

THE ALTAR OF THE DEAD: NOTES ON STRAVINSKY, ELIOT AND TRADITION

1. *Crossing paths*

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»¹. 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 [...].²

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.³

¹) Craft 1972, p. 48.

²) Stravinsky 1972, p. 67.

³) *Ibidem*.

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 ⁴.

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. ⁵

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» ⁶.

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 ⁷. 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» ⁸.

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 scranell 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 [...].

⁴) *Ibidem*.

⁵) Stravinsky - Craft 1959, p. 121.

⁶) Stravinsky 1972, p. 70.

⁷) Craft 1972, p. 73.

⁸) *Ivi*, p. 74.

We drank gin martinis (except for Eliot who took a daiquiri); a Pouilly-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.⁹

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»¹⁰. 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 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»¹¹.

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, and his talks were eventually to be published as the celebrated *Poetics of Music*.

2. *The crux of tradition*

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.

⁹) Stravinsky 1972, pp. 71-72.

¹⁰) Bortolotto 1986, p. 229.

¹¹) Vlad 1958 and 1973, p. 320.

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 issue¹². 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.¹³

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

Elle apparaît comme un bien de famille, un héritage qu'on reçoit sous condition de le faire fructifier avant de le transmettre à sa descendance.¹⁴

(It is like a family possession, something one inherits on the condition one will make it multiply before handing it down to one's children).

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»¹⁵.

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.¹⁶

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:

La musique de *Mavra* se tient dans la tradition de Glinka et de Dargomisky. [...] Il fallait donc qu'il se passât cent ans pour qu'on pût constater la fraîcheur de cette tradition qui continuait à vivre en marge du présent [...].¹⁷

¹² Cfr. E. Ferrari 1999, 2001, 2004.

¹³ Eliot 1998, p. 28.

¹⁴ Stravinsky 1952, p. 40. Tutte le traduzioni dal francese sono di Paola Catenaccio.

¹⁵ Stravinsky 1972, p. 88.

¹⁶ Eliot 1998, p. 28.

¹⁷ Stravinsky 1952, p. 41.

(The music of *Mavra* falls in the tradition of Glinka and Dargomisky. [...] A hundred years had to go by before the freshness of a tradition that survived at the margins of the present could be realised again [...]).

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.¹⁸

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

Bien loin d’impliquer la répétition de ce qui fut, la tradition suppose la réalité de ce qui dure.¹⁹

(Far from implying a repetition of what has been, tradition presupposes the permanence of what is lasting).

Tradition should not be confused with *habit* either:

La tradition est bien autre chose qu’une habitude, même excellente, puisque l’habitude est par définition une acquisition inconsciente et qui tend à devenir machinale, alors que la tradition résulte d’une acception consciente et délibérée.²⁰

(Tradition is very different from a habit, however good this habit may be, because a habit is by definition an unconscious acquisition which tends to become mechanical, whereas tradition is defined as something conscious and deliberate).

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 *historical sense*. 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.²¹

¹⁸) Eliot 1998, p. 28.

¹⁹) Stravinsky 1952, p. 40.

²⁰) *Ibidem*.

²¹) 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.²²

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 [...].²³

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 music²⁴. 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.

Pour moi, l'expérience m'a montré depuis longtemps que tout fait historique, proche ou reculé, peut bien être utilisé comme une excitation qui ébranle la faculté créatrice, mais jamais comme une notion qui puisse éclaircir les difficultés.²⁵

(Experience showed me long ago that every historical fact, close or distant, can be effectively used as a stimulus to awaken the creative faculty, but never as a notion capable of clarifying difficulties).

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»²⁶.

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 problematising of the concept of *novelty*. Eliot writes:

²²) Stravinsky 1982, p. 128.

²³) Stravinsky 1972, p. 125.

²⁴) *Ivi*, p. 190.

²⁵) Stravinsky 1952, p. 20.

²⁶) Eliot 1998, p. 28.

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.²⁷

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.²⁸

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.²⁹

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.³⁰

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.³¹

²⁷⁾ *Ivi*, p. 29.

²⁸⁾ Stravinsky 1972, p. 84.

²⁹⁾ *Ivi*, p. 135.

³⁰⁾ Eliot 1998, pp. 27-28.

³¹⁾ 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.

3. *The illusion of progress*

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. 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»³², 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*].³³

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.³⁴

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 im-

³²) «[...] aujourd'hui vaut toujours et nécessairement plus qu'hier» (Stravinsky 1952, p. 49).

³³) Stravinsky 1972, p. 54.

³⁴) Eliot 1998, p. 29.

plies a tendency towards complication and refinement of the instruments employed. Every age “progresses” 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»³⁵. 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.

4. *History between opaqueness and transparency*

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.

Some one 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.³⁶

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?»:

Le passé se dérobe à nos prises. Il ne nous livre que des choses éparées. Le lien qui les unit nous échappe.³⁷

(The past eludes our attempts to grasp it. All we are left with are scattered things, but the link between them escapes us).

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:

³⁵) Stravinsky - Craft 1959, p. 25.

³⁶) Eliot 1998, p. 29.

³⁷) Stravinsky 1952, p. 19.

Il n'est donc pas besoin, pour saisir le phénomène musical à ses origines, d'étudier les rites primitifs, les modes incantatoires – de pénétrer les secrets de l'antique magie. Recourir en l'espèce à l'histoire, voire à la préhistoire, n'est-ce pas passer le but en tentant de saisir l'insaisissable? [...] Si, dans un tel domaine, on prend la seule raison pour guide, elle nous mène droit au mensonge, parce que l'instinct ne l'éclaire pas.³⁸

(It is not therefore necessary, in order to understand the origins of music, to study primitive rites and spells, to try and learn, in other words, the secrets of ancient magic. When we rely on history, even pre-history, don't we overstep our mark, as we try to fathom the unfathomable? [...] If, in this domain, we take reason as our only guide, we will be led to falsehood, because reason is not enlightened by instinct).

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

Car l'instinct est infallible. S'il nous trompe, c'est qu'il n'est plus l'instinct. En tout état de cause, une illusion vivante vaut mieux, en de telles matières, qu'une réalité morte.³⁹

(Instinct is infallible. If it lies to us, it means it is not instinct any more. At any rate, a living illusion is much better, in these cases, than a dead reality).

Whereas Eliot demands that the poet be aware of the existence of a literary mainstream, Stravinsky identifies in «the disappearance of the musical mainstream»⁴⁰ the most important phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century, even though he laments the consequences of its demise. The *awareness* Stravinsky talks about is therefore very different from Eliot's: it is a *factual*, rather than a historical and critical awareness: action, rather than 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 animadvertisers 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.⁴¹

³⁸) *Ivi*, p. 18.

³⁹) *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰) Stravinsky 1972, p. 187.

⁴¹) *Ivi*, 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*:

Mes plus grands ennemis m'ont toujours fait l'honneur de reconnaître que je suis exactement conscient de ce que je fais.⁴²

(My greatest enemies have always done me the honour of recognising that I know what I do).

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.⁴³

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.

⁴²) Stravinsky 1952, p. 58.

⁴³) Eliot 1998, p. 30.

5. *The Altar of the Dead*

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:

Une tradition véritable n'est pas le témoignage d'un passé révolu; c'est une force vivante qui anime et informe le présent. En ce sens, le paradoxe est vrai, qui affirme plaisamment que tout ce qui n'est pas tradition est plagiat [...].⁴⁴

(A real tradition is not the testimony of a faraway past, but a living force that animates and shapes the present. This is the real paradox on the basis of which we say, in jest, that what is not tradition is plagiarism [...]).

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.⁴⁵

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. 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.

⁴⁴) Stravinsky 1952, p. 40.

⁴⁵) Eliot 1998, pp. 27-28.

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.⁴⁶

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.

Secondly, 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 dependant 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".⁴⁷

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

⁴⁶) Paci 1966, pp. 84-85.

⁴⁷) *Ivi*, p. 85.

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.⁴⁸

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

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.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

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 *dissecta membra* as anatomy students sometimes do when they play macabre games with severed limbs, heads and sexual organs.⁵¹

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

⁴⁸) Metzger 1986 (see nt. 10), p. 91.

⁴⁹) *Ivi*, pp. 91-92.

⁵⁰) James 1937, p.18.

⁵¹) Metzger 1986, p. 92.

something dead; to destroy for the sake of destruction; an exclusive interest for everything totally mechanical. A longing to disintegrate all living relations.⁵²

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. 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»⁵³.

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:

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.⁵⁴

Eliot’s essay, on the other hand, closes with the statement that, after all, through the voices of the dead 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

⁵²) *Ivi*, p. 90 (quoted from E. Fromm, *The anatomy of Human Destructiveness*).

⁵³) Kundera 1996, pp. 87-88.

⁵⁴) Paci 1996, p. 86.

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.⁵⁵

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 [...].⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸

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⁵⁵) James 1937, p. 5.

⁵⁶) *Ivi*, p. 26.

⁵⁷) Eliot 1998, p. 397.

⁵⁸) Albèra 2001, p. 64.

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