

## SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

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### IN QUEST OF IDENTITY: READING TABUCCHI IN THE LIGHT OF HERMANS' CONCEPT OF THE DIALOGICAL SELF

This article shows how Hubert Hermans' concept of the dialogical self can be applied to the interpretation of modern literature characters quest for their identity. As a point of reference, we can take a look at the literary works of a well known Italian writer Antonio Tabucchi. This modern author, translator and Portugalist constructs psychologically complex characters who try to find an answer to the perennial question of who am I? Unfortunately, the question often remains either completely unanswered or only partly answered and limited to a small area of a person's functioning.

*Key words:* narrative, dialogical self, character identity, Italian literature

This article attempts to show how Hubert Hermans' concept of the dialogical self can be applied to the interpretation of modern literature characters quest for their identity. When reading a well known Italian writer Antonio Tabucchi, we are frequently taken together with the protagonists into the past, which reveals to the reader the previous history of the characters. We learn where they lived, how they acted and what choices they had made in their past. That kind of impression remains after reading his works, such as: *Sostiene Pereira*, *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi*, *Notturmo indiano*, *Sogni di sogni*, *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro*.

At the same time, Hubert Hermans' theory helps not only to analyze the psychological situation of characters searching for their identity in the present and in the past, but also to discover the prospects and direction of their evolution,

manifested in a dynamic multiplicity of self-positions in the inner dialogue. The polyphonic self implicates a complex identity and, furthermore, it is fundamental for both actual and potential changes in identity. According to Erikson, it is the phrase “I know who I am” that represents a person’s identity. Hermans, however, replaces it with “I sense who I may be” (Hermans, 2000, 2002).

### Hubert Hermans’ concept of the dialogical self

*Functions of internal dialogues were also acclaimed by C.G. Jung (...) and exponents of Gestalt theory. Recently, Hermans has contributed to the growth of interest in that phenomenon. His concept of the dialogical self was based on Bakhtin’s metaphor of the polyphonic novel (Puchalska-Wasył, 2007, p. 43).*

Hermans’ intriguing concept has proved to be a very useful tool for literary scholars. As mentioned above, it facilitates interpretation of a literary work from the psychological point of view, especially the psychology of narration. In some measure, it also helps define existential perplexity and inner dialogues. This specific polyphony leads to constructing a broader and more developed sense of identity. It is highly possible that in the fire of clashing inner tendencies represented by the multiplicity of self-positions the dialogue helps elaborate identity (Hermans, 2002).

According to Hermans, self is a process of evaluation. The individual attributes a specific meaning to everything in his or her life. In other words, every situation in our lives is associated with a particular emotional tinge, either positive or negative. A person has a constant ability for self-reflection and the process of attributing meanings is a life-span process, which continues throughout life. Evaluation shows a subject’s activity: the process of intentional constructing and reconstructing personal meanings in the past, present and future. Evaluation is a process of selecting, interpreting and organizing experiences, which create a more or less integrated entity – the system of personal meanings. Evaluation is also a specific result of this process: a semantic individuality which is subjectively important. Self-reflection not only enables constant constructing and reconstructing of a system of personal meanings, but also creates the opportunity to formulate alternative stories from different points of view (Hermans, 1991).

And so we come to the essence of Hermans’ phenomenological theory which defines (as quoted above) different points of view of an individual as the results of assuming various self-positions. Furthermore, these different I-positions can enter into inner dialogues. Dialogues can take a form of arguments or, inversely, agreements on the interpretation of experience. (Hermans, 2002). This way, an inner polyphony of voices is developed, an expression of dynamic multi-voiced self. Completely differential stories are told, the “authors” of which are different I-positions of the same person. Therefore, a question comes up : what is its significance for identity development?

Hermans’ theory could give rise to objections by clinical psychologists for whom this kind of “split identity” constitutes a basic symptom of schizophrenia.

However, the difference comes down to Hermans' concept that particular self-positions remain in constant touch with each other, enter into dialogue, "speak their mind" on the same subject, similarly to a vivacious discussion of various people on a specific subject. Such a "healthy" affray is thought to help find the best possible solution to a problem. And so is considered an inner dialogue of our self, which may let us go beyond subsequent obstacles in building our unique identity. Ability to use dialogue functions broadens the possibilities of multi-processed reasoning about the world and various interpersonal situations. At the same time, it is also a challenge for identity, which in the presence of many harmonized voices appears as polyphonic or negotiated, but not a monolithic personality (Hermans, 2003).

Hermans associates life span development of I-positions with the process of socialization. A child enters into interaction with mother and absorbs her dialogical, socio-cultural forms of behavior. With age, children are placed by others in situation specific I-positions and they begin to participate in dialogical interactions with parents or teachers, or other representatives of their community who assign them to certain social roles of friend, student, son, daughter (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Every utterance is taken with a specific emotional tinge which helps create the image of self. As Stemplewska-Żakowicz writes, the child can be *polite* or *rude*, *attentive* or *lazy* (Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 2002). It can be assumed that in this way the social environment assigns social roles and imposes different I-positions and allocates various roles. These messages coming from the outside are internalized and then used to construct self-narrations and form subjective positions in the dialogical self (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Thus, this process of socialization determines the character of those early self-positions. Obviously, as the child grows up and the number of accessible experiences increases, some of the I-positions are reinforced and create the basic personality elements, while others are moved to marginal positions or even vanish completely.

It seems crucial at this point to indicate a key distinction between the objective *I* (as something recognized) and the subjective *I* (as someone recognizing). In this way, the subjective *I* fulfils a superior role of collecting information about the self, whereas the objective *I* provides experience and helps build the image of the self (James, 1954).

What is important in this theory and often reflected in the literature, is that the self (a dynamic structure built of many independent subjective positions) can transfer between these positions and thus perform inner dialogues (Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

Hubert Hermans' concept of identity reflected in Antonio Tabucchi's literary characters

*(...) during imaginary dialogues (with own reflection in the mirror, with a photograph of someone close and absent, with a character from a book) the subjective self can repeatedly transfer from a position which represents oneself*

*to a position which represents an interlocutor and, alternately, give these positions a voice* (Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 2002, p.102).

Imaginary dialogues, or even construction of individuals with ability to talk with a voice belonging to a determined self-position are often found in the writings of Antonio Tabucchi. An excellent example is a tale entitled *Sostiene Pereira* depicting the political and social situation in Portugal in the 40's and 50's of the past century. Information about the Salazar's regime: groundless apprehensions, uproars and lynchings are described by an eye witness, a journalist Pereira. A report told without emotion, which brings to mind a court testimony, still reveals another story, considerably more interesting than simply a portrait of everyday life in Lisbon in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reader observes the emergence of a new identity of the main character. An old journalist, who at first, lives only to receive an old age pension and tries to lie low during the hard period of political instability, when working for a Lisbon newspaper, meets members of the resistance movement and joins them, criticizing the regime in Portugal. He risks his own life by hiding in his house a member of the resistance movement and printing in a newspaper an article unfavorable to the regime. Subsequent decisions, involving even greater risks, are made after Pereira's "conversations" with the photo of his late wife. Each dialogue with the beloved woman makes it easier to cross the limitations of his conformism, passivity and fears.

*(...) si fermò davanti al ritratto di sua moglie e gli disse: senti, non è tanto quel Lugones che mi preoccupa, ma è Marta, secondo me è lei che è responsabile di questa storia (...) è lei che mette nei pasticci Monteiro Rossi (...) e lui si fa mettere nei pasticci perché è innamorato, io devo metterlo in guardia, non ti pare? Il di sua moglie gli sorrise con un sorriso lontano e Pereira credette di capire (...). Ho visto il ritratto di sua moglie in camera sua nella clinica, (...) e ho pensato: quest'uomo parla mentalmente con il ritratto di sua moglie (...). In verità non è che ci parli mentalmente, aggiunse Pereira, ci parlo a voce alta, gli racconto tutte le mie cose, e è come se il ritratto mi rispondesse* (Tabucchi, 1996, pp. 67-68,128).

It is worth emphasizing that the character's attempt to share his doubts and his point of view with the image of a beloved person, and imagining what her reaction would be, clearly coincides with the concept of the dialogical self.

Another work, which even more expressively reflects the theoretical grounds for the concept of the dialogical self, is Tabucchi's story about a trip to India in search for a missing friend. *Notturmo indiano* tells a story of an actual trip to a far and mysterious country, but it is also a story of an expedition into the inner self. Text analysis shows that from the very beginning of the story there are two characters: the narrator and protagonist, and their two stories.

Schedule I: Process of the hero's travel (A. Tabucchi, *Notturmo indiano*)

| Chapters | Reconstruction of the hero's events   |
|----------|---|
| I        | Arrival in Bombay, the Khajuraho hotel; conversation with Vimala Sar;                 |
| II       | Conversation with the doctor in the Breach Candy Hospital; Bombay;                    |
| VI       | Appointment with the guru of the Theosophical Society; Madras;                        |
| VIII     | Conversation about Xaviera (in the dream); the archive Goa;                           |
| X        | Appointment with Tommy and his girlfriend on the beach; Calangute; Goa                |
| XI       | Conversation with the maître of the Mandovi hotel about Mr. Nightingale; Pandzim Goa. |

Schedule II: Process of the narrator's travel (A. Tabucchi, *Notturmo indiano*)

| Chapters | Reconstruction of the narrator's events  |
|----------|--|
| III      | Reflections in the hotel Taj Mahal; Bombay;  |
| IV       | Conversation with an old Indian at the bus station; Bombay;  |
| V        | Appointment with a woman in the Taj Coromandel Hotel room; Madras;                                       |
| VII      | Conversation with the Indian fortune-teller on the stopping – place during the trip to Malangur and Goa; |
| VIII     | A visit in the archive, conversation with the father Pimental Goa;                                       |
| IX       | Reflections in the hotel Zuari; Goa;   |
| X        | Associations on the boat; near to the beach Calangute; Goa;  |
| XII      | Conversation with Christine; the supper in the hotel Oberoi; Goa.  |

In *Notturmo indiano* the protagonist is looking in India for his lost friend. He has got only some fragmentary information, eg. a letter left behind, someone's story. Meanwhile, the second narration is constructed by the narrator himself who, finally turns out to be that lost man. The narrator, called Roux, is leaving behind traces and decides about how much information he wants to give to the protagonist. In the end, the two stories of two characters are joined together. People who, until now, functioned separately, had different needs, objectives and expectations are placed on the same evening at two tables in the hotel restaurant. Both of them are dining in the company of women.

– *A un certo punto lo vedo. (...) Anche lui è con una donna, ma lei mi gira le spalle e io non posso sapere chi è. Forse la conosco, o credo di conoscerla (...). Lui probabilmente dice alla donna di non voltarsi (...).*

– *Insomma l'uomo che la cercava è riuscito a trovarla, disse Christine.*

– *Non esattamente, dissi io, – non è proprio così. Mi ha cercato tanto e ora che mi ha trovato non ha più voglia di trovarmi (...). E anch'io non ho voglia di essere trovato. Entrambi pensiamo esattamente la stessa cosa, ci limitiamo a guardarci (Tabucchi, 1997, pp. 99-100).*

At the end of the evening, the protagonist calls the waiter, pays the bill and leaves with a woman without exchanging even a word with the narrator whom he was searching for in India. We don't even know whether it happened for real or whether it was just the creation of the narrator's imagination. He finishes the story with the following words:

– *(...) uno di noi due finisce di bere il suo caffè, piega il tovagliolo (...) chiama con un cenno il cameriere, paga il conto, si alza (...) e se ne va. Basta, il libro è finito (Tabucchi, 1997, p.100).*

Thus, it might be suggested that the protagonist does not exist at all and the narrator is telling the plot of a yet unwritten novel. However, even this expectation turns out to be false and contrary to what happens next. When a woman and her friend decide to finish their supper and ask the waiter for their check, we read as follows:

– *È inutile discutere – dissi – la cena è gratis, la offre un cliente dell'albergo che desidera restare anonimo. Lei mi guardò con meraviglia.*

– *Sarà un suo ammiratore – dissi io – qualcuno più galante di me (Tabucchi, 1997, p. 101).*

It is hard to resist the feeling that the stranger may be the protagonist, who again, by his behaviour becomes independent of the narrator and starts functioning on his own. The woman says that it was Roux's trick, who wanted to invite her for supper, but the situation with the paid check is not entirely explained.

The key to understanding the story may be our perspective from which we observe these events. Reality is described in different ways by the protagonist and the narrator. Roux gives an answer to the woman's question of why the protagonist is trying so hard to find his friend:

– *(...) Forse cerca un passato, una risposta a qualcosa. Forse vorrebbe afferrare qualcosa che un tempo gli sfuggì. In qualche modo sta cercando se stesso. Voglio dire, è come se cercasse se stesso, cercando me (...)* (Tabucchi, 1997, p. 101).

Taking different perspectives and observing life from a distance is characteristic of Hubert Hermans' concept. In Tabucchi's works there is the protagonist in search of himself and the narrator guiding these wanderings, following a character's quest for his identity – the self – which in Hermans' concept takes on different positions and tries to reorganize the subject's identity. In *Notturmo indiano* the key to discovery of a "better self" is a journey, both real and imaginary. A mental journey into the past helps find an answer to the question of *who was I?* and investigate the changes that have occurred in identity through the passage of time. Retrospection also helps realize *who I am right now* and set developmental tasks for the future. Tabucchi uses quite an intriguing literary technique of dividing a literary character into two voices – the narrator and protagonist. In Hermans' theory we also encounter this kind of partition. According to the author of that concept, in most self-narrations the protagonist is identified with the author's objective self. The narrator stays in the background and his characteristics may differ from those of the protagonist, whose personality might be also reconstructed on the basis of narration analysis. And it is worth doing so as this is the narrator, not the protagonist, who is the real maker of the narration. Beliefs and desires create the dynamics of the plot and determine the fate of the protagonist (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2000).

Antonio Tabucchi's story has precisely this structure. The first layer of the text creates the protagonist. The second layer (the night scenes) hides the narrator, who in his solitude controls the protagonist's fate. However, some doubts arise on how much the reconstruction of the identity of a fictional person can be related to searching for one's own self by the author of the story describing the journey to India.

The third work of the Italian writer, which also combines the elements of the polyphonic self and the motif of a journey, is the novel *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi*. As usual in Tabucchi's works, the content layer contains much obscurity, contradictions and creates an oneiric atmosphere. When reading the story, we cannot be sure whether the narrator and the man in love are one or two different persons and whether it is happening for real or only in the character's imagination. What we know for sure, is that the novel is formed of letters. We learn the content of seventeen letters, written by a lonely man to a woman. The last (eighteenth) letter is written by the woman to the man. They two never meet throughout the whole novel, not even once. These letters once again reflect the identity development by means of describing the same events from, at least, two different perspectives: that of the man and that of the woman, who for unknown reasons has left the man.

*(...) Rosa ha addirittura apparecchiato per te al tuo solito posto (...) e ha apparecchiato... indovina con che cosa ha apparecchiato? Hai indovinato: ha messo proprio il servizio che lo zio Enrico ci fece come regalo di nozze (...). Il frugoletto di Tommaso (...) ha rotto un pezzo (...) quella ciotolina minuscola fatta a petalo di rosa di cui non abbiamo mai capito l'utilità e che io adoperavo come portacenere quando avevamo ospiti a cena. Ma poiché ho smesso di fumare*



*non me ne dispiace, e spero non dispiaccia neppure a te (...). O ti dispiace? No, perché guarda, se ti dispiacesse potrei capirti anzi, sono il primo a capire (...)* (Tabucchi, 2003, pp. 99-100).

The quotation above indicates both: 1) a dialogue with the woman, who is not the man's real interlocutor and 2) an attempt to see a certain situation from her point of view. The narrator wonders how she would react to a child's prank (with sadness or indifference) and conducts a dialogue with her. We do not hear the woman's answers but the man's manner of expression suggests her reactions (which are probably imagined by the man) to the reader.

In that way, it can be noticed (as mentioned at the beginning of this text) that the narrator's subjective self transfers from the position of the man to the position of the woman and conducts an imaginary dialogue with an absent lover.

### **Polyphony of the self in Antonio Tabucchi's literary characters**

It seems that the literary form of Antonio Tabucchi's works embodies perfectly well the psychological concept of the dialogical self. The probability that the Italian writer came across narrative psychology theories is unlikely, which indicates that the author intuitively applied that concept. Tabucchi's characters often experience difficult situations, which give them an opportunity to reorganize and develop their self, find the key to the mysteries of their identity. In my opinion, essential is the fact that, finally, each of them can be proud of their complete self-reorganization. A journalist transforms into a brave fighter for freedom, a traveller finds his friend in India and becomes endowed with the narrator's wisdom, and a man in love from *Si sta facendo sempre piu' tardi*? It seems that letters to a beloved woman helped him accept her absence and get over it. Knowing that he would probably never see her again kept his feeling for her strong and alive, just like in the beginning of their relationship.

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