

TABUCCHI'S INQUIETUDINE AS THE (UN)BORDERING OF EUROPE

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Abstract

The literary trajectory of Antonio Tabucchi (1943–2012) constitutes one of the most profound ontological interrogations of the concept of the “boundary” (confine) in late 20th-century European thought. This paper posited that Tabucchi’s literary geography is a “liminal space” where identity and belonging fundamentally vacillate, instead of a map of fixed territories. Against the backdrop of hardening political borders, Tabucchi proposed an “anti-geography” of (un)bordering, driven by *Inquietudine*, which functioned as a core mechanism for dissolving Europe’s ontological, geographical, and political boundaries. This study examined Tabucchi’s process of (un)bordering across three critical dimensions. Ontologically, it analyzed the deconstruction of the fixed self and linear time through the *Game of the Reverse* and “pendulum effect,” exploring a multilayered temporality where the boundary between the living and dead is annulled. The geopoetic dimension investigated the fictionality of national borders by defining language as a “portable homeland” and exploring the “shifting West” through the Azores and India. Politically, the study explored intellectual responsibility, metaphorically defined as “gastritis,” which interrogates the hidden facets of judicial and official truths. Tabucchi’s “aesthetics of absence” transcended exclusive nationalism to foster a new European subjectivity capable of accommodating the Other. Based on the premise that the earth is merely “on loan,” he demonstrated that we are all fundamentally “strangers to geography and existence.” This paper argued that Tabucchi’s work proves that constant wandering on the border constitutes the most dignified form of human existence. This is a powerful philosophical response to the modern crises of isolation, mapping a universal subjectivity that stands in solidarity with the Other on a shared, “borrowed” planet.

Keywords

Antonio Tabucchi, *Inquietudine*, (Un)bordering, Saudade, Aesthetics of Absence.

Resumo

A trajetória literária de Antonio Tabucchi (1943–2012) constitui uma das mais profundas interrogações ontológicas sobre o conceito de «fronteira» (confine) no pensamento europeu do final do século XX. Este artigo defende que a geografia literária de Tabucchi é um «espaço liminar» onde a identidade e o pertença oscilam fundamentalmente, em vez de um mapa de territórios fixos. Num contexto de endurecimento das fronteiras políticas, Tabucchi propôs uma «antigeografia» de (des)delimitação, impulsionada por *Inquietudine*, que funcionou como um mecanismo central para dissolver as fronteiras ontológicas, geográficas e políticas da



Europa. Este estudo analisou o processo de (des)delimitação de Tabucchi em três dimensões críticas. Ontologicamente, analisou a desconstrução do eu fixo e do tempo linear através do Jogo do Reverso e do «efeito pêndulo», explorando uma temporalidade multifacetada onde a fronteira entre os vivos e os mortos é anulada. A dimensão geopoética investigou a ficcionalidade das fronteiras nacionais, definindo a língua como uma «pátria portátil» e explorando o «Ocidente em mutação» através dos Açores e da Índia. Politicamente, o estudo explorou a responsabilidade intelectual, metaforicamente definida como «gastrite», que questiona as facetas ocultas das verdades judiciais e oficiais. A «estética da ausência» de Tabucchi transcendeu o nacionalismo exclusivo para fomentar uma nova subjetividade europeia capaz de acolher o Outro. Partindo da premissa de que a Terra é meramente «em empréstimo», demonstrou que somos todos, fundamentalmente, «estranhos à geografia e à existência». Este artigo defendeu que a obra de Tabucchi prova que a errância constante na fronteira constitui a forma mais digna de existência humana. Trata-se de uma resposta filosófica poderosa às crises modernas de isolamento, traçando uma subjetividade universal que se solidariza com o Outro num planeta partilhado e «emprestado».

Palavras-chave

Antonio Tabucchi, Inquietudine, (Des)fronteirização, Saudade, Estética da Ausência.

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Introduction

Antonio Tabucchi's (1943–2012) literary trajectory constitutes one of the most profound interrogations of the concept of the "boundary" in late 20th-century European thought. Tabucchi's literary geography is a "liminal space" where the notions of identity and belonging fundamentally vacillate, instead of a map of fixed territories. When European borders were hardening into new economic and political forms, Tabucchi's work proposed an anti-geography grounded in *Inquietudine*²—that is, disquietude. *Inquietudine* does not merely represent anxiety but functions as a distinct philosophical category, akin to yet independent of Freud's *Unheimliche*, Fernando Pessoa's *Saudade* and *Desassossego*, and *Nostalgia*. It acts as a driving force to dismantle the ontological boundaries of the European subject. This paper demonstrates that Tabucchi's *Inquietudine* is a mechanism of "(un)bordering," which dissolves Europe's ontological, geographical, and generic boundaries.

For Tabucchi, the concept of the boundary was inherently paradoxical: it was simultaneously a place of separation and a point of suture. In the preface to the essay collection, *Viaggi e altri viaggi*, Tabucchi warned against the "dangerous misunderstanding" of believing that the ground we stand upon belongs to us. He asserted that the earth is "on loan," and just as "everything in life is on loan," so too is the land:

*"But, when all is said and done, I have traveled much, I admit; I have visited and lived in many 'elsewheres.' And I feel it to be a great privilege, because setting one's feet upon the same soil for a whole lifetime can provoke a dangerous misunderstanding, leading us to believe that the land belongs to us—as if it were not on loan, just as everything in life is on loan"*³.

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² *Inquietudine* is a quintessential concept that traversed Tabucchi's entire literary oeuvre. Given its status as a distinct conceptual term, this paper retains the original Italian expression without translation to preserve its nuanced meaning.

³ "Ma, a conti fatti, ho viaggiato molto, lo ammetto; ho visitato e ho vissuto in molti altrove. E lo sento come un gran de privilegio, perché posare i piedi sul medesimo suolo per tutta la vita può provocare un pericoloso



This primordial transience relegated borders and territories from being objects of possession to fleeting illusions drawn atop a fluid existence. Consequently, the European subject within Tabucchi's narrative assumed a nomadic quality regarding physical space and its ontological orientation. To capture this dynamic, this study adopted the paradoxical neologism "(un)bordering" rather than the static noun "border." The parenthetical prefix "(un-)" encapsulates a dual dynamism: it presupposes the existence of the border while perpetually nullifying it. For Tabucchi, the border is not a barrier to be dismantled but an "ongoing event"—a space that must be incessantly traversed, transgressed, and rewritten to facilitate the encounter between the subject and Other.

Hence, this study conducted an in-depth examination of the modes of (un)bordering in Tabucchi's literature across three dimensions. First, it analyzed ontological (un)bordering, which deconstructed the fixed self and linear time through the *Game of the Reverse* and "pendulum effect" of time. Second, it explored geopoetic (un)bordering, exposing the fictionality of national borders through concepts of language as a "portable homeland" and the "shifting West." Third, it examined political (un)bordering, which defined the intellectual's responsibility as a form of "gastritis" and interrogated the hidden facets of judicial and official truths. This analysis demonstrated how Tabucchi's aesthetics of absence opened a new European subjectivity, which transcended exclusive nationalism, unveiling a new horizon for universal human existence.

Ontological (Un)bordering

Inquietudine Versus Desassossego Versus Saudade

The point of departure for Tabucchi's literature was the thorough exploration and practice of the Rimbaudian proposition: "When one writes, the 'I' is an other" (*quando si scrive l'io è un altro*; Tabucchi, 2003, p. 12). In *Autografie altrui*, he defined literature as a mirror in which the reader discovered their image, explaining that the author dissolved the subject's boundaries by thrusting their experience into the "skin" of another.

"Someone made him change skins, once in a lifetime [...] I made him travel in third class; and though it was only for a few pages, thanks to me, he had an experience he probably never would have had in his life"⁴.

This "changing of skins" is not mere role-play but an ontological project that refutes the myth of a unitary, fixed self. Tabucchi termed the phenomenon of a reader recognizing themselves in a fictional character an "autobiography of others" (*un'autobiografia altrui, [...] fatta da un mio lettore*; Tabucchi, 2003, p. 12), annihilating the exclusive boundaries between author and reader, reality and fiction. This suggested the possibility of a

equivoco, farci credere che quella terra ci appartenga, come se essa non fosse in prestito, come tutto è in prestito nella vita." (Tabucchi, 2010, p. 10).

⁴ *"Qualcuno gli ha fatto cambiare pelle, una volta nella vita... Io l'ho fatto viaggiare in terza classe."* (Tabucchi, 2003, p. 12).



European subject that was not confined within the identity of a single nation or state and expanded by appropriating the Other's experience.

To fully grasp Tabucchi's deconstruction of borders and formation of a transnational subjectivity, one must diachronically reconstruct the semantic field formed by his tripartite philosophical axis: *Inquietudine*, *Desassossego*, and *Saudade*. For Tabucchi, *Inquietudine* was an active epistemological stance instead of a pathological symptom to be suppressed by psychology. It represented the will of a subject that refused to accept the world as a static structure. As Salvatore Settis identified, this disquietude was the core of a modern existence that had lost its stable foundation (2012, p. 9). Within this framework, *Inquietudine* functioned as a "seismograph" that recorded the minute cracks—invisible vibrations beneath the surface of history—before they manifested as catastrophic disasters. In *Di tutto resta un poco*, Tabucchi noted:

"That illness—that is, a disjointed relationship with Time as a dimension in which we can no longer dwell, a fractured relationship with History [...]—that illness seems to me to belong entirely to the twentieth century; and I believe it has grown steadily, increasing out of all proportion until the present day. Literature has been, and certainly remains, the most reliable seismograph of this malaise, and to examine here the shivers of Inquietudine through which it has manifested itself would take too long; it would deserve a small, portable encyclopedia"⁵.

In Tabucchi's epistemological trajectory, *Inquietudine* acquired a deeper layer of metaphysical negation through Fernando Pessoa's *Desassossego*. The *Inquietudine* refined by Pessoa's heteronym, Bernardo Soares, through the *Desassossego* of the *Book of Disquiet*, transcended a mere orientation toward dynamic exploration. It encompassed the lack of peace and "absent stillness" situated at the abyss of existence. Tabucchi adopted the semantic crevice between these two terms as a creative dwelling, carrying out a "philosophical migration" by transferring his literary base to Portugal, dismantling the "immunological envelope" of a singular national subject.

Hence, the relationship with the homeland (*patria*) became an essential key for thematic interpretation and the stylistic dimension of reading Tabucchi's work. In a 2009 interview, Tabucchi famously named Italian his "portable homeland" (*patria tascabile*; Settis, 2012, p. 18), suggesting that language was the minimal mental territory that sustained a writer's existence beyond geographic borders. However, he confessed to the cracking of this stable territory by unknowingly beginning to write *Requiem* in Portuguese and the subsequent failure to translate the work into his mother tongue, Italian, while staying in Paris. This illustrated the process through which the intimate boundary of the "portable homeland" was invaded and restructured by the language of the Other.

⁵ "Quella malattia, cioè un rapporto sfasato con il Tempo quale dimensione in cui non riusciamo più ad abitare, un rapporto guasto con la Storia [...], quella malattia mi pare appartenere in pieno al Novecento; e credo che sia cresciuta via via, aumentando a dismisura fino ad oggi. Di questo malessere la letteratura è stata, ed è sicuramente il sismografo più attendibile, ed esaminare qui i brividi di *Inquietudine* con cui si è manifestata sarebbe troppo lungo, meriterebbe una piccola enciclopedia portatile." (Tabucchi, 2013, p. 20).



To contextualize this phenomenon, he cited the experiences of other alloglossic writers: "the French of Beckett, the English of Conrad and Nabokov, and even the Portuguese of the Anglophone Pessoa."⁶ Hence, the "linguistic schizophrenia" (*schizofrenia linguistica*; Settis, 2012, p. 18) advocated by Tabucchi became a subversive strategy that dismantles the rigid systems of a single national identity and native tongue, allowing the writer to reside simultaneously in multiple linguistic and cultural bodies. The confession in the preface of *Requiem* of "a language of affection and reflection" (*una lingua che fosse di affetto e di riflessione*; Tabucchi, 2014a, p. 7) symbolized the practical completion of de-bordering—a movement beyond the mere disposal of a singular identity to achieve a reciprocal encounter between the subject and Other.

While *Inquietudine* and *Desassosseg* explain the subject's internal agitation, *Saudade* completes the temporal dimension of this movement.

*"I view the revisiting of time as a cultural category akin to that of saudade, which consists of a nostalgia for the future—an oxymoronic concept that immediately confronts us with a contradiction"*⁷.

Tabucchi's *Saudade* is not a retrospective regret but a longing for unrealized possibilities—the vivid presence of absence. This "future nostalgia" prevents the subject from taxidermizing memory, inducing them to wander within a multilayered time where past, present, and future overlap. By escaping the "dictatorship of the present," the subject becomes capable of sensing the time of the Other that has not yet arrived.

These three concepts form the foundation of Tabucchi's political and cultural vision of Europe. While *Desassosseg* sinks into the internal abyss and *Saudade* swims through lost layers of time, *Inquietudine* is the mediating force that connects these affects to the historical horizon. It resists the contradictions of the present to realize the "future nostalgia" of *Saudade*.

For Tabucchi, Europe was not a fixed geographic territory but a "work in progress" that must continuously accommodate the voices of the Other. *Inquietudine* imposed an ethical imperative that pushed the subject out of the comfort of the "homeland" and into the Other's "skin." The transnational subject sought by Tabucchi was a being that constantly interrogated its boundaries through a state of "wakeful insomnia." This provided an epistemological turning point where Europe did not settle into the myth of a singular lineage but transformed absence and lack into new possibilities for coexistence. Hence, by tracing the minute tremors recorded by the seismograph of *Inquietudine*, we can map a new subjectivity that stands in solidarity with the Other upon a "land on loan."

⁶ "Come precedenti cita l'esperienza di altri scrittori alloglossi: il francese di Beckett, l'inglese di Conrad e di Nabokov, e perfino il portoghese dell'anglofono Pessoa." (Settis, 2012, p. 18).

⁷ "Io vedo la rivisitazione del tempo come una categoria culturale simile a quella della saudade, che consiste nella nostalgia del futuro, concetto ossimorico che ci pone subito davanti a una contraddizione." (Tabucchi, 2022, p. 123).



Pendulum of Time and Category of “Having Been”

In the abyss of Tabucchian *Inquietudine* lies a sophisticated and intricate architecture of time that rejects a linear worldview. Anna Dolfi identified the “pendulum effect”⁸ within his narrative strategy, signifying an objective vibration generated by forms that constantly oscillated between points in the past and points of fated return. This vibration was more than a stylistic flourish; it was a profound existential symptom. It reflected the ontological struggle of the Tabucchian subject, who refused to reside in the closed moment of a singular “present” and sought to traverse multiple temporal layers.

Within this epistemological framework, the “present” is redefined as a “porous membrane” through which the past and future incessantly permeate. As Tabucchi explicitly stated, “having been” (*l'essere stato*) places us “in a relationship with the dead.” This relationship is not mourning in the conventional sense but an active exchange.⁹ His novel *Requiem* served as the pinnacle of this temporal multilayeredness manifested in narrative space. Here, the subject facilitated an encounter between the living and dead within an orderly continuum, creating a unique temporal refraction where “the past inscribes the future within itself, offering its fulfillment” (*il passato iscrive in sé il futuro offrendone l'adempimento*; Dolfi, 2010, p. 11).

This de-bordering is a temporal event. The hierarchical boundary between the living subject and dead object of memory is erased, and death is elevated from extinction to a modulated presence. For Tabucchi, the deceased demanded to be heard as “voices carried by something” (*voci portate da qualcosa*; Dolfi, 2010, p. 18), generating an “inclination of the heart” (*inclinazione del cuore*) that unsettled the solitary self standing upon the “heart of the earth” (*cuore della terra*; Dolfi, 2010, p. 11). Therefore, the journey in *Requiem* unfolded upon the layer of “fantastic hallucination” (*allucinazione fantastica*; Dolfi, 2010, p. 11)—a sophisticated synthesis of memory and the unconscious—while maintaining the physical locality of Lisbon. This spatial turn, where fantasy and reality overlapped, became a site for an epistemological experiment that deconstructed the unity of a singular self and filled the vacuum of the subject with the polyphony of the Other. Through this narrative strategy of fullness through emptiness, Tabucchi aesthetically demonstrated how that which had disappeared could reside permanently within the present subject.

⁸ “Indubbiamente qualcosa cambia nel panorama italiano a partire dagli anni 80. Dopo i giochi dissacranti e divertiti/divertenti del Gruppo '63, le lunghe diatribe sulla fine del romanzo, parallelamente al nuovo piacere di narrare attivato dalla fortuna presso il pubblico (e non solo) della narrativa sudamericana, gli scrittori sembrano tornare al romanzo senza la rigidità, la naïveté o i sensi di colpa delle generazioni precedenti. I più interessanti sono autori avvertiti delle tecniche narrative [...] che, rassicurati, si potrebbe dire, dall' ‘Effetto pendolo’ che giustifica la ripresa – naturalmente variata – dei personaggi e delle forme, tornano al racconto/romanzo senza più esibire il distacco dalla scandalosa frase che aveva segnato un'epoca: “la marquise sortit à cinq heures” (non è un caso che Tabucchi l'abbia utilizzata qualche volta nel rivendicare il diritto/dovere dello scrittore alla fedeltà a se stesso e alla propria verità). D'altronde i loro maestri non si trovano più soltanto nella letteratura, ma nella teoria letteraria, nelle arti figurative, nel cinema.” (Dolfi, 2010, p. 10).

⁹ “La categoría del haber sido no pone en relación con los muertos [...]. Una de mis últimas obras, *Réquiem*, se centra totalmente en él.” (Gumpert Melgosa, 1995, p. 153).



Game of the Reverse and Dissolution of the Self

If *Inquietudine* is the primordial sensation triggering the subject's internal vibration, the *Game of the Reverse* (*Il gioco del rovescio*) is the decisive methodology that translates that sensation into narrative practice. This concept functions as a core strategy in Tabucchi's poetics to deconstruct the binary conditions underpinning Western ontology. Tabucchi diagnosed the modern individual as being trapped in an existential predicament, "condemned to remain always within predictable dichotomies under the Beckettian eye of a camera" (*condannati a essere sempre tra dicotomie prevedibili sotto l'occhio beckettiano di una telecamera*; Tabucchi, 2022, p. 13). This suggests that artistic "reversal" was the only escape from such a closed structure.

In Tabucchi's universe, reality was akin to a tapestry. The meticulously woven image on the surface was determined by the disorderly and chaotic knots on the reverse side; to approach the essence of truth, one had to trace those hidden knots rather than the smooth surface.

This realization inevitably led a writer to adopt a narrative stance of "voyeurism and theft" (*voyeurismo e di furto*; Tabucchi, 2022, p. 13). To reconstruct the totality of an inaccessible truth, the writer must "steal" and arrange fragments of reality, with the author's identity undergoing an unavoidable subversion. The writer becomes a "new entity that does not coincide with the writer even if it resembles them" (*nuova entità che non coincide con lo scrittore anche se gli assomiglia*; Tabucchi, 2022, p. 10). This represents a split of the subject, born from the fusion of a "diurnal double" (*doppio diurno*) and "multiplied projections" (*proiezioni moltiplicate*; Tabucchi, 2022, p. 10).

This destabilization of authorial identity—the ontological de-bordering between creator and creation—was most vividly revealed in Tabucchi's strategy of "hiding himself in a Joycean manner" (*nascondere se stesso, alla maniera joyciana*; Tabucchi, 2022, p. 13), as analyzed by Dolfi in *Zigzag*. The act of intentionally hiding behind the narrative was not a pursuit of anonymity but an aesthetic decision to halt the violent imposition of a singular ego and allow the multilayered human figures within life to speak for themselves. Hence, the *Game of the Reverse* became the pinnacle of an epistemological shift that revealed hidden truths by negating superficial reality while dismantling fixed authorial authority to create a polyphonic space where the voices of otherness could freely intersect.

This ontological dissolution of the unitary self was a foundational catalyst for a radical rethinking of the European project. Within Tabucchi's literary geography, Europe was liberated from the constraints of exclusive nationalism and territorial rigidity, re-emerging as an "archipelago of pluralities." By internalizing the mechanism of (un)bordering, the European subject transcended the myth of a singular lineage, transforming the continent into a site of perpetual hospitality where the "I" and "Other" coexisted upon a shared, borrowed land. This transnational subjectivity did not establish a new center but resided in the tremors of the borders, proving that Europe's true identity lay in its capacity to remain an unfinished "work in progress" that continuously echoed the polyphony of its Others.



Federation of Souls: Identity as an Archipelago

Tabucchi's discourse on identity established its ontological cornerstone through his encounter with Pessoa. For Tabucchi, the "I" (*Io*) was no longer an isolated monolith but a fragmented collective, a multilayered and incomplete entity that could only be captured "in profile."¹⁰ This fragmentation of the self was presented as the primordial truth of human existence, aligning with his epistemological project to dismantle the modern illusion of a unitary subjectivity.

Tabucchi's analysis of Álvaro de Campos, one of Pessoa's heteronyms, focused on specific material emblems that symbolized the subject's de-bordered nature. In the essay *The Automobile, Nostalgia, and the Infinite* (*L'automobile, la nostalgia e l'infinito*), Tabucchi identified Campos as possessing the "highest metaphysical quotient" (*il più alto quoziente metafisico*; Tabucchi, 2015, p. 45). As a naval engineer, dandy, and futurist, Campos embodied a "geometric nihilism" (*nichilismo geometrico*; Tabucchi, 2015, p. 45). Tabucchi decoded Campos's de-bordered identity through his travel accessory—the "suitcase"—which became a decisive signifier that defined Campos as a "stranger to geography and existence" (*straniero della geografia e dell'esistenza*; Tabucchi, 2015, p. 53).

*"[...] a suitcase that contains precious information. It certainly signifies the journey, the man without frontiers, but also the stranger of geography and existence"*¹¹.

Campos defined himself as a "passerby of himself" (*passante di se stesso*; Tabucchi, 2015, p. 53) and confessed: "I myself, unfortunately, am a thing on loan" (*Io stesso, purtroppo, sono una cosa in prestito*; Tabucchi, 2015, p. 50). This recognition of existence being "borrowed" from the Other carried a fundamental skepticism toward the ownership and inherent nature of the self. The "terrible, sudden, violent, inconceivable longing" (*smania terribile, repentina, violenta, inconcepibile*) he felt while driving a Chevrolet toward Sintra illustrated the essence of European *Inquietudine*: a desire to vanish into the "future road" (*strada futura*) rather than remaining fixed at a coordinate, be it Lisbon or Sintra (Tabucchi, 2015, p. 50).

The suitcase was a vessel for the metaphysical weight of a life in transit without anchorage, symbolizing the existential debt borne by the subject. This was exquisitely depicted by Campos:

¹⁰ "Esiste insomma un contesto nel quale l'io (personaggio e autore), anche se sembra talvolta ricomporsi segnando un qualche ritorno alla vecchia maniera, lo fa a partire da una situazione nuova, per definizione frammentata (si pensi in questa direzione, anche per i personaggi più 'tradizionali' di Tabucchi, alla tanto spesso evocata 'confederazione delle anime,' o all'io visto solo di profilo nello Stadio di Wimbledon del primo Del Giudice), [...]." (Dolfi, 2010, p. 10).

¹¹ "[...] una valigia che contiene preziose informazioni. Significa certamente il viaggio, l'uomo senza frontiere, ma anche lo straniero della geografia e dell'esistenza." (Tabucchi, 2015, p. 53).



"I am expiating a crime in a suitcase committed by an ancestor of mine out of aestheticism. My nerves are on the gallows, twenty by twenty, and I have fallen into opium as if into a ditch"¹².

The powerful image of "nerves on the gallows" visualized the internal tension experienced by a plural being as physical agony. Though the self was imprisoned within the anatomical limits of a single body, its nervous system expanded centrifugally toward the external world, maintaining a tension that felt as though it might snap. This organic suffering reached its peak of subject transformation in the *Maritime Ode (Ode Marittima)*, where it merged with the mechanical symbol of the "flywheel." Tabucchi cited this poem to elucidate the phenomenon:

"The poem is the Maritime Ode, and the object in question is a flywheel. Precisely because it is so incongruous with the context, so ambiguous in nature, and situated right inside Campos's chest, I find it worthy of being considered beyond metaphor. As such, it deserves a place of honor in the list of objects I am compiling: 'I gaze at the steamer from a distance, with a great independence of soul, and inside me, slowly, a flywheel begins to turn'"¹³.

Located "inside the chest of Campos," this rotating wheel drove the subject's anxiety mechanism while transforming him into a massive sensation machine. The flywheel spinning within violated the boundaries between organism and machine, interior and exterior, redefining the subject as an incessant wave of sensation. These metaphors embodied the plural self Tabucchi discovered through Pessoa, a powerful visual testimony to a modern subjectivity floating upon borders, accommodating the Other's voice and mechanical vibrations.

This ontological dissolution of the unitary self serves as a foundational catalyst for a radical rethinking of the European project. Within Tabucchi's literary geography, Europe is liberated from the constraints of exclusive nationalism and territorial rigidity, re-emerging as an 'archipelago of pluralities.' By internalizing the mechanism of (un)bordering, the European subject transcends the myth of a singular lineage, transforming the continent into a site of perpetual hospitality where the "I" and "Other" coexist upon a shared, borrowed land. This transnational subjectivity does not seek to establish a new center but resides in the tremors of the borders. This proves that Europe's true identity lies not in its fortified walls but in its capacity to remain an unfinished "work in progress" that continuously echoes the polyphony of its Others.

¹² "Sto espiando un delitto in una valigia commesso da un mio avo per estetismo. Ho i nervi sulla forca, venti a venti, e son caduto nell'oppio come in un fosso." (Tabucchi, 2015, p. 53).

¹³ La poesia è l'Ode marittima e l'oggetto in questione è un volano che proprio perché incongruo al contesto, per la sua natura così ambigua e perché si trova dentro al petto di Campos, mi pare degno di essere considerato fuor di metafora e quindi di avere un posto d'onore nella lista di oggetti che sto compilando: "Guardo da lontano il piroscafo, con una grande indipendenza dell'anima, e dentro di me, lentamente, un volano comincia a girare." (Tabucchi, 2015, p. 51).



Geopoetic (Un)bordering

The most radical form of (un)bordering in Tabucchi's work occurred at the subject's level. Traditional European humanism defined a citizen by borders, language, and soil—a consistent and integrated self. Influenced by Pessoa's theory of heteronyms, Tabucchi deconstructed this unity. He argued that identity was not a possession but a temporary state, a "thing on loan." The final, and most concrete, manifestation of this (un)bordering was geographical. Hence, for Tabucchi, Europe was not a fortress but a fluid space of transit.

Illusion of Possession and "Life on Loan"

In *Viaggi e altri viaggi*, Tabucchi deconstructed the nationalistic concept of *Heimat* and articulated a philosophy of un-belonging that challenged the nationalistic roots of European identity. Warning against the illusion of possession arising from a sedentary life, he defined the "boundary" as an epistemological error. To reside in several "elsewheres" was a privilege because it shattered the illusion of ownership. He wrote:

*"Setting one's feet upon the same soil for a whole lifetime can provoke a dangerous misunderstanding, leading us to believe that the land belongs to us—as if it were not on loan, just as everything in life is on loan"*¹⁴.

This was the cornerstone of Tabucchi's post-nationalist Europe. If the land was merely "on loan," the borders drawn upon it were fictional. This "dangerous misunderstanding" was the root of the exclusive politics plaguing the continent. By traveling and residing in several "elsewheres," the subject shattered this illusion. Hence, for Tabucchi, travel was an ontological exercise in displacement.

Travel as Ontology: Cavafy's Ithaca

Referencing Constantine Cavafy's poem *Ithaca*, Tabucchi elevated travel to an ontological status. The destination was irrelevant, but the movement mattered:

*"Constantine Cavafy said it in an extraordinary poem titled Ithaca: travel finds meaning only in itself, in the being of the journey"*¹⁵.

Tabucchi extended this to life, arguing that the primary meaning of life was "to be lived." The texts in *Viaggi e altri viaggi* were described as "islands in a floating archipelago" scattered "here and there... under different flags," resisting a singular national identity.

¹⁴ "Posare i piedi sul medesimo suolo per tutta la vita può provocare un pericoloso equivoco, farci credere che quella terra ci appartenga, come se essa non fosse in prestito, come tutto è in prestito nella vita" (Tabucchi, 2010, p. 10).

¹⁵ "Il viaggio trova senso solo in se stesso, nell'essere viaggio." (Tabucchi, 2010, p. 10).



"Born from the most diverse occasions, always from travels but never from travels made to then become travel literature, these texts wandered like islands in a floating archipelago, scattered here and there in the most disparate locations and under different flags, almost without consciousness of belonging or identity, drifting in their own way. Collecting them was like making them a single float, a boat, a canoe; caulking the cracks in the keel, and from the currents to which they were entrusted, directing them toward a single direction: the journey of a book"¹⁶.

Tabucchi's ontological elevation of travel catalyzed what can be termed "geopoetic (un)bordering." By asserting that travel found its meaning in the "being of the journey," he deterritorialized the European space. In this geopoetic framework, Europe was no longer a collection of rigid, sovereign landmasses but a "floating archipelago," a relational geography where identities were not fixed by national soil and were constantly in motion.

The act of gathering these island-texts into a "single boat" represented a subversive move against the hardening of European borders. It suggested that the true European identity was not in the stability of the "mainland" (the nation-state) but in the fluid coherence of the "vessel" (literature/language) that traversed these disparate locations. (Un)bordering occurred here: it acknowledged the "different flags" as historical markers while nullifying their exclusive power through the shared current of the journey. Hence, Tabucchi's geopoetics proposed a transnational subjectivity that viewed Europe as an ongoing "voyage of a book," where the land was always "on loan" and the only true homeland was the shared movement toward the Other.

The Shifting West and Author Sea: Woman of Porto Pim

Tabucchi's geographical imagination challenged the teleological stability of the "West" by repositioning its boundaries within the liminal space of the Azores. In *Donna di Porto Pim*, he posited a radical redefinition of Western identity: "the West has no end but continues to shift with us" (*l'Occidente non ha termine ma continua a spostarsi con noi*; Tabucchi, 2012, p. 13). By situating his narrative beyond the Pillars of Hercules, in a "mare ignoto" described as "endless and always the same" (*mare ignoto [...] senza fine e sempre uguale*; Tabucchi, 2012, p. 13), Tabucchi transformed the Azores from a physical archipelago into a site of ontological displacement.

These islands were reconstructed as a metaphysical map inhabited by the "gods of the soul, of feeling, and of passions" (*dèi dell'animo, del sentimento e delle passioni*; Tabucchi, 2012, p. 13). This shift allowed Tabucchi to diagnose the deep-seated malaise of the European psyche. He introduced the "God of Regret and Nostalgia" (*Dio del*

¹⁶ "Nati dalle occasioni piu diverse, sempre da viaggi ma mai da viaggi fatti per poi diventare letteratura di viaggi, questi testi vagavano come isole in un arcipelago fluttuante, sparsi qua e la nelle sedi piu disparate e sotto diverse bandiere, quasi senza coscienza di un'appartenenza e di un'identita, a loro modo alla deriva. Raccoglierli e stato come farne un galleggiante unico, una barca, una canoa; calafatarne le fessure della chiglia, e dalle correnti a cui erano affidati indirizzarli verso un'unica direzione: il viaggio di un libro." (Tabucchi, 2010, p. 9).



Rimpianto e della Nostalgia; Tabucchi, 2012, p. 14), who governed “the pain for that which was not and could have been” (*la pena per ciò che non fu e che avrebbe potuto essere*; Tabucchi, 2012, p. 15). This served as a poignant emblem of an existential grief haunting modern Europe—a continent mourning the possibilities it had castrated or lost through the violent ruptures of its history. However, this melancholy was met with a darker, more restrictive counterpart: the “God of Hate.” Isolated on an inaccessible conical island and manifested as “a small, gaunt yellow dog,” this deity symbolized the dormant hostility and exclusive closure toward the Other, which often lurked behind the façade of nostalgia.

For Tabucchi, the Azores functioned as a microcosm of European contradiction. The continent emerged as a tragic space where the “lost universality” of regret and the fragmented bigotry of hate perpetually coexisted. Hence, the European identity was revealed as a fractured project: one that perpetually dreamt of ideal integration while remaining unable to exorcise the internal divisions and ghosts of its past.

Journey for the Shadow and Insomnia: Indian Nocturne

In *Indian Nocturne*, travel is synonymous with “insomnia.” While Tabucchi distinguished that “insomnia belongs to the one who wrote the book, travel to the one who did it” (*L’insonnia appartiene a chi ha scritto il libro, il viaggio a chi lo fece*; Tabucchi, 2016, p. 9), he assumed the mutual penetration of the two. The epigraph quoting Maurice Blanchot clarified the essence of this journey:

“People who sleep badly seem to be more or less guilty: what do they do? They make the night present”¹⁷.

The narrator searched for his missing friend, Xavier, across Bombay, Madras, and Goa. Tabucchi provided a concrete “index of places” at the beginning of the book; however, he confessed:

“I do not know well if this was contributed by the illusion that a topographical repertoire, with the force that reality possesses, could give light to this Nocturne in which a Shadow is sought; or the unreasonable conjecture that some lover of incongruous paths might one day use it as a guide”¹⁸.

As the doctor in Bombay said, “This is the hospital of Bombay [...] leave aside your European categories, they are a proud luxury” (*lasci da parte le sue categorie europee, sono un lusso superbo*; Tabucchi, 2016, p. 24). In India, the boundaries of Western reason and logic collapsed. Concrete locations such as the Taj Mahal Hotel or the beaches of Goa paradoxically amplified the uncertainty of reality. The narrator sought the Other

¹⁷ “Le persone che dormono male sembrano essere più o meno colpevoli: che cosa fanno? Rendono la notte presente.” (Tabucchi, 2016, p. 7).

¹⁸ “Non so bene se a ciò ha contribuito l’illusione che un repertorio topografico, con la forza che il reale possiede, potesse dare luce a questo Notturmo in cui si cerca un’Ombra; oppure l’irragionevole congettura che un qualche amante di percorsi incongrui potesse un giorno utilizzarlo come guida.” (Tabucchi, 2016, p. 9).



(his friend); however, he eventually encountered his own interiority—the “Shadow.” This journey was a geographical movement and metaphysical voyage where the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, dissolved.

The geographical displacement in *Indian Nocturne* was a geopoetic (un)bordering, stripping away the rigid veneer of Western rationalism. The epistemological collapse experienced by the narrator, as he traversed the disorder of India and the sleeplessness of the night, suggested that the European subject must relinquish its exclusive superiority and redefine itself within the site of the Other. Here, the “Shadow” symbolized more than just a missing companion. It represented the “internal alterity” suppressed within the European ego.

Tabucchi dismantled the physical certainty guaranteed by maps and filled that void with the wakeful sensation of “insomnia.” This opened a horizon of intersubjective coexistence, revealing that the subject and Other were inextricably intertwined within each other’s shadows. Thus, the voyage in *Indian Nocturne* utilized an aesthetics of absence to reject the fixity of identity, mapping a new European sensibility capable of standing in solidarity with the Other beyond established borders.

Political (Un)bordering: The Intellectual as a “Useful Idiot”

“Time Ages Quickly”: Ghosts After the Wall

Il tempo invecchia in fretta, which dealt with Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, explored the temporal fissures and scars of memory that remained in place of physical borders. In the story *I morti a tavola*, a former East German intelligence agent wandered through a reunified Berlin, sensing the absence of the Wall—the vanished great structure. Monologuing before Brecht’s grave about his history of betrayal and surveillance, he experienced the sudden intrusion of ghosts from the past, disrupting the boundaries of linear time.

Furthermore, in *Clouds (Nuvole)*, an officer who served in the Kosovo War dealt with the invisible contamination of depleted uranium exposure. When the officer taught a young girl, Isabella, the art of cloud divination, the scene juxtaposed fairytale imagination with a horrific reality (radiation, death). This served as an indictment of the invisible, lethal borders (pollution) that war and violence engrave upon the body and nature, transcending national frontiers:

“On the beach, there was a great silence; the bathers had reached the restaurant. ‘[The clouds] are fraying into a kind of stracciatella,’ Isabella said in a low voice, ‘like when the trail of an airplane unravels; now they are almost gone, how strange, I can hardly see them anymore, you look too.’ The man did not move. [...] ‘The prophecy of the end of all wars was made two thousand years ago; only no one had read it well until now, and today we have finally deciphered it on this beach, the two of us’”¹⁹.

¹⁹ “Sulla spiaggia c’era un grande silenzio, i bagnanti avevano raggiunto il ristorante. ‘[Le nuvole] Si stanno sfaldando in una specie di stracciatella, disse Isabella a bassa voce, come quando lascia degli aeroplani si



Hence, the attempt to read the future of war in the scattering of clouds metaphorically demonstrated the impact of historical violence on individual lives and the natural world.

"Diabolical Staging" and the Sofri Case

The intersection of literature and justice (or injustice) was the decisive site of (un)bordering in Tabucchi's public life. His defense of Adriano Sofri, a prominent figure of the Italian Left accused of murder, highlighted the tension between official (judicial verdict) and narrative truths.

The essay collection *Plato's Gastritis (La gastrite di Platone)* quoted a chilling phrase from the initial appellate court verdict against Sofri, Bompressi, and Pietrostefani in 1991. Judge Laura Bertolè Viale used the expression "diabolical staging," which was explicitly linked to the literature:

"This diabolical staging is also, not by chance, the content of two short stories published in conjunction with the start of the first-degree trial—Leonardo Sciascia's *A Simple Story*—and second-degree trial—Antonio Tabucchi's *Can the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in New York Cause a Typhoon in Beijing?*"²⁰.

The judicial system accused the literature, specifically Tabucchi's work, of trespassing into the courtroom, interfering by creating a narrative that opposed the state's version of reality. Hence, literature had crossed the legal boundary of reality to invade the domain of "truth."

"Useful Idiots"

Tabucchi criticized the derogatory categorization used by state power to classify intellectuals. He quoted the indictment of Ugo Dello Russo (1991), the prosecution representative in the first appeal case:

*"The carriage of victimhood is being pulled by these oxen, by these useful idiots [the intellectuals]"*²¹.

Responding to the prosecution's belittlement of intellectuals as "useful Idiots," Tabucchi inherited Pasolini's declarative knowledge—"I know" (*Io so*)—to confront the opacity of

sfilaccia, ora non si vedono quasi più, che strano, non riesco quasi più a vederle, guarda anche tu. L'uomo non si mosse.'`[...] la profezia della fine di ogni guerra la fece duemila anni fa, solo che nessuno finora l'aveva letta bene e noi oggi finalmente l'abbiamo decifrata su questa spiaggia, noi due.'" (Tabucchi, 2014b, p. 76).

²⁰ "Questa diabolica messinscena e anche il contenuto di due racconti pubblicati non a caso in concomitanza con l'inizio del processo di Io grado – Una storia semplice di Sciascia – e di 2° grado – 'Può il batter d'ali di una farfalla a New York procurare un tifone a Pechino?' di Tabucchi. Dalla sentenza del 1° processo d'appello contro Sofri, Bompressi e Pietrostefani redatta dal giudice a latere, dolt ssa Laura Berto le Viale, 1991." (Tabucchi, 1998, p. 11).

²¹ "Il carro del vittimismo e tirato da questi buoi, da questi utili idioti [gli intellettuali]." (Tabucchi, 1998, p. 11).



power. Citing James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, he argued for a perspective of reversibility to uncover the hidden facets behind judicial truth.

This emphasized that democracy was an incomplete process requiring constant vigilance and critique, an attempt to redefine the European citizen's ethical boundaries. Tabucchi appropriated the insult to redefine the limits of intellectual responsibility. He rejected the role of the passive observer ("the ox") and advocated for the intellectual who interrogated complexity and sought to "disquiet" rather than provide solutions. This resonated with his self-definition as a "failed moralist," emphasizing individual responsibility and ethical rebellion over dogmatic moral preaching:

*"It is difficult to draw a precise boundary. And perhaps it would be a task suited to an orthodox moralist, while I am nothing but a failed moralist, like all good moralists, for that matter. In my opinion, we must establish the following: where do personal responsibilities begin, and where, instead, does chance end?"*²².

This political position was made clearer in Settis's *Antonio Tabucchi's Three Disquiets: Homeland, Politics, Time*. Settis emphasized that the background of Tabucchi's engagement in "Politics" lay in his experiences in Portugal under the Salazar dictatorship, where writers used writing as a tool of resistance. For Tabucchi, the intellectual must cross the boundary of silence. Hence, in a state of "threatened democracy" (*democracia ameaçada*), he "chose not to remain silent" (*escolheu não ficar calado*) (Settis, 2012, p. 5). This demonstrated Tabucchi's conviction that the literature must pierce through the boundaries of political reality, instead of staying within the limits of aesthetic play.

Conclusion

Tabucchi's discourse on (de)bordering was rooted in a critique of the modern project known as "Europe." Historically, European modernity defined itself through the rigid cartography of the Westphalian system—a process of "border-making" that bifurcated the world into the rational subject and irrational "other" and demarcated civilization from barbarism. Hence, European identity functioned as an immunological system, predicated on the exclusion of the outside to preserve the integrity of the self.

Tabucchi, an interstitial figure who wrote in Portuguese and pursued Indian shadows amid Lisbon's mists, systematically disturbed these geographical, cultural, and spiritual boundaries from within. By utilizing the borders of European exceptionalism as an epistemological laboratory, he exposed these foundations' ontological precariousness, revealing that they were "on loan." This struck at the heart of the fictiveness of modern identity, replacing the illusion of permanence with a radical transience.

²² "È difficile segnare un confine preciso. E forse si tratterebbe di un compito adatto a un moralista ortodosso, mentre io non sono altro che un moralista fallito, come tutti i buoni moralisti, del resto. Secondo me, dobbiamo stabilire quanto segue: dove hanno inizio le responsabilità personali e dove termina invece il caso?" (Tabucchi, 2022, p. 163).



However, Tabucchi's (de)bordering transcended the reconfiguration of Europe's political landscape. It evolved into a universal existential condition for contemporary humanity. From the collapse of modern borders, a planetary solidarity emerged—a *communitas* in which all beings shared a primordial sense of "absence" and "lack." His declaration that "everything is on loan" served as an ontological caveat to a humanity captivated by the modern fantasies of ownership and settlement. Consequently, (de)bordering represented a paradigm shift from the settler's logic to that of the wanderer (*Homo Viator*). It signified an epistemological migration from the isolated island of the "self" toward a polyphonic archipelago of the "Other." This "vibration of the border," distilled from Europe's traumatic and specific history, addressed a universal imperative: how the subject might "share," rather than "possess," identity in an era defined by radical uncertainty and fluidity.

Thus, Tabucchi's journey of (un)bordering can be defined as an aesthetic soteriology—a project of secular salvation for restoring the "abyss of the Other" and recovering the authenticity of existence. Through *Inquietudine*, he shattered the comfort of static settlement, forcing the subject into a state of perpetual displacement and compelling the realization that we were all, fundamentally, "strangers to geography and existence." For Tabucchi, the "homeland" (*patria*) was no longer an exclusive territory bound by blood or soil but a "portable" space of affection and reflection, constantly restructured by the Other's language.

His *Game of the Reverse* transcended narrative play, converging into an ethical mandate for the intellectual. It confronted the opacity of sovereign power by meticulously tracing the knots on the reverse side of official history. Furthermore, by projecting a "nostalgia for the future" through the paradoxical temporality of *Saudade*, he summoned the ghosts of the past into the present, maximizing the density of presence through absence.

The "plural self" and "fluid geography" constructed by Tabucchi created irreparable cracks within the rigid framework of the nation-state. Within his oeuvre, the self was expanded through its dissolution; identity was reborn as an archipelagic subject, capable of reciprocal coexistence only through its own fragmentation. This "aesthetics of absence" served as a powerful philosophical weapon against the contemporary crises of exclusive hate and isolation. It offered a profound reflective response on how we may inhabit and care for one another's pain on a planet where everything was "on loan." Tabucchi proved that the most dignified form of human existence was found in constantly wandering on the border.

(Un)bordering in Tabucchi's Europe was an ethical imperative. It was a call, as Barthes suggested, to recognize the Other within the self. It was a request to accept that we were all essentially travelers with "nerves on the gallows," as depicted in Campos's poetry, carrying suitcases filled with the weight of aesthetics and the memory of ancient crimes. We moved toward a horizon that receded as we approached. Hence, Tabucchi's Europe was a chronicle of souls in constant motion, bound together by the shared unease and persistent vibrations.



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