

T. S. Eliot Studies in Italy 1950-2007: An Overview

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The last fifty years have been for English Studies in Italy a period of high receptivity and original assimilation of literary theories, critical methods and even metaphysical constructions of the text, after much pre-war “feeding / A little life with dried tubers”. If one excepts the isolated phenomenon of a Mario Praz, our academic studies attained maturity when we ceased to import culture passively from abroad, and, with Giorgio Melchiori and Marcello Pagnini, some of our most outstanding criticism began to be translated and made available to English and American audiences.

Before and after the war Benedetto Croce was an undisputed authority on aesthetics, and also a militant comparatist – not by chance, as we shall see in a moment – in his several collections of essays that ranged over all the ancient and modern European literatures. But, as happens with literary dictatorships, he froze the critical debate well after his death in 1952. Today, with hindsight, we should perhaps rehabilitate him as the one who gave the *coup de grâce* to an old-fashioned and immobile historicism. Curiously enough, Croce came to be combated and anathematised by two schools of thought then emerging, which faced each other with daggers drawn: that of the politically engaged, Marxist critics, who had their gospel in Lukács and criticised Croce for his deafness to literature as a revolutionary political weapon; and that of the first formalists whom he, Croce, was to a certain extent instrumental in shaping, along with the American new critics and Russian formalism. They rejected Croce’s axiom that poetic form, and all the technicalities of poetry, are secondary and incidental, and objected to his famous formula of a “chemical” separation of “poetry” from “non poetry”. What he had been insensitive to, according to his accusers, was the importance of an organic concept of literary art.

After the wane of “crocianesimo” at the end of the fifties, critical schools slowly stabilised in Italy according to a tacit geographic partitioning. Academic seats won a reputation as centres of well-defined literary approaches and cultural interests, and worked for years with some mutual impermeability, later overcome thanks to the speeding up of communications and the foundation of the Italian Society of English Studies (A.I.A.). In the

sixties and early seventies, for example, an academic map would have featured Milan and Rome as strongholds of a sociological method of a Marxist matrix; Venice as the bridgehead of an approach mainly oriented towards philological and textual questions; Florence as the vanguard, where the subtlest theoretical assumptions from beyond the Alps were absorbed, at the very moment when Paris was becoming the European laboratory of innovation.

In the last three decades or so the vicissitudes of English Studies in Italy have become hardly intelligible, and difficult to synthesize, owing to an anarchic reshuffling that stems from many factors, among which the dissolution of local and regional schools, and of the immediate identification of academic seat and range of interests, is not the least notable. A further factor is the acquired scientific independence of professors of English, along with the transformation of the Italian academic system from an *élite* to a mass university, entailing a steep increase in the members of staff to match a correspondingly steep rise in the numbers of student enrolments. The recruiting system of members of staff, which until some years ago worked on a national basis, could, to construct an example, move a lecturer, whose career had begun in Milan, to the University of Catania. It is thus impossible to update the Italian academic map, so easily sketched out after the war, as far as English Studies are concerned. What remains feasible is simply to keep referring to universities identifying, with some exceptions, with the study of certain authors rather than with approaches and methods – Shakespeare at Rome and Florence, Joyce at Trieste, Conrad at Pisa, the Victorians at Venice and Pescara, to name only a few. Also, one should not forget the bifurcation which occurred after the institutionalization of Post-colonial Studies, an interest taken up today by many of us as an alternative to “purely” English Studies. This split completes the one which, years ago, separated American from English Studies. One final remark concerns the ruinous earthquake caused by the recent academic reform which, by instituting three- and two-year degrees (supposedly) modelled on the English B.A and M.A. respectively, has reverberated – mainly negatively – not only in the strictly educational field but in the scholarly activity

itself of staff researchers. These are discouraged from writing – and therefore find it hard to publish – specialized books which cannot be targeted at the academic consumer, let alone the ordinary reader. Hence, there is an undoubted lowering of the scientific standards of the publications destined for the university, only remedied in the form of books totally or partially financed by the CNR (National Research Centre) or by Departmental funds.

T. S. Eliot studies in Italy between the post-war years and today may exemplify the gamut of these phenomena. On the one hand Eliot, retaining an always provocative centrality in the Modernist canon, and a durable pride of place in the syllabus, has never failed to stimulate the production of reading guides in Italian, and periodically challenges poets and critics to compile annotated anthologies of his poetry with facing texts. Alessandro Serpieri, as we shall see, one of the most sophisticated Italian critics of Eliot, has recently reprinted¹ his edition of *The Waste Land* (first published in 1982) enriching it with an appendix dealing with the first draft of the poem, excerpts of which appear in translation. On the other hand, Eliot seems to be the ideal writer to allow us to follow the vicissitudes of theory and method in Italy in the last half-century, a role obviously shared by Shakespeare and, on a different scale, by other authors. It goes without saying that, in what follows, a purely phenomenological, neutral and objective overview will hardly be possible, since I am myself an actor in this story².

Eliot studies began to establish a major tradition in Italy in the late fifties, at the very moment when the English scholar and university researcher was slowly trying to divest himself of an old-fashioned identity. He had been and still was a literary historian, an anthologist and therefore a translator, in order to face primary or quasi primary needs of the Italian readership. Until then, significantly, to write a literary history had been the crowning achievement of any outstanding literary scholar and of any ambitious professor of Modern Languages aspiring to leave a personal mark in the annals of his discipline. At the same time, or I could say *pour cause*, he was a comparatist in the broadest sense of the word: a student not only of English literature, but also of modern and ancient European literatures, and an overall expert capable of capturing and elegantly expatiating on parallels between the sister arts – literature, painting, sculpture, music and, later, cinema. Herein lies the explanation of the surprising fact that many pioneering Modern Languages Italian scholars, active on either side of World War II, such as Federico Olivero or Arturo Farinelli, boasted an

eclectic, if not chaotic, bibliography that included publications on topics ranging from English to French, Spanish and German literature. Specialization was still to come. The literary interpreter was naturally inclined to a judicial kind of criticism based on mere impressions, which dangerously relied on rather vague and largely implied canons of taste. No less than four major histories of English literature appeared in a short time-span between the late thirties and the early sixties. That of Mario Praz (1937, revised and enlarged in the many subsequent editions), properly speaking not a manual, as I shall argue, was followed by A. Zanco's unpretentious one (1945 and 1958), and by C. Izzo's (1961-1963). Gabriele Baldini, a fine, well-known Shakespearean scholar, left his unfinished after the first volume (1958), which reached the middle of the sixteenth century. This identity of the Professor of English, who had to act, perhaps somewhat unwillingly, as a literary historian, collapsed at the end of the sixties. No single-handed histories of English literature, no histories at all were produced after Izzo's for many years. Decades later, the revival of historiography would result in a brand-new shape: that of a team of experts on definite areas and authors, working under a general editor, the internal organization planned according to the different aspects or problems of the literary activity to which authors accommodated themselves (the audience, the literary market, the aesthetic debate etc.), rather than to the sequence of authors. To explain this revival we need only recall certain developments in European criticism in the late sixties. The literary work – obviously in rivalry with different configurations of the text – had increasingly come to be considered as a self-contained structure, with no links whatsoever with the author and with his/her social, historical, biographical and even psychological background: it was irrelevant who wrote a poem, or when it had been written, because a poem was a network of purely linguistic and signic relations. A fierce war was waged in Italy, in some quarters, on historicism in any form. The "death of the author" was *per se* the death of the literary history. Yet semiotics, with the reinstatement of history and context, and Lotman's cultural typology concomitantly provided an inflow of oxygen to new-concept, resurrected literary histories. Manuals of English literature did get to be written in Italy in the eighties and nineties, such as those edited by Franco Marengo (*Storia della civiltà letteraria inglese*, 4 vols, 1996); by Marcello Pagnini (*I contesti culturali della letteratura inglese*, from 1986, in several monographs), and by Agostino Lombardo (*Storia*

delle letterature di lingua inglese, from 1991), not to mention other, self-defined “short histories” in response to the reform of the Italian academic system which I mentioned above.

After all, the most popular and best-known History of English Literature in Italian, the manual *par excellence*, has always been for us that by Mario Praz, who is reputed by almost unanimous consensus the greatest all-time Italian scholar of English literature, and *ipso facto* of the century just gone by. I do not personally fully concur with this evaluation. One might object that the vocation of the historian did not fit him well, and that he wrote the book (the first edition is dated 1937) merely to meet the demands of the publishing market and to provide a long-expected instrument for a growing university population. True, Praz wrote at least two everlasting, and even today indispensable classics of criticism which everyone knows and has read, but his spectacular bibliography overflows above all with collections of essays, especially of that kind called in Italian “elzeviro” – a term, I find, which comes from Elsevier, a Dutch family of printers. He excelled in this genre, which is not merely the literary review but may be a rhapsodic *divertissement* on a variety of topics. Simply as a reviewer, his style was witty and vivacious, his pen pointed, even caustic, whenever, for example, he pitilessly exposed errors in others’ translations. Praz as literary historian – Praz the asystematic, Sternian and Borgesian writer of fantasies, Praz the weaver of far-fetched analogical webs that transgress the historical perspective – nearly sounds a contradiction in terms. Edmund Wilson coined the term “prazzesco” for his method, which may be defined as “a quasi Sternian play of associations and digressions” (A. Lombardo). Praz himself left us a disconcerting, delicious *persiflage* of the *métier* of the uninspired, routine literary historian, worth quoting to give an idea of his prose to those who have never come across it: “very little is needed. It is not necessary to be intelligent. On the contrary a certain, sweet passivity is preferable – a certain, tranquil obtuseness, which lets itself be soaked more easily by the colours and sounds of books. As to the writing itself, it’s a trifle. You but need to know the main verbs, some adjectives (but not too many), the correct use of *consecutio temporum*; and at the end, even if one has no talent for literature, the art of the past, from Homer to Musil, is so rich and so beautiful that it will end up by letting fall a few tiny drops of its riches, forming lovely or bizarre stalactites, into the critic’s prose”.

Defining Praz’s aesthetics of historiography helps one not a little to understand the objectives of his

criticism. The best and most valid critical sections of his *Storia* strike one as indeed idiosyncratic, imaginative, altogether personal *résumés*, enlivened by a systematic attempt to define a literary work, or a passage or a line of poetry or prose, in terms of another work. Such a method may be judged benevolently and felt as quite modern; it creates in fact a few inconsistencies. One is that it conceals a relativistic deferment of judgment: to define a writer or a work by means of an analogy with another writer or another literary work, or a painter or a painting, is obviously not equivalent to *explaining* them. As T. S. Eliot himself once remarked, “any book, any essay, any note in *Notes and Queries*, which produces a fact even of the lowest order about a work of art is a better piece of work than nine-tenths of the most pretentious critical journalism, in journals or in books”. At any rate Praz’s fundamental critical works were targeted at the *élites* of the well-read. *The Romantic Agony* is strewn with overlong quotes, often drawn from secondary and marginal works, and given in all the major European languages, and quotes which should speak for themselves, offered as they are to the expert without comment. One may add a couple more objections to this kind of procedure. What one favourably notices on reading his collections of “elzeviri” is that Praz is much more convincing, and critically informed, when he visits an author for the second time. A comparison of parts of his *Storia* with subsequent essays dealing with the same subject, while it astonishingly reveals that Praz tended to repeat his initial formulations *verbatim*, also proves that he was able to enrich and document them. Far less agreeable, and much more irritating, is the detection, which follows even a casual reading of his books, of entire parts lifted from his previous works – Praz seems to have known and applied the now so well-known practice of “cut-and-paste”. *Est modus in rebus*. What is also disturbing is that Praz did not know, let alone admit, of the possibility – if not the necessity – of revising one’s own idea of an author or a work. He set in stone his definitions for posterity, so to speak. A recent commemorative book³ has put the finishing touches to the mythologizing of this scholar. This hagiographic work hardly concedes limitations to its subject – except perhaps some timid doubt on the part of Agostino Lombardo on Praz as a translator. For Piero Boitani, Praz is “in this genre [essay-writing], the greatest writer in the world” – an obviously overgenerous judgment. D. Colussi on Praz’s critical style and use of the Italian language provides in fact the only non-eulogistic contribution; its companion might have been one –

missing – on Praz’s method and analytical procedure. The book also features a witty interview with Praz by the well-known journalist and polemicist Corrado Augias, which, however, mostly teases Praz as a man rather than as critic. In one of his answers Praz maintains, however, that he had kept aloof, as a young scholar, from the “positivist orbit of the search for sources”. If one elides “positivist”, this definition describes to a tee Praz’s critical practice.

Were one to point to some constants or variables in T. S. Eliot studies in Italy, the first is the evidence of a predictable growth in critical density – from which subterranean depths Eliot’s texts get dredged, the sort of magnifying lens which is employed. In the primitive stage a critic could well afford to quote a long poetic excerpt and close it with the tag that “the reader may easily enjoy it by himself”, and judge thereby the complexity of the poem. From the eighties onwards the single poetic line, even the single lexeme, may raise a paragraph, if not a page or a number of pages, of commentary. Another constant concerns the subdivision of Eliot’s *œuvre* and the kind of focus brought to bear on the different textual aggregations. *Four Quartets* has never enjoyed much favour with us, and in books and essays critical analysis tends to thin out when that text is reached, the exploration usually ending with *The Waste Land*. *Prufrock* has received the same if not greater attention than *The Waste Land*, and chapters dealing with it occupy the largest part in the most recent monographs. Virtually every prominent critical method or jargon has found nearly immediate application in Eliot studies. In this effort to test theory on text, two famed theoreticians who seem to have had a lesser or no impact are Lotman and Bakhtin. Lotman is cited by D. Calimani in his 1998 book, when he analyses what he calls the “rhetoric of space”, which in fact means the metaphors of space and the moral symbols or even allegories attached to them. We may finally subdivide the Eliot critics into two rough categories, those who have apparently studied him *malgré tout*, and others who have thought him infallible as poet and critic. In the politically incorrect Italy of the sixties and seventies one might be likely to tackle Eliot from the wrong and to tolerate his ideology, limiting praise to the mere technique. Marxist critics could but parade him as an example of the crisis and degeneration of advanced bourgeois capitalism, and approach him emptied of any drop of *suspension of disbelief*. Eliot’s international stature could not be disowned and not find status and function even in the rigidly demarcated agenda of Marxist ideology. Perhaps a third group is that of the neutrals, who would have

dissented both politically and ideologically with Eliot, but were aware – with Mallarmé – that poems are made with words and not ideas.

Mario Praz was the author of the first substantial and authoritative Italian essay on T. S. Eliot, “T. S. Eliot and Dante”. It first appeared in English in a *Southern Review* issue as early as 1937⁴. But I propose to discuss it later on, along with his 1967 book on Eliot and Joyce. With this exception, the pioneering essays on the poet were those by Giorgio Melchiori in his *Tightrope Walkers*⁵. By a strange or perhaps predictable optical effect Melchiori sounds today more “modern” than Praz, who followed him nine years later; and a whole critical epoch seems to have elapsed between Praz 1967 and the equally pioneering article by Marcello Pagnini on *Four Quartets*, which in its turn *precedes* Praz’s book by nine years.

Both Praz and Melchiori took for granted, in rapid and synthetic reductions *en passant*, the or a meaning in Eliot’s poetry, and dwelt instead on the literary echoes as a key to or a support of the poetic meaning. Such a procedure, certainly legitimate with all poets, is most necessary with Eliot, in whom each single quotation is relevant in the parodic interplay, and poetry exists as a series of conflicts of echoes and decontextualized quotations; but it must not be radicalised. Both critics therefore worked, on the basis of inference, as diviners of echoes and influences mostly undeclared by the author, and detected in the single line and even in the single lexeme.

The title of the main chapter on Eliot in Melchiori’s *Tightrope Walkers* – “Echoes in ‘The Waste Land’” – is emblematic both of the aesthetics of that book and of the overall activity of most Italian critics in those days. The book first came out in English in 1956, and a few years later it was translated into Italian. It thus addressed an adult, international public. Melchiori did not aim to give his own global and organic interpretation of the poem – in his words “the whole impression of the structure before me”. He sought in fact to prove, in Eliot’s poem, a theory of his own regarding the creation of poetry: a “stream of more or less unconscious echoes and recollections reassemble and rearrange themselves to form the unit of a new poem”. This is the “creative process” of poetry. Hence, the critic was for him the erudite scholar able to capture the most recondite sources that may have acted in the poet’s mind – every grain of literary material that migrates, raw or reshaped, to another linguistic organism: “all real poetry is born in the same way, absorbing and transforming the work of the past”. Melchiori himself unveiled his analytical model, that formidable catalogue by

Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, which “leaves nothing to be discovered” in Coleridge’s creative process. Lowes’s book was repeatedly praised because it exemplarily performed the same task as Melchiori’s: to open up, as with a lancet, the brain of the author, to “meander through the mind of a poet”, to reconstruct “the process of mental associations”.

In this essay Melchiori avoided any attempt to seriously clarify the ways in which the external materials get pasted into the new organism. He judged as “dangerous” any foray into psychology, and was satisfied to define the “interplay” of sources as either “fully conscious” or “not conscious” – a distinction reformulated as “conscious” vs “lurking in the back of the mind”. Focussing on the second section of the poem, *A Game of Chess*, to the poetic reminiscences stated by the poet Melchiori added others, not “conscious” ones, that is to say “automatic”: congeries of residues or surfacings from habitual memory (Keats, Ovid, Swinburne, Shakespeare), all of them proving the “shifting and constant rearranging of known images and words in the artist’s mind”. One of these images was drawn from Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Eliot, argued Melchiori, had read that masterpiece, admitted to having been impressed by it, and, *therefore*, “it would not be surprising” that a scene from that novel “should have wandered into the poet’s imagination”. The final part of the essay addresses Joyce’s “influence” on the poem “as a whole”. Such an interplay of both conscious and unconscious reminiscences creates a distinction which corresponds, substantially, to that between echoes that a well-read audience could immediately spot, and others so subtle as to require the expert. Melchiori’s critical style evoked the University classroom, if not a circle of academic colleagues who need only to look each other in the eye to understand each other. He often used the filler “of course” to fend off the possible objection that he was disclosing an obvious source; but then moved on to deal with more concealed and more sophisticated borrowings. These function on the basis of inference, of probability, of the “nose” of the critic as detective (see for instance: “the presence of Joyce’s novel can also be detected...”). Closing his discussion of the Philomel range of echoes, Melchiori observed that a “hook” acted in Eliot’s mind to bring to the surface words and images from the magma of memories lying on its bottom. The critic quoted James’s “unconscious cerebration”.

As I have mentioned, Praz received, while still living, a canonization *d’emblée* backed by American critics such as Edmund Wilson. Some years ago (2002) he was awarded the immortalising accolade

of a “Meridiano”, a prestigious Mondadori anthology of his multifarious production. Wilson, it must be noticed, had extolled the *artist* rather than the *critic*. Even to define Praz as the greatest-ever Italian scholar of English literature means little after so many vicissitudes in our discipline, and requires the specification of a few parameters. In an age of approximations such as the one when he started out, Praz no doubt knew English perfectly and could rap on the knuckles the sometimes pathetic and improvised translators of his time, whose versions were full of blunders. A formidable scholar, he was rarely or never at fault on the objective data. Praz’s own method, he himself admitted, was “blamed because metaphorical”; he didn’t write “like a structuralist”, and whenever he could he had recourse “to an image”.

Praz, too, in the Introduction to his book on Joyce and Eliot⁶, repeated the rudimentary distinction, apropos of the creative process of 20th century writers, between the “semiconscious” and the “subconscious”. The book seemed written and conceived in the wake of Melchiori’s exploration, because it put the two writers on the same axis as Melchiori had done. Praz the historian of ideas and of historical cycles aligned the 17th and the 20th centuries along the ideological turmoil, the desperation and frustration of the writer at grips with the new scientific discoveries, and facing the collapse of a previously solid world-image. The two ensuing chapters, one on Joyce and one on Eliot, form an odd and uneven book, certainly not one of Praz’s best. Probably a transcription of a radio broadcast, it simplifies and reduces the critical appreciation, while it is occasionally unable to resist the temptation to add some pearls of erudition.

The “influences” detected in Eliot do not conflict with those of Melchiori – they coalesce with them. Eliot, for Praz, felt above all the influence of Dante. The single Eliot poems were presented and introduced following the biographical thread, and as usual one is struck – and by turns fascinated and surfeited – by Praz’s mania for associations⁷. His literary comparativism has remained unique, and it is always first-hand. A reading of this Eliot chapter leaves no room for doubt that Praz was at the same time a superlative Italian and French literature scholar. He was perfectly at his ease in those literatures. While detailing the influence of Laforgue, Praz only could pick out the French poet’s subtle reminiscences in the less well-known Italian *crepuscolari* such as Gozzano, Palazzeschi and Govoni. In the course of the chapter Praz, like Melchiori, let himself be guided by the echoes, he

too bypassing the question of the conscious or unconscious nature of Eliot's borrowings. He often observed of such and such a line that it "made one think" of another poet; or that this or that passage shared "a family likeness" (a typical idiolect) with another; but he said precisely nothing about the poet's associative processes. Due perhaps to its origin, as I have said, this chapter soon turns into a chain of poetic quotations, in some cases of poems themselves given in their entirety and without any comment. At the end, the pages containing only quotations exceed those of commentary! A real *explication de texte* always remained foreign to this critic. Praz seemed much more anxious to embellish his discourse by not only pointing out echoes captured from the most disparate writers, but also by venturing towards hazardous and surprising analogies (like the equivalence between Eliot's dramatic works, exploiting the conventions of commercial theatre for metaphysical aims, and the *burlas y juegos* of the 17th century Jesuit Alonso de Ledesma). The "echoes" he found, though to him "self-evident", had not of course appeared as such to anyone before. Intermittently his comparativism became interartistic – Prufrock's "overwhelming question" reminded him of a scene in Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberry*. Yet the realm of painting is obviously Praz's privileged field of reference and source-finding. In *The Waste Land* he discovered analogies with the *fauves*, with Surrealist painting, even with the *photomontages* and the *pastiches* of an Erni, the caprices of a Max Ernst or the *cauchemars* of a Dalí; in another passage he compared the element and sensation of "fake" in *Murder in the Cathedral* with Ingres's paintings of historical subjects. Extending the range he sighted an analogy between a *divertissement* by Ibert and the obscene song about Mrs. Porter in *The Waste Land*, and compared Eliot's mixture of tragic and comic to Strauss's operas.

An appendix to this essay is a shorter one, "T. S. Eliot and Dante", which English readers find included in *The Flaming Heart*, though that version is not exactly coincident with the Italian in a number of slight but not wholly insignificant details. Once again it confirms Praz's extraordinary command of Italian literature, with a witty and paradoxical discussion of Dante's influence on Eliot "from an Italian point of view". In this case, the nature of the essay exempted Praz from any attempt at a proper interpretation, and soon the essay becomes an affair of "echoes", of words and themes Eliot "may have remembered" – of his "indebtedness", of the poetic "germs" (this word appears in the Italian text only) he caught from Dante.

On *La Figlia Che Piange*, Praz shared Melchiori's view that Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel* "may have haunted the dim corners of [Eliot's] memory", or even "was actually at the back of [his] mind".

In 1958 Marcello Pagnini wrote an essay on the "music" of *Four Quartets*⁸. It had nothing in common with the search for echoes and influences of Praz and Melchiori, and beat courageously an altogether new critical path. Pagnini had already proved the Italian scholar most receptive to suggestions and insights coming from the most advanced sectors of English and American theoreticians of the literary text. His essay on *Four Quartets* is interspersed with references and quotations from, for example, I. A. Richards and Northrop Frye, of whom very few were aware in those days. Simply put, with that essay Pagnini inaugurated in English Studies in Italy a type of approach more attentive to the morphology of poetry. For such a task a deeper knowledge of the raw materials of literature, and a new and more appropriate critical vocabulary were needed. He achieved that by seeking to tackle, on the basis of that poem, the question of the analogies – general and specific – between two languages having different grammars and signic systems. In *Four Quartets* Pagnini found the application of the rhythmic phrase of music; and in the domain of meaning he brought to light the iteration of images or "subjects", the presence of thematic groups, and the recourse to the *Leitmotiv*. He was indeed silently acting according to a different generative premise. Poetry did not take shape, in Eliot and *qua* poetry, as echo or verbal substance, but rather as rhythmical figure, an intention borne out by his theoretical writings. *Four Quartets* thus revolved, for Pagnini, around rhythmical variation and around linguistic discontinuity modelled on colloquial speech. This kind of argument was obviously imperfect for the time being, and the analogies were found and discussed in terms of "similarities" and of recurring effects in rhythm and construction (as in the fugue motifs) and of examples of fusion between sound and sense. (Conversely, one might add, musicologists often employ linguistic and prosodic metaphors, such as spondees, iambs, or anapaests, in describing a musical passage.) The term "echo" indeed recurred in Pagnini, but it had an exclusively musical meaning, and referred to structural and morphological aspects alone. Thus, on the conceptual plane, it meant, exclusively, a repetition of a thematic enunciation.

In the early seventies the fruitful encounter between formal-structuralism and Eliot's poetry was already under way if not yet in full swing. However,

it had been preceded, chronologically, by another critical school that “appropriated” Eliot for half a decade. Intrinsically, Eliot might have very little to say to materialist and Marxist criticism; or he might have figured merely as the reactionary poet and ideologist to decry. This friction was unavoidable when that encounter did happen. In 1971 Silvano Sabbadini was a young graduate from the University of Milan, where he had attended the English and American literature courses of Agostino Lombardo, a competence surfacing in Sabbadini’s book of 1971 – *Una salvezza ambigua. Studio sulla prima poesia di T. S. Eliot* (Bari 1971) – in the wealth of background references to a realist, decadent and at the same time symbolist Puritan culture into which, Sabbadini insisted, Eliot was born. Infatuated by Marxism as a medicine for the regeneration of society, Sabbadini explained the genesis of his book, its justification and *raison d’être*, in his preface: “the insufferability, for us, of some parts of Eliot is the surest proof of his utter refusal of second-hand amiability”. Eliot’s *œuvre* was thus, in 1971, already dated and “impracticable” in many of its parts, and the only justifiable approach was neither the “specious discussion of a frankly reactionary ideology”, nor a focussing on the “pure poetry”, but the adherence to its existential trajectory. A Marxist like Sabbadini was apt to feel reassured by Eliot’s “disillusion”, by his failure to “attain salvation”, and his “adventure” was seen as one of the many “frustrated peregrinations” of a long prehistory of writers. His book may be taken to demonstrate, from its point of view, the ontological impracticability of a merely spiritual, “vertical” salvation, and the necessity of one “laically taking place on the horizontal plane”. This ideological frame was, on the whole, superfluous, as it led to the stock diagnosis, that “the central problem of Eliot’s poetry” is a “crisis not simply involving the individual, but embracing the whole Western world”. Because of its obedience to this frame the book does not make easy reading. Based “on a continuous parallel of poetry and ideology”, it imitates a “philosophical” style made up of overlong periods, syntactical contortions and unusual participial formations. Its critical language betrayed the rigidity, the peremptoriness and the penchant for apophthegms of the Marxist jargon then in vogue (of the type: “The innermost meaning of art has always been in its alienation”).

Eliot’s poetry was studied by Sabbadini within its segnic demarcations, yet considered materialistically as the poetry of a New England American that arose subsequent to realism and decadentism – the poetry of the bourgeois

intellectual, conscious of the commercialization of his product, and looking for his salvation to an art alienated from the world. Yet Sabbadini was far from insensitive to the new French theories of the text, and sought to combine Marxist and post-Marxist axioms with the analytical techniques of formalism and structuralism, and even with suggestions derived from studies of phonology. The result was a series of probings carried out in almost total forgetfulness of the ideological schemes: even traditional readings of the poems are seen as parodies of forms transmitted by tradition, or as clusters of recurrent images submitted to gradual semantic metamorphosis. In the last analysis, Sabbadini’s critical and theoretical equipment could be said to be of mixed in its nature, as his *points de repère* ranged from Lukács to Spitzer, from Sartre to Contini, from Marcuse and Benjamin to Barthes. Here lay perhaps the reason for his paradoxical defence of Eliot’s ideology as an integral part of his poetry, a defence due to the fact that the “transcendence” of history is an ideal more often called into question and denied by the exploration of its “negative counter-ideal”. This made it, for him, all the more necessary to relate the poetry to its socio-cultural context, that of the “last phase of the collapse of a civilization that was by then outside history, and to which nothing remained but the refuge in Utopia or metaphysical sublimation”. As one easily notices, Eliot’s plight was seen as a 20th century version of the “disappearance of God”, even though Hillis Miller’s classic was not cited: a “theological impotence”, in fact, accompanied “the infernal wanderings of Eliot’s early *personae*”, vainly, tragically driving man to replace a dead God.

In 1975 Franco Moretti made his academic début – if I am not mistaken – with an anthology of translations of Eliot criticism to date⁹. His brilliant and problematic introduction – which is, between the lines, no less than a reasoned interpretation of Eliot’s poetry – represents in my view the final “twist of the knife” for an updated and self-critical Marxism, yet one always strenuous, perfervid in combating the supporters of the autonomy of the literary and the extrapolation of the writer, of any writer, from the historical context. And indeed Moretti was honest enough to present this anthology as “partial”, that is to say “constructed on a partisan point of view and founded on two hypotheses whose validity is obviously for the reader to judge”. He was “guilty” of some glaring omissions that stem from that perspective. For example, there is no coverage of the tradition of textual studies and source-finding in Eliot’s poetry. He was evasive on Melchiori, and,

mysteriously, altogether silent on Praz, who is not even anthologized. It is a target, however, which Moretti hit obliquely, when he accused Empson of having fathered “academic post-war pedantry” and made of Eliot’s poetry an “inventory” of “bookish quotations”. On the other hand it would be misleading to say that Moretti simply wanted to quarrel with the formalist or structuralist critics who, just a few months before, supremely indifferent to all ideological schemes, had opened up new perspectives on the poet. He criticized the alleged “indifference of the structural-semiological approach to the *meanings* of poetry” and the “non-historicity of its interpretative categories”, but he was even more positive than the structuralists that it is in form and style that the “concordance between [...] poetry and its historical and ideal *humus*” resides: that “semantic organicity”, as he repeated, was what a critic should seek – that, in other words, even the most advanced contemporary Marxist critics were too imperfect formalists. His reprimanding of rudimentary critical Marxism turned on the point that form is not a surplus of content or, worse still, a deceiving “trick”. In his survey he was dissatisfied with or even dismissive of everyone, and animated by a *destruens* attitude which betrayed that mature Marxism, unhappy with the simplistic and therefore repudiated canons of the likes of Lukács, was still in search of a critical father and a theoretical guarantor, and was unable to find one in a Raymond Williams or a Terry Eagleton. Re-reading this essay it still escapes me which is, in the end, Moretti’s exact formulation of the proper sociological criticism he had in mind, and how it is possible to prove, from a Marxist perspective, that the “mystic” and “decadent” Eliot may be preferred to the writers of the “progressive” bourgeois tradition. His working hypothesis, that it is precisely in the “aesthetic forms” that the social values of literature lie, was left unproved.

With Moretti the battle between the content-oriented critics and the formalists came to an end. The latter were the victors. In another essay Pagnini focused on the “modular scheme” at work in Eliot’s *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*¹⁰. In its wake Alessandro Serpieri¹¹ set himself the objective to study the operations of the Jakobsonian linguistic functions and of the “submerged” structures, also employing categories drawn from Chomsky’s generative grammar and thus amalgamating neo-Freudianism, Russian formalism and linguistics. A. L. Johnson¹² was the author of the most organic mapping of Eliot’s images and of their major oppositions, reappearing transformed throughout the whole extension of the

poetry. In every lexeme, nominal or verbal form, colour or vectorial field, Johnson found associations with a table of abstract and symbolic values (dirt, sensuality, fertility, the phallus, female and male, money and gold, etc.). This type of approach was taken in this book to an analytical level beyond which it seems difficult or impossible to proceed. Eliot’s poetry was disassembled down to the last units of the signifier – down to the morphemes and the phonemes of the single poetic line – in the attempt to find the mutual cohesion of the sound-chains (in the form of anagrams, puns, etc.) with the sense-chains. Yet, when from this pulverization he tried to reassemble it and set forth a model, even he could but find results not all that different from the usual ones, that is to say of a poet puritanically obsessed/fascinated by sex as “negative death”, i.e. sex as procreative, rejected and dirtied in hallucinated and repellent symbols. Johnson’s premise was itself partisan, both aesthetically and practically, since poetry is in its nature, he thought, conflictual, and where there is no more conflict there is no more poetry, and after 1922 or 1925, and *a fortiori* after 1930, Eliot did not have any more conflicts to work upon, let alone oppositions of images, and the critic finds himself deprived of his materials, with the implicit consequence that poetry is defunct after *The Waste Land*.

The eighties saw the end of a critical task jointly performed by Pagnini, Serpieri and Johnson. Angelo Righetti, in a remarkable book¹³, did not substantially change the received interpretation of *Prufrock*, but supported it with unprecedented attention to the motivation of its signs. He was able to catch unheard resonances and to weigh sources we had never suspected or had been told. He proved how deep and permanent was Eliot’s knowledge of Swinburne, and how often he reworked lines from Browning, or parodied Wilde, or echoed the Old Testament and the Gospels. A small reservation remains: sometimes the source is so remote and far-fetched that it is hardly possible to believe that Eliot may have read it, let alone kept it in mind; and the proof that a source is a source would seem to come from merely consulting a concordance. Not even Righetti, in the last analysis, refrained from using the risky inferential method of Eliot’s first critics. Paradoxically, he proved that the search for echoes is still far from over and will go on, and that other *files rouges* may still be followed, as for instance the intertextual dialogues between Eliot and Hopkins, never thoroughly studied. *Prufrock* was examined with an alertness to the text as a semiotic and many-levelled organism. Righetti’s object was to prove the cooperation of

signifier and signified, the former covering, by and large, the rhetorical usages and strategies, another new tool in the critical equipment of those years, after Barthes's *L'ancienne rhétorique* and the Groupe *è*. Apart from that, the new critical agenda in Righetti's book may be summarised as the sequential reading of the poem, a fresh attention to the interfusion of the poetic levels, the use of a specific and specialised critical language, and the secondary importance, or even irrelevance, of the judicial act; finally a self-imposed abstinence from overstepping the linguistic boundaries of the text towards historical contextualization. This procedure struck root and found favour, whether applied to a Shakespeare play or to a poem by Donne or Dylan Thomas.

From the late eighties to our own day Eliot has been predictably reread in Italy against the background of the critical currents and of the

international issues that are "in", such as gender and new historicism. We may provisionally conclude with Dario Calimani, who republished in 1998 a previous book – mainly dealing with the subtle uses of irony in *Prufrock*¹⁴ – with very few substantial additions except a new introduction aiming a belated attack at Eliot *qua* ideologue. Calimani looked back to Anthony Julius and to his allegedly fundamental study on Eliot and anti-Semitism (1995 and 2003) – on Eliot's "vandalic" anti-Semitism. In 1998 Calimani supported an openly ideological reading of the poet, joining more openly the ranks of Eliot's detractors, and sounding rather like someone who repents having loved too much an undeserving woman. This book proves a development or perhaps an involution in English Studies in Italy at the end of the millennium, the growing decline of a rigid and therefore ideologically anodyne structuralism; it also proves the wane of Eliot's formerly untouchable primacy.

NOTES

1. T. S. Eliot, *La terra desolata*, ed. A. Serpieri, Milan 2006, "with a new essay on the genesis of the poem".
2. Likewise, as this article cannot be exhaustive for obvious reasons of space, I apologize to all colleagues whose valuable books and essays on Eliot are not examined or mentioned.
3. Mario Praz *vent'anni dopo*, ed. F. Buffoni, Rome 2003.
4. M. Praz, "T.S. Eliot and Dante", *The Southern Review*, II:3, 1937, rpt. *The Flaming Heart*, New York 1958, 1973, pp. 348-374.
5. G. Melchiori, "Echoes in 'The Waste Land'", in *The Tightrope Walkers: Studies of Mannerism in Modern English Literature*, London 1956, pp. 53-88 (Italian edition as *I funamboli*, Turin 1963).
6. M. Praz, "Thomas Stearns Eliot", in *James Joyce Thomas Stearns Eliot. Due maestri moderni*, Turin 1967.
7. Praz's translation of *The Waste Land*, reprinted several times, and judged by some "a beautiful translation" constituting "a reference point for all new translators of the poem" (Serpieri), was preceded in the Einaudi edition (Turin 1966) by a short preface which largely re-uses and concocts previous material on the poet, but with some additions. The opening statement may be taken as an example of an excess of conflicting analogies found by the critic, which creates confusion in the reader, to say the least: "Eliot is the American who returns to his European origins following the same course as James, one also typical of so many characters of this novelist; he is the *vers libre* poet in the footsteps of the *poètes maudits*, the greatest exponents of Romantic individualism, which came to react against a century of confessions and unruliness in the attempt to go back to a classic, objective ideal of art. He looks back to Dante's *Paradiso*, yet reaches it not from the *Inferno*, but from much farther, from the *Saison en enfer* by Rimbaud. Even stronger than Rimbaud's, however, is the influence he initially felt from Laforgue, in whom decadentism, on a philosophical plane – Laforgue had profoundly nourished himself with Schopenhauer and Hartmann – reaches a lucid self-consciousness and resolves the vanity of the world into bitter amusement".
8. M. Pagnini, "La musicalità dei *Four Quartets* di T. S. Eliot", in *Critica della funzionalità*, Turin 1970 (I ed. 1958).
9. *Interpretazioni di Eliot*, ed. F. Moretti, Rome 1975.
10. M. Pagnini, A. Serpieri and A. Johnson, "Rhapsody". *Tre studi su una lirica di T. S. Eliot*, Milan 1974.
11. A. Serpieri, *T. S. Eliot. Le strutture profonde*, Bologna 1973.
12. A. L. Johnson, *Sign and Structure in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot*, Pisa 1976.
13. *Dittico eliotiano*, Verona 1984.
14. The two books, largely coextensive as I am saying, are respectively *T. S. Eliot. Lo spazio retorico*, Rome 1988, and *T. S. Eliot. Le geometrie del disordine*, Naples 1998.