

MASTER AND PUPILS – a Memoir of Mario Praz –

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Since Mario Praz's demise on March 23rd 1982 – unexpected and untimely, in view of his persisting intellectual alertness – and since the official obituaries¹ and the appreciative offerings by disciples, colleagues and other scholars in several papers and journals, hardly anything significant has appeared in Italy to weigh and critically assess his cultural legacy, and to honour the memory of the country's 'chief of men' in English studies, scholarship and history of literature.

In the last issue, the "Memorial" no. 30, of *English Miscellany* (1984) – the yearly" symposium of history, literature and the arts" founded by Praz in 1950 was included the Bibliography of his printed writings to date. A first updating bibliography appeared in vol I of *Friendship's Garland* (Rome 1966) the Festschrift presented to him on his retirement, and a further supplement was published in *Panopticon Romano Secondo* (Rome 1977), a collection of Praz's Roman writings. The conclusive issue of *English Miscellany* reprinted some of the tributes, both Italian and foreign, previously published, to his international reputation and scholarly achievement. One of them, by Gianfranco Contini, in stressing Praz's singular personality, his outdistancing most competitors in the field and his cosmopolitan approach to literature, went so far as to assert that he had become nearly a 'stranger', an outsider to his own countrymen: 'Mario Praz, lo Straniero'.

Mario had actually become a sort of XX century 'Hythlodæus', one is tempted to gloss, perhaps with some exaggeration: the fictional character in Thomas More's *Utopia*, a fabulist from Nowhere placed among the self-styled 'scientific', 'cultural', 'operators' in the area he cultivated and fertilized for over half a century, his productivity leaving agape all knowledgeable colleagues.

Praz's personality and taste as a connoisseur of Empire furniture, as a collector of pictures and a shrewd judge of the figurative arts,

were well illustrated by the Exhibition 'Le Stanze delle Memoria. Vedute di ambienti, ritratti in interni e scene di conversazione della collezione Praz Dipinti ad acquarelli 1776 - 1870'. This was organized by Dr Stefano Susinno and Ms Elena di Majo in the Galleria Nazionale di Arte Moderna in Rome, May-September 1987.

The fame of the Master seems to have been obscured, if not blighted or dented in Italy, by the same temporary eclipse which befell Benedetto Croce since his death in 1952. But whereas the waning of the great philosopher's star was affected by political no less than cultural forces in postfascist Italy—chiefly by the emergence of an aggressive Marxist dogmatism reacting against the hegemony of the liberal, idealistic thinking embodied in Croce's vast historical *oeuvre*, Mario's undisputed supremacy in English scholarship seems to have suffered in his own country from the by now dwindling vogue of new currents of taste and fashion in literary criticism: mainly structuralism, semiology, sociology, psycho-analysis, 'mythical' or symbolic criticism.

No doubt he had sharply exposed, pilloried or poked fun at the excesses of these old and new schools of thought, of chiefly French or American derivation. Mario made no secret of his boredom with and contempt for, what he labelled, with a snorting dismissal, 'tutta la bardatura della retorica strutturalista', the 'new scholasticism'. The rhetoric and 'psyttacism' indulged in by many a younger levy of the Italian more or less avant-garde, 'postmodern', academics, like as many Dickensian Sloppys 'doing' their Freud, Lacan, Greimas, or De Man 'in different voices', often raised his indignant or mocking strictures. He protested against their gleeful luxuriating in abstract theories, new-fangled terminologies, and absurd taxonomies; against their 'slaughtering' or 'ousting' of the creative imagination and against their obliteration of form and beauty through oversophisticated dwelling upon 'problems' of structure and symbol, or on the infrastructures of social forces underlying in their views, works of art.

As an example of Praz's sceptical view of Sergio Perosa's overenthusiastic evaluation of a contemporary poet, John Berryman, I should like to quote what he wrote in *Il Giornale* of 11 August 1978: 'Un 'Maudit' Americano'. The Master's command of interdisciplinary approach stands out in what follows:

'Che la poesia di Berryman sia 'grande', 'la voce più intensa e più nuova del secondo dopoguerra', e addirittura "un esempio di grande poesia postmoderna", in quanto 'recupere alla poesia della pienezza emotiva e vitale dell'io', mi pare debba ammettersi con molte riserve. La coesistenza simultanea di ordini diversi di stile e di soggetti del discorso, le dislocazioni grammaticali, sintattiche, semantiche impiegate nelle ricerca di esprimere il dramma dell'io diviso, non approdano, a mio parere, a risultati più convincenti di quanti ne abbia raggiunti li *stream of consciousness* di moda nella prima metà del secolo. Si tratta, nella migliore della ipotesi, quanto a validità artistica (per tacere di rispondenza alla realtà, ch'è tutt'altra cosa) di svolazzi e arabeschi come quelli che usavano nelle fioretture calligrafiche in cui si nascondevano le firme di personaggi importanti nell'epoca rococo.'

It is to be hoped that Agostino Lombardo's official commemoration of Praz at the National Academy of Lincei in Rome, early in 1992, will help revive his faded image and his message in the world of learning. Our contemporaries and especially our younger scholars should be made better aware of the extraordinarily seminal quality of Praz's contributions to English studies and of the relevance of his heritage. Perhaps it is not too rash to expect, or hope, that a serious documented biography will be soon taken in hand by some suitable researcher, not necessarily a new Boswell – whose *Life of Johnson*, after all, came out only seven years (1971) after the great Doctor's death.

He/she will have the unprecedented advantage of drawing upon Praz's manuscript 'Journals' (September 1943 – September 1980), partly in English and partly in Italian. They were deposited by his daughter Lucia Shakir in the library of the Rome Academy of Lincei and entrusted, in July 1988, to that illustrious institution. They are still, as far as I know, unexplored. To a perfunctory, superficial examination by the present writer, the nearly two thousand pages in loose copy-book sheets of varying size, covered in pen or pencil by his 'vermiculate' hand, appeared as an autobiographical chronicle of remarkable interest. It is likely to shed considerable light upon Praz's lived reality in Rome, exhibiting at least the lineaments of some of his odd and sinister dreams tormented loves and frustrating attachments: of his more or less gratified desires. The encounters and relationships of Mario's maturity and surprisingly sensitized, mellow old age, with many scholars, artists

and Distinguished People of those decades are recorded in a hurried, matter-of-fact style. Little, though, if anything at all, one learns from these journals about his working plans and his habits of unflinching industry at his desk. We don't need to be told, however, that he never rested on his oars or laurels.

Another desideratum to honour the memory of Praz is a re-examination and selection of his impressive reviewing record over the last sixty years – a wish I already voiced in my article 'Praz in Inghilterra: 1923 – 3' (*English Miscellany*, 30, 1984). The object would be to collect and reprint those of his minor writings which still possess an enduring critical value. They record the essayist's stylistic and creative development no less than, in John Donne's phrase, his immoderate, 'hydroptic' thirst of knowledge, his 'voluptuous desire' of human learning. Many of his reviews provide plenty of evidence of 'il Maestro's' constant practice which became more articulate in the final years of his life, to 'ridimensionare' and set in proper perspective, when not to depedestalise, cut down to size and debunk, inflated reputations and excessively acclaimed 'experimental' products of contemporary literary criticism and of the figurative – or more frequently non-figurative! – 'sister arts'. In his last period, Praz's rejection of the XX century *Zeitgeist* and of most of its culture grew more embracing and uncompromising. One is led to wonder whether he too, like R.L. Stevenson, had so much 'unwrapped *his* thoughts from about life as to have hardly left any filament for him to hold by'.²

Praz's own last collection of his 'occasional' writings and best 'elzeviri' dates back to 1980. It is named, after a piece which was first published in the 'Corriere della Sera' of February 18, 1943 and reprinted in *Lettrice Notturna* (1952), *Voce dietro la Scena. Un'antologia personale*. His last piece of this kind, which appeared in 'Il Giornale' of Milan on March 14, 1982, a few days before his death, was devoted to an Italian translation of Joyce's *Epiphanies*, and expressed critical reservations about this hyped up offspring of the author of Ulysses.

While many of Mario's best-known works have recently appeared in French translation and, since 1982, been reprinted by Italian publishers, a particular mention deserves the elegant volume *Mario Praz* which Blaise Gautier brought out and edited in 1989 as one of the 'cahiers pour un temps' produced by the Centre Georges

Pompidou. It is now my privilege to offer to the *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* an unpublished essay of 'il Maestro', so that his own voice, still far from the drawling and world-weary accents it had assumed in the last few months of his life, may be heard again and readers can feel as if Mario were still among us: 'l'ombra sua torna ch'era dipartita'! In its few pages the essay presents a unique document illustrating Praz's prevailing attitude to his disciples and friends (admittedly, his pupils always played a limited role in his life).

This attitude was never protreptic, condescending or lecturing, but rather smilingly or yawningly ironic and leg-pulling. It was a blend of guarded affection and balanced appreciation of their intellectual abilities, taste and efforts: mostly detached but leaning to an unsparing 'anatomy' of their character. He rarely held his fire or pulled his punches, where he felt it was necessary. Gabriele Baldini, although technically never one of his pupils – he had graduated in Italian literature with a thesis on a minor author, Alfredo Panzini (1862 – 1939) – had attended Praz's classes in English literature at Rome University, as he recalled in his charming autobiographical book *Le Rondini dell'Orfeo* (Torino 1965). Over the years, he had become one of Mario's colleagues in Rome University's Faculty of Magistero and a close friend. Thanks to his generous nature, immense musical sensibility and knowledge, and to his creative, if undisciplined mind, Gabrieli proved an amusing and serviceable companion to Praz, escorting him often to concerts and plays, but also in his travels. Mario, however, was obviously baffled and, I suspect, at times unsettled by this disciple's adventurous, exuberant, easy-going and seemingly frivolous habits. These occasionally clashed with our Maestro's wide-ranging curiosity and methodically planned explorations of foreign countries, to which he was primarily attracted by their museums and art monuments. All this comes across quite clearly in Mario's Memoir of Gabriele.

To place this writing in context, suffice it to recall that it was designed to join a sheaf of contributions, by Gabriele's most intimate friends, to a memorial volume I edited after his death – *Ricordo di Gabriele Baldini* (Roma, 1970). His wife Natalia Ginzburg, however, to whom I showed the proofs of Praz's tribute objected to (in fact refused to approve) its publication. She regarded it as discreditable to the reputation of her husband, a piece of covert

denigration, pervaded and inspired, in her view, by a lurking hostility, envy and resentment against Gabriele.

Though I could not disagree more with her judgement and unsubstantiated charges convinced, as I still am that Gabriele's keen sense of humour would have been delighted and amused by 'Il Maestro's complaints and bitter jabs at his 'unreliability', I then complied with Natalia's wish and refrained from including Mario's piece in the memorial volume, not to wound her feelings in her still fresh bereavement. She may have later changed her views about Praz's character and purpose, which had raised her suspicions in 1970 and caused her irrational veto. She attended his funeral, standing with other devoted friends of Gabriele on the University staircase in Rome, when a brief farewell function was held.

The proofs of Mario's essay have since remained unused with me. As far as I know and can guess, it never appeared in print at the author's initiative. I now welcome this opportunity to publish this striking piece, associated with the memory of two friends: an admired Master and a beloved fellow-pupil. 'I documenti é giusto farli conoscere', Natalia recently stated in commenting upon the publication of some autobiographical and politically controversial notes of Cesare Pavese (*La Stampa*, Turin 21 August 1990). The novelist and poet was a great friend of hers and took his own life forty years ago. He had been deeply impressed and affected by F.O. Matthiessen's suicide in Boston not long before (1950).

In my view, Praz's observations do not reflect adversely on Gabriele's human personality or scholarly output. Of his work in English literature Mario had previously written with more than a nod of acknowledgment³; the Memoir does not doubt reflect both enjoyment and some irritation at the disciple's unpredictable character. It discloses something of the author's and of Gabriele's idiosyncracies and human limitations. In short, it offers a perceptive lifesize outline or sketch of both Master and Pupil, with their peculiar susceptibilities and with, at least, some of their 'warts'.

My personal recollection of the prevailing mood at the 1947 Salzburg Seminar in American Studies in Leopoldskron Castle, when I look back at that eye-opening experience, are quite different from Mario's. They do not conjure up a bleak and glum landscape but are still imbued with some of the excitement, of that unique dawn of hope, effort, expectation and desire, after the horrors of the last war.

I trust, on balance, that Praz's piece deserves to be regarded as a valuable personal statement, in the tenth anniversary of his death. Mario's love of fun and his delighted curiosity for bizarre situations once more sparkled while he was lying on his deathbed in the Rome nursing home 'Ars Medica'. After wilyly regretting that, owing to the misplacement of the drip's needle, instead of his blood being augmented, it had been split and lost, he conjured up to my wonder Gabriele and himself cheerfully romping together under the showers of Leopoldskron bathrooms, during that lean summer of 1947, in *The Heart of Europe*⁴. We have certainly no grounds to hang our heads in regret, rebuke or resentment over this brief memoir.

In the absence of a full collection of Praz's correspondence only his letters to Bruno Migliorini and to Emilio Cecchi have so far been published⁵, it was pleasant surprise to read in a recent issue of *Nuova Antologia* (July-September 1990) a revealing letter of his from Manchester, on October 3rd, 1934 to Leone Ginzburg (Natalia's first husband). Both of them were then contributors to the distinguished literary journal 'La Cultura'. Non-Italian readers need perhaps be reminded that, a Russian born Jew and Italian citizen. Ginzburg was an original scholar and a heroic antifascist fighter against Mussolini's dictatorship, who died in the Rome jail of Regina Coeli in March 1944. Praz's letter displays both his intellectual clear-sightedness and his ethical indifferentism with regard to both Fascism and Zionism.

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Notes

1. Oddly enough, the London *Times* failed to record, in its obituary of March 26 1982, the "honorary degree" in Letters that Cambridge University conferred upon Praz in June 1957.
2. R.L. Stevenson, *Letters* (ed. S. Colvin, 1912) p. 434: letter to A.C. Baxter, September 1894.
3. Praz's comments on Gabriele's *Il Dramma Elisabettiano*, in 'Belfagor' 1963, and on his 'encomiabile versione completa' of Shakespeare's works, preceded by an 'ottima introduzione generale' (*Cronache Letterarie Angloassoni*, vol. III, Roma 1964), cannot be construed as disparaging or damning with faint praise.
4. See F.O. Matthiessen's account of the Salzburg Seminar and his sympathetic remarks on Gabriele in his Journal *From the Heart of Europe* (Cambridge, Mass. 1948).
5. *M. Praz, Lettere a Bruno Migliorini*, a cura di Lidia Pacini Migliorini (Firenze 1983), *Carteggio Cecchi-Praz*, a cura di Francesca Bianca Crucitti Ullrich. Prefazione di Giovanni Macchia, (Milano, 1985).