

**STUDIES IN WALTER PATER  
AND AESTHETICISM**

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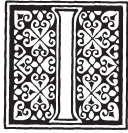
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*MARIO PRAZ: VOICE CENTER STAGE*. EDITED BY ELISA BIZZOTTO. VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN STUDIES 7. BERN: PETER LANG, 2019. 239 PP. £53.00.



IN ITALY, THE NAME OF MARIO PRAZ has never ceased to be surrounded by a fatal aura, even forty years after his death. Perhaps too susceptible to his eccentric persona and the legend of his evil eye, Italian academics have either approached him with a form of sacral (and therefore distant) reverence or superciliously dismissed his critical positions as golden relics of a bygone era. In the Introduction to *Mario Praz: Voice Center Stage*, Elisa Bizzotto provides a satisfactory explanation for this problematic reception. Praz's one-of-a-kind erudition, she rightly argues, has often been discouraging for the following generations of scholars, his influence too pervasive to be reckoned with without a sense of anxiety; moreover, from a methodological point of view, his non-theoretical perspective has been, at least superficially, at odds with the dominant critical trends of the last fifty years. Despite this troubled legacy, Praz has never fallen off the radar in his country—several of his works have never been out of print and a selection of them was even collected in the prestigious Meridiani series, a privilege that several canonical authors of Italian literature have not yet been granted. Conversely, even though many of his writings were translated into English and have had an international resonance, there has been a paucity of Anglophone criticism on the man Frank Kermode called the 'greatest of foreign students of English' (p. 20). A collection such as Bizzotto's is therefore certainly welcome, especially since, as she notes, a number of Anglophone scholars have recently revamped some of Praz's formulations.

Testifying to the range of Praz's studies, the book is divided into three parts, dedicated respectively to literature, visual art, and (auto)biographical questions. Opening the first section, Loretta Innocenti's considered essay shows how Praz assiduously investigated the age-old question of the analogies between the arts. A focal issue is his relationship with Aby Warburg, evidenced by many methodological similarities (if not cases of undeniable influence). Just as she links Praz's thematic and inter-artistic approaches to Warburg and Ernst Robert Curtius, Innocenti aptly unearths Praz and René Wellek's all-important, albeit often neglected, debate on the comparison between artistic forms and on the contested notion of the spirit of the times. The intermedial, comparative, and trans-historical character of

Praz's criticism is also at the core of Laura Scuriatti's essay, which offers a brilliant analysis of Praz's engagement with the profoundly interrelated critical categories of Baroque and Mannerism. After an informative overview of the late-nineteenth to early twentieth-century European reappraisal of what may be loosely labelled as Baroque culture and aesthetics, Scuriatti succeeds perfectly in explicating the geographical and chronological complexity of these categories in Praz's writings; she discusses how he systematically connected them with Modernism and modernity, a critical assessment shared with contemporary figures such as T. S. Eliot and Walter Benjamin. Equally incisive, if more restricted in scope, is Renzo D'Agnillo's contribution, which focuses on Praz's later re-assessment of Gothic literature as a way of revising his magnum opus *The Romantic Agony* (1933). As well as commenting on Praz's idiosyncratic view of *Frankenstein*, D'Agnillo convincingly illustrates how Edmund Burke's aesthetics, omitted in Praz's earlier work, assumes a prominent place in his later reading while, intriguingly, his earlier moral condemnation of de Sade becomes less rigid.

The next section opens with a theoretically dense essay by Jonathan Siegel. By drawing on his self-coined (and felicitous) idea of the 'superillustrated text'—a 'published collection of images in which the experience of accumulation itself is central to the project' (p. 81)—Siegel analyses at length Praz's richly illustrated book *Conversation Pieces* (1971) and the portrayal of his cinematographic double in Luchino Visconti's *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno* (1974). If photography plays a pivotal role in Siegel's speculations, it is even more central in Angelo Maggi's contribution, which provides a detailed account of Praz's lifelong and multifaceted interest in the topic. Maggi explores how, in several works, Praz sought to debunk the myth of photographic objectivity and, consequently, to emphasize the subjective, artistic quality of the medium. This twofold critical operation is evident in Praz's original treatment of the realism of Julia Margaret Cameron's portraits and in his astute reflections on the effect of photographic reproduction on the perception (and study) of visual art. Painting is the focus of the following essay. Here, Sofia Magnaguagno carefully, if somewhat discursively, points out how Praz's remarks on Veronese's theatricality bear the trace of much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and art scholarship—from Ruskin and Gautier to D'Annunzio and Berenson—and, more particularly, how they are imbricated with Shakespearean criticism. Her consideration of Praz's claim that Shakespeare's plays are extremely adaptable to the medium of film is

especially valuable. Lene Østermark-Johansen's essay deals with a more peripheral artistic form, wax sculpture, of which Praz was an avid and sophisticated collector. Looking at the impressive number of wax sculptures displayed in the Praz House Museum in Rome, Østermark-Johansen investigates Praz's fascination with an art characterized by uncanny hyperrealism, cadaverous perishability, and haptic sensuality. In this respect, her analogy between Praz's wax portraits and the thematic and formal 'bric-a-brac' (p. 139) of *The Romantic Agony* is particularly illuminating (and can be extended to all of his works).

Opening the last section, Guido Zucconi's contribution focuses on Praz's rarely mentioned travel-writing. On the one hand, the essay shows how Praz strove to contrast the specific geographic stereotypes that emerged with Romanticism and the subsequent advent of mass tourism. On the other hand, it convincingly delineates Praz's notion of stylistic coherence in architecture and his relativistic—albeit at times equally aestheticized—view of urban landscape. Stefano Evangelista masterfully tackles the complex philological and bio-critical question posed by the correspondence between Praz and Vernon Lee. Through a scrupulous cross-analysis of both Lee's letters to Praz, published by the latter, and Praz's still unpublished letters to Lee, Evangelista sheds new light on the various phases of their close relationship, from Praz's uncertain first steps into the international world of letters that Lee had opened up for him, to her merciless dig at his bookish self-fashioning. While Evangelista's essay closes with an overview of Praz's assessment of Lee's oeuvre, Bizzotto's contribution delves into his critical engagement with Walter Pater. Bizzotto skilfully explores Praz's profound indebtedness to Pater, examining their shared motif of the house as well as Praz's affinity with Pater's aesthetic historicism, and pointing out how Pater's Decadent, Medusean reading of Romanticism was undoubtedly totemic for Praz. Her acute remark that in his historical frescoes Praz often fictionalizes more than Pater—even though he stigmatized the latter precisely for this tendency—is subtly done.

As this summary suggests, the arrangement of the book is rather arbitrary. Of the first three essays, only D'Agnillo's is centred on literature. Moreover, both Bizzotto's and Evangelista's contributions deal with literary questions, while Zucconi's would perfectly fit into the second grouping. But this minor flaw—inescapable in confronting Praz's eclecticism—is candidly acknowledged (and thus mitigated) in the Introduction. The book's virtues, however, are many. It manages to capture the evolution of Praz's thought, and does justice to its (often latent)

intersections with enduringly crucial theoretical and literary-historical issues. The essays also provide useful insights into Praz's style, from his frequently frowned-upon redeployment of previous passages in later publications to his proclivity for metaphors. (Appropriately and commendably, quotations from his works are given both in English and Italian.) Finally, all of the contributions contrast or link aspects of Praz's writings with modernity: Innocenti points out his grappling with Structuralism and especially (post-)Saussurean theories; the quintessentially modern media of photography and cinema are investigated respectively by Maggi and Magnaguagno; Scuriatti discusses Praz's association with Modernism, while Evangelista refers to his suspicion of Futurism and D'Agnillo to his distaste for modern experimental narrative; Zucconi illustrates his reaction to twentieth-century architecture and tourism, and Østermark-Johansen comments on his brilliant analogy between wax sculpture and Warhol's pop art. Contemporary readers may disagree with Praz as a critic, but this volume forces them to reconsider his pre-eminence as a *writer*.

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SIEGEL, JONAH. *MATERIAL INSPIRATIONS: THE INTEREST OF THE ART OBJECT IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND AFTER*. OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020. 373 PP. 82 FIGURES. £45.



**M**ORE MATTER WITH LESS ART', Gertrude says to Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (II. 2. 95). Impatient with his accumulative and rambling rhetoric, she wishes him to get to the point, to reach the heart of the matter without further digressions and circumlocutions. In his monumental volume on nineteenth-century art-writing, Jonah Siegel quotes Gertrude (p. 3) as a way into a complex and learned discussion of the still unresolved relationship to matter in the world of art, with 'unresolved' as a favourite adjective throughout the book. In fact, Siegel's courage to embrace the unresolved and let it remain so for