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Elisa Bizzotto (ed.), *Mario Praz: Voice Centre Stage*
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Mario Praz: Voice Centre Stage is a collection of essays that sets out to bridge a “substantial critical gap” (p. 25) in academic studies dealing with Mario Praz (Rome, 1896-1982), as Elisa Bizzotto, the editor of the volume, aptly underlines. Drawing on the contributions presented at a conference on this Italian literary scholar, art critic, translator and historian of culture, which was held at Iuav University of Venice in December 2016, this collection offers new insightful perspectives on one of the central figures of the twentieth-century intellectual *milieu* and international literary relations.

As Bizzotto observes, scholarship on Praz has so far shown various limitations, since it has failed to unveil the complex interdisciplinary dimension of this eminent author’s *oeuvre* by generally privileging “literature and biography over the incredible range of his interests” (p. 22). *Mario Praz: Voice Centre Stage* thereby brings together national and international voices specialising in different branches of humanities research in order to offer a clearer and more encompassing picture of Praz as “not only a man of letters and art collector but also as a critic of art and architecture, literary and cultural theorist, travel writer, photography and cinema enthusiast and innovator in print culture” (p. 25).

For ease of reference, the contributions to the volume have been expertly categorised into three sections, namely, “Literature”, “The Arts” and “Forms of Auto-Biography”. This distinction, however, is not meant to be a rigid demarcation, as each chapter differently engages in dialogue with the three main areas of focus. This is evident from the very outset of the book, where Loretta Innocenti’s essay “Word and Image: A Comparison between Two Languages” opens the literary section. Innocenti places emphasis on Praz’s theoretical concern with the intersections between literature and the visual arts or, more broadly, “between verbal and visual texts, images and words” (p. 34). This concern has characterised all of Praz’s scholarly career, as testified to, for example, by his work on emblems and devices in *Studi sul concettismo* (1934, enlarged in 1946) and his later volume *Mnemosine* (1970). In exploring symbolic texts such as emblems and devices, Innocenti argues, Praz clearly shows how “[t]he visual and the verbal are combined here in a single language”, as “Siamese sisters, impossible to separate” (p. 35). In addition to shedding light on Praz’s interactions with major figures of the twentieth-century critical and philosophical landscape, including Warburg, Curtius, Wellek and Propp, Innocenti duly recognises his concurrent capacity to re-evaluate and restore the dignity of “a genre [emblems and devices] that had been incredibly fashionable in the seventeenth century but was later relegated to the cabinet of curiosities” (p. 34).

This interdisciplinary dialogue further unfolds in Laura Scuriatti’s contribution “Modernism and the Baroque: Two Strange Bedfellows in Mario Praz’s *Oeuvre*”, where she delves into both Praz’s engagement with the ways literature and the arts crucially intersect and his prowess in establishing meaningful connections between the past and the present.

In this sense, Scuriatti pointedly highlights how, according to Praz, “the literature, art and culture of the past exist insofar as they are ‘recognised’ by successive generations, that is when successive generations, or authors, recognise themselves in them, when there is, in certain cases, a ‘shock of recognition’” (p. 47). To support this argument, Scuriatti proceeds to discuss Praz’s study of Baroque art and aesthetics, underlining how the Italian critic’s version of the Baroque was closely related to his understanding of modernity and Modernism. In this process, she also assesses Praz’s dialectic approach to Modernist authors, notably T.S. Eliot, as if he strove to establish a “deep affinity of sensibility” (p. 49), a kinship of emotional and aesthetic responses between the Baroque and Modernism, these being two epochs similarly engaged in a struggle with their recent past.

The “Literature” section closes with Renzo D’Agnillo’s “Mario Praz: Beauty, Terror and the Artificial Man”, which is the contribution that, more than others, focuses on the literary aspects of Praz’s *corpus*. In particular, D’Agnillo explores Praz’s investigation into the literary and artistic sensibility of the Gothic in the context of his introductory essay to the 1968 Penguin volume *Three Gothic Novels*, which included Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, William Beckford’s *Vathek*, and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. D’Agnillo sees Praz’s discussion of *Frankenstein* as the most intriguing part of that introduction. He also suggests that Praz can here be shown to expand his views on the topic as originally outlined in his internationally acclaimed *The Romantic Agony* (1933), which had counted no more than “three fleeting references” to Shelley’s novel (p. 67). Significantly, whilst admitting that Praz’s commentary on *Frankenstein* in the 1968 piece still seems to be left “in the realm of speculation”, D’Agnillo emphasises that the Italian scholar “was one of the first critics to seriously address the technical aspects of Shelley’s novel” (p. 73). Indeed, Praz drew attention to Shelley’s interest in and familiarity with the ‘masculine world’ of science and technology of her time.

The second section of the volume focuses on “The Arts” and provides further evidence about Praz’s engagement with varied forms of art, as well as his fascination with the eccentric and the bizarre. Among the four contributions that constitute this section, Lene Østermark-Johansen’s essay “Framing Likeness and Otherness: Mario Praz and Wax Portraiture” is perhaps the most outstanding. Here Østermark-Johansen explores Praz’s obsession with wax as a material for miniature sculpture. The result of this obsession is a fine collection of wax sculptures – ranging from portraits in profile and *en face* to devotional and mythological scenes – which is housed in the Museo Praz in Rome. Praz’s wax collection, together with his literary production on wax sculpture, certainly attest to his fascination with the beautiful and the bizarre, “his taste for the tasteless” (p. 139), but also to his interest regarding questions of mimesis and representation. Building on Praz’s “Le figure di cera in letteratura” (1938), Østermark-Johansen underscores “[wax’s] ability to imitate human skin and flesh to an almost uncanny degree”, thus collapsing “the boundary between original and image, sitter and representation, life and art in a way which makes us feel uncomfortable” (pp. 142-43). Crucially, she also places emphasis on the ephemeral nature of wax as an organic sculptural material, a condition that it shares with human corporality. In spite of being preserved behind frames and glass covers, “wax sculpture in Praz’s private collection serves the function of *memento mori*” (p. 150).

Angelo Maggi’s “Praz and the Camera Obscura of Memory” and Jonah Siegel’s “Evil Eye: Mario Praz and the Superillustrated Text” continue this conversation on portraiture. On the one hand, Maggi examines Praz’s interest in photography, stressing how it had for

him the power to trigger memories, “giv[ing] consistency to a lost time” (p. 109). When analysing Praz’s remarks on photography, Maggi also observes how they possibly reveal an attempt at elevating it to the status of art. Borrowing Praz’s words from his 1967 essay on portraiture, “Pittura di ritratto e fotografia”, Maggi contends that “[p]hotography has a great deal to say about the person portrayed, but what is most certain is that, no less than a portrait, it has much to say about the photographer” (p. 111), thus foregrounding the creative role played by the photographer. On the other hand, Siegel turns his attention to Praz’s later publications on art history, such as *Conversation Pieces* (1971) and *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration* (1964), and suggests that these texts should be seen

as belonging to a particularly modern category, the twentieth-century superillustrated book, a genre only possible when the technologies of photography and of printing – not to mention the means of communication – have reached the point at which such extraordinary accumulations of images are conceivable. (p. 82)

These works, Siegel goes on to argue, contain signs of Praz’s compulsion to both collect and display, his pleasure in accumulation and excess, and “a mood of voyeuristic fascination with gazing on the lives of others” in their informal day-to-day dimension, which “one cannot help reading as in some measure suggesting a failure to fully live among them” (p. 78). Interestingly, Siegel concludes his piece by reflecting on the ways Praz’s *finesse* can also be seen to inform Luchino Visconti’s 1974 film *Conversation Piece*, which is partly based on Praz himself and might be posited as an over-elaborate example of the superillustrated text (p. 100).

Sofia Magnaguagno’s “Praz’s Reception of Paolo Veronese: An Intercultural Dialogue” further strengthens the notion of Praz’s rich and diverse research interests, which are here exemplified by his mastery in the field of European-art historical criticism, with specific regard to Venetian painter Paolo Veronese. In particular, Magnaguagno draws attention to the analogies between the styles of the Italian painter and William Shakespeare, which Praz had highlighted in his 1937 article “Shakespeare e lo schermo”. While discussing a possible film adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Praz extolled Veronese’s art as “a philologically appropriate scenography for film adaptation – or ‘translation’ as he calls it” (p. 126), thus envisaging a transcoding process between literature, painting and cinema. In addition to showing his profound knowledge of the Venetian master and his reception, “Shakespeare e lo schermo” attests to Praz’s “anticipation of intermedial studies” (p. 135).

Moving to a more autobiographical dimension, the third and last section of the collection, “Forms of Auto-Biography”, consists of three contributions that shed light on other aspects of Praz’s large *corpus* and his intellectual interests and ideas. In “Unromantic Praz: Anti-Stereotyped Portraits of Cities and Places”, Guido Zucconi focuses on Praz’s writings on travel and underlines how this part of his *oeuvre* has attracted less critical attention, if compared to his works on literature and art. More specifically, Zucconi cites Praz’s *Unromantic Spain* (1929), *Il Mondo che ho visto* (1982) and *Voce dietro la scena. Un’antologia personale* (1980) to discuss the Italian critic’s approach to travel writing, which is supposed to aim “at getting rid of the commonplaces that prevented travellers from getting a fuller and more complex understanding of their experiences” (p. 156). The exploration of Praz’s aforementioned works shows how he was committed to providing uncommon perspectives when portraying the places and cities he visited, so as to dismantle *clichés* and stereotypes. Zucconi goes on to observe that, to achieve this end, Praz also recommends that travel writers

should “ideally” complete and integrate their descriptions with “plenty of references – even fragmentary – to literature and art history” (p. 165), a suggestion that once again confirms a propensity for intercultural dialogues between disciplines.

As anticipated by the title of his contribution, “A ‘Life inside my own Life’: The Correspondence between Mario Praz and Vernon Lee”, Stefano Evangelista focuses on the relationship between Praz and his mentor Vernon Lee by examining the unpublished 1920s letters between the two that are included in Lee’s miscellaneous manuscripts housed in Somerville College, Oxford. These letters, Evangelista rightly contends, serve “both as platforms to establish [Praz’s] authority *vis-à-vis* the older critic and laboratories of essayistic writing” (p. 168). Through a careful selection of extracts, Evangelista shows how a young and unexperienced Praz seeks and relies on Lee’s advice to find his own academic voice “outside the Italian language” (p. 170). Lee played a key role in facilitating Praz’s entry in foreign circles; for instance, she provided him with an important early contact with the *London Mercury*, which, in turn, allowed Praz to practise and reflect on his critical voice. Most significantly, Evangelista evaluates the essayistic tone of the letters and highlights how these also show Praz’s evolution from a talented but naïve young author to a more confident and self-conscious critic.

Elisa Bizzotto’s “Marius the Epicurean, Walter the Medusean: Praz’s Paterian (Self-) Fashioning” is the last paper of the “Forms of Auto-biography” and the whole collection. This chapter treads a parallel path to the one taken by Evangelista, as Bizzotto decides to explore another fundamental figure in Praz’s literary, artistic and cultural education (p. 29), namely, Walter Pater, who was both a “principal interest of Praz’s work as a translator” and a “long-standing object of his critical attention” (p. 189). It is paramount, then, to closely examine Praz’s relationship with the author of *Marius the Epicurean* and consider the ways in which Pater’s work has informed Praz’s identity as “a writer, critic and public intellectual” (p. 190). In particular, Bizzotto analyses Praz’s engagement with two elements that show his indebtedness to Pater, that is, the house trope and the cultural myth of the “synthetic *femme fatale*”, which he elaborates from Pater’s description of *Mona Lisa* (p. 202). Besides pointing out the similarities and discrepancies between the two authors, Bizzotto claims that, although he failed to recognise that Pater had more to offer than his Decadent sensitivity, Praz’s Paterian criticism was profoundly influential in Italy as well as worldwide.

Combining pluri- and interdisciplinary voices, *Mario Praz: Voice Centre Stage* makes a crucial contribution to the scholarship dedicated to Praz, shedding new light on his vast and eclectic research interests, intellectual achievements, and critical work. In the Introduction, Bizzotto remarks that individual studies on Praz have never been published outside of Italy, apart from a relatively unknown French exception (p. 21). In this sense, having chosen to write the papers in English certainly provides added value to the volume and helps to promote a national and international, but also intercultural, debate on Praz’s centrality in the literary and cultural landscape of the twentieth century.