

N E K R O L O G I

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RENATO POGGIOLI
(1907—1963)

Comparative literature: All of us realize to what extent world literature is one, and how fruitful it is to see literary problems from wider than national perspectives. In the actual work, however, we are impeded by one paramount practical obstacle. In order to be able to work with true competence in several literatures it is not sufficient to have a so-called reading knowledge of the relevant languages, a relatively easy achievement. One has to acquire close familiarity with those languages, to be able to sense the associative aura of their expressions, to discern between different shades of meaning. That is why comparatists who can take in their stride several national literatures are so rare. Renato Poggioli was one of them. He was well at home in at least five literatures, Italian, English, French, Russian and Spanish, and had some knowledge of other Slavic literatures as well as of German.

Moreover, in his case, a scholar of imposingly wide horizons and sharp critical acumen was coupled with a poet. His poetic gift found its outlet in translations only — mostly from Russian, but also from Bulgarian, Czech, English, French, German, Polish and Spanish — into his native Italian, characterized by a verbal felicity inconceivable without true poetic sensibility. His most impressive venture in that field was his large anthology of translations of Russian poetry from Pushkin on, *Il fiore del verso russo*. That anthology, which in its last edition (1961) was included in the popular Mondadori *Biblioteca moderna*, has acquired in Italy — judging by the critical acclaim and reception by the reading public — the status which, with no exaggeration, could be compared with the position A. W. Schegel's translations of Shakespeare and the Spanish drama have achieved in the German literary world.

His was an unusual, innate combination of scholarly and literary gifts; and the breadth of his interests can be, to a certain degree, explained in terms of his biography. A Florentine by birth, he studied Slavic philology at the University of Florence and received his doctor's diploma in 1929, at the age of twenty-two. In 1931—32 he spent a year in Prague on an exchange scholarship, and later spent one more year there as the secretary of the Prague Italian Institute. In 1935 he went to Poland where for three years he worked as lecturer in Italian, first in Wilno and then in Warsaw. The upshot of his stay in Poland was, on the one hand, his

Polish paper *O estetyce Crocego*, published in the June 1936 issue of the review *Skamander*, on the other, articles on Polish literature and on Wilno in Italian periodicals.

Upon having returned to Italy in 1938, he became a Privatdozent (Libero Docente in Filologia Slava) at the University of Rome. Finding the oppressive atmosphere of Fascist Italy most uncongenial, he decided the same year to emigrate to America. At first he taught Italian literature at Smith College and Brown University. In 1948, he moved to Harvard University where he became a professor of Slavic and comparative literature. At Harvard he quickly rose to a position of eminence, and, together with Harry Levin, he was the Comparative Literature Department of the University. As visiting professor he lectured at the Sorbonne and the University of Rome.

Although he took root in the United States and became an American citizen, he never lost ties with his native country. After the war his rich literary production became, and remained until the end, bi-lingual. From Cambridge, Massachusetts, he was co-editor of "Inventario", a literary quarterly, international in spirit, published in Florence and Milan. Of similar character — as its hybrid, Anglo-French name indicates — was another venture published in Italy under his editorship, "Bateau Books", a collection of volumes of little-known poetic texts by such poets as St.-John Perse, Jorge Guillan, Pedro Salinas, all of them with his short critical essays.

Judging by sheer bulk, his books and papers on Russian literature occupy the first place in his literary production. Of widest scope among them is *The Poets of Russia, 1890—1930* (1960), the only one in any Western language on such a large scale to present a general picture of a dazzlingly rich — and confused — period in the history of Russian poetry, with Blok, Majakovskij, Esenin and Pasternak in the forefront, a book made more difficult to write since some writers and even whole trends with which it deals have scarcely been studied at all. "M. R. P.," Charles Corbet wrote of this book in "Revue de Littérature Comparée", "déploie un talent d'écrivain et une originalité de vues qui font de la lecture de ce volume une fête continuelle pour l'esprit. Il ne lui suffit pas de dominer sa matière: ça et là il en jongle avec une brillante dextérité"¹. The special qualities of the book are its author's vast literary horizons, his familiarity with parallel developments in Western literatures, which few historians of Russian literature would have at their command.

Previous to *The Poets of Russia*, there appeared under the title *The Phoenix and the Spider* (1957) a volume of essays on Dostoevskij, Goncharov, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Bunin, Rozanov, Babel and "The Correspondence from Opposite Corners" between Ivanov and Gershenzon. The question of how those writers viewed themselves, a problem which above all interested their author, added a certain

¹ "Revue de Littérature Comparée", XXXV (1961), p. 313.

unity to this collection of otherwise rather disparate essays. One of the papers of the collection on Tolstoy, seen as a sort of Russian incarnation of Molière's Alceste insisting on being "right" against the whole world, may strike one as being more ingenious than doing justice to Tolstoy's greatness. The essay is, however, a good example of the originality and freshness of Poggioli's critical views. It created a certain stir; indeed, it was meant to be provocative. Another essay, on Rozanov, was separately published later on in 1962, in England as a short monograph.

Among Poggioli's other studies in Russian literature I would like to mention at least one: the introduction to his Italian translation of the *Igor Tale*, *Cantare della gesta di Igor* (1954). Poggioli was no specialist in Old Russian literature, but in literary appreciation he was able to bring in his vast knowledge of world literature, and the reader is over and again referred to *Chanson de Roland*, *Poema de Mio Cid*, *Nibelungenlied* and to St.-John Perse's masterpiece *Anabase*.

He best showed his mettle, however, in those studies which cut across national boundaries and are truly comparatist in character. The readers of this periodical can see from his magisterial *Oaken Flute*² how stimulating and enlightening such studies could be. Like his great compatriot, Benedetto Croce — whose aesthetic and, generally, whose philosophical ideas he did not share — he had the knack of going straight to the essential problems and omitting the paraphernalia, as well as the gift for trenchant, precise formulations.

His *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* (1962) also belongs to studies dealing with vast subjects of "Weltliteratur". The book is not a history of avant-garde literature, although it contains interesting historical disquisitions (as, for instance, the story of the term itself and the discussion of the romantic roots of the avant-garde). It aims at something different, at bringing order and intellectual clarity into a vast and messy subject. Partly it is a sort of phenomenologist "Wesensschauung", partly — owing to the author's keen interest in the social conditioning of art (he was especially interested in applying Pareto's sociological categories to literary history) — a treatise in the sociology of literature. Written for the general public, it was published without notes, but it would not need a very experienced reader to sense on how vast and variegated a reading it was based.

One should, finally, at least mention some of his various other papers which have not hitherto been collected in book form. He was a Dante scholar (*Tragedy or Romance: A Reading of the Paolo and Francesca Episode in Dante's Inferno* and *Dante poco tempo silvano*), wrote a highly interesting paper on Pascal's classicism (*Pascal's Classicism: Psychological, Aesthetic and Scriptural*), published in Italian two papers on romantic poetics as reflected in Madame de Staël's *De la littérature* and Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme*, and wrote commentaries to individual poems by Mallarmé. Two of his papers deal with the literature of decadence (*The*

² "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich", III, 1 (1960), pp. 39–77. The English text of the paper appeared in the "Harvard Library Bulletin", XI (1957), pp. 147–184.

Autumn of Ideas and *Qualis Artifex pereo: or Barbarism and Decadence*). Several times, once in French, he wrote on the poetry of St.-John Perse. He wrote in English on modern Italian literature: Pirandello, Italo Svevo, modern Italian poetry, and in Italian wrote on modern American poetry.

This variety of subjects is really dazzling and, at first sight, even a bit disquieting, because it suggests a certain dissipation of interests. One can discern in his papers, however, some major centers of interest, vaster thematic groups. It was Poggioli's literary strategy to publish chapters of his books to come — and he would write several at once — as independent essays. Only recently he decided to concentrate on a series of books on larger themes. Since he was in the prime of life and had a gift for quick, efficient work, one could expect from him a sequence of books coming one after another at short intervals. He managed, however, to put into final shape only the *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* and a new bold venture, an anthology of twentieth-century European and American poetry for young people, translated into Italian, which he tried out on his daughter. The book, now in the press, is scheduled to appear by the end of 1963. Death in an automobile accident overtook him when he was nearing the completion of another book, this time in English, on pastoral poetry, a book of which *The Oaken Flute* forms a nucleus; the papers on Dante's *poco tempo silvano*, and another paper, published first in Polish in these pages on Gogol's *Oldfashioned Landowners*³, constitute two separate chapters. This book, although lacking some final chapters, was left in an advanced enough stage to be published. Following in line was to be a book on the literature of decadence. And a few weeks before his death he signed a contract with a publisher for still another book on symbolist poetry. One could expect also that his papers on Madame de Staël and Chateaubriand would be continued and that he would one day give us a book on romantic poetics as stated in some key texts.

Thus, scholarship has suffered a truly great loss with his untimely death. It is the more difficult to become reconciled with his death since he was a man of unusual vitality and *joie de vivre*. He managed to combine inner strength and vigor with subtle artistic sensibility, and although a hard-working man, he had nothing in himself of the scholar closeted in his study. He enjoyed travelling, good society and good talk, responded vividly to paintings, was an avid reader of historical literature and a passionate debater of political issues. Death cut short a life that was remarkably full and rich in achievements.

³ "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich", IV, 2 (1962), pp. 137—155. The English text was published in the "Indiana Slavic Studies", only later, in 1963.