
Savina Stevanato, “*The Music of Poetry*”?:
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Savina Stevanato’s critical reconsideration of *Four Quartets* is an attentive and insightful reading of Eliot’s late masterpiece that intersects three different methodological perspectives and stances:

I interpret the poem’s musicality through an integrated approach consisting of three investigative categories based on: up-to-date theoretical notions and tools from the intermedial research field which, from both formalist and cultural perspectives, support the validity of verbal musicality even when no real music is involved; a cultural and aesthetic contextualization of Eliot’s poetics within modernist poetics; a textual analysis of the poem (15-16).

In spite of this ecumenical preface, a superficial reader of selected passages from Stevanato’s book would probably come away with the wrong impression that this is “old-fashioned textual criticism”, as A.S. Byatt satirically describes the practice of close reading in one of her bestselling novels dealing with the endless mannerisms of the academy. And, to an extent, the superficiality of this reader would be excusable because especially Stevanato’s third and final chapter, “The ‘Musical Ways’ of *Four Quartets*”, is indeed a sustained effort in critical immanentism, a careful and reliable analysis of the text’s formal and stylistic features. Not to mention the fact that Stevanato’s phraseology is semiotic throughout, as shown, to quote just one further example, by the title of a paragraph appearing in chapter two: “The Musicality of Signifiers and of Signifieds”. And not to mention the more substantial thing that, although the aim of this second chapter is the contextualization of Eliot’s text within the modernist scene, its focus is on context in a strictly aesthetic sense. The reader must not expect a contextual discussion of *Four Quartets* in the manner of such eminent critics of Modernism as, say, Lawrence Rainey or Robert Scholes. Stevanato’s cultural investigation does not concern Eliot’s socio-cultural background or the historical issues that produced modernist music and Eliot’s modernist poetry. To her, as indeed to Eliot, culture is in fact always high culture and strictly related to aesthetics and poetics. As such, it has certainly little to do with the by-products of mass civilization whose exploration is perpetrated by mainstream cultural studies. Consequently Stevanato devotes vast portions of her book, especially the whole second chapter significantly titled “Towards *Four Quartets*”, to a discussion of Eliot’s poetics and of the aesthetic ideas that influenced his creativity. But not only does Stevanato’s approach differ from most contemporary contextual studies, which notoriously cultivate area perspectives, extra-aesthetic issues and group-related interests. It also results, on the other hand, conspicuously un-Adornian. While Adorno, the high priest of modernist music, elaborated on Benjamin’s concept of constellation in order to bring together conflicting views of contemporary music and demonstrate the transience of traditional value-laden notions, namely history and nature, Stevanato does her best to prove that Eliot’s poetical masterpiece tries to transcend time and dissolve it into eternity. While Adorno and his epigones recognize the discontinuous and fragmented character of modernist art, which never tends to the smooth reconciliation of its contradictions or to a preordained end, according to Stevanato in *Four Quartets* Eliot aims at transcending the imperfections of time by dissolving it into the self-contained perfection of eternity. In fact, following Neubauer, Stevanato claims that Eliot’s “mindset is always directed towards totality” (66). He is one of those modernists who are

mainly concerned with such concepts as wholeness, harmony, truth, essence and progress. While these artists are unstintingly striving after unifying procedures and the restoration of unity, the opposite type of modernist writer, F.M. Ford being the paradigm offered, privileges the notions of chance, heterogeneity, and chaos. In other words, the first kind of modernist never succumbs to incumbent disintegration and insists on conjuring up remedial strategies. Jürgen Habermas’ idea of modernity as “incomplete project”, one to be constantly resumed and emended, comes to mind here. While modernists *a la* Ford express their bewilderment at the “smashing and crashing ... the breaking and falling” (V. Woolf, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”, qt. by Stevanato, 66) by mimicking poetically the world’s chaos, modernists *a la* Eliot testify to their longing for harmony by constantly imagining unifying textual projects. Eliot’s and Joyce’s mythical method, Pound’s metaphor of the attracting magnet, Eliot’s view of the poet as catalyst are obvious points in case. I will return to this fundamental claim of Stevanato’s book with reference to its symbolist implications, but not before having briefly considered the structure and contents of the volume.

Chapter one offers a historical overview of the relationship between music and poetry duly providing an up-to-date discussion of intermedial studies that have moved across the two disciplines. Starting from Calvin Brown’s seminal study, *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts* (1948), going through Wolf’s and Scher’s fundamental contributions that since the Eighties and Nineties have explored the still “rough theoretical ground”, and culminating in the discussion of the most recent conceptualizations of intermediality, Stevanato examines the milestones and the most productive developments of intercodical studies. At the end of her well-researched excursus, in the wake of Wolf’s theorizations Stevanato concludes that *Four Quartets* should be considered an intracompositional phenomenon that specifically includes intermedial reference. This means that, although the poem imitates other media (namely music) and at the same time thematizes them, *Four Quartets* clearly remains a monomedial work displaying only one semiotic system: verbal language. Sound strategies may only *point* to another medium, music, but not fully integrate it into the textual machinery. Stevanato thus rejects as artificial the readings of *Four Quartets* that tried to transfer coded musical patterns (sonata, quartet) into the fabric of Eliot’s text. The interart relationship is intended by Stevanato as essentially metaphorical, which, on the other hand, does not entail that critics have to resort to extemporaneous impressionism. Quite the opposite. The textual instruments adopted by Stevanato – those provided by theorists like Jakobson, Lotman and Marcello Pagnini – are in fact methodologically sophisticated and neatly defined. Stevanato produces a selective but certainly correct reading of the structuralist-semiotic poetics in the versions offered by these authors, taking from them what may prove instrumental in her interpretation of *Four Quartets*, the main point being the notion that the poem constitutes a semantically saturated structure, one in which each single component is structurally relevant and formally motivated. A notion which, incidentally, Pagnini regarded as the most lasting legacy left by structuralism and which he called “textual functionalism”.

When I highlight Stevanato’s selective attitude, I also imply that she does not discuss other forms of functionalism, for instance those elaborated by Mukarowsky or by Fónagy, whose researches on the semantics of sound and the partially natural character of signs in poetic language could possibly be an interesting point of intersection with Eliot’s view of ordinary language as strictly related to the poetic elaboration. This could mean that Stevanato rejects the psycho-physiological correlations postulated by Iván Fónagy because, as once argued by a critic, they are a problem of physiology, not of poetics. But taking Mukarowsky and Fónagy as fellow travellers would have probably distracted Stevanato from her ultimate goal: to demonstrate that Eliot’s poetry constantly aspires towards the condition of music and reveals its aspiration by self-reference and introversive semiosis, which are the typical traits of musical language. From this viewpoint, significance is undecomposable and can be grasped only through the immanent structural whole. Stevanato stresses this specific point because she is convinced, as is Brown, that “Harmony ... is impossible to factually convey in literature because it requires simultaneity, never

literally present in the verbal code” (42). Therefore tonality, repetition, variation/contrast, balance come out as the musical devices amenable to poetry, and in particular to Eliot the author of *Four Quartets*, in order to musicalize language though never managing to achieve the supreme immanence of music. The periodic organization of the message, Stevanato argues drawing on Stankiewicz, is thus a remedial strategy that Eliot’s poetry adopts, in analogy with music, to overcome the inherent linearity of verbal discourse and consequently suggest the simultaneity which is accessible only to the sister art. “In my end is my beginning” is just the most popular cipher of the poem’s circularity, whose effects of recursivity and attempted simultaneity (a more complex phenomenon, at which poetry can only hint) are amply distributed in the text.

The first chapter also presents an interesting philosophical coda in which Susanne Langer’s conception of music is briefly sketched. The attention granted to cello player and philosopher Langer is another clever move by Stevanato. Langer the theorist of rhythm as immanent in all organisms provides Stevanato with an operating key which enables her to put together the idea of human behavior as rhythmically organized and the notion of art as formal (symbolic) translation of human sentience. To Langer, music is a tonal analogue of emotive life, an unconsummated, organically rhythmical symbol that constitutes an indistinguishable unity of form and content. As was the case with semiotic functionalism, Stevanato is here shoring supportive fragments against the foundation of her under-construction house. At the height of her journey through theories and methodologies, in fact, we understand that she is suggesting a nearly-symbolist reading of Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, one in which Mallarmé replaces Donne as inspiring totem, one in which feeling and sentience take the place of impersonality, one in which Coleridge’s romantic organicism is as comfortably at home as Dante’s poetics of structural integrity and wholeness. And indeed Eliot’s brash definition of Coleridge as the corruptor of taste, provided in his 1923 essay on “The Function of Criticism”, was later completely revised by Eliot, who, among other things, praised the great romantic poet for the modernity of his critical approach. But this certainly does not entail the full-hearted romanticization of Eliot’s late phase. In his late style, when Mallarmé takes the place of honour once granted to Donne (who, incidentally, is never mentioned in Stevanato’s essay), Eliot is still a classical and now symbolist poet, while in his early phase he was classical and metaphysical. This is my only point of difference with Stevanato, who extends the definition of symbolist to Eliot’s high-modernist phase, whereas, it seems to me, high-modernist Eliot was hardly interested in sublimating reality into symbolic essences, nor did he aim at grounding supersensible ideas in pure language, concepts or feelings. Rather, he followed the opposite trajectory and translated metaphysics into chains of events and fragments of things, providing what Pound would call “luminous details”. As a high modernist, which is not the same as avantgardist, Eliot was a classicist who did not cancel tradition but entertained a competitive relation with it. In his 1927 essay on Baudelaire he could thus praise Dante for his magisterial ability in imposing order on matter, whereas Baudelaire, put to the same task, proved simply confusing. This was, incidentally, a point which Jacques Maritain could not grant to Eliot. Still, Dante’s neat allegorical clarity and concreteness evidently worked better to him than Baudelaire’s vague theory of correspondences.

The risk of confusion is in fact always present to Eliot, who, in his early phase reacts against it, as suggested by Stevanato in chapter two, by conjuring up a mythical order, while in his late phase he replaces the mythical method with musical poetry as a structural principle. His obsessive relational sensitivity to equivalence thus eventually triggers a research into the “beyondness” and transcendental significance of music. Like the French symbolists, Eliot was interested in the ultimate essence of reality. Unlike them, as Stevanato acutely observes, he understood musicality in terms that were not purely acoustic but encompassed the semantic component of words. He thus replaced the notion of relational by that of “points of intersection” between two opposite dimensions that tend to a supersensible communion. This concept of point of intersection between the timeless with time is developed by Stevanato in chapter three, where the critic discusses with remarkable acuteness the contrapuntal

arrangement of subject-matter, the incarnated Word as the privileged locus of encounter between conflicting dimensions, the organization of the text’s horizontal linearity, the way in which it fosters the vertical dimension, recurrence and metatextuality as structuring principles.

Far more complex is Stevanato’s analysis of the poem’s macro-framework, which, in her interpretation, consists of four poems, each containing five movements: “each movement is characterized by its own structure which remains, on the whole, unchanged throughout the four poems and the twenty movements. This framework of equivalent sections and sub-sections, and the length of the poem greatly favour recursive interrelations and thus the principle of intersection” (114).

Ingenuously conceived, impeccably crafted and demanding as they are, sections two and three of this final chapter are among the strong points of Stevanato’s book. Here the critic analyzes the intersection of two thematic areas, which unsurprisingly she calls *Time* and *Eternity*, and convincingly demonstrates how their interweaving involves both reiteration and variation, linearity/circularity and eternity, the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axis of the text. The reader’s perplexity at the apparent obviousness of Stevanato’s hermeneutic programme, as it was initially formulated by the critic, is eventually dissolved. She does not demonstrate what everybody already knows and what Eliot himself clarified. She skillfully deals with time and eternity as structural and thematic notions that act ‘musically’ in the text at the micro-level of phonetic recurrence as well as at the macro-level of the overarching structure of the four quartets. She thus provides new impetus for further discussion about Eliot’s late masterpiece, which is no small achievement for the study of such an over-interpreted text.