

COUCH AND SCREEN

Letters, Words and Metaphors: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Michael Radford's 'Il Postino'

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October 2015

"Il Postino" - Directed by Michael Radford (1994), 105 minutes.
Produced by Mario Cecchi Gori for Miramax.
Distributed on Touchstone Home Video.

'WANTED - POSTMAN WITH BICYCLE'. Only a temporary job, but almost tailor-made for Mario (Massimo Troisi), an introverted and uneducated yet sharply insightful young man, protagonist of Michael Radford's delightfully bitter-sweet, humane, humourous, moving yet never sentimental, comedy *Il Postino*. The job involves carrying the mail to just one illustrious addressee, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (Philippe Noiret) exiled in the early 1950s to the Southern Italian island of Procida because of his communist views. Every day Mario pedals up to the poet's new residence - a villa located on the top of a hill, surrounded by wild Mediterranean vegetation and overlooking the sea - carrying a leather bag full of correspondence: mostly, at least in his adolescent mind fuelled by newsreel mythology, love letters from adoring women all over the world.

At first, of course, Mario and Neruda hardly talk. What is there to be said, anyway, between them? Intrigued by his own thoughts and feelings, the postman cannot find the words to express them and the poet has better

things to do than listen to him. But, as the relationship develops, Mario finds an interlocutor and, with it, a voice: tentative at first, when he dares, after a farcical rehearsal in front of the mirror, ask the poet for an autograph in the hope that this will impress his girlfriends in Naples - then progressively more secure. In *Neruda-the-Man* he gradually discovers the parental figure to identify with and idealize; in *Neruda-the-Poet* the language to make sense of his inner world. If Mario's real father is a silent, down-to-earth (or down-to-sea) fisherman with little understanding of his son's existential problems ('I am tired of being a man', Mario says echoing Neruda's words), his dead mother is entirely absent - other than, that is, in the guises of Nature, both literally in the external world, and literarily in Neruda's, and then Mario's own, poetry: an all-embracing, all-containing and nurturing sea surrounding the beautiful - part lush, part desert - island.

The film has the structure, familiar to fiction readers and cinema goers alike, of a *Bildungsroman*. Witnessed by the poet himself, Mario's development into a mature man culminates in his achievement of potency, which finds its expression at three different, but interconnected, levels: (1) Sexual through his relationship, as passionate as it is clumsy, to maidenly sensuous waitress Beatrice (Maria Grazia Cucinotta), whom he eventually marries, with Neruda's help and blessing; (2) Literary as Mario starts reading and producing verse himself, and even suggesting to his own Master an excellent adjective ('sad') to describe what fishing-nets look like. It is not a coincidence that he will un-selfconsciously create his first metaphor when listening to Neruda's lyrical description of the sea: 'I feel... weird and seasick', he says, 'like a boat tossing around... WORDS!'; and finally (3) Political by tentatively opposing a local Mafioso boss and through an ill-fated involvement with a communist demonstration, where he is invited to read one of his own Neruda-inspired poems to the crowd.

Part of the fascination of *Il Postino* consists in creatively immersing a real and contemporary character, the poet Pablo Neruda here portrayed with much biographical accuracy, in an entirely fictional situation. But if the filmmaker's fantasy interplays with history, the external world also intrudes, and most tragically, into the artistic work: as soon as the shooting of *Il Postino* was over Massimo Troisi, the actor in the title role, prematurely died. In the film, Mario is killed at a mass rally during an incident with the police: a conclusion perhaps ideological and aesthetically unnecessary, but also providing the viewers who are aware of Troisi's death with a powerfully unheimlich experience of life imitating

art.

I would like to suggest here that Neruda is also Mario's 'psychoanalyst'. The 'sessions' are represented by the postman's uphill journeys by bicycle, at regular intervals, to the poet's villa. Such ritualized visits, charged as they are for Mario with meaningful words and silences, half monologues and half dialogues, readily become opportunities for him to learn about love, literature, relationships and, ultimately, himself. A central mechanism in this 'therapeutic' process is identification: 'I'd like to be a poet too', says Mario, and asks Neruda how to become one - a wish that the latter only superficially discourages ('You'll get as fat as me!'). The postman/patient identifies with the poet/analyst: his wish to become like him is so frequent in clinical practice that it could be hyperbolically argued that, in fantasy at least, all analyses are training analyses!

Mario's journeys to the poet's villa, at the same time, are also more regressive explorations of 'primal scene' unconscious fantasies, as exemplified by the love letters he delivers, and is explicitly curious about, to Neruda as well as by the poet's openly sensual relationship with his wife Matilde. The first time Mario finds them hugging he modestly hides away. Later however, after he has himself established a sexual relationship with Beatrice, he allows himself some vicarious pleasure by watching the Nerudas dance a passionate tango. We can recognize a number of important elements, crucial to the film's narrative and characterizations, which are also integral aspects of the psychoanalytic experience. For example, our postman alternates between blaming Neruda for his love problems with Beatrice and expecting him to resolve them - a situation not unfamiliar to psychoanalysts. The name Beatrice is itself evocative, being also the name of the woman who inspired Dante Alighieri, whose presence in the background as the Father of all Poets reminds one of the part played in many analyses by Sigmund Freud, the Father of all Psychoanalysts. (Neruda and Freud, by the way, were both candidates, though only the former successfully, for the Nobel Prize - and *Il Postino* for five Academy awards).

Neruda tells Mario that 'poetry is the experience of feeling', a statement that could as well apply to psychoanalysis: indeed, they both provide alternative perspectives on the world - and a language to describe it. It is significant, I think, that our hero is a postman, he who 'carries across' ('trans-fers') emotionally loaded messages; and that his conversations with the poet often revolve around the subject of 'metaphors', a word

which in the film becomes itself a metaphor for all that is not prosaic in life. It is after all primarily through their interpretative work, which depends on such rhetorical devices as metaphors and analogies, that analysts help analysands understand the complex connections between different sets of thoughts, emotions and relationships. Furthermore, having the same etymology as 'transference', the concept of metaphor seems ideal to indicate the associations between literature and psychoanalysis and, in its audio and visual representations, cinema itself. Words - the stuff both poetry and 'the talking cure' are made of - are powerful. Even Beatrice's bigoted, but not idiotic, aunt Rosa, constantly worried about her niece's virginity, can state that 'a man is not far off with his hands when he starts touching you with his words!'

Of course, Neruda's 'countertransference' relationship to Mario - as he has always suspected, but also denied until its reality becomes overwhelmingly painful - is coloured by ambivalence, and not just or even primarily because of its homosexual undertones: the poet, at least in Mario's projective fantasies, is partly the benevolent parental figure we assume he has never had, partly the detached, indifferent, cold professional - almost a caricature of a psychoanalyst - ready to forget him as soon as the 'contract' is over, as soon as he can return to Chile and there is no more correspondence to be delivered. When Neruda embraces Mario before leaving the island, the 'termination' of their relationship is as deeply felt by both of them as the one at the end of a good analysis. 'You left something behind for me', says Mario, who is now ready to internalise the poet/father/analyst and get on with life on his own, though of course not without much sadness. But then his mentor fails to keep in touch: when at long last, after more than one year, Mario receives a letter from Chile, it is a disappointingly impersonal message from the poet's secretary, asking for some effects left behind in the by now dilapidated villa to be returned. Mario feels devastated but still tries to rationalize the poet's behaviour: 'Why should he remember me?... I think it's quite normal...', he says. But with bitter tears in his eyes.

Michael Radford's *Il Postino* may not be what is conventionally understood as a 'psychoanalytic' film. Attempting to interpret the unconscious meanings of an exiled communist poet's behaviour and verse, or of an islander's everyday life preoccupations, would have been a futile exercise; the film has minimal symbolism in its imagery, no dream sequences, no scenes taking place in a mental institution or in a therapist's consulting room, no display of violence, perversion or

psychopathology. And yet the description of a process of maturation through an intense personal rapport full of transference and countertransference connotations, which is central to this movie, has much in common, in its structure and function, with the psychoanalytic relationship. In this respect, viewing *Il Postino* through a psychoanalytic lens by drawing parallels between the two situations will hopefully enrich and deepen our understanding of both.

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