

Roberto Ludovico

Renato Poggioli. Between History and Literature

Until the year 2007 only two critical articles had been written on Renato Poggioli: one by his colleague at Harvard University Dante Della Terza in 1971 (Della Terza 1971), and two much more recent ones: by Giuseppe Ghini (2005), and by the Belgian scholar Laurent Béghin (2005). In addition to these two articles, Ghini had circulated a short but informative bio-bibliographical document dated 2005 on the internet. These three scholars, with over a dozen others, including historians, slavists, italianists, and comparatists, animated a three-day symposium dedicated to Renato Poggioli's centennial by three American Universities in 2007: the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Brown University and Harvard University. The intent of the symposium was to reignite interest in Poggioli and to re-evaluate the role he had in the twentieth century's international literary debate. Since then a number of new publications (see for instance Pavese, Poggioli 2010), newspaper articles (Pirani 2008; Canali 2008), conferences¹, reprints of Poggioli's work (Poggioli 2012), and even television broadcasts² have contributed to rediscovering Renato Poggioli and his legacy as a scholar and as an intellectual. The collection of essays *Renato Poggioli. An Intellectual Biography*, edited by the three organizers of the 2007 symposium – Lino Pertile, Massimo Riva and myself – is the first book-length publication entirely dedicated to Poggioli.

Far from wanting to provide an annotated bibliography of critical literature on Poggioli, these few introductory notes are meant to suggest that the scarce *presence* of his name in literary criticism after his death in 1963 is strictly connected with his cultural profile and the unusual trajectory of the biographical events that led him to leave Florence and Italy to pursue a career as Professor of Slavic Studies and Comparative Literature at Harvard University. Before that, Poggioli lived in Prague, Vilnius and Warsaw in the 1930s, and taught as a full-time faculty member at Smith College and Brown University in New England, as well as a Visiting Professor at a number of other higher education institutions in North America and in Europe.

¹ The Rome based “Centro Studi Americani” held on May 26th, 2008 a round table entitled: “Renato Poggioli: fu censura comunista?”, with Mario Pirani, Sylvia Poggioli, Luisa Mangoni and Roberto Ludovico, coordinated by Giuliano Amato.

² On May 4th, 2013, RAI Education aired *Ricordo di Renato Poggioli* as part of its series *Scrittori per un anno*, to remember Poggioli on the fiftieth anniversary of his death (available online through RAI's websites).

His overall intellectual profile was the result of the diverse experience during the four decades surrounding the crucial years of World War II and the originality of his thinking. These are the characteristics that, for so many years, made his work as an engaged intellectual impossible to frame within one specific traditional discipline, one methodological approach, or one defined ideological creed. This might be one of the reasons that has caused the name of Renato Poggioli to slip through the cracks of mainstream literary criticism, particularly in his home country.

Poggioli left Europe in the summer of 1938 and moved to Northampton (Massachusetts) to take a one-year position as Italian lecturer at Smith College instead of returning to his post as lecturer of the Italian government in Warsaw. This was a move that he had cautiously arranged and that he revealed to the Italian ministry of Foreign Affairs, of which he was an employee, only after his arrival in New York³. Quite clearly the year he chose to leave Warsaw, where he himself had insisted on being relocated from Vilnius, marks a turning point in the history of Mussolini's Italy and of all Europe. His immediate involvement with the antifascist group gravitating around Gaetano Salvemini and Poggioli's colleague at Smith College Michele Cantarella, demonstrates the motivations that led him to move to the United States and to apply that same year for another teaching position, in order to prolong his residence in that country beyond the initial one-year appointment at the prestigious Western Massachusetts' all-women college. The President of Smith College, William Allan Neilson, in a 1939 recommendation letter for Poggioli emphasized his competence both as a teacher of Italian and as a slavacist, but also explained that "he is pretty thoroughly out of sympathy with [*the Italian government*] and would very much like to stay in the free atmosphere"⁴. Perhaps unintentionally President Neilson had provided a rather effective representation of Poggioli's personal and professional character: through a glimpse on his diverse literary competence that, *in nuce*, foreshadows his disposition as a comparatist among the most dynamic ones of his times, and by hinting to his commitment to freedom.

Poggioli was not the only one who left Europe to fight the nazi-fascist regimes from abroad, although his perspective was that of an anti-totalitarian rather than simply that of an antifascist. Poggioli was an antifascist as much as he was an outspoken anticommunist: a characteristic that he maintained throughout the prewar years and that matured further during the decades of the Cold War while he was a well-established member of the American academia. The consequences of his anticommunist views are well documented through the letters he exchanged with Cesare Pavese, then editor at the Einaudi publishing house, between 1947 and 1950. The exchange, entirely published in "*A meeting of minds*". *Carteggio 1947-1950*, documents the uneasiness with which the editorial board of the Turin-based publisher received the explicit anti-Soviet views that Poggioli expressed in his *Il fiore del*

³ We draw this information from a letter that Poggioli sent on September 13rd, 1938 from New York to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Fondo Archivio Scuole, Fascicoli Personale Docente Estero non più in servizio [1920-1955], pacco 426, Posizione IV).

⁴ Letter conserved at the Smith College Archives. Faculty Collection. Box 42. "Poggioli".

verso russo, published by Einaudi in 1950. This incident ended up costing Poggioli the cancellation of a verbal agreement with Pavese to publish, also with Einaudi, what would become his most famous and still today most well known critical essay: *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* (Poggioli 1962). In a letter to Pavese dated January 30th, 1950, describing his ideological inclinations, Poggioli stated his refusal to be “neither red nor black”; in his February 16 reply Pavese very clearly framed the implications of Poggioli’s position within the Italian cultural and political establishment by saying that his refusal to take sides with any of the major ideological factions, means “in today’s Italy, to be ‘suspended between the Earth and the sky’, ‘not inside nor outside’, ‘neither clothed nor dressed’”. Pavese’s words candidly describe the dynamics that characterized the Italian cultural establishment of the postwar years, and suggests one of the reasons for Poggioli’s neglect in the decades following his death in 1963. Other reasons are to be found in his scholarly profile, which was possibly as hard to categorize in Italy, as was his political affiliation or lack of it.

At the base of Poggioli’s rejection of the Soviet regime was, primarily, his familiarity with contemporary Russian culture that he acquired very early in his life as a student at the University of Florence. He graduated in 1928 under the mentorship of Ettore Lo Gatto and soon became one of the most active among critics and translators in Italy, thus largely contributing to the diffusion in Italy not only of Russian literature – especially early twentieth century poetry – but also Czech and Bulgarian, along with several other European literatures in which he was fluent: French, Spanish, German, and so forth. The years he spent between Prague, Vilnius and Warsaw gave Poggioli the opportunity to further enhance his familiarity and understanding of those cultures and their languages. This experience also provided him with one of his most valuable assets as a critic, which will always characterize his positions as an intellectual: as a lecturer of the Italian government, Poggioli was a teacher of Italian at local universities and, while fully immersed in the host country’s culture, he developed an outsider’s perspective on his own country’s literary culture and tradition, as well as its politics.

Like many other *émigré* intellectuals to the U.S. in the first half of the twentieth century, Poggioli started his American academic career as a teacher of Italian, at Smith College in 1938-39, and at Brown University until he transferred to Harvard in 1947 to formally return to his original activity as a slavist and, finally, as one of the founders of the department of Comparative Literatures at that university. Even during these years, Poggioli maintained strong ties with Italian culture, publishing extensively in Italy, helping to promote the translation and the publication of contemporary Italian literature in the U.S., and – perhaps his most ambitious project – founding the literary periodical *Inventario* (1946-1963) with Luigi Bertì. This was meant to be the two long-time friends’ contribution to the cultural reconstruction of Italy after the destructive years of World War II, through a forward-looking literary journal that presented its readership with a broad selection of the best literature the contemporary international scene had to offer. Evidently, this was a move to expose postwar readership in Italy to those foreign literatures that the cultural nationalism of the fascist Ventennio had programmatically ostracized. Promoting literature

as a form of dialogue among countries once at war was, in Berti's and Poggioli's view, one way to contribute to the civil and social rebirth of their country. Poggioli's role as director of the international editorial board of *Inventario*, allowed him to make good use of his direct exposure to the international literary world he had gained during his many years abroad and through the opportunities offered to him by his post as a professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard.

The American years allowed Poggioli to further broaden the Europe-wide perception of literature he had developed in the 1930s when he looked at Italy within the continent's context. From his trans-Atlantic observation point he was now able to look at Europe within the East-West perspective, extending from North America to Russia: two countries with which he had become quite familiar.

Poggioli's multifaceted intellectual profile as a slavacist, an italianist, a translator, a pioneer comparatist, and as a literary theorist, together with his ideological libertarian convictions, all contributed to placing him in a sort of *no man's land* characterized by the absence of boundaries – political, geographical, or linguistic – between different cultures and disciplines. This intellectual universe was kept together by his strong belief in the unifying force of literature as an instrument of dialogue and reciprocal understanding. This hard to categorize identity contributes, on the one hand, to his singular profile as an intellectual, and on the other, to the limited circulation that his name and work have enjoyed in the past fifty years, especially in Italy. Nonetheless, even a very superficial bibliographical research will yield a number of references to Poggioli in relatively recent studies, mostly published by North American scholars, dedicated to Modernism and to the origin and history of the avant-gardes. His *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, is inevitably quoted and acknowledged as one of the seminal studies investigating how and in which circumstances these artistic movements came into being⁵. Also, Poggioli's work as a slavacist, and his activity as a translator into Italian from Russian and other Slavic literatures, as well as from English (see Poggioli 1954), are known among specialists of each of these literary fields of study.

Besides these rather specific references, however, a few instances present Poggioli in a role that goes beyond the context of the technical concerns of one given field among the many he was involved in. It is interesting, for instance, that a scholar of modern Italian culture such as Ruth Ben-Ghiat should start her *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-45* with a quotation from Renato Poggioli's 1934 review of Giovanni Battista Angioletti's *L'Europa di oggi* (Angioletti 1934):

⁵ Ernesto Livorni in his article *Renato Poggioli's Theory of the Avant-Garde and its Legacy* (Livorni 2012), has provided the historic context to Poggioli's work by establishing its relationship to earlier theorists' work, such as Walter Benjamin and Hans Magnus Henszenberger, to his contemporaries Guillermo De Torre and José Ortega y Gasset, and with some whose work borrowed, more or less explicitly from their predecessors: Peter Bürger and Matei Calinescu. On the same topic see also Wladimir Krysin'ski's "Il condizionamento postmoderno e le nuove aporie dell'avanguardia" (Krysin'ski 1998).

In 1934, the young art critic Renato Poggioli asked his peers: “What is this Europe in dissolution that wants to drag us into the abyss as well? Should we Italians become more European, or should Europe become more Italian? ... Are we merely an eccentric peninsula on the continent, or are we still and always the garden of the Empire? To defend ourselves spiritually, should our culture turn its back on Europe, or should we be open to that which comes from outside?” Poggioli’s concerns over national identity and the future of Europe were shared by intellectuals throughout the continent after World War I (Ben-Ghiat 2001: 1).

It is not hard to imagine that Poggioli’s own answer to this rhetorical question would strongly lean toward a strategy of aperture and dialogue with the rest of Europe, taking a position that was provokingly against the grain of fascist nationalistic politics. These views were perfectly in tune with the positions developed within the group of young writers gathered around the Florentine literary periodical *Solaria* (1926-1934) to which Poggioli was a regular contributor during these years. *Solaria*’s group included writers of the caliber of Gadda, Saba, Montale, Vittorini, and of many other protagonists of Italian twentieth century literature, who shared a strong commitment to bringing Italy up to speed with the achievements of European Modernism. Poggioli himself explicitly identified himself as a “*solariano*”, choosing this periodical over the very many he wrote for, as the one that best represented and most influenced his views during his apprenticeship years. With her choice to quote this passage from a book review by Poggioli, Ben-Ghiat highlights not the slavacist, nor the translator or the theorist, but Poggioli-the-intellectual, who was already setting the foundations for one of the larger scale topics of critical and theoretical investigation that accompanied him throughout his life: the destiny of European culture and the role of Italy within the European context⁶.

When writing the review to Angioletti’s book, Poggioli likely had in mind Leo Ferrero’s article *Perché l’Italia abbia una letteratura europea*⁷, which appeared in *Solaria*’s issue of January 1928 (Ferrero 1928), the same that, at a close reading, may have inspired his opening article in the inaugural issue of *Inventario* of Spring 1946. Here, a more mature Poggioli, who has spent the war years in the U.S. and who is now a member of the de-

⁶ We should not forget that at this point Poggioli has already spent a year studying at the University of Prague, and that later in 1934 he would have gone back to the Bohemian capital to work as secretary of the local Italian Cultural Institute.

⁷ In this 1928 article Ferrero lamented the decline of Italian literature – prose in particular –, and attributed it to the disconnect between Italy and the broader European culture, according to the following syllogism: “Non siamo più europei perché non siamo più italiani. Si chiama infatti letteratura europea – e qui ci occupiamo soprattutto della romanzesca, e escludiamo la lirica – quella che dipinge il proprio paese, sottintendendo gli altri. [...] in ogni libro che dipinga grandiosamente l’Italia si deve avere il presentimento del mondo”. The disposition to sharing the world’s passions and struggles is, in Ferrero’s view, the key to a literature of universal value: “Gli scrittori italiani non sono più europei perché non hanno la chiave della vita, non solo europea, ma universale, che è il sentimento morale”.

partment of Romance Languages of Brown University, is re-framing his European views and updating them to the North American perspective.

Chi vive in terre lontane, o meglio in altri continenti – started Poggioli in a clearly autobiographical key – non può mai dimenticarsi, anche quando non glielo ricordi un'occhiata al globo o ad una carta, quanto sia fisicamente piccola l'Europa: né quanto sia proporzionalmente minuscola quella lunga penisola che ad essa è insieme congiunta e disgiunta, e che ha nome Italia... (Poggioli 1946: 1).

In the following paragraphs the European continent becomes the meeting ground for a Californian and a Siberian soldier who choose to shake hands in sign of peace on the soil of the Old Continent. Despite what from our historic perspective would appear as a utopia, we will recognize in these words an approach similar to that reflected in the quotation that opens Ben-Ghiat's book, although it is now applied to the global geo-political context. In both cases, Poggioli indicates that deeply understanding one's own culture should lead to a more profound understanding of that of others, thus favoring moral growth and civilized dialogue among peoples.

Among the frequent references to *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (mostly found in preliminary bibliographical reviews within volumes on the origins of the avant-gardes, or closely related topics) Umberto Eco refers to Poggioli's book on more than one occasion. In a 1971 article entitled "The Death of the Gruppo '63", when comparing the concept of *neo-avant-garde* with that of *historic avant-garde*, Eco refers to Poggioli's "valuable study" to provide a schematic definition of the *fin-de siècle* avant-garde movements (Eco 1971)⁸, upon which the rest of the essay's definition of the Gruppo '63's hinges.

Again in a very recent interview that appeared in *Il Venerdì di Repubblica* of February 1st, 2013, fifty years after the creation of the Gruppo '63 and incidentally, as we know,

⁸ At page 63 of Eco's essay we read: "Straightaway in this kind of sociological sketch, in these initial reflections about a poetics and an ideology, an inevitable question comes to mind: in what sense did the new Avantgarde differ or match with the historic one? Perhaps we can take Renato Poggioli's valuable study *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* and try to trace the recurring features in movements of the Avantgarde down through history:

- 1) Activism – Adventure; Aktion; Sturm; Excitement.
- 2) Antagonism – Anti-Tradition; Bloodymindedness; Opposition to other movements.
- 3) Nihilism – Terrorism; Scourge of institutions.
- 4) Demagogism – Self-propagandism; I'm the king of the castle.
- 5) Cult of youth – Production; Creation, Rejuvenation.
- 6) Cult of modernity – Futurism; No more Latin in class.
- 7) Games – Dada; Let the children have their fun.
- 8) Self-sacrifice – The individual dies to allow the re-birth of another.
- 9) Revolutionism.
- 10) Domination of the opus by its poetics".

half a century after the death of Poggioli, Eco once again referred to the *Theory of the Avant-Garde*⁹.

“Bisogna rileggersi”, Eco says “il saggio di Renato Poggioli, bellissimo, sulle avanguardie: ne faceva una fenomenologia fissandone le caratteristiche. E fra queste per l’avanguardia diceva che deve esser terroristica e suicida. In ogni caso espressione polemica di un gruppo bohemien ancora escluso dal potere. Il Gruppo era terroristico, ma non suicida, perciò non eravamo come l’avanguardia storica”.

Regardless of the appreciation that Poggioli’s book receives from an intellectual of the stature of Umberto Eco once again in 2013, what matters most is the connection he establishes between Poggioli’s work on the avant-gardes and the *neo-avant-gardes* such as the Gruppo ’63, of which Eco was a founding member.

Even a quick look at Poggioli’s bio-bibliographic data might reveal aspects of his strategic role within twentieth century western literary culture that would be hard to dismiss as a pure coincidence of dates. Poggioli’s early work and formative experiences of the pre-American years mostly deal with aspects of late Modernism in Europe. In fact he could be considered part of the last generation of European intellectuals whose early experience is rooted in the last decades – the 20s and the 30s – of an era that was about to end (or to be radically transformed, depending on different critical approaches) as a consequence of World War II. In addition to his interest in the Russian poets of the earlier part of the century, Poggioli’s articles on Franz Kafka, Ramón Pérez de Ayala, Thomas Mann, and Jaroslav Hašek (among several others), and his early familiarity with the work of the acknowledged masters of European Modernism, provide a clear example of the *humus* that nourished his intellectual curiosity in those years. Similarly, he was directly engaged – through *Solaria* that spearheaded this initiative – in the efforts to establish a connection between Modernist Europe and Italian writers through the rediscovery of Svevo and Saba, the work of Montale and that of a young Carlo Emilio Gadda, just to mention a few significant names among those involved in this process.

This was the cultural baggage that Poggioli brought with him on the ship that took him to New York in the late summer of 1938. Once in New England, he was immediately involved in the antifascist initiatives that lead to the creation of the Mazzini Society in 1939, of which he was one of the original founders and first interim president. From Northampton he moved to Providence (RI) in the summer of 1939¹⁰ where, while teaching at Brown University and getting acquainted with the new academic community of which he was becoming a permanent member, he continued his active involvement in the Mazzini Society, alongside Gaetano Salvemini and Count Carlo Sforza, among others.

⁹ It might be useful to remember that Poggioli’s book’s original edition in Italian was published in 1962, just the year prior to the constitution of the Gruppo ’63, by Il Mulino, a publishing house based in Eco’s own home town of Bologna.

¹⁰ That summer he also taught at the Middleborough College Summer School.

Poggioli's earliest reference to his work on the avant-garde is in a letter to Massimo Mila of 1947 (shortly after going back to some sort of normality when the War was over), although the essay appeared as a volume only twenty-five years later, after having been published in four installments in *Inventario* between 1949 and 1951. This makes the *Theory of the avant-garde* a life-long project stemming from Poggioli's own direct exposure to the tail-end of that extraordinary season of European Modernism, observed and reorganized, after the pause imposed by the war years, from an external point of view that is chronologically close enough, and geographically distant enough to justify a first attempt at a conclusive evaluation of its origins, dynamics, and outcomes. Incidentally, *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia*, becomes available to Italian intellectuals as a volume on the eve of another season of avant-garde movements, inaugurated by the Gruppo '63. Poggioli's accidental death did not allow him to witness and possibly participate in the lively debate sparked by the provocative claims of Eco, Anselmi, Guglielmi, Sanguineti and their friends. Poggioli would have most certainly followed this debate with interest and curiosity, likely contributing to it, once again, from the advantageous perspective of the outsider. The sudden interruption of his career when it was reaching its apex at age 56 also contributed to erase Poggioli's name from the memory of many, though, as we have seen, not that of everyone. Nonetheless we realize today that Poggioli's work, often performed behind the scenes, as is often the case for "cultural mediators"¹¹, also places him in the key position of connecting the pre-World War II European cultural experience, with the one that emerged on the World scene from the social transformation that followed the War. Hinging exactly on the years of the Conflict, and embracing a perspective that goes from Eastern Europe to the western outposts of the American academia, Poggioli's life and work deserve to be framed within the larger picture of his contribution to the grand scheme of twentieth century western cultural transformations.

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¹¹ "Mediatore culturale" is the role that Carlo Bo most appropriately attributed to his long friend Poggioli in "La cultura europea in Firenze negli anni '30" (Bo 1969).

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Abstract

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Renato Poggioli. Between History and Literature

A pioneer of Slavic studies in Italy during the pre-WWII years, Poggioli graduated in Russian philology under Ettore Lo Gatto in Florence before spending most of the 1930s between Prague, Vilnius and Warsaw as a lecturer for the Italian government. In 1938 he emigrated to the United States to teach Italian at Smith College and Brown University. After the War he went to Harvard as a professor of Slavic Studies and Comparative Literature. This essay shows Poggioli's role during the first part of his career in making Slavic literatures, and modern Russian poetry in particular, accessible to Italian readers and scholars through his translations (*La violetta notturna*, 1933; *Il fiore del verso russo*, 1950). It also highlights his pan-European cultural vision, soon to be further extended to the transatlantic perspective after 1938. Looking beyond his specific work as a translator, a literary critic and theorist (*Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia*, 1962), and his active engagement in antifascist initiatives in the U.S., Poggioli is depicted as a sophisticated intellectual against the backdrop of the crucial decades centered around the years of WWII. Poggioli is not only a "cultural mediator" between the traditional eastern and western geo-cultural spheres, but also covers a key role in the transition between the late season of European Modernism, of which he was an offspring, and the age of the neo-avant-gardes, symbolically inaugurated in Italy in 1963, the same year of Poggioli's premature death in a car accident in California, half a century ago.

Keywords

Renato Poggioli; Modernism; World-Literature.