



Tondelli and Morrissey: Separate Rooms, Connecting Rooms

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Pier Vittorio Tondelli, one of the most significant writers of the European Eighties, was arguably the first interpreter within the Italian literary milieu of Morrissey's lyrics and imaginary. The artist from Manchester – first with his band, The Smiths, and then as a solo artist – established himself as the most “literary” songwriter in contemporary English culture, becoming a cult author thanks to works which span from the records *Meat Is Murder* (1985), *The Queen Is Dead* (1986) and *Viva Hate* (1988) to the book consecration of his *Autobiography* (2013), published in the Penguin Classics collection. Tondelli deeply engaged with the melancholy poetics that characterized Morrissey's lyrics (spleen, Wildean decadentism, a desperate sentimentalism and a distinctive sexual ambiguity), going as far as to insert precise mentions and references from Morrissey's works in his most famous novels. From *Rimini* (1985) to the spiritual testament *Camere separate* (1989), along with the miscellaneous nonfiction anthology *Un weekend postmoderno* (1990), Tondelli never ceased to dialogue with the British singer as a poetic coeval soulmate within an aesthetic paradigm of both the “artist as a young man” and the homosexual as a “forbidden hero”. Due to his early death, Tondelli never had a chance to meet Morrissey personally and Morrissey probably never read Tondelli's works. This article seeks to investigate in detail the almost unexplored relationship between two crucial authors of the European Eighties, whose apparently separate rooms become connecting through literature, the search for a homeland, lost and found time.

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Loneliness clarifies.
(P. Larkin)

These Melancholic Men. Morrissey as Read by Pier Vittorio Tondelli

If Livio Romano wrote that nostalgia is the real “leitmotif of the Tondellian *Bildungsroman* [...] containing either a strong integration yearning or a final accomplished growth, against the backdrop of relatively peaceful western Eighties” (Romano 2016, 183; my translation), we can assume that Morrissey and The Smiths constitute the main soundtrack to the melancholy that always underlies the works of Pier Vittorio Tondelli, despite his reception as a libertine, transgressive and apparently disengaged figure back in the day.

The Smiths became “the cult band for a cult writer”, the commonest term used by music journalists (Campofreda 2014; my translation) when they talk about the band’s link with Tondelli. But, more significantly indeed, Morrissey’s lyrics proved to be essential in shaping the imaginary of the author both diegetically and intertextually. Tondelli is in conversation with Morrissey’s lyrics not just as a fan who knows the words of his favourite singer, but as if they were lines by W. H. Auden, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Samuel T. Coleridge, or John Keats. In other words, Morrissey’s lines have a function comparable to poetry when lyricism, emotion and melancholy are at their highest within Tondelli’s *opera omnia*. For Tondelli, Morrissey also represents the handsome, sorrowful and lonesome rebel without a cause who “speaks the ‘truth’ of desire – naked (if somewhat neurotic) lust unclothed by fond clichés about gender and warm prejudices about sexuality”, becoming for a whole generation “the definitive outsider, revealing a desire that was always outside – outside of marriage, outside of the family, outside of convention, outside of romance, outside of sexuality” (Simpson 2004, 100).

Another relevant feature that unites them is the presence of melancholia in their works. Freud defined melancholia as “mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love [...] expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults” (Freud 1957, 244); in *Seminar VIII*, Lacan added that “a melancholic never tells you that he looks bad: instead he tells you that he is the lowest of the low, that he brings on one catastrophe after another for his family” (Lacan in Mills 2020, 203). In these respects, Morrissey should be regarded as a melancholic lyricist and an author capable of interpreting the uneasiness and the *spleen* felt by the European youth in the Eighties: just to mention some of his most memorable titles, we could remember *Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now*, *Still Ill*, *Nowhere Fast* (“And when I’m lying in my bed / I think about life and I think about death / And neither one particularly appeals to me”, 1985) *I Know It’s Over*, *Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me* (“No hope, no harm / Just another false alarm”, 1987), *Unloveable*, *Half a Person*, *I Don’t Mind If You Forget Me* and the manifesto *The Boy With the Thorn In His Side*:

The boy with the thorn in his side
Behind the hatred there lies
A murderous desire for love
How can they look into my eyes
And still they don’t believe me?
(The Smiths 1986)

These lines signal a crucial point of contact between Morrissey and the attributes of many of Tondelli's characters. For both, love is a lost object, and "so, by taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction" (Freud 1957, 257). Furthermore, if Tondelli was openly gay and Morrissey "consistently subverted hegemonic understandings of sexuality and gender [...] through a wide range of queering strategies" (Dillane, Power and Devereux, 152), we should not forget that "the analysis of homosexual and queer melancholy cannot be regarded as symmetrical to the analysis of heterosexual melancholy" since "the latter is culturally enforced in a way that the former clearly is not" (Butler 1993, 271). Butler also states:

Prohibitions, which include the prohibition on homosexuality, work through the pain of guilt. [...] This prohibition against homosexuality *is* homosexual desire turned back upon itself; the self-beratement of conscience *is* the reflexive rerouting of homosexual desire. If, then, as Freud contends, pain has a delineating effect, i.e., may be one way in which we come to have an idea of our body at all, it may also be that gender-instituting prohibitions work through suffusing the body and soul with a pain that culminates in the projection of a surface, that is, a sexed morphology which is at once a compensatory fantasy and a fetishistic mask. (Butler 1993, 65)

The access to happiness seems in fact constantly denied for those who are judged by social conventions as "different": as a consequence, both within Morrissey's lyrics and Tondelli's fictional alter-egos (especially Leo in *Camere separate*, a character we will return to on several occasions) the feeling of pain and the sense of guilt are always felt to extreme depths. A song by Morrissey called *I've Changed My Plea to Guilty*, in particular, seems to say between the lines that his guilt complex is activated by all those "spoiled" people in the world outside from whom he has to come apart; and a key-passage from Tondelli's *Camere separate* affirms even more dramatically the necessity of a "separate" world in which he can express his real feelings:

I'm standing in the dark
With my innocent hand on my heart
I've changed my plea
I've changed my plea to guilty
Because freedom is wasted on me
See how you're all spoiled again
Outside there is a pain
Emotional air raids exhaust in my heart
And it's safer to be inside
(Morrissey 1988)

Allora, forse, tutta la sua vita, il suo essere separato, non è altro [...] che una elaborata messa in scena della propria, inestinguibile, volontà di svanimento; la spettacolarizzazione pubblica di un complesso di colpa, di un'angoscia che lui ha sentito forse fin dal primo giorno in cui ha aperto gli occhi al mondo, e cioè che non sarebbe mai stato felice. E questo senso di colpa, per essere nato, per aver occupato un posto che non voleva, per l'infelicità di sua madre, per la rozzezza del suo paese si è dislocata in un mondo separato, quello della letteratura, permettendogli di sopravvivere, anche di gioire, ma sempre con la consapevolezza che mai la pienezza

della vita, come comunemente la intendono gli altri, sarebbe stata sua. (Tondelli 2011, 213-14)¹

Nevertheless, as Spadaro pointed out, even though “the ‘separate life’ is powerfully nostalgic since it always desires *another* dimension, [...] beyond the impossible achievement, the condition of hope and expectation vibrates: melancholia did not say the last word” (Spadaro 2002, 255, my translation). This is certainly true for the Italian writer and we will try to figure out why later on; as for Morrissey, we could recall what the writer Will Self claimed in a well-known article for *The Observer* about the singer: “No matter the quantity of *spleen*, he has too acute a view of himself to become one of those grandads of pop, perambulating around the stage in support hose, permanently marooned in some hormonal stretch limo” (Self 2006, 181-182). It might just be time, then, to delve deeper into the tie that binds these two kindred spirits of the European Eighties.

Morrissey and Tondelli have also a similar feeling for their hometowns, Manchester and Correggio, resulting in a frequent attraction-repulsion towards their birthplace and in a series of journeys searching for a new homeland, only to realize that just like melancholia “your homeland is a mother that never repudiates you” (Tondelli in Fangareggi 1985, 5, my translation). The last two sections of this article about Tondelli in Paris, on the (sound)track of Morrissey, will provide more insights on this matter, but a confrontation between this last quote from Tondelli and some lines by Morrissey could offer a relevant connection to conclude this preliminary part:

Oh Mother, I can feel the soil falling over my head
and as I climb into an empty bed
Oh well. Enough said.
I know it's over - still I cling
I don't know where else I can go
(The Smiths 1986)

It might not be a coincidence, then, that the first literary *locus* within Tondelli's works where we can meet Morrissey and Pasolini is his very homeland, Emilia-Romagna. In a book, more specifically, named after a precise city.

***Rimini*, so much to answer for**

The first peculiar element to notice, never highlighted before, is that Morrissey and The Smiths appear in Tondelli's works not in the form of a reference or epigraph – which, following a Genettian terminology, means and leads “*off* the work” (Genette 1997, 144) – but as deeply rooted *in* the diegesis, an integral element of the story which is being narrated. This is a trait that could certainly fall within the realm of “intertextual intersections” I dealt with in a previous theoretical study (Pantalei 2016, 158). In this respect, the first quotation drawn from the English songwriter already features this

¹ So perhaps, throughout his life, the fact of being apart is nothing else [...] than an elaborate setting for his own unquenchable desire to disappear; the spectacular public manifestation of a guilt complex, of an anxiety that he has perhaps felt ever since the very first day when he opened his eyes on the world, an anxiety that he would never find happiness. And this sense of guilt, at having been born, at having had a place that he did not want, at his mother's unhappiness, at the coarseness of his home town, all this has been transferred into a world apart, the world of literature, permitting him to survive and even feel gladness, but always with the consciousness that the fullness of life, as other people usually see it, would never be his for the taking (Tondelli 1992, 184).

modus operandi and can be found in *Rimini* (1985), Tondelli's third novel, a book without which – as Lanfranco Vaccari wrote – “the perception of what were the Eighties in Italy would not be the one that all of us, not just a couple of generations, have inherited” (Vaccari in Tondelli 2003, 12, my translation), that is “a clearheaded and vibrating idea of Postmodern culture [...] immersed with a touch of frank, perhaps melancholy curiosity in the manifold and flashing theatre of the Eighties mundanity” (Fenocchio 2004, 220, my translation).

Among the multiple stories that form the polyphonic plot there is a character with whom the author clearly identifies, Bruno May, a young homosexual writer going through an existential crisis. He undoubtedly represents the most melancholic figure of the text, lost inside a dull present and memories of a complicated love for an emotionally unstable artist named Aelred. It could be said that the focalisation on Bruno is almost ‘diachronic,’ because it seems to progress through flashbacks and digressions triggered by present circumstances that always lead to the past. With this in mind, the fact that some lines from The Smiths’ *I Don’t Owe You Anything* spark off the crucial analepsis about his episode becomes particularly noteworthy:²

Improvvisamente la ghiaia scricchiolò alle sue spalle. Bruno si arrestò. Sentì un rumore di passi che lo stavano raggiungendo. Cautamente si voltò. Scorse un’ombra. Una figura alta gli andava incontro, superò il vialetto e calpestò l’erba a una decina di metri da lui. Bruno non si mosse. Cercò di individuare quella persona. Sentì gli arbusti scrocchiare e poi il fischio di una canzone [...]. Bruno si inchiodò a terra. Conosceva molto bene quella canzone. La ripescò dalla memoria. Faceva:

Did I really walk all this way
Just to hear you say
Oh, I don’t want to go out tonight...

I ricordi si scatenarono l’uno nell’altro, lo stordirono. L’ombra lo aveva ormai raggiunto e continuava a canticchiare:

I don’t owe you anything
But you owe me something
Repay me now...
Bruno vide un ciuffo di capelli biondi. Alzò la mano come per accarezzarli. ‘Aelred’, soffiò. ‘Come hai fatto a trovarmi ancora?’ (Tondelli 1985, 191-92)³

² *Rimini* has not been translated in English, therefore I will provide translations into English in the footnotes. I have used the 1985 original edition of the text. I also refer to a 2003 critical edition. As for The Smiths’ song the reference will be their debut album: The Smiths. 1984. *The Smiths*. London: Rough Trade.

³ Out of the blue, the gravel creaked behind his back. Bruno stopped. He heard a sound of footsteps coming towards him. He turned around carefully. He saw a shadow. A tall figure was reaching to him, he got over the alley and stepped on the grass about ten meters from him. He tried to figure out who he was. He felt the crack of the trees and then the humming of a song, [...] Bruno kept stuck on the ground. He knew that song very well. He dredged it up from his memory. It went like: Did I really walk all this way / Just to hear you say / ‘Oh, I don’t want to go out tonight’... Memories raged out one on the other, he was stunned. The shadow had almost reached him and kept on singing: I don’t owe you anything / But you owe me something / Repay me now... Bruno saw a lock of blond hair. He lifted his hand as to caress it. ‘Aelred’, he whispered. ‘How did you manage to find me again?’.

These lyrics from Morrissey introduce the central flashback of Bruno's story which tells of his first meeting with Aelred and then narrates their love, their first sexual intercourse and eventually their break-up. There is an additional hermeneutic layer to the identification between Bruno and the main character of *The Smith's* tune. They both have a drinking problem and their first appearance is in a state of drunkenness ("Bought on stolen wine / A nod was the first step / You knew very well / What was coming next", Morrissey 1984; "Stava seduto su di una poltrona, al buio, rannicchiato su se stesso. Aveva in mano una bottiglia da cui beveva lunghe ed estenuanti sorsate. [...] Era fradicio come può esserlo solo un alcolizzato", Tondelli 1985, 189).⁴ They are both caught between sadness and the expectation of happiness ("Too freely on your lips / Words prematurely sad / Oh, but I know what will make you smile tonight"; "Bruno fu glaciale. 'Ti ho lasciato scritto un biglietto.' [...] Ma a Bruno sfuggì un sorriso che Aelred immediatamente colse", Tondelli 2003, 193-94).⁵ Most of all, both long for "something" which they think their partners/lovers owe them.

Furthermore, one should notice that those lines are actually the last words Bruno says in his life, indeed: after the broad flashback about his affair, the reader can figure out that the sudden overnight appearance of Aelred in Rimini is just an alcohol-induced hallucination after which the character is severely beaten up by some passers-by who assault and insult him very likely because of his homosexuality (as he had tried to caress a boy mistaking him for Aelred). The sequence of events clearly reminds of the violent killing of Pier Paolo Pasolini occurred in Italy ten years before Tondelli's novel. Bruno is left half-dead on the ground although Tondelli allows his fictional *doppelgänger* to take the remaining half of his life by his own hand:

L'ombra uscita dai giardinetti di fronte al Grand Hotel gli era di fronte. Smise di fischiettare quel motivo. 'Aelred', disse Bruno avvicinando la mano fino ad accarezzarlo. Un colpo violento lo prese alla bocca dello stomaco. Cadde in terra. Sentì altri colpi alle costole e sul cranio e una voce che lo offendeva. Perse i sensi. Quando si svegliò, si trovò spogliato della giacca e pieno di sangue sul volto e sulle mani. [...] Barcollò fino a raggiungere la casa. Entrò nella sua stanza. Chiuse gli occhi. Quello che seguì non fu altro che un dolore ridicolo e fulmineo. [...] Che se ne occupassero gli altri, ora, di quel corpo abbandonato sul pavimento. Lui ci aveva tentato per tutta la vita. E non c'era riuscito. Sì, che se ne occupassero una buona volta gli altri. Lui era definitivamente al di là di qualsiasi preoccupazione. (Tondelli 2003, 221-22)⁶

Using a concept elaborated by Francesco Gnerre, Bruno becomes the "forbidden hero" of the novel, who manages "to get rid of 'a burden' but at the cost of getting rid also of the very essence of his life" (Gnerre 2000, 407, my translation). At the same time,

⁴ He was sitting in an armchair, in the dark, crouched on himself. He held a bottle of wine from which he drank long and draining sips. [...] He was drunk, as only a wino can.

⁵ Bruno was glacial. 'I left you a message'. [...] Bruno put upon his face a smile that Aelred caught immediately.

⁶ The shadow coming out of the hedges in front of the Grand Hotel was ahead of him. He stopped whistling that tune. 'Aelred', Bruno said, moving his hand as close as to caress him. A violent blow hit him in the pit of the stomach. He fell on the ground. He felt other blows to his ribs and his skull, while a voice insulted him. He lost consciousness. When he woke, he found himself without his coat and full of blood on his face and hands. [...] He staggered to get back home. He came into the room. What followed was nothing else than a ridiculous and lightning quick pain. [...] Let the others deal with that abandoned body on the floor. He tried all his life. And he failed. Yes, let them deal with it. He was definitively beyond any concern.

Bruno's suicide somehow achieves in the most tragic way the parable presented in *I Don't Owe You Anything*, which remains open to different possible interpretations (including a happy ending) but certainly stakes a claim of intense subjectivity by saying:

You should never go to them
 Let them come to you
 Just like I do
 Just like I do
 (The Smiths, 1984)

Almost paradoxically, in order to reach a state of ataraxia – to be “beyond any concern” – and in order to let the others finally come to him instead of him going to them, Bruno has to die proving how “the melancholic subject is always defined by a dynamic relation to the past rather than a confirmed step beyond definitional thresholds” (Boulter 2011, 183).

In conclusion, I have mentioned at the beginning of the article that Morrissey's lines have a function comparable to poetry in Tondelli's works and it could be important to underline in this respect that the only other poetic lines integrated into the narration come from Emily Dickinson, a “genius soaked in melancholy” (Kirkby 2011, 248), whose verses are quoted and transfigured by a character called Alberto as the lyrics of a song – an imaginary summer hit – capable of detecting the posthumous sense of emptiness after the wild nights spent clubbing in Rimini:

Raggiunse il lungomare. Si sedette sul muricciolo e cominciò a suonare. Attaccò con una libera esecuzione del ritornello dell'Hit della stagione:

I'm nobody! Who are you?
 Are you – Nobody – too?
 Then there's a pair of us!

Il testo – aveva letto – era stato scritto da una poetessa americana cent'anni prima, ma quello che veramente lo faceva impazzire era la musica. [...] E il suono del suo sax, la sua musica, fu come il rauco grido di dolore delle cose e degli uomini colti in quel momento bagnato, all'alba, dopo il diluvio. (113-14)⁷

This further corroborates that Tondelli dialogues with Morrissey as a real and proper poet. The borders between poetry and music are then blurred to the highest degree and the poems-songs are juxtaposed in a symmetrical way: Dickinson's words close the first section of the book and Morrissey's words close the second, epitomising the deepest form of melancholia which seems to intrinsically represent the downside of the uncommitted and light-hearted materialistic surface of the Eighties.⁸

⁷ He went to the seaside. He sat on a low wall and started to play. He started with a personal rendition of the Hit of the Season chorus: 'I'm nobody! Who are you? / Are you – Nobody – too? / Then there's a pair of us!' The lyrics – he had read – had been written by an American poet a hundred years before, but he went wild because of the music. [...] And the sound of his saxophone, his music, was like the hoarse painful cry of all things and all men caught in that wet moment, at dawn, after the flood.

⁸ It is worth noting that at the end of the book, after the finale, Tondelli adds a page called “Musiche” to retrace the soundtrack associated with the writing of *Rimini*. The Smiths have the highest number of songs, three, along with Leonard Cohen, U2 and Echo and the Bunnymen: *I Don't Owe You Anything*, *Suffer Little Children*, *Reel Around the Fountain* (Tondelli 1985, 291).

Sneaking into *Separate rooms* (Camere separate)

To some extent, the above-mentioned characters become prototypes for what is believed to be Tondelli's masterpiece and spiritual testament, *Separate rooms* (Camere separate, 1989), the last novel he published before dying of AIDS in 1991 at the age of thirty-six. The book immediately received acclaim and was reviewed by Enzo Siciliano in the columns of *Corriere della Sera* as a work which was able to "scrutinize what is enclosed within the shadow cone left behind by youth, catching sight of its restlessness, its heart wrenching anomaly, its anguished defensive play" with "a special sound and an equally special colour; the sound and colour of elegy, of erosive melancholia" (Siciliano 1989, 5; my translation).

Deeply autobiographical and following a non-linear structure of recurrent flashbacks and streams of consciousness, the story of the passionate and impossible love between Leo and Thomas is orchestrated around three "movements" like a symphony in which the themes of death, separation and loneliness recur:

L'idea era un po' quella della musica ambientale in cui ci sono le stesse note, apparentemente non cambia niente e poi, in effetti, capisci che non stai fermo, che ti stai muovendo, che stai sprofondando. In queste cadute c'è anche tenerezza, forse estasi. Penso al finale delle *Elegie duinesi* di Rilke. L'immagine è quella delle foglie che cadono e della pioggia. Così conclude:

'E noi che pensiamo la felicità
come un'ascesa, ne avremo l'emozione
quasi sconcertati
di questa cosa ch'è felice, cade'.
(Tondelli 2001, 978)⁹

The third "movimento", which bears the title of the novel itself, is arguably the most important of the whole book because it consists not only of the break-up of the story (the two lovers split up and Thomas dies)¹⁰ but also of the sad farewell which is bid to the readers by Tondelli – the author – who had just been diagnosed HIV positive. The presence of lyrical and musical references is more prominent in this last section, as if to compose one final ideal soundtrack along the last events of both the novel and his life. In the order the songs appear in the novel a primary list could include Joe Jackson and his bluesy song *We Can't Live Together*, the abovementioned *Duino Elegies* by Rilke, Billy Bragg, Wim Mertens and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, but, most of all, The Smiths and Morrissey.

Morrissey is mentioned three times in the last twelve pages, which make up one of the most significant diegetic cores of the novel as the protagonist "finally tries to piece together what he remembers of the past and accommodate it to his present; what his

⁹ I borrowed this idea from ambient music in which there are always the same notes, nothing ever changes apparently, and in the end you actually realize that you're not still, that you're moving, that you're falling down. In these falls there's also tenderness, maybe rapture. I think about the ending of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. The image of the falling leaves in the rain. It ends: 'And we think of happiness / like a fall, we will have the emotion / almost astounded / of this thing that is joyful, and falls' (my translation).

¹⁰ It is almost certain that Thomas dies of AIDS but the illness is never mentioned in the book, a fact that proves the difficulty in Italy to even call AIDS/HIV by its name in the late Eighties. Outside the fiction of the novel, suffice it to think that when Tondelli passed away many Italian newspapers completely avoided mentioning the cause of his death. For further reading on this matter see also Crimp 2002.

grief and suffering achieve is the consolidation of Leo's sense of his vocation as a writer" (Duncan 1999, 62). For this reason, Morrissey becomes the most important lyrical interlocutor for the main character (and, of course, for the author) in the text; furthermore, his lines – just like in *Rimini* – are deeply incorporated into the narration.¹¹ Apart from a quick mention where Leo lists the names of the bands on the cassettes that Eugenio gave him ("Si mette la cuffia e ascolta le cassette che gli ha registrato Eugenio: Morrissey naturalmente e The Smiths, poi Deacon Blue, Swing Out Sister...", Tondelli 2011, 205),¹² something which is still interesting due to The Smith's first position and that adverb "Morrissey, of course" remarking a profound predilection, the other two *loci* are even more assimilated within the filigree of the plot.

As a matter of fact, after Thomas' death, the protagonist begins to forge a friendship with a young man called Eugenio; when the two head to the "Rilke Walk", the trail between Duino castle and Sistiana, Leo finally figures out that Eugenio knows about his condition and instinctively protecting himself he teases him by quoting some lines:

Il castello, massiccio, assomiglia a un fortino. Si erge forte e pauroso come un complesso di colpa: l'avamposto della cupezza dal quale rivolgere domande senza risposta. [...] Leo capisce in questo preciso istante che Eugenio sa. E sente con forza il desiderio, se tutto questo fosse mai in suo potere, di benedirlo. Altre volte, benignamente, Leo scherza sull'atteggiamento di Eugenio e gli canticchia *Suedehead*: 'Why do you come here, why, why do you hang around?', poi si accorge che, dietro ai sorrisi, Eugenio ne è ferito. E lui si blocca perché non sa... (Tondelli 2011, 203-4)¹³

The quoted song is not a track like the others but the debut solo single by Morrissey right after the troubled split up of The Smiths, a disbandment that – as J. K. Rowling put it in Channel 4 broadcast called *The Importance of Being Morrissey* – "affected a whole English generation" (Channel Four 2003). The main theme of separation in the final pages of the novel is then amplified by a song that reports the cryptic conversation of two people who seem to orbit around each other without touching, giving way to an anaphoric chorus sung in a quite mournful way (chorus in italics):

Why do you come here?
And why, why do you hang around?
I'm so sorry
I'm so sorry

Why do you come here
When you know it makes things hard for me?
When you know, oh
Why do you come?

¹¹ The official translation into English published in 1992 will be the reference edition for all the upcoming quotes in translation.

¹² He puts on his headphones and listens to the tapes that Eugenio has recorded for him: Morrissey, of course, and The Smiths, then Deacon Blue, Swing Out Sister... (Tondelli 1992, 177).

¹³ The massive castle looks like a stronghold. It soars upwards powerful and fearsome: the outpost of obscurity from which to pose answerless questions. [...] Leo realizes in this very moment that Eugenio knows. He feels a strong desire, if such a thing were ever in his power to do, to bless him. At other times Leo jokes lightheartedly about Eugenio's attitude, and hums *Suedehead*: "Why do you come here, why, why do you hang around?" then he realizes that behind his smiling face Eugenio is hurt. And Leo feels helpless... (175).

I'm so sorry
I'm so sorry

You had to sneak into my room
 Just to read my diary
 It was just to see, just to see
 All the things you knew I'd written about you
 (Morrissey 1988)

The regretful tone perfectly matches the atmosphere of the situation between Eugenio and Leo, who seems to think that his new friend sneaked into his “room” – a keyword in the novel – and secretly read his “diary” after having realized about his condition; for this reason, Leo feels “helpless” just like the protagonist of *Suedehead* (arguably Morrissey himself) feels “sorry”.

Moreover, from the perspective of the readers, it is noteworthy that Tondelli neither mentions the singer here nor specifies that the verses belong to a song that at the time was not famous enough in Italy as to allow its being immediately recognized by the readers. This is probably why the reference has remained unnoticed by those who have studied the novel and its intertextual implications over the years. On the contrary, this fact seems quite important because it proves once again that Tondelli regarded Morrissey's lines as proper poetry and used them intentionally in his prose, in moments when the degree of lyricism, sentimentalism and melancholy reaches his climax.

In this regard, the most significant clue comes in the very last page of *Separate Rooms*, where the author decides to quote other lines by Morrissey in an openhearted stream of consciousness that leads to his final goodbye, caught between a strange momentary joy and the awareness of the inevitable end:

Allora pensa all'Italia, ai suoi amici, a Eugenio che verrà a prenderlo a Milano e per il quale ha comprato alcuni regali. Segue le parole della canzone di Morrissey: 'Oh, I'm so glad to grow older, to move away from those younger years, now I'm in love for the first time.' In un qualche modo è felice. Fra qualche ora si imbarcherà sul jumbo, leggerà qualche pagina, ascolterà della musica e si addormenterà per svegliarsi, pochi istanti dopo, nella luce accecante del nuovo giorno. Ma fra qualche ora, fra un giorno forse [...] sentirà una fitta diversa prendergli il petto o il respiro o l'addome. Nonostante siano trascorsi tanti anni, o solo un'ora, ricorderà il suo amore e rivedrà gli occhi di Thomas come li ha visti quell'ultima volta. Allora saprà, con una determinazione anche commossa e disperata, che non c'è più niente da fare. (Tondelli 2011, 216)¹⁴

The song title – *Break Up the Family* (from the singer debut solo album *Viva Hate*) – seems to speak for itself, gaining a value which could go far beyond “the author's sharing with Morrissey a *queer* poetics that stresses anarchical and melodramatic aspects” (Porciani 2010, 158, my translation). The internalization of these lines by Morrissey

¹⁴ He thinks of Italy, his friends, Eugenio, who will come and see him in Milan. He follows the words of the Morrissey song: 'Oh, I'm so glad to grow older, to move away from those younger years, now I'm in love for the first time.' He is, in a way, happy. In a few hours he will board the jumbo jet, read a few pages of a magazine, listen to some music, and drop off to sleep, then wake up a few minutes later in the dazzling light of a new day. In a few hours, in a day's time, [...], he will feel a twinge seize him in the chest or lungs or abdomen. Although so many years have passed, or just one hour, he will remember his love and once more see Thomas's eyes, just as he saw them the last time. Then, with a resolve that is as moving as it is desperate, he will know that there is nothing more that can be done (186).

coincides with what Marino Sinibaldi sees as “Tondelli’s ultimate acceptance, the one he lacked to complete his journey and the re-construction of his self, to finally fulfil his destiny [...]: to be a writer is to remark his diversity and his separateness even more” (Sinibaldi 1992, 116, my translation); for this reason, the same critic defines the use of these lyrics as a “proper epigraph” for his farewell (Sinibaldi 1992, 116, my translation).

But crucially, Tondelli does not simply ‘mention’ three lines by Morrissey. No one ever noticed that he somehow translates and paraphrases in prose the entire stanza of that song. If we take a closer look at the verses and chorus the similarities become clear:

I want to see all my friends tonight
 Yes, you found love, but you weren’t
 At peace with your life
 Home late, full of hate
 Despise the ties that bind
 I’m so glad to grow older
 To move away from those younger years
 I’m in love for the first time
 And I don’t feel bad
 (Morrissey 1988)

The passage where Leo wants to see his friends mentally recalls Morrissey’s lyrics: here, the author concludes with the statement that “he is, in a way, happy”, reminding Morrissey’s line “And I don’t feel bad”. In addition, and more importantly, there is a surprising affinity between the ending of the song and the ending of the book:

So wish me luck my friends
 Goodbye
 So wish me luck again
 Goodbye

Si avvierà alle sue cure, cambierà letti negli ospedali, ma saprà sempre, in qualsiasi ora, che tutto sarà inutile, che per lui, finalmente, per grazia di Dio onnipotente, anche per lui e la sua metaphysical bug, la sua scrittura e i suoi Vondel o Madison, anche per tutti loro è giunto il momento di dirsi addio.” (Tondelli 2011, 216)¹⁵

Leo eventually breaks up with his family and finds the courage to say his last goodbye to his friends, experiencing a previously unknown sense of relief and joy which transcends, for the first time, his melancholia. And this is how, unexpectedly but unmistakably, Morrissey enters contemporary Italian literature.

A Postmodern Weekend: around Europe with The Smiths on

Whilst we have dealt with the writer’s fictional alter egos so far, we can now examine Tondelli *agens* first-hand. Tondelli published a wide collection of reportages, reviews, descriptions, press articles, live reports and personal reflections in a volume called *Un weekend postmoderno. Cronache dagli anni Ottanta*, defined by Tondelli himself in an interview as “the subtext (‘sottotesto’ in Italian) to my novels, my real and proper writing workshop, [...] documenting the most creative and experimental sides of the

¹⁵ He will go to his therapies and treatment, he will change hospital beds, but he will always know, no matter what time of the day, by the grace of the almighty God, at last, that for him and his metaphysical bug, his writing, and his Vondels and Madisons, for all of them the time has come to say goodbye (186).

Eighties” (Tondelli in Panzeri, Picone 2001, 65-66, my translation). Here we find the author hanging out in clubs, big cities, suburbs, concerts, exhibitions and events of any kind in Italy, Eastern and Western Europe, North America and Tunisia, often as a reporter for important newspapers and magazines such as *Corriere della Sera*, *Repubblica*, *L'Espresso*, *Linus*, *Arte* and *Rockstar*.

A whole chapter of this collection (published in 1986) is dedicated to The Smiths and Morrissey, providing what is likely to be the first proper literary review of the band ever to appear in Italy. The titles given to the subparagraphs are telling: *The Queen Is Dead*, *The literary side of the band*, *Repressive institutions*, *Hells of suffering and fury*, *Old England*, *Morrissey: comparisons* (Tondelli 2005, 14-15¹⁶). Tondelli critically analyses Morrissey's lyrics, just as if Morrissey were a literary figure and going as far as to say:

Scelgo i raffinati amanti dei fiori sulla scena perché, da un punto di vista letterario, mi sembrano essere quelli più intriganti; [...] perché dopo il mediocre *Meat Is Murder*, ritrovino la genialità e il 'bel tenebroso' continui a consolarci con la sua voce sensuale, strascicata e maledetta: l'unica un po' perversa che questi primi anni Ottanta – obsoleti, invece, di falsetti e mezzeseseghe – ci abbiano dato. [...] La consapevolezza letteraria di Morrissey ha dunque dato vita a una 'trilogia dell'artista da giovane', una sequenza poetica in tre fasi che viene ad accostarsi idealmente ai tanti giovani Werther e giovani Ortis e giovani Holden di ogni letteratura: a *Dedalus* di James Joyce (anche in Morrissey non si riesce tanto bene nel salto alla cavallina: '*Please excuse me from gym*'), a *Ritratto dell'autore da cucciolo* di Dylan Thomas, a *Infanzia di un capo* di Jean-Paul Sartre e, in particolar modo, a *Il giovane Törless* di Musil. (300-1)¹⁷

Further on in the article, he also translates a couplet into Italian, in order to explain why Morrissey's lines mean so much to him, with words that already sound as a prelude to the “movement” of *Camere separate*:

Gli incontri d'amore esistono anche se l'altro, normalmente, poi se ne andrà, si sposerà e si vergognerà per quel momento in cui ha ceduto con il vino o la persuasione come succede in *William It Was Really Nothing*. Ma ecco, infine, il momento del trionfo, Morrissey che si rotola per terra, coi jeans quasi giù, e canta: '*Hand in glove, the sun shines out of our behinds. No, it's not like any other love, this one is different because it's us...*' ('Armoniosamente uniti, camminiamo da amanti in controtuce: no, questo è un amore diverso, è diverso perché riguarda noi...'). In questa voce, in questo grido, posso cogliere le speranze del ragazzo che sono stato

¹⁶ The reference edition is the critical edition published by Bompiani in 2005 but the book is not translated into English yet; for this reason, all the translations in the footnotes will be mine except for Tondelli's own translation into Italian of *Hand in Glove* by The Smiths.

¹⁷ I choose the elegant flower lovers because, from a literary point of view, they are the most intriguing; [...] because after the mediocre *Meat Is Murder*, I hope for their brilliance to be restored and for the 'bel tenebroso' to keep on consoling us with his charming, mourning and cursed voice: perhaps the only real twisted voice that these Early Eighties – full of shallowness, hypocrites and posers – gave us. [...] Morrissey's literary consciousness gave life to a 'trilogy of an artist as a young man', a poetic sequence in three rounds which ideally sits next to many young Werthers or young Ortises or young Holdens in any history of literature: he's next to James Joyce's *Dedalus* (by the way, Morrissey doesn't stand out on the vaulting horse: '*Please excuse me from gym*'), to Dylan Thomas' *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, to *The Childhood of a Leader* by Jean-Paul Sartre, to – most of all – the *The Confusions of Young Törless* by Musil.

e dei ragazzi che tutti siamo stati. Morrissey ha buon gioco: ‘*I am human, and I need to be loved.*’ (302-3)¹⁸

But the most significant article related to the *fil rouge* of melancholia – among various other references to Morrissey, including a funny note where he confesses “I read Oscar Wilde because The Smiths always talk about him in their songs” (Tondelli 2001, 834) – became part of another volume called *Quarantacinque giri per dieci anni*, published in 1990. A whole chapter named *1987. Radio On* is dedicated to the discovery of *Viva Hate*, a record that would eventually turn out to be crucial as previously discussed:

A Parigi *Viva Hate* di Morrissey, ossessivamente presente nei miei spostamenti in aereo, sui treni della banlieue, in certi pomeriggi-sere prima di uscire quando nella tua stanza d'albergo vorresti solamente un buon rum forte e ghiacciato che ti carichi per la serata, a Parigi i dodici pezzi di questo album intenso e soft, assorto con quel tanto di sguincio e di kitsch così ben mischiati nella voce di Morrissey, certe sue pronunce da *queen mother*, [...] incipit e ouverture struggenti, teneri, sempre con quella particolare, patologica malinconia adolescenziale e perversa che da anni mi affascina, con quello spirito protestatario e irriverente degno di un dandy sublime, anche con il suo populismo (*Bengali in Platform* è la sua *My Beautiful Laundrette*), bene, a Parigi *Viva Hate* mi è entrato nel sangue soffusamente [...]. La voce di Morrissey – che non mi sarei mai aspettato in quel loft – era perfetta. Non avrei mai immaginato tanta assorta tenerezza per quel duro che sono diventato. (Tondelli 2001, 672-673)¹⁹

These pages, written in the first person, seem to resonate with what Julia Kristeva theorized about the *erotization of suffering* and the *depressive affect*, namely that “sadness reconstitutes an affective cohesion of the self, which restores its unity within the framework of the affect” (Kristeva 1989, 19). By saying that in Paris – completely on his own and in a hotel room – he could rediscover his tender and emotional side thanks to Morrissey’s words, music, body and voice, the writer seems to experience a reconciliation between his melancholia and the “hard-hearted man” he says he has become. So, as Kristeva states in the same passage, “the depressive mood constitutes itself as a narcissistic support, negative to be sure, but nevertheless presenting the self with an integrity” (Kristeva 1989, 19). From this point of view, if Tondelli himself firmly

¹⁸ Love affairs exist even though the loved one, as normal, will go away in the end, will get married with someone else and will feel ashamed of himself for that moment of weakness because of wine or persuasion, just like it happens in *William It Was Really Nothing*. But here, well, in the end there is a triumph, when Morrissey rolls on the floor with his jeans almost down and sings: ‘*Hand in glove, the sun shines out of our behinds. No, it’s not like any other love, this one is different because it’s us...*’ (‘Armoniosamente uniti, camminiamo da amanti in controluce: no, questo è un amore diverso, è diverso perché riguarda noi...’). In this voice, in this desperate cry, I can retrace the hopes of the boy I have been and everyone of us has been. Morrissey plays smoothly: ‘*I am human, and I need to be loved.*’

¹⁹ In Paris *Viva Hate* by Morrissey, obsessively playing in the background of my traveling days, on the planes, on the trains to the *banlieue*, in some evenings-nights before going out when you are alone in your hotel room and you just would like to sip an icy strong rum which gets you warm for the night out, in Paris the twelve tracks of this intense and soft album, absorbed in that kitsch and off-the-rails perfectly mixed in Morrissey’s voice, some *queen mother* pronunciations of his, [...] some moving and tender *incipit* and *ouverture*, always with that particular, pathological and twisted teenage melancholy I’ve been fascinated by for years, with that witty and nonconformist spirit fit to a sublime dandy, even with his pinch of populism (*Bengali in Platform* is his *My Beautiful Laundrette*), well, in Paris *Viva Hate* started to quietly run through my veins. [...] Morrissey’s voice was perfect. I would have never expected such a tender affection for that hard-hearted man I’ve become.

asserted in one of his last interviews that “my literature is emotional, my stories are emotional: the only space my writings can last in is an emotional space” (Tondelli 1993, 7, my translation),²⁰ it is reasonable to argue that Morrissey’s lyrics deeply influenced his emotionality.

Nearly thirty years on from his death, we can conclude that his prediction was right: his melancholia – also thanks to his visceral Morrisseyean soundtrack – have kept on finding their space among generations of younger and elder readers.

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²⁰ La mia letteratura è emotiva, le mie storie sono emotive: l’unico spazio che ha il testo per durare è quello emozionale.

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