Postmodern Ethics

The Re-appropriation of Committed Writing in the Works of Antonio Tabucchi and Leonardo Sciascia 1975-2005

By
Elizabeth Wren-Owens
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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout *Postmodern Ethics*:


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Part I

Text and Society: Text in Society
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

In La fine del postmoderno, Romano Luperini argues that recent events, such as the two Gulf Wars, the destruction of the Twin Towers and mass immigration into Italy, require a response from a new type of writer-intellectual, able to use intellectual debate as a means of addressing contemporary issues.¹ Luperini suggests that such discourses have been absent since the mid 1970s, with 1972-73 marking “la progressive scomparsa della figura dello scrittore-intellettuale.”² Luperini praises the work of writers such as Leonardo Sciascia in the early 1970s, and laments the growth of the new generation of writers such as Antonio Tabucchi, “nati dal culto postmoderno dall’interstualità e dal citazionismo colto.”³ Luperini’s assertion that a new breed of intellectuals is required to confront the contemporary socio-political climate underscores a belief that from the mid 1970s until 2005, writers have failed to offer a sustained engagement with society.

Postmodern Ethics seeks to challenge this viewpoint, by focussing on works written by Sciascia and Tabucchi in precisely the period which Luperini views as characterized by an “ilare nichilismo […], il lusso della leggerezza e della irresponsabilità” (Luperini, La fine del postmoderno, 12-13). It represents the first comparative study of socio-political engagement in the works of Sciascia (1921-1989) and Tabucchi (1943-). Postmodern Ethics focuses on the ways in which the two writers engage with society through their texts, and on the means through which they assert a belief in the value of literature as a tool for understanding and for acting in the contemporary world. It builds on the valuable but limited studies on Tabucchi’s writings to offer a radically different interpretation of engagement in Tabucchi’s work. Previous research has suggested that Tabucchi’s texts may be divided into different strands, which either address socio-political concerns or which concentrate solely on postmodernist debates such as ontology, multiplicity or division of the subject.

¹ Romano Luperini, La fine del postmoderno (Naples: Alfredo Guido, 2005).
² Romano Luperini, Controtempo: Critica e letteratura fra moderno e postmoderno: Proposte, polemiche e bilanci di fine secolo (Naples: Liguori, 1999), 173.
³ Luperini, Controtempo, 176. Luperini refers to Sciascia’s earlier works in La fine del postmoderno, 125-29. No mention is made of any of Sciascia’s writing after 1974.
In her recent monograph, *L’uomo inquieto: Identità e alterità nell’opera di Antonio Tabucchi*, Pia Schwarz Lausten suggests that the divided subject and the search for the other underpins all of Tabucchi’s writing. Flavia Brizio-Skov’s earlier monograph, *Antonio Tabucchi: Navigazioni in un arcipelago narrativo*, suggests that *rovescio* represents the underlying theme of Tabucchi’s writing, and she acknowledges the presence of engaged writing only in Tabucchi’s 1994 text, *Sostiene Pereira*, and his 1997 text, *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro*. Recent articles and chapters written on Tabucchi have also examined the committed writing of *Sostiene Pereira* and *La testa*, viewing these texts as separate from Tabucchi’s other writings, which examine more literary and ontological themes. *Postmodern Ethics* counters such readings of Tabucchi’s texts, to suggest that socio-political commitment underpins all of Tabucchi’s works, and that the themes pinpointed by other critics as divorced from engagement in fact represent a different yet powerful form of committed writing.

Critics have long recognised that a belief in literature as a means of engaging with society underscores Sciascia’s writing, and much of the critical analysis of Sciascia’s texts makes a passing reference to *impegno*. Texts such as Adamo Liborio’s *Leonardo Sciascia: Tra letteratura e impegno* do not however unpack the term *impegno*, or question the extent to which it is an appropriate term to employ from the 1970s onwards. As yet no research has been published which examines the ways in which Sciascia’s commitment faces and overcomes the obstacles posed to notions of *impegno* during the 1950s and 1960s. Incisive works have been published, which examine Sciascia’s texts through the prism of a genre or a theme in his writing, and which comment on aspects of his

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engagement. Francesca Bernadinin’s edited volume, *Leonardo Sciascia: La mitografia e la ragione*, Massimo Onofri’s *Nel nome dei padri: Nuovi studi sciasciani* and Ricciarda Ricorda’s *Pagine vissute: Studi di letteratura italiana del novecento* represent fascinating studies of Sciascia’s dialogue with other writers, at times hinting towards ways in which such dialogue may have a pedagogical value. Anne Mullen’s chapter on “Leonardo Sciascia’s Detective Fiction and Metaphors of Mafia” offers a perspicacious study of Sciascia’s use of detective fiction to engage with the problem of the mafia, and Ruth Glynn’s recent analysis of the Italian historical novel illustrates Sciascia’s commitment in an early historical novel, *Il Consiglio d’Egitto*. Despite their very real value, these studies are necessarily limited by their specificity to a certain genre or a single text. On the other hand, monographs such as Massimo Onofri’s comprehensive *Storia di Sciascia*, or Joseph Farrell’s excellent *Leonardo Sciascia*, seek to touch upon all aspects of Sciascia’s vast opus. Although these texts address the notion of commitment, they do not unpack or analyse his methods of engaging in a sustained and critical manner. *Postmodern Ethics* seeks to fill such a gap in scholarly research, offering a framework in which to examine the different manifestations of socio-political engagement in Sciascia’s various forms of writing, in a climate informed by the doubts and scepticism of postmodernism. Critical readings of Sciascia’s work tend to focus on his early writing, whereas the focus of *Postmodern Ethics* is on his later texts, examining his engagement with a more complex literary and socio-political climate.

*Postmodern Ethics* is structured in five parts. The first part seeks to locate Sciascia and Tabucchi in the traditions of committed writing, and then to analyse the ways in which they comment directly on current affairs, through both fictional and non-fictional texts. It examines the literary prisms adopted by both writers in their non-fiction and challenges the perception that their fiction

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and non-fiction may be considered as separate entities. Part two examines the ways in which the representations of space in the texts of Sciascia and Tabucchi engage with society. *Postmodern Ethics* details the changing depiction of Sicilian space in Sciascia’s writing, from a real, geographical space, to an empty metaphorical space and finally to a spatial representation which lies somewhere between the two extremes, and seeks to root such a pattern in the changing socio-political framework. It locates Sciascia’s portrayal of historical space in the debates of microhistory and charts the representation of historical space against a backdrop of socio-political events. Part two also examines a shift in Tabucchi’s representation of geographical and border spaces, and suggests that such changes respond to debates surrounding Italy’s place in Europe, internal tensions exacerbated by the rise of the *Lega Nord*, and by immigration. Parts three and four analyse the means through which Sciascia and Tabucchi draw on arguments which on the surface appear antithetical to engagement, and use them to reinforce their commitment. The representations of a de-centred truth, and interplay with the notion that language cannot fully express ideas, are examined in part three, whilst part four details the roles of dialogue, intertextuality and self-reflexivity in Sciascia’s and Tabucchi’s texts. Part five examines the values with which Sciascia and Tabucchi imbue journalism as opposed to literature, and assesses the importance which the two writers ascribe to literature as a means of engagement.

Parts three and four suggest that Sciascia and Tabucchi further their engagement through the very issues which challenge and undermine *impegno* during the 1960s. Such different forms of commitment necessitate a distinction between Sciascia’s and Tabucchi’s engagement and the *impegno* championed by post-war writers in Italy. This introduction will examine the notions of commitment outlined by early practitioners of *impegno*, and their subsequent rejection of commitment in the light of the issues which challenged *impegno* during the 1950s and 1960s. The introduction will propose that Sciascia’s continued dialogue with contemporary affairs from the 1970s onwards indicates that he is more usefully studied in relation to Tabucchi, who also engages with society in a culture influenced by the uncertainties of postmodernism, than in relation to his contemporaries Calvino (1923-1985) and Pasolini (1922-1975), who reject literature as a valuable form of engagement during the 1960s and 1970s. The introduction will suggest that Tabucchi, as well as Sciascia, represents a particular and unique intellectual who stands apart from his contemporaries, and will also outline the significance of 1975 as a starting point for this study.
Post-war belief in literature

Surveying the role of the intellectual in Italy from the Middle Ages to the end of the twentieth century, David Ward argues that “the history of Italian intellectuals’ attempt to exert an influence over Italian society is a history of gallant well-intentioned effort, but above all a history of failure.”  Although the success of intellectuals in influencing society may have been no greater in the years immediately following the Second World War than during any other period, the post-war era is marked by a new-found belief that writing could influence the shape and the direction of post-fascist Italy. Guido Bonsaver defines the three major characteristics of the neorealist writing which emerged in the wake of World War Two as:

a) the exploration of the reality of Italian society - particularly the crude reality of working class life affected by unemployment, poverty and deprivation; b) a clear social and often political commitment, on the parts of writers and directors, that turned those works into powerful moral pictures of Italian society; c) as its name suggests, the preferred narrative technique was that of realism, that is, a naturalistic approach which would emphasize the representational, documentary value of the work.

Lino Pertile stresses the centrality of this second element, known as impegno, arguing that the primary aim of the neorealist writers was “to sow amongst the people the seeds of a social awareness which in turn, it was thought, would bring about a radical renewal of society.” In the aftermath of fascism and of war, writers believed that literature could (and indeed should)

12 Ward suggests that even in the postwar period the impact of committed writing was limited, as writers aligned closely with the Partito comunista italiano (PCI) focussed on “high” culture, which alienated vast swathes of the population (although offering valuable new opportunities to a minority) (Ward, “Intellectuals,” 83-91). This view is reiterated by Stephen Gundle in “The Legacy of the Prison Notebooks: Gramsci, the PCI and Italian Culture in the Cold War Period,” in Italy in the Cold War: Politics, Culture & Society 1948-1958, ed. Christopher Duggan and Christopher Wagstaff (Oxford: Berg, 1995) 131-47 (142-43).
help to fashion a blueprint for a new society. Gramsci had argued that the lack of shared experience between writers and readers made it hard for literature to engage with the need for change in Italy, writing

non esiste, di fatto, né una popularità della letteratura artistica, né una produzione paesana di letteratura “popolare” perché manca una identità di concezione del mondo tra “scrittori” e “popolo”, cioè i sentimenti non sono vissuti come propri dagli scrittori, né gli scrittori hanno una funzione “educatrice nazionale,” cioè non si sono posti e non si pongono il problema di elaborare i sentimenti popolari dopo averli rivissuti e fatti propri.15

The experience of the Resistance, in which Italians from all walks of life had developed a close bond of communication as they worked for a common goal, offered an unprecedented opportunity for writers to live the same experiences as the reader, and to use literature as an agent for change. Calvino outlines this belief in the 1964 preface to his neorealist novel Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno (first published in 1947); a preface which in many ways serves as a post-dated manifesto for the neorealist programme. Calvino writes that:

l’essere usciti da un’esperienza–guerra, guerra civile–che non aveva risparmiato nessuno, stabiliva un’immediatezza di comunicazione tra lo scrittore e il suo pubblico: si era a faccia a faccia, alla pari, carichi di storie da raccontare, ognuno aveva avuto la sua, ognuno aveva vissuto vite irregolari drammatiche avventurose, ci si strappava la parola di bocca. La rinata libertà di parlare fu per la gente al principio smania di raccontare.16

16 Italo Calvino, Presentazione, in Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno (Milan: Mondadori, 1993), v-xxv (vi).
The implicit trust between writer and reader facilitated the writers’ aim of fashioning a new civil society, a new Italy. Such a belief was shared by many writers of the period, and in her analysis of three key neorealist writers, Jennifer Burns asserts that:

Vittorini, Calvino and Pasolini all convey a powerful sense that reality was somehow palpable at that historical moment; that the problem of creating a truly representational literature was suddenly attenuated, as the filters of class and cultural experience which had stood firm between intellectual and public suddenly seemed to have been removed. (Burns, *Fragments*, 15)

The post-war climate afforded new possibilities for writers to engage with and to influence society in a meaningful and powerful fashion.

Opinions as to the exact form that this *impegno* should take varied between writers, but they were united in their belief in literature as an agent of change. Vittorini expresses this certainty in his *Diario in Pubblico*, suggesting that engagement is inherent in a writer:

io nego che uno scrittore (o un pittore, un musicista) possa impegnarsi a lavorare in un senso piuttosto che in un altro, e poi averne qualche risultato valido. Uno sforzo velleitario, da parte sua, non coinvolge, al più, che il suo intelletto e non fa che accentuare il lato “intellettualistico” della sua arte [...]. Ma c’è un engagement “naturale” che agisce in lui al di fuori della sua volontà. Gli viene dall’esperienza collettiva di cui egli è spontaneo portatore, e costituisce, segreta in lui stesso, l’elemento principale della sua attività. [...] Nell’engagement naturale [...] l’artista contribuisce alle trasformazioni della realtà.18

17 Burns outlines the differing positions of Vittorini, Calvino and Pasolini in *Fragments*, 13-37. She defines Vittorini as a strategist, for whom *impegno* involves discovering the place of literature within culture, the place of culture within society and then the promotion of culture as an inclusive and multi-referential area of exploration in which all classes of society can participate, moving towards the goal of self-fulfilment. She suggests that Calvino may be seen more as a creator, who believes that *impegno* involves producing models of rational human activity within the literary text, which might then function as the blueprint, or at least the inspiration, for individual action within society and which may serve the common good of all social groupings. Pasolini, Burns argues, is a stylistician, for whom *impegno* is a matter of expression, of discovering and re-discovering the forms of expression used by social groups conventionally excluded from cultural recognition and of promoting the use and the appreciation of such forms.

This notion is reiterated seven years later in Calvino’s 1955 essay, “Il midollo del leone”, in which Calvino declares that:

noi crediamo che l’impegno politico, il parteggiare, il compromettersi sia, ancor più che dovere, necessità naturale dello scrittore d’oggi, e prima ancora che dello scrittore, dell’uomo moderno. Non è la nostra un’epoca che si possa comprendere stando au dessus de la mêlée, ma al contrario la si comprende quanto più la si vive, quanto più avanti ci si situa sulla linea del fuoco [...] Noi pure siamo tra quelli che credono in una letteratura che sia presenza attiva nella storia, in una letteratura come educazione, di grado e di qualità insostituibile.19

Calvino’s faith in literature as a form of socio-political engagement faltered in the years following 1955.20 His responses to the key challenges facing impegno are charted in Una pietra sopra, a collection of Calvino’s essays drawn from 1955-1978. Despite the clear limitations inherent in viewing the course of impegno through the lens of one writer, this text offers a valuable means of navigating changing attitudes towards socio-political engagement, as well of course as painting a portrait of Calvino-scrittore.

The challenges facing impegno

Three causes are generally seen to have undermined the notion of impegno and the neorealist movement: the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956; the economic boom; and changes in the literary environment, which saw a shift away from political themes towards non-political themes and towards linguistic experimentation.21 From the immediate post-war period, impegno was linked to the PCI and to a socialist vision of Italy’s future. Although the extent to which the PCI exercised any level of influence over the writers has been brought into

19 The essay “Il midollo del leone” was first published in Paragone, 66 (June 1955) and is reproduced in Italo Calvino, Una pietra sopra: Discorsi di letteratura e società (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 5-22 (15-17). The text was first published in 1980.

20 Burns suggests that his belief in literature had been shaken even by 1955, arguing that his declaration in “Il midollo del leone” rings hollow as a mere two years later he published Il barone rampante, in which the protagonist lives in the trees and is literally “au dessus de la mêlée” (Burns, Fragments, 21).

21 Burns (Fragments, 26-27) stresses the importance of linguistic experimentation, whereas Pertile (“Italian Novel Today,” 7) emphasizes a re-emergence of non-political themes such as the psychological, the fantastical and the sentimental.
question, the shared reforming vision was clearly left-wing. Following the Soviet invasion of Hungary, many Italian intellectuals (including Calvino) distanced themselves from the party and were alienated from the communist project.

Socialist reforming zeal was also undermined by the economic boom which occurred in Italy during the 1960s. As the working classes became increasingly content with their lot, the desire for revolutionary change faded into the background. Calvino expresses his revulsion at this new material culture in his 1959 essay “Il mare dell’oggettività” (Una pietra sopra, 47-54). He writes that:

la resa all’oggettività, fenomeno storico di questo dopoguerra, nasce in un periodo in cui all’uomo viene meno la fiducia nell’indirizzare il corso delle cose [...] perché vedo che le cose [...] vanno avanti da sole, fanno parte d’un insieme così complesso che lo sforzo più eroico può essere applicato al cercar di aver un’idea di come è fatto, al comprenderlo, all’accettarlo. (50, italics in text)

Burns suggests that Calvino’s opposition to this new material culture is intellectual rather than moral, since he is concerned at the lack of individual control as the intellectual becomes subsumed into society, indistinguishable from the masses. As such, the writer loses his privileged position and his capacity to direct social change.

David Ward suggests that it is the complacency of the working classes following the boom which pushed artists towards literary experimentation and towards a focus on language and literature as the elements which shape consciousness and perception. Ward writes that:

if language was one of the vehicles for the bourgeois codes which had conditioned the working class, it was only by revising those codes that the preconditions for change could be created. This conclusion had radical consequences: intellectuals no longer needed the working class as a direct ally. They were free to carry out their work independently; and the kind of writing encouraged was of a far more experimental nature than the Neorealist texts

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24 Burns, Fragments, 23.
sanctioned by the PCI - a kind of writing, in fact, that had little meaning for a mass readership. ("Intellectuals," 91)

By challenging a language enmeshed in the ideology of the bourgeoisie, the neo-avanguardia could challenge reality in a way in which the neo-realist texts could not. The nucleus of experimental writing in Italy lay in the Gruppo 63, which focused on writing which systematically debunked traditionalist forms. The group, which lasted from 1963-67, included Nanni Balestrini, Renato Barilli, Umberto Eco, Angelo Guglielmi, Francesco Leonetti and Edoardo Sanguineti. The movement defined itself as a reaction to the “falsa coscienza” of impegno, and Barilli and Guglielmi outline the main concept of the group as being that:

l’azione, anche intesa nel senso più pregnante e dinamica, estesa cioè fino al momento rivoluzionario, deve cominciare a trovarsi dentro il linguaggio, il quale non serve né come “specchio” di contenuti predeterminati, né come eco consolante dei tormenti psichici individuali.25

The linguistic experimentation of the neo-avanguardia was distanced from a mass readership, and directly challenged the notion of a close dialogue between reader and author as championed by the practitioners of impegno.

As a result of these challenges, even the architects of impegno began to question the notion of socio-political engagement through literature. Calvino’s 1964 preface to Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno consigns neorealism and impegno to a very specific historical moment (the years immediately following the war), a period so distant that “tutto è lontano e nebbioso,” (Il sentiero, xxv). In 1967 Calvino develops this notion of the historicity of impegno even further, in his essay “Per chi si scrive? (Lo scaffale ipotetico)” (Una pietra sopra, 193-98). In the essay, Calvino responds to Gian Carlo Ferretti’s open question “per chi si scrive un romanzo? Per chi si scrive una poesia?”26 Calvino responds that a book should be written to form part of a bookshelf, to dialogue with other written texts. The crucial error of neorealism, he suggests, was to seek to make written texts dialogue with a socio-political project rather than a literary framework:

26 Ferretti’s question appeared in Rinascita, 39 (1967), and Calvino’s essay featured in issue 46 of the same journal that year.