



Tondelli, Pier Vittorio (1955-1991)

by Luca Prono

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The position of Pier Vittorio Tondelli within the Italian literary canon is an unusually central one for a gay novelist: studies of his work abound; his collected works are included in the publisher Bompiani's "classic" series; his novels remain in print and sell steadily; and he continues to influence the younger generation of Italian writers and Italian popular culture.

Yet very little critical commentary has been devoted to the representation of homosexuality and sexual difference in Tondelli's novels. The queerest thing about Tondelli studies is that they are frequently authored by Catholic intellectuals, such as Fulvio Panzeri, a close friend of Tondelli's and his testamentary executor, and the Jesuit scholar Antonio Spadaro. These critics ignore or, at best, minimize the theme of homosexuality in Tondelli's oeuvre. They emphasize instead the universality and implicit religiosity and Christianity of the works.

This critical construction builds on Tondelli's return to his Catholic faith during the last months of his life. (In contrast, many gay critics have been angered by Tondelli's non-militant way of living his homosexuality in the last phase of his life, as well as by his silence about AIDS, complications from which he died in 1991.)

Countering the critical tradition that ignores the homosexual themes in Tondelli's novels and short stories, however, are the author's own words. In a 1983 article for the Italian gay and lesbian monthly *Babilonia*, he wrote: "I believe that the gay experience is the only one which recognizes--in the desolated panorama of youngsters' wishes--a common imaginative and metaphoric language, a common unwillingness to conform, a common claim to liberate desire"

Tondelli was born in Correggio, near Reggio Emilia, on September 14, 1955. After attending the local grammar school, he moved to Bologna in the 1970s, where he enrolled in the university in its Department of Art, Music, and Drama. He graduated with a dissertation on "Epistolary Literature and the Theory of the Novel."

During his university years he wrote his first book, *Altri Libertini* ("Other Libertines"), which was published in 1980. The volume is a collection of short stories about Tondelli's "homeland and its generational myths," narrated in a style tending to reproduce the spoken idiom of the characters.

Only twenty days after its release, the judiciary ordered the seizure of all copies of *Altri Libertini*. Magistrates accused Tondelli of obscenity. What the censors found most shocking were the explicit portrayal of homosexual life (as in the short story "Viaggio") and, above all, a scene in the short story "Postoristoro" ("Railway Snack Bar"), where a junkie is given a drug injection in his penis. Tondelli was eventually acquitted of the charge of obscenity.

After the success of his first book, Tondelli began to contribute articles to newspapers and magazines; and, in 1982, he published his autobiographical novel *PaoPao*. The title means "Picchetto Armato Ordinario" (Ordinary Armed Picket) and is sometimes translated *Guard Duty*. The novel is an ironic and irreverent

account of twelve months of military service (which, until the late 1990s, was compulsory in Italy).

The allegedly "macho" institution of the Army is shown in the book as offering a continuous opportunity for homosexual romance and for an alternative lifestyle based on smoking marijuana and drinking cheap red wine. The novel continues Tondelli's experimental quest for a written literary language that is able to reproduce the spontaneity of a spoken language, what the novelist referred to as "emotional language."

Tondelli's next novel *Rimini* (1985), named after the popular seaside resort on the northeastern coast of Italy, marked a break from his experimental phase and shifted his fiction towards a more structured and less autobiographical plot. The novel became an instant bestseller, although reviews were not uniformly favorable, as many critics accused Tondelli of having left behind the rich literary experimentation of his first two books for a more commercial form of writing.

The novel was also at the center of another scandal: it was scheduled to be launched during the popular Sunday afternoon television show *Domenica In*, but the interview with Tondelli was cancelled at the last minute due to the homosexual content of one of the novel's subplots.

Although its critical reception was not enthusiastically favorable, *Rimini* is actually a complex, polyphonic novel in which Tondelli interweaves the stories of a dozen different characters and mixes several literary genres and themes, including *noir*, romance, and political intrigue.

In 1986 Tondelli moved to Milan and edited collections of short stories written by young writers. In the same year he published a private book addressed to his closer friends: *Biglietti Agli Amici* ("Cards for My Friends"). The book was published in a limited edition and was not sold in bookshops until after Tondelli's death.

The non-commercial publication of *Biglietti agli Amici* is a sign of Tondelli's retreat from mundane Milanese society and his revulsion against modern consumerism. Another sign was his decision to live in an unfashionable and obscure street, via Abbadesse.

In a book-length interview with Fulvio Panzeri, Tondelli complained that "the Eighties were tragic because of . . . the superficiality, the vulgar willingness to impose one's presence and a certain stupidity which emerged and erased those possibilities that had been created by the 1970s. Everything was sacrificed in the name of the rules of the market, of efficiency and productivity."

In 1989 Tondelli founded, with Enzo Siciliano and Elisabetta Rasy, the literary magazine *Panta* and published his last novel, *Camere Separate* (translated in English as *Separate Rooms*). The following year he collected a great number of his critical essays, short stories, and newspaper articles in the volume *Un Weekend Postmoderno* ("A Postmodern Weekend").

Camere Separate focuses on the mourning of the novelist Leo for the death of his beloved Thomas. Although Tondelli declared that reading the story as specifically about gay people would be wrong--"I wouldn't talk of homosexuality. I would talk of love, full stop. I am tired of these distinctions concerning a way of loving which is, after all, similar to everyone else's"-- the homosexual specificity of the work is crucial.

Often hailed by Catholic critics as a novel of conversion that repudiates the transgressiveness of the author's earlier texts and documents his return to the Catholic faith, *Camere Separate* actually questions the validity of heterosexual culture's claim as the social norm. It also exposes how religion supports this claim and thus excludes and marginalizes gay people.

While he is attending mass in his native town, for example, Leo cannot help but feel tense. He experiences "the one real feeling that he can have when he looks at the crowd: shame." His aversion to official religion

is clearly voiced: "He could have joined a religious community. They would have been delighted to take him in. They would have felt even more in the right because the lost sheep had returned to the fold. But he could not give up his own self. He could not cripple himself."

This passage has an almost prophetic quality, for Catholic critics have indeed transformed the novelist into the redeemed sheep, a conception that Tondelli's alleged deathbed pronouncements may encourage, but that his texts deny.

In 1991 Tondelli moved from Milan to Bologna and returned to his Catholic faith. At the end of August he was hospitalized in Reggio Emilia with AIDS complications. He started to work on a new literary project provisionally entitled *Sante Messe* ("Holy Masses"), which would have described several masses he attended.

Unfortunately Tondelli was only able to jot down some notes: he died on December 16, 1991 at the age of 36.

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Luca Prono holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Nottingham, where he taught courses in American culture and Film Studies. He has published articles on Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Italian Neo-Realism, and American Radical Literature, as well as on contemporary representations of homosexuality in Italian films.