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Sergio Pitol

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PEREIRA DECLARES

Sergio Pitol

Writing about Antonio Tabucchi has always placed me on the threshold of the impossible. Astounded by his writings, my greatest temptation is to reproduce them abundantly. I'm tempted to fill pages with his quotes, to look for a linking thread and then present them in commodious order to share with the reader the pleasure of reading him. His is a prose extremely difficult to imitate; it has its own melody, an emotional tension modulated by Tabucchi's intelligence. His writing is at the same time both conjectural and precise. In *Requiem*, one of his novels, a ghostly Pessoa begs the narrator: "Don't leave me alone with people full of certainties. Such people are terrible'.

Misunderstandings, mistakes, shadowy realms, false evidence, dreamed realities, dreams tainted by a terrible reality, the search for what is known to be already lost, games that place the world on its head, voices originating from places next to hell, are all elements that we often find in Tabucchi's world. And another thing, a perfect elegance for never having put on airs. Generally, the elegance found in Tabucchi, just like the melancholy, is always bound to the story's mood or buried in the depths of language.

Tabucchi claims that he tries to write for a reader who expects from him neither solutions nor words of reassurance, but rather questions. The intended reader should be approachable, embrace the unknown, modify their mental categories, change their lifestyles, introduce new approaches to the human condition: press their luck rather than condemn themselves to an anticipated requiem.

At a conference in Tenerife in 1991, entitled "The Twentieth Century: Balance and Perspectives", Tabucchi insists "A writer who knows everything and who is acquainted with everything, should not publish a single book. The only certainty I possess is that every thing is relative, that in all things are their opposites. It is, above all, within this realm that I like to explore, a realm in

which nothing is clear at first sight.” And later, he writes, “The man that our contemporary literatures gives to us is a lonely and divided man. He is a man alone, but does not yet know himself and has even become unrecognizable. [...] It is necessary to defend the right to dream. At first sight, perhaps such a right may seem trivial. But upon further reflection, it may seem like a vital prerogative. If a man is still capable of nurturing illusions, then that man remains free.”

And with this we get to Pereira, and the claims that his character makes as the novel's protagonist. Tabucchi takes on risks that few authors dare to run. Among other things, *Pereira Declares* is a political novel, and for that reason alone some people may find it disturbing. It narrates events that occurred in Lisbon from the end of July to the end of August of 1938, a period when Salazar's regime reinforces its totalitarian ethos and envelopes Portugal into a seamless dictatorship that will last thirty-five cruel years more. Yes, it is a political novel, but is different in every meaning of the word from the ideological narratives of socialist realism. The only trait that Tabucchi's novel shares with the ideologically laden narrative, is a tendency to use the parable. From this stems, perhaps what is his greatest challenge. All of the characters who seek forgiveness exemplify either a virtue or a vice that at the end will be rewarded or unmasked and punished; each of their actions and words are predetermined in an overall manner to achieve this end. But, in order to be considered worthy of the genre of the novel, the character must breathe on his own and must adopt these virtues or defects as an expression of his individuality, otherwise his words will inevitably emit a propagandistic stench.

Pereira, the protagonist of Tabucchi's novel is like Ariel, from *The Tempest*, created from the same material that dreams are made of. And so, as he fulfills his destiny, he becomes more imbued by reality, by a tragic reality. At the end we find him transformed into a character who is extraordinarily alive and one of the most beloved in contemporary narrative. He enjoys the dual privilege of maintaining his individuality, while at the same time becoming a symbol.

But given all this, who is Pereira, what does he do for a living, and what kinds of problems does he face? Here it is: an old journalist; a widow; hellishly fat; full of ailments; a person for whom the doctors predict few more years of life. A short time ago, he started to edit a weekly literary page of a mediocre evening paper. He has fallen into a death obsession that almost amounts to a mania. There may be several reasons to explain this phenomenon, perhaps the fact that his father was owner of a funeral home, *La Dolorosa*, or that his wife spent her entire married life afflicted by tuberculosis, an illness that killed her in the end, or because he was convinced that his cardiovascular ailments would bring him to an early death. But also, because of the fact that during that radiant summer of 1938 he began to sense that Lisbon stank of death, and that all of Europe stank of death. Pereira is Catholic. The immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the flesh are two topics that Pereira contemplates incessantly. The first one illuminates him, the second one horrifies him. Thinking about the

resurrection of the immense amount of fat that suffocates him, produces vertigo. Pereira is, simply put, a good man immersed in a world that every day repulses him more. The cult of death leads him to create an obituary column intended for the literary page under his direction and to have prepared in advance, the obituaries of writers who he admires, but for some reason, he refuses to be the one who writes them. For that purpose he gets in contact with a young man who recently graduated with a degree in philosophy, Francisco Monteiro Rossi, whose essay on death he has just read.

Pereira Declares intermittently takes me back to a previous novel by this author for which I feel reverence: *The Edge of the Horizon*. At first glance they seem contradictory. The old Pereira moves about under the radiant blue of Lisbon's sky. Spino, the character in *The Edge of the Horizon*, in turn, makes his inquiries under a hazy sky in a city submerged in dankness and darkness. Pereira's quest ends in the discovery of personal freedom, in carrying out an act of protest, and at that moment a heroic character is engilded: through self-revelation, he discovers the society that is all around him. Spino, on the contrary, withdraws from society in an effort to nullify the metaphysical sign. So then, how are these two stories related? For one thing the theme of death is always present in both stories. Pereira thinks about a collection of obituaries available to his cultural page. Death and possible resurrection are his two obsessions. Spino works in the morgue of a hospital, his handling of the corpses is permanent. In both novels the theme of personal identity is embedded. In both the result is the same: each of the characters parades towards the revelation of a destiny that incubates within them.

Upon his encounter with the young Monteiro Rossi and his fiancée, Pereira's agony and his final resurrection begin. "In what kind of world do I live? – he asks himself at a particular moment; and it occurs to him as a fantastic idea, that perhaps he was not alive, but rather as though he was already dead". Destined, nevertheless, to save his own life, all the encounters of the journalist with this young couple lead him into difficult situations, at times really atrocious. From this stems the most difficult challenge that Tabucchi has undertaken. To present a young communist of the 1930's not as a cruel and insensitive sectarian, something that is generally expected today. The young Monteiro Rossi and his friends are communists, yes, and are conscious of the need to strengthen the international brigades that fight in the Spanish civil war, among other things, because Franco's victory would mean the perpetuation of the Salazarist dictatorship in Portugal. He knows nothing about the purges of Moscow and if he had been told about them, he would have believed that it was a lie invented by fascist propagandists, or that it had something to do with the punishment of a succession of traitors who before being executed, had committed their crimes. It is the same thing that Kio, of Malraux's *Human Condition* (one of the most beloved heroes during my youth, and whose death affected me as if one of my closest friends had died), would have thought. Here, Tabucchi breaks with a rigid contemporary mode of "politically correct thought"

that converts despicable monsters, active accomplices of crimes committed by Stalin, and creators of concentration camps, into any communist militant situated in the years of the Soviet purges. It would be like condemning Walter Benjamin, Picasso, Tibor Déry, and hundreds of intellectuals who envisioned the possibility of changing the world. *Pereira Declares*'s young hero could be any one of them. Not long ago, Jérôme Garcin related a conversation with Julien Gracq, in which that notable writer without any doubt referred to some circumstances of the 1930's: "revolution was an occupation and a faith. At that time he was a communist and a militant in the CGT. He never missed a single meeting [...] He remembers, with amusement, almost being fired in 1938, after having participated (he was the only one of all the professors of the Licé de Quimper), in a forbidden strike. He can't stop recalling that time of soliciting donations, of meetings and of illusions when he was directing a Section and was carrying the word of the Party to the rod fishermen (*palangreros*) of Douarnenez, to the tuna boats of Concarneau, and to the lobstermen of Guilvinec, and in cafés where the 'chouchen' inflamed the brains of the fishermen. Gracq surrendered his affiliation card in 1939, when the announcement of the German-Soviet pact was made. Severed on time? No – he replied – already too late. From the first of the Moscow talks, he thinks back, he should have cut his losses. But he adds that he would have then deprived himself of the beautiful moments of brotherhood in that secret and rugged Finisterre where he learned the meaning of a universe that was at the same time both Manichean and pure'.

Censorship, the loss of confidence in his newspaper, the police vigilance will eat away at Pereira. It may seem that the encounter with that couple, the young writers of the delirious and unpublishable obituaries would have been a curse for that old and ailing journalist, who will be compromised more and more by the "Manichean and pure" world to which his protégés belong. In the end, he will be another man. Without a doubt, the hurdles that he must jump in order to survive will grow larger, but he will have the certainty of having saved his soul. His victory will be immense. The only obituary that he manages to write is that of the young Monteiro Rossi. It will be, what is more, the most beautiful page of the entire novel.

We don't know who Pereira is talking to, before whom he testifies about what happened during that horrendous summer of 1938. Maybe he gives his testimony to some of his comrades in exile, one of them who pretends to be the author of the novel, he who conveys to the reader (who becomes the true recipient of this testimony), everything that the journalist claims, by providing commentaries, details, and nuances. The method is perfect. It permits intimacy and also allows for distanciation. And these two words: "Pereira declares", repeated throughout the novel, function as a ritornello which accentuates the melody of a perfect prose.

Xalapa, July 1995

Translated by Jesús Salas-Elorza