

Tondelli's *Camere separate* Through Roland Barthes' Lexicon

Laura Gagliardi

Camere separate (*Separate Rooms*, 1989) is a novel written by Pier Vittorio Tondelli, an Italian writer active in Bologna during the 1980s. In order to understand the thematic complexity of this book, I shall use the theoretical lexicon elaborated by the French theorist, Roland Barthes, in his *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977). Barthes' writing becomes an essential tool to explore the subtleties of romantic novels, which can be read more deeply and more clearly when analyzed through the definitions of typical lovers' images which are defined and exemplified in Barthes' love vocabulary.¹ The Italian critic Eugenio Bolongaro, in his essay "A Scandalous Intimacy," remembers that "Pier Vittorio Tondelli's *Camere separate* is such a novel, a work that challenges the method as well as the hedonism of the Barthesian model," a work seen "as the site for an endlessly renewed encounter between living beings in and through language" (816). Therefore, to survive the challenge, and go beyond the understanding of Tondelli's novel, I shall follow a process of analysis going deep into the lexicon provided by Barthes, applying it to different moments in Tondelli's work.

Tondelli was born in 1955 in Correggio, a small town in Emilia Romagna, and began his career at twenty-five with the novel *Altri libertini* (1980), a literary phenomenon that upset the intellectual scene of the time². Introducing themes that were considered outrageous and foul, such as homosexuality and sexually transmitted diseases— *Camere separate* is the first novel to ever depict the AIDS epidemic in Italy. At the same time, Tondelli was appreciated by the youth of the 1980s, who felt represented by the simple and plain style of his writing. His fourth novel, *Camere separate* explores homoerotic romantic relationships, which generated a literary uprising in those years characterized by fights for emancipation and human rights movements,

¹ I use the term *Image*, as Barthes did, to refer to the fragments he described in his *Lovers' Discourse*, as representations of typical scenes, thoughts, or events happening between two individuals while undergoing an amorous relationship.

² In the official website dedicated to the author <http://tondelli.comune.correggio.re.it> we read "*Altri libertini*, pubblicato da Feltrinelli nel 1980, viene sequestrato dalle autorità giudiziarie per il reato di oscenità venti giorni dopo la sua comparsa in libreria" ("*Altri libertini*, published by Feltrinelli in 1980, gets confiscated by the judicial authorities accused of the crime of obscenity, twenty days after it appeared in the bookstores"). Translation mine.

for instance related to AIDS and its connection with homosexuality. The thematic element of separation alluded to so often in this novel is not only that of two lovers dealing with the hostility of the society of their time, but also the distance in time and space between the two, who live in two different places and who see their love story dismantled by society's preconceived fears, and historical circumstances.

The plot centers on the multifaceted emotional relationship of two men pressured by homophobia and societal restrictions. Leo is a writer who meets Thomas, a German musician, while in Paris for the presentation of a book, and they fall in love. Leo is always traveling to attend conferences and meetings, while Thomas lives in Berlin. For this reason, they live their relationship separately, but trying to meet often. The separate rooms are the "places" where their relationship grows, and as Bolongaro suggests in another analysis, *Leo's Passion*, "in this light, the 'separate room' strategy which allowed Leo and Thomas to continue their relationship in spite of increasing tensions, reveals its nature as a convenient, elegant, clever mask to hide Leo's inability to accept intimacy, to accept the gift that Thomas offered" (105). Unable to be alone, Thomas begins a parallel relationship with a woman. This intricate situation ends when Thomas' HIV takes over his health, and he dies. Leo realizes he is alone, trapped in his solitude; while abroad, he sees the world and remembers the places he visited in the past when traveling with his partner, feeling the weight of a separation which is recalled everywhere, and at every time.

Camere separate breaks conventional narrative forms, and unfolds as a musical piece instead. The plot is divided into three musical movements, which follow the mood of the protagonist while he goes through his emotional journey of love, loss and despair. The first movement, which corresponds to the first part of the novel, describes Leo and Thomas' courtship. In the second movement, while the novel unfolds, Thomas is diagnosed as HIV-positive but keeps it secret from his lover until he dies. The third and last movement, leading to the end of the book, depicts the contours of Leo's mourning and his mental digression, which is the focal point of the end of the story, where the lover realizes what true love is. Through his personal elaboration of his tormented love, Leo goes through a sort of healing process. The way this process is described makes the readers follow it along with the protagonist, who eventually

reaches an epiphany of understanding and surrenders to those very emotions with which he could not cope at the beginning of the novel.

Tondelli's style abounds with flashbacks and flash forwards, which outlines four possible levels of interpretation of the plot, until Leo finally accepts his diversity, his separation from the outside world and, especially, his role as a "different" writer. Bolongaro wrote that "reconstructing Leo's development in *Camere separate* is an unusually complicated task. The novel does not provide a linear narrative" (97). For this reason, I believe it is key to focus on the structure of the novel and, in particular, on its musical aspects and its unique partition in three movements. Cristiana Furlan, arguing about movements in Tondelli's narrative, reminds her readers that "questa particolare struttura testuale, da un lato giustifica l'organizzazione in movimenti anziché in capitoli, dall'altro amplia le possibilità interpretative del sostantivo movimento" (167). With musical movement I mean what the Oxford Music Online Dictionary defines as "a term for a section, usually self-contained and separated by silence from other sections, within a larger musical work. It originates in the idea of work consisting of sections defined by their difference in tempo or 'movement'; hence the use of *mouvement* in French and *movimento* in Italian to denote tempo and of the Italian term *tempo* for a movement"³. For instance, the structure of Tondelli's novel consists of an intro, a following refrain, a description in between, and the last refrain, all of them movements, or *tempi*, that create suspense and atmosphere in the plot leading to the ending scene. This musical structure reproduces the inner evolution of the main characters, whose narrative path could be described as an emotional journey.

In order to decode the unique structure of the novel and comprehend its author's ambition, I segmented it into several parts, and reconstructed the storyline by combining it into individual thematic and narrative units. These units shall correspond to the images elaborated by Roland Barthes in his book *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977). Barthes' book resonates with Tondelli's reflection on romantic relationships as private discourses of alienation and separation, and his fragmented discourse provides the reader with a "vocabulary" to decipher *Camere separate* seen as, in fact, a private discourse of alienation and separation. Following up on Armine Kotin Mortimer's idea of Barthes' work as a tool, "I propose to show that *Fragments d'un discours*

³ <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.bc.edu>

amoureux is a book about the love of writing as much as about the love of another person, so that each figure, each explanation, each analysis, each “speaking” may connect to reading and writing” (27). In light of this approach, Barthes’ lexicon becomes essential to a proper understanding of Tondelli’s novel.

Published in 1977, *A Lover’s Discourse* is a collection of fragments—or “figures,” as Barthes defines them—which are gestures of the lovers while interacting in their relationship. These fragments are defined on a rhetorical basis, accompanied by quotations from philosophical, historical, literary and artistic masterpieces:

Figures take shape insofar as we can recognize, in passing discourse, something that has been read, heard, felt. The figure is outlined (like a sign) and memorable (like an image or a tale). A figure is established if at least someone can say: “*That’s so true! I recognize that scene of language.*” For certain operations of their art, linguists make use of a vague entity which they call linguistic feeling; in order to constitute figures, we require neither more nor less than this guide: amorous feeling (8).

The author creates a unique love lexicon because, as he explains, lovers speak a language that can be understood only by the lovers themselves and interpreted only by their own critical thinking process. That is why Barthes seeks to express the non-verbal characterization of a language based on virtual images created by the feelings and emotions of two individuals. It is a lexicon of and about love, which becomes the essential tool in deciphering the non-verbal but communicative side existing in a love relationship. As Mortimer points out, “the book would thus be a reference and a resource, which anyone might consult to gain glimpses into the language of love and its connection to other texts” (33).

The two texts I am considering in my article, Barthes’ *A Lovers’ Discourse* and Tondelli’s *Camere separate* appear generously heterogeneous. However, they pursue the same objective: to represent the complexity of a love relationship, while, at the same time, trying to express the difficult interpretation readers can draw from a groundless, separated perspective. On the one hand, Barthes structured his lovers’ discourse as a “dictionary of love” (words are defined and organized in the book following an alphabetical order so that the lexicon can be consulted as a real dictionary), where love and romantic situations are defined, or decoded, with the assistance of examples extrapolated from literature, philosophy, real life and art. On the other

hand, Tondelli provides his readers with a broader sequence of introspective moments from the protagonists, which indicate the complexity of their connection. The two books are similar because of the subject of their narration, but are different in their narrative structure; nonetheless, they are complementary. Barthes offers the opportunity of a more focalized interpretation of *Camere separate*. In fact, *Discourse* can be used as a guide, or a handbook, a pool of specific references and technical definitions for a more proper reading of Tondelli's novel. In the following pages, I shall deconstruct the plot of *Camere separate* into minimum units that correspond to Barthes' images.

The novel begins with the first encounter of the two lovers Leo and Thomas, which is completely different from what their actual relationship would become: it shines and appears beautiful at first, but problems and flaws soon appear, forcing the lovers to overcome obstacles while looking for a way through their life together. This phase of their romantic discourse can be better understood by borrowing the following images/fragments from Barthes' vocabulary:

Ravishment, ravisement / ravishment, the supposedly initial episode (though it may be reconstructed after the fact) during which the amorous subject is "ravished" (captured and enchanted) by the image of the loved object (popular name: love at first sight; scholarly name: enamoration) (188).

This figure refers to the *conquering, ravishing, capturing* feeling a person in love feels when encountering the loved one. Every time a person is emotionally involved in a loving relationship, Barthes explains, "he revives a fragment of the archaic time when men were supposed to carry off women"(188) but he continues underlying the aspect of impotence that this sudden feeling creates, leaving the ravished in a static state of defeat. Later in the plot, Leo tries to explain what happened to him and how he fell in love; what he describes when referring to Thomas is the way he felt drawn to him because unexplainably he was the object of his desire, and we can better understand this moment of the novel, with the following image of desire: "«Show me whom to desire» induction / induction way, which is explaining that the loved being is desired because another or others have shown the subject that such a being is desirable: however particular, amorous desire is discovered by induction" (136).

Once the image of the lover gets impressed in his/her partner's memory, and "induction

discovers the amorous desire” (136) the conventional love affair can begin. Phone calls, encounters, anything that can help the two lovers discover their relationship through perceptions, leads to the final achievement. This is the moment when the various flaws of the other are recognized, yet accepted, as part of the reflection of the self onto the other. Love becomes the mirror image of one lover and the other. In *Camere separate*, for instance, there is a scene in which Thomas reflects on Leo as much as Leo does on Thomas, when the first one leans on the other hugging him and protecting him, and their relationship can be portrayed as the image of a mother holding her baby. Barthes portrays a similar situation in the following image, where he defines the embrace of a lover as a moment of union and sharing which fulfills a dream: “«In the loving calm of your arms» étreinte / embrace: the gesture of the amorous embrace seems to fulfill, for a time, the subject's dream of total union with the loved being” (104).

Barthes’ *Fragments* become a powerful instrument in order to understand a crucial theme of Tondelli’s novel: the longing for a lost lover. It is when Thomas passes away that Leo fully realizes what their love meant. The very first image “I am engulfed, I succumb”, which introduces Barthes’ work, describes Leo’s sense of despair, exposing the hollowness a lover feels when the subject of his romance disappears: “«I am engulfed, I succumb ...» s’abîmer / to be engulfed defined as the outburst of annihilation which affects the amorous subject in despair or fulfillment” (10).

The “Absent One” figure, “absence / absence: any episode of language which stages the absence of the loved object—whatever its cause and its duration—and which tends to transform this absence into an ordeal of abandonment” (13), allows a connection to the sense of despair that Leo feels due to the loss of Thomas. Leo comprehends that living separately and sensing the absence of his lover, is detrimental to their relationship. After this realization, he is overcome with anguish and agony. It is a feeling that can be fully understood when seen through the lens of another of Barthes’ images: “Agony, angoisse / anxiety: the amorous subject, according to one contingency or another, feels swept away by the fear of a danger, an injury, an abandonment, a revulsion – a sentiment he expresses under the name of anxiety” (29).

When the two lovers want to express their feelings through the touch of their bodies, preconceptions and the fear of judgment, because they were “different” and unaccepted as a

couple, are expressed through the easy and clear fragment of the “catastrophe,” a crisis, as defined by Barthes, that destroys the bond between the two lovers, rendering the whole situation an inescapable trap: “Catastrophe, catastrophe / catastrophe, defined as a violent crisis during which the subject, experiencing the amorous situation as a definitive impasse, a trap from which he can never escape, sees himself doomed to total destruction” (48). Although being different is felt like a hindrance for the protagonists, and the crisis or catastrophe is inevitable, it is when, as Bolongaro explains, “the fundamental role of gender and homosexuality in the protagonist’s experience are recognized,” that “it becomes easier to grasp Leo’s complex and mobile relationship to language and discourse” (101).

In *Camere separate* there is a moment when the two depart, and Thomas gets sick while Leo goes on with his life, meeting someone new. Leo learns of Thomas’ death after having suffered for the rejection that can be interpreted only through Barthes’ image of the “*Fade out*” because it essentially points out the soul of a moment expressed in the novel, but cannot be fully understood if not seen from the perspective that this figure of the lexicon explains:

Fade-out image, fading / fade-out: painful ordeal in which the loved being appears to withdraw from all contact, without such enigmatic indifference even being directed against the amorous subject or pronounced to the advantage of anyone else, world or rival (112).

It is only after the final reckoning that Leo feels guilty. It might have been a matter of social judgment that kept him away from Thomas, or it was simply attributable to how he intended their relationship to be, but what appears from the eventual outcome is that most of it was due to the social hindrances of their time and the preconception of a society that was encountering for the first time delicate themes such as homosexuality and sexually transmittable diseases (like HIV).

In conclusion, Barthes becomes crucial to fully understand Tondelli’s novel and its ambition to break literary boundaries. The musical structure of Tondelli’s novel, as described in this research, is explained by Tondelli himself in the “*Conversazioni*” (Conversations) with other authors, critics and journalists, which are added to the section “*Note per la quarta di copertina*” (Notes to the back cover), in the Bompiani edition of the novel, where he answers their questions about his life, style and literary background. This is in addition to the actual

chapters in the books that are introduced by the titles “Movimento” followed by the number, preceding the title of the chapter. As Tondelli himself discussed in one of these conversations, Barthes’ *Fragments*, which he read and are part of his inspiration, was fundamental to develop his novel and, in my research, Barthes’ *Fragments* helped to untangle the unfolding of Tondelli’s plot, to focus on the nonverbal aspects of the images that were illustrated, and go beyond the shortcomings of its critics.

The study of Barthes’ *Fragments* was instrumental to translate the coded love relationship of *Camere separate* because it conveys how certain non-verbal languages are widely recognized, in a sense that goes beyond the images of stereotypical love and the usual archetypes. In every relationship there is an incommunicable sense, which is difficult to decipher and to comprehend, both by the lovers and by the people who surround them and who may be part of their relationship, with their concerns and support. Both works elaborate the idea of romantic relationship in modern times as made of solitude, alienation and separation. *Camere separate* is a book that expresses the existential condition of two lovers who cannot fully live their love because they are separated, as the title suggests, mirroring the concrete struggle of each and every couple facing distance and communication hindrances, and Barthes allows Tondelli’s readers to understand the full complexity of the story as a multi-layered discourse on the complexities and shortcomings of modern romantic relationships.

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