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Stravinsky and Eliot at the Mirror

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Abstract: This article describes a comparative examination of the theoretical positions of I. Stravinsky and T. S. Eliot on the relationship between tradition and creativity. This theme is the one point from which a network of ideas regarding artistic ability in its deepest and most essential characteristics unravels. It outlines an articulate system of relations between the thoughts of the two authors, which on the one hand precisely lays out similarities and differences, and on the other hand throws light on crucial aesthetic problems for poetry and music, which draws from the intellectual capabilities of two protagonists of the highest level in art and culture in the twentieth century.

Key words: Stravinsky, Eliot, tradition and the individual talent, musical aesthetics

1. Introduction

There are cases, in cultural history, in which relations between differing ideas and arts came to life in a personal relationship between two artists. This is the case for Stravinsky and Eliot, who were two of the most important developers of music and poetry in the nineteen-hundreds. The suggestion of recreating their relationship gives the opportunity to systematically compare several of their key ideas in their respective art forms. Working with two such notable artists uncovers no lack of surprises. The first is to discover how rich a source of ideas they were, and how broad their scopes of intellect were. The second partially bewildering surprise is the realization that in a general framework, which all too easily highlights the differences of opinion they held, some opinions they expressed on important matters were surprisingly similar, to the point that in some cases they seem, almost, like echoes. This is, of course, an illusion, given that their ideas were developed independently, but as we shall see the similarities are notable — notable enough at least to justify in part the title of this piece. The third surprise is in the differences between these two artists, which, whilst seeming to complete the intriguing framework that can be sketched out, appear to have a regular oppositional symmetry rather than simple diversification: Stravinsky considers history to be unfathomable, while Eliot favours understanding; Eliot believes in a literary mainstream, while Stravinsky points out the disappearance of a mainstream in music; and the list goes on. The final surprise is in comprehending just how far the formation of this subtle labyrinth of intellectual connections goes beyond the realm of historical or philological reconstruction, due to the enormous level of importance the ideas in question have. Discussing the relationships between the past and creativity, tradition and modernity, Stravinsky and Eliot lay out interesting developments, not just for culture and aesthetics, but for education. Themes such as the

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nurturing of talent, personal growth, eulogising the dead and the awareness of self are not only crucial for reflections on art, but also for those on the sense of our inhabiting a space in time and in history as conscious individuals.

2. The Chronicle of a Friendship

Stravinsky's writings are full of recollections of and observations on the famous people he met during his long life. Sometimes only cursory remarks, sometimes longer passages, they are all written in the composer's customary style, which aims at recreating his impressions of things and People without any pretence of systematicity or objectivity. It is this snapshot quality that makes Stravinsky's descriptions so effective: they provide glimpses of his world from a very personal perspective, and although they may not result in comprehensive portraits, their depictions of individual traits are unfailingly keen and lively. Irony and *méchanceté* are rarely spared, fuelled by an endless curiosity for the variety of human types and a penchant for paradox. Only seldom, in this prose averse to sentimentalism, is it possible to discern the expression, however sober, of a feeling of respect untainted by corrosive remarks — one such case being the *memoir* which Stravinsky devoted to "the unforgettable Eliot" (Stravinsky, 1985, p. 452) in *Themes and Conclusions* (Stravinsky, 1972).

According to the composer, Stravinsky and Eliot first met in December 1956 in London for tea. Year and month are confirmed by Robert Crafts in his stenographic diaries (included in *The Chronicle of a Friendship*, 1972), which also specify the day: December 8th, "T.S: Eliot and Stephen Spender for tea" (Craft, 1972, p. 48). On first seeing one another, the two artists literally measured each other up, in the most physical sense of the word.

> On a later occasion he said that from seeing me on concert podiums he had expected a taller man. Conversely, I had anticipated less imposing proportions; his big, rather stolid and cumbrous frame seemed an unnecessarily large refuge even for so much shyness and modesty. Conversation was not easy or "flowing", and at times you could almost hear the waiters silently polishing the silverware […] (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 67).

Eliot's conversation manner, as Stravinsky describes it, was not exactly designed to make the interlocutor feel at ease:

> Eliot would turn his head from speaker to speaker with a slight jerk, and from time to time emit a nervous-tic "yes" or "hm", which could make you feel he was registering an unfavourable impression. "Hm, well, yes, perhaps, but not precisely in that way", he seemed to say, and when he actually *did* say, "Then, you really think so?" the inflection left you wondering whether you would ever again be so rash as to "think" or assert anything at all. Even the slight pause after your remarks seemed to have been timed to allow you to savour their full fatuity (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 67).

Eliot's forbidding attitude did not, however, prevent Stravinsky from appreciating the quality of a man whom he revered not only as a wizard with words, but also as a "key-keeper" of language (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 67).

After this first encounter, Stravinsky and Eliot met again several times in the following years, up to the poet's death. Robert Craft's *Chronicle* registers with regularity new meetings and conversations, teas and dinners involving the two artists, who were bound by a feeling which André Boucourechliev describes as mutual respect, a deeply felt affection, though far from any kind of familiarity (Boucourechliev, 1984, p. 355).

Stravinsky also appears to appreciate Eliot's *meekness*, which he depicts with gentle irony in an anecdote reported in his *Conversations*. After the opening night in Venice of Stravinsky's *Canticum Sacrum* (13th

September 1956), the *Time* had defined Stravinsky's direction of the piece a *Murder in the Cathedral*.

> In London, shortly after the *Time* episode, I was at tea one day with Mr. Eliot, being tweaked by a story of his, when my wife asked that kindest, wisest and gentlest of men, did he know what he had in common with me. Mr. Eliot examined his nose; he regarded me and then reflected on himself, tall, hunched, and with an American gait; he pondered the possible communalities of our arts. When my wife said "Murder in the Cathedral", the great poet was so disconcerted he made me feel he would rather not have written this *opus theatricum* than have its title loaned to insult me (Stravinsky & Craft, 1959, p. 121).

On December 8th 1958, exactly two years after Stravinsky and Eliot's first meeting, Stravinsky and Craft are at dinner at the Eliots' residence in London. In his *Themes*, Stravinsky remembers that all the words that came out of Eliot's mouth were, without exception, "both exact and beautiful" (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 70). On the same occasion Craft also notices Eliot's love of language.

> He also provides apt and exact translations of the foreign expressions that occur regularly in Igor Stravinsky's talk, at the same time disclaiming that he is a linguist: "I only pretended to be one in order to get a job in a bank". But he is a quiet man, slow in formulating his remarks, which trail off in *diminuendo*; the life in him is not in his voice, but in his clear, piercingly intelligent gray eyes. He breathes heavily and harrumphs a great deal: "Hm, Hmm, Hmmm", deepening the significance, it seems, with each lengthening "m". His long, fidgety fingers fold and unfold, too, or touch tip to tip, which suddenly makes me aware that Igor Stravinsky's hands, otherwise remarkable for the large spread between the knuckles, are the least nervous I have ever seen (Craft, 1972, p. 73).

Eliot confesses that he cannot recite his poems by heart, as he has rewritten them so many times that he cannot remember their final versions. This remark cannot but please Stravinsky, who states that he only gave up going on rewriting his works forever for lack of time. After leaving the Eliots', the composer remarks: "He is not the most exuberant man I have ever known, but he is one of the purest" (Craft, 1972, p. 74).

Craft mentions two more dinners, on September 6th 1959 and on October 16th 1961; but the most moving description is Stravinsky's account of his last meeting with Eliot in New York, shortly before the poet's death.

> He bent over his plate, drinking little but hardly eating at all. Two or three times he raised himself bolt upright and fixed us in those clear hazel eyes, the force of whose intelligence was undiminished. But his voice had dwindled to a scrannel murmur. And owing to his low resonance, other speakers tended to jam him with their louder equipment, myself included, for I always talk too much when I find my neighbours difficult to understand. […]
>
> We drank gin martinis (except for Eliot who took a daiquiri); a Poully-Fumé; a Cheval Blanc; Armagnac (but Eliot took a Drambuie). In the Armagnac-Drambuie stage he suddenly sat straight up and, using my first name for the first time ever, proposed a toast to "another ten years for both of us". But perdurability on that scale seemed so improbable that the clink of our glasses rang hollow, and the words sounded more like a farewell; obviously he felt closer to me than ever before (Stravinsky, 1972, pp. 71-72).

The relationship between Stravinsky and Eliot was not limited to regular encounters involving reciprocal respect. Rather, it affected their art too. As Mario Bortolotto points out, the final reading of Auden's libretto for *The Rake's Progress* was Eliot's, who "was responsible for two corrections — one regarding an infinitive, and one an anachronism: Auden, incredibly enough, had used the word *alluvial*, but in Hogart's times the appropriate term would have been *fluminous*. The name acted[1]" (Bortolotto, 1986, p. 229). Two of Stravinsky's compositions are directly linked to Eliot. The first one is *Anthem*, a piece for mixed choir *a cappella* (1962). Stravinsky had been

[1] Translated from the Italian source (1986).

asked to contribute to a new hymn book in English for Cambridge University Press, and Eliot himself suggested that *Little Gidding*, the fourth part of the last of the *Four Quartets*, could be suitable. The other composition is *Introitus*, for tenors, basses and small musical ensemble. Composed early in 1965, soon after Eliot's death, it was dedicated to his memory and was meant to be, in Stravinsky's intention, a small processional rite as the poet would have liked it (Vlad, 1973, p. 320).

One last episode of the two artists' intellectual biography suggests a convergence of thought which makes the two figures even closer: during the academic year 1932-1933 Eliot was invited to hold a series of lectures at Harvard University on *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. A few years later, Stravinsky was to be the first musician to lecture from the same podium (White, 1983, p. 128) and his talks were eventually to be published as the celebrated *Poétique musicale*.

3. Tradition and the Individual Talent

Apart from the actual encounters and collaborative episodes involving the two artists, it is their intellectual affinity which, more than anything else, demands a closer look. Eliot's theoretical work cannot be compared with Stravinsky's, Eliot's being more profound and much more articulated than the latter's, who, strictly speaking, did not write any essay. Stravinsky's writings can hardly be said to contain a well-defined poetics, or any critical theory or aesthetics of a systematic nature; taken as a whole, however, they do provide a useful insight into what can be defined as Stravinsky's "thought", and into his contribution to crucial issues of twenty-century art criticism (Ferrari, 1999, 2001, 2002). In particular, both Stravinsky and Eliot focused on the concept of tradition, and, within it, on the definition of the contemporary with respect to tradition itself.

As far as the role of tradition in Stravinsky's works is concerned, I have discussed it in *Tradizione e modernità nel pensiero di Igor Stravinsky* (*Tradition and Modernity in the Thought of Igor Stravinsky*), to which the reader is referred for a general overview of the issue. My aim in this essay is to analyse the way in which the positions of the two artists differ or converge; to do so, I will begin with a close reading of some passages from *Tradition and the Individual Talent*.

The starting point is that tradition cannot be taken for granted: it is not an idle burden which can be handed down from one generation to the next. On the contrary, it is the outcome of a conscious acquisition process.

> [Tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour (Eliot, 1998, p. 28).

Stravinsky's definition of tradition as worded in his *Poetics* is strikingly similar:

> It appears as an heirloom, a heritage that one receives on condition of making it bear fruit before passing it on to one's descendants (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 57).

The source of both images appears to be the parable of the talents in the Gospel of St. Matthew (Matthew, 25, 18-26). Both Stravinsky and Eliot warn the artist about following the example of the timorous servant who hurried to dig a hole in the ground to hide the money he had been put in charge of. Should the artist behave like the servant, he too would be a wicked and slothful servant, doomed to a painful sterility. The good and faithful servant, on the contrary, succeeds in doubling the five talents he had received from his master. Stravinsky draws on similar money-related imagery in his *Themes*, when talking about Rachmaninoff, whom he defines as "conventional"—by which he means "a kind of art that carries over with little change from its immediate legacy"(Stravinsky, 1972, p. 88).

Eliot seems to imply a similar meaning when he states that

> [..] if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged (Eliot, 1998, p. 28).

The paths of tradition are *non linear*: just like a river, the course of a tradition can go underground and disappear, resurfacing only after a long time. As Stravinsky points out in this example,

> The music of *Mavra* stays within the tradition of Glinka and Dargomisky. […] So a hundred years had to pass before the freshness of the Russo-Italian tradition could again be appreciated, a tradition that continued to live apart from the main stream of the present […] (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 58).

This way to interpret the meaning of "tradition", according to Eliot, is based on a confusion, at a conceptual level, between *tradition* and *repetition*:

> We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition (Eliot, 1998, p. 28).

As Stravinsky puts it, in perfect accordance with Eliot's statement:

> Far from implying the repetition of what has been, tradition presupposes the reality of what endures (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 57).

Tradition should not be confused with *habit* either:

> Tradition is entirely different from habit, even from an excellent habit, since habit is by definition an unconscious acquisition and tends to become mechanical, whereas tradition results from a conscious and deliberate acceptance (Stravinsky, 1947, pp. 56–57).

It is worth noticing that in the few pages which make up the first paragraph of *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, there are more than ten occurrences of the words "conscious" and "consciousness". However, it is on the issue of consciousness that the first, substantial difference between the two authors can be found. According to Eliot, an awareness of tradition demands, first and foremost, a *historicalsense*. On this topic Stravinsky's writings appear to be ambivalent. On the one hand, he makes continuous reference to the past, the tradition and the history of music, so much so that historicity appears as a fundamental and inescapable feature of composing. To quote but one example:

> The music of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern in the twenties was considered extremely iconoclastic at that time but these composers now appear to have used musical form as I did, "historically". My use of it was overt, however, and theirs elaborately disguised (Stravinsky & Craft, 1959, p. 126).

Elsewhere, however, Stravinsky insists on his *disillusionment with history*, and firmly denies that an awareness of history may be useful or necessary to a good composer:

> I do not understand the composer who says we must analyse and determine the evolutionary tendency of the whole musical situation and proceed from there. I have never consciously analysed any musical situation, and I can follow only where my musical appetites lead me (Stravinsky, 1982, p. 128).

Awareness, distance and a sense of temporal perspective seem to be the qualifying features of the critic, who evaluates the work with hindsight, not of the composer while creating the work:

> […] the awareness of historical process is better left to future and different kinds of wage earners […] (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 125).

At the end of the short piece *A Few Perspectives on the Contemporary*, Stravinsky confesses that he has never thought of himself in this perspective, i.e., from the point of view of his "historical" role in 20th century music (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 190). His approach to history does not focus on trends or evolutionary developments, but rather on single pieces, works of the composers that came before him, which he appreciates as *creative occasions*, and not as elements of a larger design providing an explanation for the present.

> My own experience has long convinced me that any historical fact, recent or distant, may well be utilized as a stimulus to set the creative faculty in motion, but never as an aid for clearing up difficulties (Stravinsky, 1947, pp. 26–27).

This is evidently very far from Eliot's conviction that possessing the historical sense makes the poet "most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity" (Eliot, 1998, p. 28).

Notwithstanding this substantial difference, there are several points of contact between Eliot's essay and the statements scattered in Stravinsky's books. The first one concerns the problematizing of the concept of *novelty*. Eliot writes:

> And we do not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value — a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity. We say: it appears to conform, and is perhaps individual, or it appears individual, and may conform; but we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other (Eliot, 1998, p. 29).

The new is not obvious, and does not display "evident" features. Stravinsky is even more radical when he observes that although "old" and "new" are easy to *define*, establishing *criteria* which allow to isolate and contrast them in the living body of a work of art is much more difficult:

> The new cannot be isolated from the old, yet must not be judged entirely in terms of it either. The question then turns to the measurement of the individuating newness (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 84).

As for the complex relationship between novelty and tradition,

> The most consequential is often simply the better sited, the more easily seen or heard, and the inconsequential (historical sense) simply the less accessible, often owing to internal and external innovations of thought and communication (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 135).

Both authors conclude that the opposition between tradition and originality is a false one, and that a close relationship exists between these two concepts.

> Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously (Eliot, 1998, pp. 27–28).

Stravinsky makes a similar claim for himself when he comments on his *Pater Noster*:

> I knew very little about Russian Church music at that time (or now), but I hoped to find deeper roots than those of the Russian Church composers who had merely tried to continue the Venetian (Galuppi) style from Bortniansky. Whether my choruses recapture anything of an older Russian tradition I cannot say; but perhaps some early memories of church singing survive in the simple harmonic style that was my aim (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 40).

Although the artist feels tradition as an overwhelmingly constricting force, his aspiration is not to break free from history, but rather to capture its deepest soul.

4. Evolution and Development

In this context, the passing of time is unrelated to the concept of value. *Progression in time does not imply progress*. That art does not improve is for Eliot an obvious truth, even though the material of art is never quite the same. The same can be said of Stravinsky: Mondrian painted a series of trees which progressively move away from the figurative and get closer to the abstract, but nobody could sensibly maintain that any one of them is better than any other "*for the reason that it is more or less abstract*" (Stravinsky & Craft, 1959, p. 126). According to Eliot, although the material of art changes, nothing, in the development of art, is lost *en route*. Along the same line, but more forcibly, in the *Poetics* Stravinsky attacks the "religion of Progress", for which today is always necessarily worthier than yesterday (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 72), a way of thinking that he sarcastically defines elsewhere as more suitable to Public Relations:

> Whether a composer can make use of the past as I did, and at the same time move in a forward direction is a question for Public Relations that concerned me not at all during the writing [*The Rake's Progress*] (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 54).

It remains unclear what the aim of art development may be, since this vision of art excludes any idea of rising to higher aesthetic values.

In fact neither Stravinsky nor Eliot deny in absolute terms that some form of artistic "progress" may exist: rather, they both tend to limit and define its importance. For this weakened and controversial — from a critical point of view — concept, they use different terms. Eliot talks of development, rather than progress, and Stravinsky uses the word *evolution*:

> [The poet] must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe […] is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route* […]. That this development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not, from the point of view of the artist, any improvement. […] Perhaps only in the end based upon a complication in economics and machinery (Eliot, 1998, p. 29).

Eliot stresses that the *material* of art is never quite the same, and talks about a growing complication in *economics* and *machinery*. This suggests that he refers to the technical and linguistic dimension of art. Stravinsky, on the other hand, seems to make an implicit but consistent distinction, in his writings, between the *absolute value* of compositions (which, as shown above, does not grow in time), and *the language of music*, which he talks about in terms of *evolution*. The evolutionary dimension of language implies a tendency towards complication and refinement of the instruments employed. Every age "progresse" only in the sense that it develops the language of music according to its needs, modifying rhythms, sound combinations and formal structures. Serial writing techniques, for instance, "widen and enrich harmonic scope; one starts to hear more things and differently than before" (Stravinsky & Craft, 1959, p. 25). Evolution, therefore, does not refer to "music", but to the linguistic tools used in each and every age; it allows for a multiplicity of simultaneous directions (it is not monodirectional); and is entirely unconnected to the intrinsic value of each individual composition.

5. History and Awareness

> But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show.
>
> Someone said: "The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did." Precisely, and they are that which we know (Eliot, 1998, p. 29).

Along the same line, Stravinsky regards himself as "richer" than an African or a Papuan, precisely because he was born after Bach and his *Well-Tempered Clavier* (Stravinsky, 2013, p. 178).

It is, once again, on the issue of awareness that Eliot and Stravinsky — whose opinions appear elsewhere very similar — differ. In this passage Eliot seems to postulate — at least to a certain extent — a *transparency of the past* which makes it possible to read it, understand it, and critically re-work it. These activities are not attributed to the critic, but explicitly demanded of the poet as part of his *métier*. Stravinsky, on the contrary, does not believe in the transparency of the past, and rejects the idea of historical awareness as a component of the composer's *métier*. He sees time as a labyrinth, in a way which reminds one of the beginning of Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*: very deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless?

> The past slips from our grasp. It leaves us only scattered things. The bond that united them eludes us (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 25).

In the *Poetics* Stravinsky uses expressions which call to mind the *despair of reason* maintained by the followers of the so-called "historical Pyrrhonism" in the 17th century debates on the possibility and the certainty of history.

La Mothe Le Vayer (1668):

> There is hardly any certainty in anything the most famous historians to date have tried to pass off as certain, and presumably whose who will engage in the same endeavour in the future will not fare much better[2] (Borghero, 1983, p. 77).

Stravinsky (1942)[3]:

> Hence, in order to lay hold of the phenomenon of music at its origins, there is no need to study primitive rituals, modes of incantation, or to penetrate the secrets of ancient magic. To have recourse to history in this case, even to prehistory, is that not to overshoot our mark by seeking to grasp what cannot be grasped? […] If we take reason alone as a guide in this field, it will lead us straight to falsehood, since it will no longer be enlightened by instinct (Stravinsky, 1947, pp. 24–25).

Lack of trust in reason, praise of instinct, which is elsewhere defined an as *appetite*, almost like a Socratic *daemon* capable of guiding one with mysterious confidence through the maze of history:

> Instinct is infallible. If it leads us astray, it is no longer instinct. At all events, a living illusion is more evaluable in such matters than a dead reality (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 25).

Whereas Eliot demands that the poet be aware of the existence of a literary mainstream, Stravinsky identifies in the disappearance of the musical mainstream the most important phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century, even though he laments the consequences of its demise (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 187). The *awareness*

[2] Translated from the Italian source.
[3] English translation, 1947.

Stravinsky talks about is therefore very different from Eliot's: it is a *factual*, rather than a historical and critical awareness: action, rather that understanding, is its domain of application; it refers to doing, rather than to analysing, and does not involve finding one's bearing in history — in relation to which Stravinsky sees himself as a rhabdomancer, wary of rationalising his gift for fear of interfering with it — but rather manipulating the objects that history consigns to one's appetite.

> My activity — or re-activity, as my animadverters would describe it — was conditioned not by historical concepts, but by music itself. I have been formed in part, and in greater and lesser ways, by all of the music I have known and loved, and I composed as I was formed to compose (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 190).

We are now in the position to solve the crux of Stravinsky's apparent ambivalence about history mentioned above. When Stravinsky refers to himself and to Schoenberg with the adjective "historical", he is talking about the *use* of certain forms, i.e., something which is part of the awareness of materials, projects and tools that a capable craftsman must have. When, on the other hand, he denies that historical awareness is necessary or even useful for composing, he refers to the reconstruction of a general historical design, whose very possibility he is sceptical about, and which, at any rate, only concerns professional historians and future generations.

Stravinsky's pride does not lie in knowing his place in history, but rather in *knowing exactly what he does*:

> My greatest enemies have always paid me the honor of recognizing that I am fully aware of what I am doing (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 84).

Our conclusion is paradoxical: how can one explain the affinity and mutual appreciation between two artists whose opinions differ so much on an issue which is of crucial importance for both? We believe that the answer lies in the internal dialectic of their positions, which are much more complex than may appear at first sight. True, Eliot does claim that an intellectual awareness of history is necessary, but he does so in an essay — *Tradition and Individual Talent* — which is about *poetry*. He is not interested in sketching the principles of academic education, nor in stating the basis for becoming a "man of culture": it is poetry, and poetry only, he is concerned about. Consciousness and knowledge are therefore, after all, *components of a much more complex metabolism* which must "absorb" and incorporate culture and put it to the service of a *creative* faculty.

> Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it. Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum (Eliot, 1998, p. 30).

What did Stravinsky do, throughout his life, but "absorb" those parts of history that appealed to his appetite, with a prodigious ability to employ them as *chemical reagents* for his creative faculties? Eliot's can be described as *creative awareness*, Stravinsky's as *conscious creativity*: this chiasm, we believe, contains the paradox whereby the sceptic of historical awareness became an example for one of its warmest supporters.

6. The Altar of the Dead

The reader familiar with Stravinsky's writings will have been startled more than once by the similarities between some passages of *Tradition and the Individual Talent* and Stravinsky's writings: some of Eliot's thoughts are extremely close to the Russian musician's even in their wording. But there something else which makes this essay kindred to Stravinsky's universe: a subterranean but pervasive feeling of the presence of death. The relationship with history, crucial for both artists however differently they may have interpreted it, and a keen sense of the past — also dissimilar at points, yet fundamentally alike — demand that the authors come to terms with the

kingdom of the dead, with their way of being present or absent, their voices, their ambiguous legacy.

A first link — first in conceptual, rather than chronological terms — is established by Stravinsky in his *Poetics*, where he makes a connection between tradition and the *life* of the present:

> A real tradition is not the relic of a past that is irretrievably gone; it is a living force that animates and informs the present. In this sense the paradox which banteringly maintains that everything which is not tradition is plagiarism, is true … (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 57).

The same concept can be found in the Eliot passage quoted above, albeit with a significant addition: the vitality of the present is explicitly linked to — and almost identified with — the vitality of the dead poets, thus establishing a connection between the life blood of the present and death.

> Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously (Eliot, 1998, pp. 27–28).

This subtle affinity was first pointed out by Enzo Paci in his essay *On Contemporary Music*, where he uses a quotation from *Tradition and the Individual Talent* to clarify a crucial passage of Stravinsky's *Poetics*. Leaving aside the platitudes of conventional criticism, Paci tackles the issue of the relationship between Stravinsky and tradition using as a starting point not his so-called "neo-classical period", but rather *The Rite of Spring*, a work which has become the emblem of Stravinsky's "modernism", his apparent break with tradition (but, as Stravinsky puts it: "My music is neither 'futurist' nor 'passé-ist', only the music of today") (Stravinsky, 1925).

Commenting on the symbolic value of a work in which man's primeval barbarity is portrayed with fascination as well as horror, Paci observes that two reactions to this shocking revelation are possible: we can either remove the intolerable link between the killing of the victim and the triumph of spring, or attribute this barbaric and aggressive joy to Stravinsky alone, denying that it may be ours.

> Either response makes it impossible to comprehend the meaning of Stravinsky's work, and it is only natural that using either of them as one's starting point one can understand neither Stravinsky the neoclassic, nor Stravinsky the author of the "cult of the dead" and of religious music. In Stravinsky's *opus*, *The Rite of Spring* cannot be separated, for example, from *Persephone*, where a barbaric human sacrifice is transformed into a "civilised" Christian sacrifice. The sacrifice of the virgin in *The Rite of Spring* becomes a victory on the "telluric": no longer the sense that life must kill, but rather the conviction that the task of life is to make death alive within us, to awaken in us the voice of the past so that it becomes our voice: this is the way Stravinsky accomplishes the recovery of musical tradition[4] (Paci, 1966, pp. 84–85).

This passage contains in an extremely concise form a series of crucial points worth exploring in further detail.

Firstly, the relationship with tradition is identified as a key element of Stravinsky's *creative journey in its entirety*, rather than as a feature of one particular period. This implies an overturning of the conventional approach to Stravinsky's work: instead of acknowledging the apparent discontinuities and inconsistencies in the composer's work, trying to *explain* them and thus depriving them of their enigmatic character, Paci looks for a *principle of continuity*, a subterranean course connecting the musician's different creative phases, and identifies it with the recovery of tradition. This interpretation is perfectly in line with Stravinsky's, who consistently *denied*, against all appearance to the contrary, that his stylistic "turns" implied substantial changes in the fundamental processes

[4] Translated from the Italian source.

involved in his composing. Not only that: Paci also applies on an interpretive level the same principle used by Stravinsky when talking about style:

> Contrast is everywhere. One has only to take note of it. Similarity is hidden; it must be sought out, and it is found only after the most exhaustive efforts (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 32).

This approach is also useful from a critical point of view. Although the passage from the "Russian period" to the "neoclassical period" was seen by many contemporaries as a turn from modernism to restoration, today it is possible to give a more accurate account of it: in particular, it can be interpreted as a move from a direct influence of the Russian tradition to an indirect one, mediated by the assimilation of other traditions. According to Druskin, the Russian cultural tradition stayed alive in Stravinsky's conscience throughout his long life, and came through in his works both directly (during the so-called "Russian period") and indirectly (Druskin, 1986, p. 100).

Secondly — going back to Paci's passage — the relationship with tradition, far from being painless, is of a sacrificial nature. Sacrifice is the theme of the *Rite of Spring*, but is also a recurring motive in other works of Stravinsky's — *Persephone* and *Oedipus Rex* to name but two.

Thirdly — and more importantly for us — tradition, in its sacrificial aspect, becomes the key element of the cycle of extinction and renewal regulating the relationship between the living and the dead. The recovery of tradition implies *a rebirth of death within us*: the voices of the dead are thus made to speak in and through us. *The voices of the dead play a crucial role in making the living speak*, but we can only hear them if we go through a process of renewal:

> The recovery of tradition in Stravinsky is dependent on renewal, and not viceversa. [….] The dead can speak within us only if we renew ourselves: I remember an excellent essay by T.S. Eliot on *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Eliot writes: no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists[5] (Paci, 1966, p. 85).

That the relationship with the dead was also important for Stravinsky can hardly be denied. The musician's last token of appreciation for Eliot was the above-mentioned *Introitus*, which he composed in memory of the poet. In his revealingly entitled essay *Stravinsky and Necrophilia*, Heinz-Klaus Metzger pointed out

> the extremely peculiar inspiration [Stravinsky] found — throughout his life — in funerals and memorial services. The list of compositions he wrote for the funeral or in memory of dead people is astonishing: in 1908 he wrote *Chant funèbre*for his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov, in 1920 *Symphonies pour instruments à vent* in memory of Debussy, in 1943 *Ode* for Natalia Koussevitzkij, in 1944 *Elegie* for Alphonse Onnou, in 1954 "Dirge-Canons and Songs" *In memoriam Dylan Thomas*, in 1956 *Epitaphium* for Max Egon, Prince of Fürstenberg, and *Double Canon* for Dufy, in 1964 *Elegy* for John F. Kennedy and *Variations in memoriam Aldous Axley*, in 1965 *Introitus* on the death of T.S. Eliot, and finally in 1966 *Requiem Canticles* for Helen Buchanan Seeger[6] (Metzger, 1986, p. 91).

This list leads Metzger to claim that Stravinsky was a "composer explicitly specialized in funeral occasions", and to formulate a curious theory:

[5] Translated from the Italian source.
[6] Translated from the Italian source.

> The observer versed in psychoanalysis cannot but suspect that the unconscious of the great artist/undertaker may have secretly looked forward — anticipating his pleasure in composing — to the death of the many people he loved and admired, for whom he later set his musical tombstones[7] (Metzger, 1986, pp. 91–92).

The wording of this quotation is surprisingly close to a passage in Henry James's *The Altar of the Dead*:

> There were hours at which he almost caught himself wishing that certain of his friends would now die, that he might establish with them in this manner a connexion more charming than, as it happened, it was possible to enjoy with them in life (James, 1937, p. 18).

At this point, though, Metzger's theory diverges from our line of argument, and becomes, in our opinion, one-sided:

> His musical genius […] was always waiting, with a vulture's patience, for the historical disintegration of musical language and style, only to seize them as soon as they had exhaled their last breath and dissect them like corpses, playing with their *disjecta membra* as anatomy students sometimes do when they play macabre games with severed limbs, heads and sexual organs[8] (Metzger, 1986, p. 92).

This conclusion follows naturally from the essay's initial assumption, which is based on a categorisation of Stravinsky's art under the definition of necrophilia, by which Metzger means

> a passionate attraction for everything which is dead, putrefied, decomposed and diseased; a desire to transform something which is alive into something dead; to destroy for the sake of destruction; an exclusive interest for everything totally mechanical. A longing to disintegrate all living relations[9] (Metzger, 1986, p. 90).

It is our opinion that this approach, when taken to its ultimate conclusions, is misleading, and goes against facts.

As far as *composing* is concerned, the tango tradition could hardly be considered as "putrefied" in 1940, the year in which Stravinsky composed *his* Tango for piano (Ferrari, 2011). The same can be said of *Ragtime* and *Jazz*, which Metzger is forced to declare prematurely dead (a highly questionable declaration in historical terms) if he wants to fit the pieces the composer wrote in these styles into his vision of a Stravinsky necrophile.

In terms of *enjoyment*, some of Stravinsky's works undoubtedly give off "a sinister smell which betrays their coming from the grave", as Metzger puts it, but this is only one of the reasons of their appeal, and it definitely does not apply to all of them. In the words of Milan Kundera, "Curious, curious. And what about the delight that beams from that music? [...] but the delight I'm talking about and that I love would not proclaim itself as delight through the collective act of a dance. This is why no polka makes me happy except Stravinsky's *Circus Polka*, which is written not for us to dance to but for us to listen to, with our legs lifted up to the sky" (Kundera, 1996, pp. 87–88).

On the *theoretical level*, Stravinsky's comments never come across as indulging in necrophilia; on the contrary, they tend to stress how his use of the past imbues with new life dead fragments whose meaning would otherwise elude us: they are therefore far from suggesting a desire to transform what is alive into something dead.

The most convincing argument seems to us to be Paci's reconstruction of Eliot's, according to which the relationship between the living and the dead, rather than being one-sided, is characterised by the complexity of circularity:

[7] Translated from the Italian source.
[8] Translated from the Italian source.
[9] Quoted from E. Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*.

> Bach is born again for us both in Berg's *Concert* and in the *Chorale and Variations* transcribed by Stravinsky, and it is born again if we are able to renew ourselves[10] (Paci, 1966, p. 86).

Eliot's essay, on the other hand, closes with the statement that, after all, through the voices of the dead make we become aware not only of what is dead, but also — and especially — *of what is already living*.

Several of the themes we have been focusing on could already be found in Henry James's *The Altar of the Dead*, which can be seen as expressing in a literary form some of the aspects of the *cult of the dead* common to Stravinsky and Eliot:

> They were there in their simplified intensified essence, their conscious absence and expressive patience, as personally there as if they had only been stricken dumb (James, 1937, p. 5).

The composer's relationship with the voices of the dead, therefore, goes well beyond a series of occasional compositions, however numerous, or a pathological *cupio dissolvi*. Henry James identifies a link which is crucial for Stravinsky and Eliot alike:

> But it was not their names that mattered, it was only their perfect practice and their common need.
> These things made their whole relation so impersonal that they hadn't the rules or reasons people found in ordinary friendships […] (James, 1937, p. 26).

Impersonality and *extinction* are married before the altar of the dead. This conceptual matching is explicitly thematised by Eliot:

> What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.
>
> What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality (Eliot, 1998, p. 397).

One cannot help thinking about the "renunciation to speak in the first person" which, according to the critics of a "neoclassic Stravinsky" is a symptom of the poverty of his music at the expressive and human levels, whereas for his supporters it is a key feature of his art:

> The withdrawal of the individual, which the author postulated when he suggested that his works should be "performed", non "interpreted", results in the freeing of the forces and deep structures which determine the individual, and belong to a certain community. It is no chance, therefore, that as an old man Stravinsky was unable to write a piece about himself, and put to music two Lieders by Hugo Wolf instead: the subject renounces to speak in his own name, and becomes the medium through which the heritage he was handed down by history speaks (Albèra, 2001, p. 64).

7. Conclusion and Further Perspectives

By way of conclusion, we would like to suggest a possible future line of inquiry as far as Stravinky is concerned. *Tradition and the Individual Talent* identifies as the key point of tradition the relationship between past and present, living and dead, personality and extinction. In the case of Stravinsky, all this is certainly appropriate — as we tried to show in this essay — but it needs to be applied to an even wider conceptual framework.

[10] Translated from the Italian source.

In the first place, if we consider the whole corpus of his compositions and of his writings (especially the last ones, *Dialogues* and *Themes and Conclusions*) it seems to us that it may be more fitting to talk about *traditions* in the plural, rather than *tradition* in the singular. Far from drawing his inspiration from *mainstream* tradition only, Stravinsky turned now to late Medieval polyphony, now to the Renaissance, now to the Russian tradition, jazz, opera, and so on.

Secondly, when defining these traditions, time is not the only important variable; *space* is equally important. Stravinsky's journeys through history are often mentioned, but it is worth remembering that his journeys through the geography of world music were equally important: Italy, France, England, Russia, North America, Argentina and many more.

Thirdly, it seems to us that the ultimate conceptual framework shaping Stravinsky's vision of the relationship with tradition — with *traditions* — is not the relationship between past and present, but the even more comprehensive one between *identity* and *otherness*. Traditions are but the way in which the innumerable mosaic pieces making up the world arrange themselves, in the course of time, in a certain geographic area — main lines of descent in time, as the author defines them. The encounter with tradition is ultimately a form of relationship with the world, hence part a mirrored image, and part an encounter with the *other*. The relationship with the dead is to be seen in the same terms as the relationship with the living: both are part *opposite, facing* the composer, and part *inside* him. It may be more than a fortunate coincidence that in James's *The Altar of the Dead*, indirectly linked to the themes discussed in this essay, the dead are also called "the Others":

> It was doubtless the voice of Mary Antrim that spoke for them best; as the years at any rate went by he found himself in regular communion with these postponed pensioners, those whom indeed he always called in his thoughts the Others (James, 1937, p. 5).

In the case of Stravinsky it would appear that the sense he privileged in this relationship with otherness and with the world was the sense of hearing. If one were to look, in jest, for any "pathologies" affecting Stravinsky's hearing, several would be more fitting than necrophilia: bulimia, for instance, or kleptomania. Stravinsky himself confessed that he listened to and remembered virtually everything, and his writings, among the zillion identities that make them look like a mosaic, also provide an extraordinary sound archive containing an incredible range of memories going from Malipiero's owls to barrel organs. His avid hearing does not appear to make any difference between the living and the dead: it is capable of grasping the sound of bells with the same precision as a Beethoven theme, serial techniques or the rhythms of Argentinian tango:

> I have been formed in part, and in greater and lesser ways, by all of the music I have known and loved […] (Stravinsky, 1972, p. 190).

The living and the dead appear thus to share the *same way of incorporating*, which a perhaps not unfit hyperbole could define as *cannibalistic*. Stravinsky himself points us in this direction by suing metaphors such as "my musical appetite" and "my musical saliva". Charles Ferdinand Ramuz, who was very close to the composer at the time of the First World War, describes Stravinsky's peculiar attitude in the following terms:

> Ce que vous aimez est à vous, ce que vous aimez *doit* être à vous. Vous vous jetez sur vos proies, vous êtes un homme de proie. Vous voulez tout avoir à vous […] (Ramuz, 1929, p. 49).
>
> [What you love is yours, what you love *must* be yours. You spring on your prey, you are a hunter. You want everything to be yours].

In *Crowds and Power* Elias Canetti described with astonishing precision the psychology of seizing and incorporation, linking them to the hunting of a prey in a way which is easy to refer metaphorically to the domain of art in Stravinsky's case.

> Already while he is prowling around he feels that it *belongs* to it. From the moment he selects it as his prey, he thinks of it as incorporated into himself (Canetti, 1962, p. 203).

Watching and lying is then followed by seizing and incorporating:

> The road that the prey travels through the body is a long one and on the way all its substance is sucked out of it; everything useful is abstracted from it till all that remains is refuse and stench. […]
>
> The constant pressure which, during the whole of its long process through the body, is applied to the prey which has become food; its dissolution and intimate union with the creature digesting it; the complete and final annihilation, first of all functions, and then of everything which once constituted its individuality; its assimilation to something already existing, that is, to the body of the eater — all this may be seen as the very central, if most hidden, process of power (Canetti, 1962, pp. 209–210).

Up until the last quote, however, Canetti's argument can only be applied to Stravinsky on the condition that constant adjustments and corrections are made. Although — to an extent at least — the passage does fit the composer's vision in so far as it is interpreted as an "organic" metaphor of Stravinsky's assimilation of musical objects and traditions, the last sentence cannot possibly be applied to the composer. In fact, with an interesting paradox, Stravinsky describes his way of seizing his "musical preys" not as an act of power, but rather as an *act of love*. Going back to the scandal of his *Pulcinella*, he remarks:

> Not only is my conscience clear of having committed sacrilege, but, so far as I can see, my attitude towards Pergolesi is the only one that can usefully be taken up with regard to the music of bygone times (Stravinsky, 1962, p. 82).
>
> Is it love or respect that urges us to possess a woman? Is it not by love alone that we succeed in penetrating to the very essence of a being? But, then, does love diminish respect? (Stravinsky, 1962, p. 81).

The urge to seize and incorporate, therefore, is not destructive but *generative*, and it is no chance it is described as a form of *eros*. The encounter with the collection of Eighteenth century music Djagilev submitted to Stravinsky's attention is described as love at first sight: "I looked, and I fell in love" (Stravinsky & Craft, 1962, p. 112).

Love, then, is the engine of the musical cycle of death and regeneration set into motion by Stravinsky, who seems to have been aware of this complex play of identity and assimilation of the other when he allows himself a joke and says: "Pergolesi? *Pulcinella* is the only work of 'his' I like" (Stravinsky & Craft, 1959, p. 76).

> No critic understood this at the time, and I was therefore attacked for being a *pasticheur*, chided for composing "simple" music, blamed for deserting "modernism", accused of renouncing my "true Russian heritage". People who had never heard of, or cared about, the originals cried "sacrilege": "The classics are ours. Leave the classic alone". To them all my answer was and is the same: You "respect", but I love (Stravinsky & Craft, 1962, p. 114).

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