding of time, in which present, past and future are strictly intertwined. Similarly Benjamin maintains that ‘the soothsayer who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty’. A comparable position can be identified in Tabucchi’s definition of his own poetics in terms of ‘backwards poetics’. Notably he writes that:

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.

Sometimes literature is blind. And in its blindness, prophetic. Still its prediction does not concern the future, rather what happened in the past to us or to others and that we had not realized it had happened and why.20

In a sense, therefore, literature shares the seer’s vision; the capacity to uncover potentialities. Yet, how does it specifically relate to the theme of memory? The answer lies in the understanding of Anaximander’s saying in its convergence with the possibility of a vision freed from the constraints of actuality. This refers to what I have previously argued about the centrality Tabucchi ascribes to the mode of potentiality and also introduces a merging between the ethics of memory and the role of the sight. Hence David Michael Levin explains how:

The seer’s vision dislodges things from their placement in the conventional time-continuum of history and gathers everything into the preserve of primordial temporality, surrendering all things to the deconstructive interplay (the Spielraum) of concealment and unconcealment. […] When Heidegger says that the seer has "always already seen" (immer schon gesehen ), what he means is that, by virtue of a recollection of being, the seer sees the ontological dimension of time and history, sees the conditions of possibility for historical ruptures and radically new beginnings.21

In a similar vein, an equivalent parallel between memory and disquieting and plural perspectives is captured within the concept of déjà vu. Such thought, in fact, brings within itself a sense of duplicity that collapses the opposition between reality and illusion. Tellingly Nicholas Royle emphasises how déjà vu ‘is the experience of the double par excellence: it is experience of experience as double’.22 Accordingly the OED explains it as ‘a feeling of having previously experienced a present situation; a form of paramnesia’,23 thus a typology of mnemonic dysfunction. Likewise the definition of ‘paramnesia’ is particularly relevant here since it allows us to cast an innovative light on the narrative logic of Tabucchi’s story. According to Chambers it pertains to:

1. A memory disorder in which words are remembered but not their proper meaning.
2. The condition of believing that one remembers events and circumstances which have not previously occurred.24

The first connotation provides a new optic from which to scrutinise the sensorial solicitation that triggers the narrator’s memory and which establishes, therefore, a short circuit between voice and memory. Deriving from the poem ‘Nocturne At My Apartment Window’ by the Brazilian poet Drummond de Andrade, the expression ‘alla notte, al mare, alla distanza [to the night, to the sea, to the distance]’, which also gives also the title to the short story, constitutes the raconteur’s continuation and corollary of Tadeus’ enunciation ‘perché è un buon viatico’ [because it is a good viaticum]. Accordingly the incipit of the story thus recites:
Ogni volta, quando immaginava come avrebbero potuto essersi svolti i fatti quella notte, gli arrivava la voce nasale e ironica di Tadeus che scandiva una di quelle sue frasi che volevano dire tutto e niente: perché è un buon viatico.

Every time, when he imagined how the events might have occurred that night, it used to arrive to him Tadeus’ nasal and ironic voice, articulating one of those sentences of him which meant all and nothing: because it is a good viaticum.25

Likewise Giorgio Bertone precisely recognises as the distinguishing feature of L’angelo nero ‘the overlaying of different temporal planes of memories and the blending of voices’.26 The second meaning, instead, helps in illuminating the condition of possibility and the mechanisms of narration itself. On the one hand it gestures towards the already investigated hybridisation between memory, imagination and potentiality. While on the other, it theoretically grounds within the field of the uncanny all those devices Tabucchi exploits to deal with trauma and to which I shall now turn.

In this section I intend to investigate in more detail the fictional strategies adopted by Tabucchi in Notte, mare o distanza, which will allow us to enumerate the basic components of his aesthetics of memory. The first aspect to be addressed is that of the arrangement of manifold temporal planes. What distinguishes the story is a pervasive sense of circularity, insofar as the writing begins and concludes at the moment of the narration, and therefore unfolding a narrative based on the interaction between the proceeding of its very imagination and what is imagined. In a sense, it is the blending of plural temporal layers to engender imaginary memories. This is made evident in the ending, when Tabucchi transforms the image of the grouper into a temporal shifter, which crosses the years, ultimately reaching the narrator himself and maybe venturing even beyond him.

Indeed, and this is the second feature to be stressed, the narrator is caught by the temptation as well as by the impossibility to reach a stable, fixed closure. Moreover, the linguistic transposition of such temporal oscillation is rendered through the overlapping of three main tenses: the imperfect, the past historic and the present. The latter, however, does not refer to the temporal positioning of the narrator, as the reader would expect. On the contrary, the present tense is used to signal the appearance of the grouper, hence characterising the instant of highest proximity to the uncanny and to trauma alike. Thanks to this fictional strategy, the short story gestures beyond the traditional, literary forms of memory writing, being classifiable neither as a testimony nor as an historical chronicle. Truly, the only conventional typology of historical account is that of the political policeman, occurring as a nauseating testimony. The fact that Tabucchi inserts, at the core of his eccentric narration, an established narrative of remembrance marks even more candidly the hiatus between literary habits and his idiosyncratic treatment of memory.

The centrality of the fish metaphor is the third element to be highlighted. As already asserted, such incongruous detail establishes a fracture between actuality and the potentiality of remembrance. By epitomising the atmosphere of guilty and remorse that pervades the entire narrative, the image of the grouper constitutes also the occasion to interlace memory and saudade. The fourth, yet most evident component, around which the short story is centred and structured, is that of what Tabucchi defines a ‘circolo vizioso [vicious circle]’, which in my opinion should be ascribed to the obsessive use of an interrupting repetition or a repeated interruption. In this perspective, a suggestive connection between potentiality and repetition is isolated by Agamben, to whom ‘la ripetizione restituisce la possibilità a ciò che è stato, lo rende nuovamente possibile […]. La memoria restituisce al passato la sua possibilità [repetition restores the possibility to what
has been, it makes it possible again […] Memory returns the past its possibility.] 27 Here it becomes evident the ethical component of such attitude, in which memory acts as the potentiality to revise the past:

E tutto ricominciava, nell’immaginazione di chi immaginava quella notte, come una pantomime 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.

And everything started anew, in the imagination of whom imagined that night, like a pantomime or a sorcery: […] like unfortunate creatures […] doomed to a senseless repetition, forced to mime and to go again through the prelude to the atrocious adventure which awaited them in the night and that an imagination was not courageous to make them live in the way they had to.28

Also, this abundant use of repetition and interruption points towards the connection between memory and trauma. As Robert Eaglestone argues, when dealing with a traumatic past:

The memory of the event remains to haunt and disturb the person, as the memory is either repressed and ignored (and so comes back in complex and unpredictable ways) or constantly relived inside the mind as ‘flashbacks’ of images or behaviours.29

Overtly, with Tabucchi, we dwell in the second track of traumatic memory. Ultimately, the narrative strategy of an obsessively recursive recalling that is always interrupted by temporal caesurae, allows Tabucchi to create a loop, a mnemonic paralysis, which mirrors, in a sort of mise-en-abyme, the circularity of the narration and which paradoxically blocks any linear development of history, dislocating writing on the edge of a filmic script. After all, Benjamin himself recognised the transposition of the montage principle to a critical historiography as a necessity.

In conclusion, therefore, what Tabucchi produces in the short story Notte, mare o distanza, is a literary experiment in which the form establishes and alters the plot. What unfolds in Tabucchi’s narrative is precisely a mnemonic experience in which fictional schemes uncover and intertwine with the ethical side of memory. An interesting way to look at this writing would be, then, to consider the several, at once imaginary and mnemonic efforts, as literary incipits and, consequently, as the archetypical representation of the functioning of literature itself, when confronted with history and the past. Yet, this is a door that, for the time being, I leave open.

2 Ibid., p. 32.


13 Tabucchi, *L’angelo nero*, p. 39


25 Tabucchi, *Notte, mare o distanza*, p. 32


