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Shooting Off At The Mouth: Freudian Lapsus in Antonio Tabucchi's *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza*

> *... At a certain age one begins to think that personal responsibilities exist. This is what I thought about at the time I was writing Piccoli equivoci senza importanza, which derives and proceeds from this reflection: that responsibility counts a lot in life's accidents.*[1]

Antonio Tabucchi's *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* is a meditation on the question of the role of responsibility in quotidian life, illustrating the concept with characters, however, that are often unaware or negligent of their own responsibility and free will. Events often transpire seemingly caused by fate and coincidence. Viewed from the exterior by the reader, however, it becomes apparent that Tabucchi's protagonists, albeit in denial or consciously unaware, do control and often desire the outcome of their individual fate. Such desire, what one might even call self-fulfilling prophecy, is revealed through technical and thematic features that in fact resemble those defined and classified by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *The Uncanny*.

In Tabucchi's work, the *lapsus* is not by definition that which Freud categorized through psychoanalysis, but rather, it is evoked via Tabucchi's narrative style, meandering through the text in a circuitous route. On a verbal level, the text vacillates between clarity and equivocation, just as on a thematic level the characters wander aimlessly through the cities in which they live, through the recesses of their minds, and, overall, through life. In conversational instances, where dialogue is exchanged between characters, the narrative style remains unclear—upon a very first reading, it is unclear exactly who is speaking. Sentences of direct speech are strung together and are part of the fluid prose, resembling a sort of free association, much like the "voice" of recollection.

In his introduction to the collection of stories, Tabucchi explains the motives and sources of inspiration that lie behind his verbose, often meandering and circuitous narrative style:

> I barocchi amavano gli equivoci. … Anch'io parlo di equivoci, ma non credo di amarli; sono piuttosto portato a *reperirli.* Malintesi, incertezze, compresioni tardive, inutili rimpianti, ricordi forse ingannevoli, errori sciocchi e irrimediabili: le cose fuori luogo esercitano su di me un'attrazione irresistibile, quasi fosse una vocazione, una sorta di povera stimmate priva di sublime. Sapere che si tratta di un'attrazione ricambiata non è esattamente una consolazione. Mi potrebbe consolare la convinzione che l'esistenza sia equivoca di per sé e che elargisca equivoci a tutti noi, ma credo che sarebbe un assioma, forse presentuoso, non molto dissimile dalla metafora barocca. (7)

Although Tabucchi claims that it would be presumptuous to assume that existence itself is an equivocation, the constituents he categorizes as "fuori luogo" are in fact the very same equivocations that occupy the Freudian unconscious and that are the basis of human interaction, both within the self and with others. In fact, one of the most disconcerting components of life is battling with the equivocal, or in Freudian terms, ambivalent, nature of the self; the ideal, and nearly impossible, end is to reconcile the opposing drives of the id, ego, and superego. Tabucchi's characters are not immune to this struggle, and the story "Cambio di mano" is replete with features that Freud himself could have employed as examples to support claims made in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *The Uncanny.*

Set in fairly contemporary New York City, "Cambio di mano" opens with a sort of inner monologue by the principal protagonist, Franklin, who expounds upon the question and definition of habit and rite, wondering whether they serve as a type of exorcism from which some amount of pleasure is derived. He wanders aimlessly through the city, for some business-related purpose, although the reader is never privy to what kind of business it is. In fact, Franklin himself also questions why he is there (119). His thoughts drift from the past to present, and he is psychologically and physically without autonomous direction. It is evident that whatever his profession, he is controlled or commanded by someone else, a man named Bolivar. Franklin is constantly surrounded by a veritable labyrinth—of names of cities and hotels (121), of people, lights, and velvet at the opera (123), and of his own thoughts and memories.

The first of the latter are his memories of Dolores, and these memories correspond literally to her name: he is pained by the recollection, but convinces himself that perhaps his actions are a means by which to "non cancellare un ricordo" (119). Moreover, his desire to continue remembering is equated with his motivation for coming to New York: "lo stava facendo per lei" (119). Not only has he fallen into the repetition and reproduction of unpleasant memories (the reader knows Dolores has died), but he projects responsibility onto her for his own actions. He is disturbed enough by the meandering nature of his mind and the unbearable weight of life to demand, "Scacciapensieri scacciami i pensieri" (120), yearning for his thoughts to be driven away. Yet, he cannot escape them, or himself. This repetition of painful memories, or of the repressed, also reflects what Freud writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

> But how is the compulsion to repeat—the manifestation of the power of the repressed—related to the pleasure principle? It is clear that the greater part of what is re-experienced under the compulsion to repeat must cause the ego unpleasure, ... That, however, is unpleasure of a kind we have already considered and does not contradict the pleasure principle: unpleasure for one system and simultaneously satisfaction for the other. (20)

Remembering Dolores and *dolores* is a means by which to grapple with the difficulty of the past, or repressed pain. For Franklin, the process serves as a sort of catharsis, or exorcism, of that pain, conveying also that he has in a sense overcome it, if he may recall it without continual pain. Franklin is much like Freud's patients, who "repeat all of these unwanted situations and painful emotions, ... activities intended to lead to satisfaction, ... repeated, under pressure of a compulsion" (21). In fact, in Franklin's terms, "l'abitudine è un rito" (119).

Labeling Franklin's tendency for repetition as a "compulsion" is actually quite accurate, becoming more apparent as the story unfolds. Franklin, commanded by Bolivar—a name that alludes to the patriot, statesman, and liberator of many South American countries—attends the opera to carry out orders. He assesses the audience members around him, and determines that the person with whom he should be meeting is a particular woman whose physical description is

that of the classic femme fatale. The opera being staged before them is *Rigoletto,* introduced by the title of a similar story: "E ora le roi s'amuse" (124), a clear reference to Victor Hugo's work that is another version of *Rigoletto.*

In the opera, the title character has enlisted the help of a professional assassin, Sparafucile, to kill the Duke with whom his daughter, Gilda, has become enamored. Perhaps motivated by an unconscious sexual interest in Gilda, his daughter, Rigoletto disapproves of the Duke as a proper partner for his Gilda. However, at an inn on a wild and stormy night, through a series of tricks and disguises, Sparafucile kills Gilda-gone-incognito, dressed as a man per her father's orders. This array of façades, charades, and bad timing, or "equivoci," has ultimately brought about the death of the one person who was never intended to die. Freud would label the murder of Gilda as "unwitting and unwilling" on behalf of Rigoletto, and in Tabucchi's terms, it is in a sense a "cambio di mano"—that is, a change (or exchange) in position: Rigoletto becomes the assassin. Furthermore, the opera serves as a mirror, or doubling of life, subtly apparent in the text as the opera begins, and clearly apparent by the story's end. The opera opens with a "scenografia volgare…troppo rosa e troppo azzurro, terribile" (124), a description that employs the technique of metonymic association, effectively echoing the same negativity toward, or rejection of, the city's aesthetics: "acqua sporca, asfalto sporco," and in the foyer of the opera-house, "troppa luce, troppi velluti rossi" (123).

Beyond the descriptive and technical levels of similarity, the opera and "Cambio di mano" parallel in the action that transpires between characters in the story: Franklin and the woman with whom he is certain he must do business leave the opera together for dinner, and continue their evening together by returning to his hotel room. For the entire duration of their tryst, however, the reader remains clueless as to what exactly the business dealing is, and along with the protagonist himself, does not know just who this woman is. As in the opera and (Franklin's) life, identities are concealed or kept from being revealed. When asked what her name is, the woman replies, "Come ti pare," which carries the double meaning: "as it appears to you," and "as you wish, or as you like it." Tabucchi almost pays homage to the tradition of equivocation in literature with a verbal duplicity that hearkens back to Shakespeare and Pirandello. Franklin further complicates the ambiguity—rather than choosing or determining a

specific, individualized name for her, he joins the words together: Cometipare. Again, just as he cannot recall exactly in what city he experienced events that surfaced in the beginning of the story, just as his mind swims around a series of hotel names and locations, just as nothing is distinguishable or distinguishing to him, the name Cometipare proves the same. She presents him with a decision, but, ambivalent and passive, he is content to make no decision: he has the option of being subjective, but has no opinion on *come lei appare*—her name and his point of view remain undecided and unresolved.

Or is he, by appearing not to "name" her, actually making a decision that ultimately transmits the voice of his unconscious? As the story unfolds, what Sparafucile sang in the opera, "una metà si anticipa, il resto si dà poi" (125), reveals the truth of what is about to happen between Franklin and Cometipare. Back at the hotel, she has admitted, "Sparafucil mi nomino" (128), and he has been nothing but accepting, replying, "Va già meglio, Sparafucile Cometipare, è stato bellissimo, mi è sembrato di amarti con vero amore, da anni che non mi capitava più" (128). Translated and interpreted to the letter, he actually admits, *That's better, gunshot as you like (as it appears to you), it's been beautiful, it seemed to me as though I truly loved you, for years I haven't felt this way.* In fact, since Dolores and a past replete with pain that has become a habit, Franklin has been deprived of "piacere," a word that recurs more frequently than any other in the opening page of the story. Although *piacere* would seemingly be in opposition to *dolores,* it is obvious that for Franklin, the two are synonymous: pleasure is pain, and pain is pleasure.

Franklin unequivocally embodies Freud's pleasure principle, which is composed of two conflicting instinctual forces: that which would perpetuate life, sexual intercourse and reproduction, and that which would end life, bring death, or the return to an "ideal," inorganic state that is fixed and stable (38-42). Both apply to Franklin: he engages in sexual intercourse with Cometipare Sparafucile, and like a true femme fatale, she will then kill him. The moment in which he realizes she will do so is crucial, signified by the photograph of him that he finds in her cosmetic bag. Just after they have had sex, he excuses himself to the restroom, where he finds her cosmetics bag and rifles through it, finding his photo. Upon doing so, he recalls having earlier taken a photo of two tourists who stopped him on a New York street:

> Due signore ... gli tesero la loro macchina fotografica dicendo per favore, e si misero in posa con il sorriso forzato dei fotografati. Le inquadrò nell'obiettivo cercando di prendere anche uno scorcio dei grattacieli, come loro volevano, pensò come era strano quel piccolo occhio che si apriva e si chiudeva, clic, e un attimo morto restava prigionero lì dentro, eterno e irripetibile. Clic, grazie, di niente, buonasera, clic, un attimo, dieci anni passati in un attimo, Dolores scomparsa, irripetibile, eppure era lì solo un attimo prima e sorrideva contro i grattacieli, in quello stesso punto, clic: dieci anni. D'improvviso li sentì tutti sulle spalle, quei dieci anni, e anche i suoi cinquant'anni, pesanti come le tonnellate di quel colosso di metallo e pietra. (121-122)

At the moment in which the camera shutter clicks Franklin is revisited by the memory of Dolores, who smiled at the same skyscrapers that tower above the tourists, and he is seized by the realization that a picture captures a moment in time that will never be relived. The nature of a photograph is fixed and immobile, emblematic of death.

Franklin is literally weighed down by the time that has passed, and seems exhausted enough to want the only true form of relief: death. Dolores also signifies death, and the memory of her is perhaps a longing to be with her, possible only through death. That Franklin is burdened and disconcerted by the temporality of experience in life and the nature of life itself is also a death-wish, and eventually, Franklin succeeds in achieving that desire, via Sparafucile Cometipare. Upon finding his photo in her cosmetics bag, he hears the "click" of the camera shutter resounding in his mind, and that "click" or "piccolo occhio che si apriva o chiudeva" become the "click" and "eye" of the *fucile* that will kill him. To Franklin, the sensory components become synonymous, much like they are for Nathaniel in Hoffman's "The Sand-Man," Freud's case of study in *The Uncanny*, who links together the childhood myth of the Sand-Man with the vendor of spectacles and Coppelius' threats of blinding him (158-160).

Like Nathaniel, Franklin is revisited by recurring images and sounds and is fixated upon repeated symbols that he equates in significance. Per Freud's definition, it is uncanny, or disturbing and duplicitous, that Franklin has been asked to take a photograph and has also seen a photograph of himself in a short duration of time. He has been on both sides, and the state of reconciliation between the two

positions is death. The *clic,* and Franklin's response to it, exemplify the Freudian "double," whose "invention... [is] a preservation against extinction" and "has its counterpart in the language of dreams" (162). Franklin is consumed by these dreams, constantly daydreaming about the past, repeating imagery and language throughout his inner monologues. The double connotation that the *clic* possesses—a *clic* that once captured Dolores, whom Franklin wanted to remember—has moved from what Freud deems the "soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism" or "assurance of immortality" (162). Applied to Franklin, that ego wishes to have any sentiments of guilt or remorse over Dolores' death removed, and therefore consciously makes an effort, which becomes a habit, to remember Dolores. Simultaneously, the reaffirmation of immortality is clearly that he continues to live after she has died.

However, the double also "takes on a different aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, he becomes the ghastly harbinger of death" (162): the camera shutter is transformed into the gunshot, and Dolores, who died, becomes Cometipare, who kills. Furthermore, that which lies beyond the pleasure principle comes into play, and as Franklin holds the photo in his hands, knowing that shortly he will die, he does nothing to change his fate because he has desired it all along. "Scacciapensieri scacciami i pensieri" takes on a whole new meaning that revolves around the verb *scacciami*: already scattered, like his thoughts, Franklin not only wants his thoughts—or that which defines identity—chased away, but wishes to go a step further, wanting *himself* to be driven away, and the unbearable weight not of life, but of *his* life, to be negated.

Bolivar, the driving force that once seemed behind Franklin, apparently is not; Franklin has unconsciously sought and brought about his own fate. Because the desire to die was an unconscious drive, death comes as an equivocation, in the form of Cometipare, who, though he was unable to see it, exactly represents Franklin's yen. His plea, "Scacciapensieri scacciami i pensieri," was the evocation—and equivocation—of the wish to ignore himself and his drives, developed further in his attempts to convince himself of outside forces driving his actions. Franklin, whose name is a play upon the Italian "franco," that is, "sincere, genuine, frank," is actually quite the opposite—he is deluded by his own self-fabricated illusions: that he has no capacity for free will, that he is not the master of his volition, that

he does not motivate himself into independent action. The misconceptions are numerous and have been long-standing: first, he was lured to this city by Dolores and the habitual, ritualistic position she occupied in is mind; then, he was made to work by Bolivar. Later, when Cometipare asks him if she might accompany him back to his hotel, he responds, "La responsabilità è tua," thereby removing himself from a position of responsibility and, in effect, conscience. What Franklin cannot escape or elude is the voice of his *unconscious.* Like Rigoletto, whose text within the text mirrors the story of "Cambio di mano," Franklin has been betrayed, but the culprit has been none other than himself. Bolivar has lived up to his name, having been a means by which Franklin has been "liberated" from the overbearing weight of his past and of the present, but Franklin is responsible for the "slips of the tongue [that] amount to self-betrayal" (91), which are the equivocations constantly surrounding him.

Tabucchi would be reluctant and even unwilling to admit to any truth behind the Freudian *lapsus,* but Tabucchi himself has constructed the story in a way that effectively proves that the "equivoci" which punctuate his characters' tales are in fact important. The word "scherzo" is omnipresent throughout the story, both inserted frequently into the narrative and thematically apparent in *Rigoletto,* where the title character is the court jester, alluded to in the opera's opening, *Le roi s'amuse.* The "scherzo" is the "cambio di mano"—the change or sleight of hand that moves the ever-ambivalent Franklin from the realm of the conscious to obeying the voice of the unconscious, where he makes his first definitive decision, finally achieving his ultimate desires and mastering his own fate.

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NOTES

[1] Tabucchi, Antonio, in *Conversaciones con Antonio Tabucchi.* (My translation.)

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