
REVIEW: Franco Marucci, *Storia della letteratura inglese. Dal 1870 al 1921*, vol.4, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2006, pp. 1225, Euro 64,00.

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Franco Marucci's *Storia della letteratura inglese dal 1870 al 1921* is the second volume to be published of a projected five-volume series; it is actually Volume IV, and follows Volume III, which covered the High Victorian period (1832-1870). Marucci is intending to complete this huge project by himself but has understandably begun with the period most congenial to him – or, at least, the period to which he has devoted most study. It will also be fully understandable if the future volumes are rather less substantial; sheer bulk is, after all, one of the qualities we tend to associate with Victorianism. The earlier volume was in fact so large that it was divided into two “tomes”, to adopt the Italian word (*tomi*) used in such cases. The volume under review is just a little over 1200 pages.

Of course, it is traditional in these cases for a reviewer to make a few humorous remarks on the sheer physical difficulty of reading such a volume,

together with a few quips on the lightness or not of the writer's style; let's take these comments for granted and start at once by examining the reasons for the size of the book. In fact, one word will do by way of answer: inclusiveness. Marucci clearly intends to include not only every writer of any note, but (in most cases) every single work of every such writer published in the period under examination. In addition he gives not only a biographical account of each writer, with an overall account of his or her career and development but a close analysis of each work; in the case of novels and narrative poems, this involves both a recapitulation of the plot and critical exegesis. One might be tempted to make ironic comparisons with Casaubon's *Key to all Mythologies* but the difference is that Marucci has brought his work to completion – principally, of course, because he doesn't in fact pretend to offer any all-purpose “key”.

There is a kind of practicality about the work that has definite attractions. It certainly pays little homage to any current schools of critical theory; we get nods towards gender criticism with regard to Hardy or Swinburne, for example, but more typical are the remarks that conclude the presentation of Kipling, which tell us that, apart from the “orientalist” debate, he has been spared most of the “*ipoteche e manie critiche dell'ultima ora*” (the latest critical

doubts and crazes), so that there is no “*Kipling da decostruire o interpretare con le chiavi del marxismo freudiano o lacaniano, o del poststrutturalismo*” (Kipling to be deconstructed or interpreted with the keys of Freudian or Lacanian Marxism, or of post-structuralism).

The volume is divided into two parts, part one being devoted to “*il crepuscolo vittoriano*” and part two to “*La letteratura inglese dal 1901 al 1921*”; the division comes roughly three-quarters the way into the volume. After a brief but helpful explanation of the criteria adopted and a three-page outline of British history from 1870 to 1901, Marucci starts with his parade of authors, the first four being Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, and Ruskin; although they are what we might term “left-overs” from the previous volume, the discussion of their late works takes up the first 200 pages of the book. We are then introduced to two minor writers, “B.V.” Thomson (of “Dreadful Night” fame) and De Tabley, who are followed by four more major survivors from Volume 3: Trollope, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins and Meredith, who take us up to page 367, when Lewis Carroll is introduced...

As I have tried to make clear with this brief outline of the first third of the work, Marucci's approach is very clearly author-based, with each writer having a separate section devoted to his or her life, career, main themes and individual works. The big names are interspersed with a fair sprinkling of lesser-known ones, including a few who were completely unknown to me (Philip Bourke Marston and Digby Mackworth Dolben, for example). Indeed, one of the perverse effects of this attitude of all-inclusive hospitality is that the reader is tempted to raise questions about other possible candidates for discussion; for example, in the section on “*romanzi esotici, sensazionali, polizieschi*” (exotic, sensational and detective novels), I find myself wondering, given that Anthony Hope, Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle are included, whether space couldn't have been found for Stanley Weyman and perhaps even for Rafael Sabatini. And I ask, perhaps a little more seriously, why G.K. Chesterton, whose critical judgements are cited with evident approval on several occasions, does not merit a section all to himself.

But obviously nobody would dare to accuse Marucci of skimping. The first impression of the work is of its daunting thoroughness; the author seems to be aware of the possibly off-putting nature of his all-inclusiveness and has adopted a typographical strategy often found in guidebooks, whereby the minor sights in a city or museum, or possible excursions from the main route, are printed in a smaller typeface. Everything is here, the author seems to say, but if you have an early train to catch, you can concentrate on the five-star monuments and museums. The book is not divided into separate chapters, but into numbered sections, with internal subdivisions; for example, sections 52 to 69 cover Trollope; within this part, section 55 deals with his novel *The Eustace Diamonds*, with sub-section 55.1 giving a thematic introduction, 55.2 (in smaller type) discussing the character of Lizzie and recounting the detective-story side of the plot, 55.3 comparing the novel with works by Thackeray and Eliot, and 55.4 (again in smaller type) examining a few of the minor characters. Some of the decisions as to what goes in smaller type seem occasionally a little arbitrary, but one cannot fail to appreciate the solicitous intentions that lie behind them.

In the opening section, in which Marucci explains the “*criteri orientativi*” of his work, he uses the Jamesian image of the “figure in the carpet” – although it becomes inevitably plural in this case; the figures thus found are (my translation):

the sense of demarcation, which leads to a historical perspective, and makes the end of the century appear as an age of transition towards modernity or towards a more extreme modernity; consequently the need to save the world, and hence positive, optimistic and propitious apocalypticism, and pessimistic and negative apocalypticism; the debate on faith and on science; the interest in myth and in mythological literature.

No single or simple pattern there, clearly, and he goes on to say: “Late 19th-century culture is a culture of complexity, and for the scholar complexity becomes, also with respect to an earlier simplificatory tendency of criticism, in itself an interpretative key (*un codice di lettura*) to the literary and cultural history of the period.” Complexity, therefore, is not simply a handy shrug-word that a critic can use to get out of the task of explaining the period; it is actually the key (or, at least, a key) to any understanding of it. And this leads straight into a passage on Walter Pater, who – to judge by the purely empirical method of a page-count – would seem to be the most important writer in the volume. Marucci describes him as the “*svisceratore principe della*

complessità” (the prime dissector of complexity) and the “*teorico e cultore*” (theoretician and votary) of the relativism that is its consequence. Inconstancy and fluidity were for Pater the marks of modern thought, and Marucci points to his fondness for the word “many-sided”, which appears so often in *The Renaissance*.

What is interesting is that he passes straight from this discussion of the key-figure in late 19th-century aestheticism to a discussion of Robert Browning, who would seem to be, in both character and thought, about as far removed as one could imagine from Walter Pater. But, Marucci tells us, “Browning too, Browning especially, among the survivors, can do no more than obsessively rotate and whirl around the conflict between the eternal and the transient, between the fixed and the relative, a *filo conduttore* that redeems an apparent dispersiveness of his poetry after 1870...”

There is perhaps something revealing about the way Marucci attributes to this conflict the redemptory notion of being a “*filo conduttore*”. This Italian expression, which presumably derives from the myth of Ariadne, literally means “guiding thread” but in critical prose can usually be translated as “main theme” (or perhaps “underlying theme”). In this volume Marucci uses the term often, perhaps indicating both his own need as a critic to find some way around the bewildering labyrinth of his material and that of the writers themselves to establish at least the semblance of a clear path of thought, amid their often rambling digressions and asides. For it is not only Browning who can be accused of an “apparent dispersiveness”.

Browning, however, is clearly the other key figure in this volume. Although he may not have quite so many pages devoted expressly to him as Pater (50 as opposed to 75 – but we must remember that Browning has already been dealt with extensively in the previous volume), his name recurs far more often throughout the text as a whole. For example, Arnold’s discussion of Roman Catholicism is compared with Bishop Blougram’s apology, Ruskin’s more rambling letters in *Fors Clavigera* are compared with the orations of the lawyers in *The Ring and the Book*, Hardy’s treatment of factual material in *Tess* is compared with the use Browning made of the “square old yellow book”, and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is compared with some of Browning’s “confessional” poems; Browning can also serve by way of contrast, as in the case of the Arthurianism of Tennyson, Morris and Swinburne, which is seen as the exact reverse – or, at least, mirror image – of Browning’s

exploitation of modern or contemporary material.

It is hard not to feel that Marucci feels some kind of identity with the poet, when we read a passage like the following:

Arisophanes' Apology is a compendium of anecdotes, episodes and historical references, and a *cento* of quotations, allusions and tracings of poetic literature and Greek drama, or rather a suggestive digression on Greek history and civilisation from 480, the year of the victory of Salamis, up to the tangle of events in the years 406-404. Browning lavishes on it all the erudition he had acquired over a long period spent studying and reading the masterpieces of that literature...

In attempting to do justice to the all-inclusive nature of Browning's work, Marucci proves equally lavish and profuse with his descriptive terms. He, too, is attempting to find a "guiding thread" through a plethora of literary works of all kinds. And just as Browning, in his Greek works, first celebrates Euripides without detracting from the greatness of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and then manages to put Aristophanes on the same plane as the great tragedians, so Marucci in this volume finds a way of respecting both the grand old men of Victorian high seriousness and the exponents of aestheticism. And he says once again:

a general unifying mark of late Browning is, we repeat, dispersiveness: it is a poetry that, at least *visibly*, lacks a formal unitary centre – that which was previously constituted by the obsessive dramatic monologue – and which becomes predominantly occasional and anecdotal also with regard to its themes. But there is a method in this anecdotalism, and in what might even seem an irreducible marasma...

Although Marucci declares his belief in a "method in this anecdotalism" (again the search for the guiding thread), it is equally plain that he relishes the dispersiveness for its own sake. Nobody could write with such enthusiasm about late Browning, Tennyson, Ruskin and Arnold who did not enjoy a certain expansiveness of movement and style. His defence of their late works may at times seem a little over-stated but there is no doubting his sincerity. He evidently sees greatness where many have seen only tiredness.

In the section on Tennyson he even manages to find a good word to say for his dramas, claiming that they reveal an unsuspected gift for comedy. He is perhaps being deliberately provocative when he declares that the *Idylls* did not need Mark Twain to make fun of them, since they contained their own in-built parody; perhaps, he suggests slyly, that it is only now, when the "remake" has become such a popular sub-genre, that we can appreciate

Tennyson's "*vittorianizzazione sistematica dei personaggi del mito*" (systematic Victorianisation of the characters of the myth).

I was spurred by the section on Browning to seek out a number of late poems which I had never read and am grateful for the experience. Naturally enough, when talking about a poem like "Forgiveness", he compares it with better-known earlier works like "My Last Duchess", but he proves that the comparison is well-merited. In particular he draws our attention to the digression on oriental weapons, which, as he says, betrays the sinister and fetishistic sadism of the protagonist; it is an extraordinary piece of writing, a more extreme version of that unsettling moment in *The Ring of the Book* when "Half-Rome" eagerly tells his listener that he is "useful at explaining things", such as "how the dagger laid there at the feet, / Caused the peculiar cuts; I mind its make..."

In the section on Ruskin, Marucci goes so far as to say – or, at least, as he cautiously puts it, to "*fondatamente proporre*" (reasonably propose) – that the late works are superior to the early ones:

In an overall assessment, late Ruskin may actually be preferred above all for its vein of improvisation, for the perpetual transition and variability of the register, ranging from taxonomy and apophthegm to quip, to *rodomontade* and to memorable flash. Transition and association are still the two most habitual and intimately characteristic procedures of Ruskin's late style...

As has often been noted, Ruskin, who talked of the importance of "governing ornament", was forever incapable of imposing any governance on the "prickly independence" of the ornaments of his own style; Marucci here suggests that it is precisely because late Ruskin is more honest about the purely arbitrary nature of his flow of thought, that such works as *Fors Clavigera*, with their "*drammatica discontinuità*" are truer to his own genius.

With Trollope, of course, Marucci does not have to make any special case for the superiority of the late works, since this is generally accepted. Instead, he concentrates on the darker vision of these later novels, showing how Trollope seems to have inherited certain themes from Dickens's own late novels, such as mental illness, which often tips over into paranoia and violence. He gives exhaustive descriptions of all the novels in the Palliser series but the high point of this section is a discussion of *The Way We Live Now*, presented almost as the first novel of "globalisation":

The Way We Live Now – written in 1875 – is therefore the first European novel to annihilate the sense of the geographical distances of the continents and to enclose

the whole world in a handkerchief, and make one think how immediately accessible every part of the globe is. With the same impression that Dickens's novels left, Trollope wants to make us feel that these poles, so apparently distant and incompatible, the zenith and nadir of world spectography, are closer than one thinks. The old Suffolk farmer, remote and atemporal, cut off from the flow of history, is part of the same orbit as the great London financier and the Emperor or China, even if he never meets them.

Marucci actually devotes nearly a whole page to listing the faults of the novel – in terms of its structure, its style, its improbabilities, its coincidences – before concluding that the superiority of the novel lies in the way it all turns around a single hub, which is constituted by the figure of Melmotte, who is the very personification of “*febbre azionaria*” (stock-market fever). In this sense, he tells us, the novel also looks backwards, recalling a minor genre of the 1830s and 1840s, best exemplified by Thackeray's *Titmarsh*.

This continual play of intertextual (and intertemporal) comparisons becomes almost one of the book's organisational principles, although I am glad to say it is not done in any systematic way. It is simply the way Marucci's mind works and the comparisons he makes are always pertinent, though sometimes surprising. We have already seen how in the opening section he draws together Browning and Pater; an equally unexpected pairing is between Trollope and William Morris, who are shown to share certain basic preoccupations:

... Morris, who is the writer that leans most clearly towards revolution, although an unarmed one, and to a new socialist order, and Trollope, who still sees the mainstay in the bourgeoisie and in rural feudalism, which also testifies to his somewhat superficial acceptance of the attractions of the medieval model.

Later, we are told that Tennyson, in *Merlin and Vivien* and in the monologue *Happy*, “*fa il verso a Wilde*” (literally “imitates” Wilde) in showing characters who are “*affascinati dall'orrido o dalla bellezza decomposta della vecchiaia*” (fascinated by the horrid or by the decomposed beauty of old age). Ruskin, in the first chapter of *The Bible of Amiens*, is described as apparently engaged in making a parody of the Barchester chronicles. At times this tendency seems to be taken to extremes, as in this discussion of Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*:

Henchard [...] in his ups and downs, in his outbursts of generosity and in his fall into abjectness, recalls Thackeray's old Osborne, George Eliot's miller Tulliver, and above all Dickens's uncle Nickleby. We could describe him as a Dickens character born forty

years late and transplanted into the soil of Wessex. However, his most obvious doppelgänger remains Emily Brontë's Heathcliff...

These comparisons are by no means confined to the specific time range of the volume, so that *Fors Clavigera* is described as “*una specie di anteprima di uno stream-of-consciousness saggistico*” (a kind of preview of an essayistic stream-of-consciousness), and Hopkins's poetry is compared with that of Dylan Thomas (perhaps not so unexpected a comparison), while his critical prose is said to be more “*lungimirante e sottile*” (far-seeing and subtle) than that of any other non-professional critic until Orwell (a little less obvious).

This tendency to read the texts in a creatively anachronistic fashion becomes more marked as he approaches the twentieth century; it sometimes gives him the chance to provide fresh interpretations of writers otherwise unfairly ignored by the critical world. For example, he devotes nearly eight pages to John Davidson, and does not limit himself to the poem praised by T.S. Eliot (“*Thirty Bob a Week*”), nor to the suggestions offered by Hugh MacDiarmid that Johnson, with his visions of urban alienation, his variety of registers, and his use of contemporary material, was a proto-modernist; as Marucci points out, much of this can be found in Browning. Instead, he proposes that Davidson can actually be read as already *post-modern*, with his deliberately parodistic and debunking use of courtly and chivalric materials. But even as he says this, he typically looks backwards as well, reminding us of Thackeray's reworkings of Scott.

This gift for “*associazionismo libero*”, to adopt the term he used with reference to Ruskin, is what gives the book, for all its weight of solid information, a redeeming lightness of touch (I guess “lightness” had to be brought in at some point) and critical nimbleness. Given the nature of the work, it is unlikely that many readers will sit down and read it from start to finish (and certainly not in a single session); it is designed to be consulted. However, it is well worth reading the complete sections on the individual writers; they always offer a complete picture, even if, as is inevitable, the author's own sympathies are obviously more fully engaged in some portraits than in others. I would guess, for example, that Marucci is more stimulated by Hopkins than by Yeats; he gives us all the facts we might need to understand both these poets, but we can sense a clear difference in the depth of individual response to the poems. “*The Windhover*” has four full pages devoted to it, and

shows a passionate involvement on the part of the critic, while no single poem of Yeats gets extensive treatment; of course, it is possible that he is holding himself back for an in-depth reading of the late great works, like *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, which will come in the next volume.

This volume takes us up to 1920, so that we get complete studies – to list just a few – of Hardy, Kipling and Conrad, and partial studies of Yeats and Shaw. As always, Marucci seems determined to treat not only every work by these major authors but also all the lesser-known talents of the age, so that the section on Hopkins is followed by a discussion of Bridges, Dixon and Dolben, Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell; Wilde is followed by Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Gray and Symons (“*estetismo minore*”), Blunt and Watson (“*controestetismo*”) and, as already mentioned, Davidson (“*Uno scozzese predestinato*”), as well as a general section on “*poeti giocosi ed eruditi*” (Charles Stuart Calverley, Andrew Lang, Edmund Gosse, J.K. Stephen and Saki) and “*poesia femminile*” (Augusta Webster, Mathilde Blind, Michael Field, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge and Charlotte Mew).

Similarly, the section on Stevenson is followed by a short one on Anthony Hope, and then by the catch-all section already mentioned on “*romanzi esotici, sensazionali, polizieschi*”. Here it is possible to feel that Marucci has, so to speak, dutifully fulfilled his task but without full personal involvement; he doesn’t talk about any of these authors with the same sense of clear excitement as does Graham Greene, for instance. He makes, as always, interesting comparisons, suggesting that *Barry Lyndon* and *The Cloister and the Hearth* might lie behind *The Prisoner of Zenda*, but is also guilty of one or two simplifications. It is not true, for example, that Hope’s subsequent

novels all moved away from the Ruritania world; *Rupert of Hentzau* is a direct continuation of *Zenda*, and many readers would suggest that it is at least as good as the earlier novel; furthermore, a work like *Phroso*, while it has a different setting, is totally Ruritania in spirit. It is misleading, too, to suggest, as he does in a footnote, that Arthur Conan Doyle’s historical fiction was unsuccessful; the Brigadier Gerard stories are, in my opinion, possibly even better (certainly wittier) than the Holmes stories. But now that I have mentioned the section on Doyle, I think it worth pointing out that the footnote on page 572, where he presents a summary of all the short stories in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, is a masterpiece of compression and concision.

Probably the best part of this section is the passage on Haggard, in which he provocatively declares that we can see a strange “*prefigurazione del mondo di Conrad*”, and suggests, rather as he had done with *The Idylls of the King*, that only an ingenuous reader could possibly believe that *She* was not written with a deliberately parodistic intent. Indeed, he invokes Peacock and Sterne as possible predecessors and Beerbohm as a possible progeny.

With a work of such dimensions and such ambitions, it is inevitable that the reader will be stirred into occasional disagreement, as in the cases just mentioned. (I might as well add at this point that I also think he is a little unfair on Arthur Sullivan in declaring that Gilbert’s words are clearly superior to the accompanying music.) But the overall judgement can only be one of admiration for the energy and dedication that have gone into this monumental work. And I hope that Professor Marucci, on its completion, conceded himself more of a break than Anthony Trollope used to do between one novel and the next. He certainly deserved it.