



ITALIAN PERSPECTIVES 26

Edoardo Sanguineti

Literature, Ideology and the Avant-Garde

Edited by Paolo Chirumbolo and John Picchione



LEGENDA

Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge

EDOARDO SANGUINETI
LITERATURE, IDEOLOGY AND THE AVANT-GARDE

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Figure 1: Sanguineti in the 1960s
(photograph by Mario Dondero, Archives, *Il XIX Secolo*)

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EDITED BY PAOLO CHIRUMBOLO AND JOHN PICCHIONE



LEGENDA

Italian Perspectives 26
Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge
2013

First published 2013

*Published by the
Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA*

*LEGENDA is an imprint of the
Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge*

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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ISBN 9-781-907975-78-3 (hbk)

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PREFACE



Paolo Chirumbolo and John Picchione

One of the most original and influential Italian intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century, Edoardo Sanguineti died on 18 May 2010, in Genoa, the city where he was born on 9 December 1930. Throughout his long career, Sanguineti was engaged as a poet, novelist, literary critic and theorist, playwright, translator, politician, and teacher. He relentlessly investigated the links between literature and other art forms (the visual arts and music in particular), as well as the relationship between literary language and ideology, literature and its functions within the social and economic structures of late capitalism. Indeed, from the 1950s, he gradually became a central and irreplaceable protagonist of Italian culture. A major figure of the neo-avant-garde, the most radical literary and artistic movement of post-WWII Italy, Sanguineti expressed a rebellious disposition that transpires invariably in his creative work, theoretical postures, and political orientation. He has left a vast and impressive body of work that persistently defies traditional and hackneyed notions of literature and art.

The plurality of topics and critical perspectives presented in this volume stems from the conviction that it is the most productive strategy for introducing a literary and intellectual figure who pursued theoretical and interdisciplinary interests and tackled different genres in his creative undertakings. Consequently, the objective of this volume of essays is to explore the extraordinary range of his work, the accomplishments and breakthroughs of a writer whose magnitude has yet to be fully accredited, especially outside Italy. The volume is divided into two parts: a collection of essays written by North American scholars and an Appendix with a number of testimonials offered by Italian colleagues, writers, artists, critics, and a former student who all had direct contacts with Sanguineti — some considered him a friend.

The essays aim to introduce Sanguineti's works to an English-speaking audience by providing a critical perspective different from, or alternative to, the Italian one. The essays which open the volume explore the author's critical and theoretical framework, together with his ideological and formal orientation. These essays serve to familiarize the reader with Sanguineti's Marxist positions and adherence to the fundamental tenets of historical materialism, his unremitting investigation of the relationship between language and ideology, and the influence on his theoretical bearings of thinkers such as Gramsci, Lukács, Adorno, and Benjamin. These essays emphasize also Sanguineti's anti-canonical stands on the Italian literary tradition and Dante's great impact on his poetic and intellectual formation.

If the first three chapters aim to delineate Sanguineti's theoretical and literary background, the next four chapters provide a thorough account of his extensive

and multi-faceted poetic production. They follow his transformations from the early multi-linguistic and unsettling poetry to subsequent phases that feature a somewhat more communicative poetic approach. This set of essays, spanning his entire poetic production — including a work published posthumously — captures Sanguinetti's subversion of genres, the complexity of his themes, the opacity of his language, and his astonishing linguistic ingenuity. Close analyses of his fundamental stylistic traits are always linked to the poet's investigation of our social and psychological realities.

The following two essays are devoted to Sanguinetti narrative works. They address primarily their anti-conventional properties, meta-literary awareness, whimsical disposition, together with their clever and provocative social critique. The last set of essays focuses on his legendary versatility and his passion for interdisciplinary experimentation. Sanguinetti's wide-ranging interests and pursuits include unique translations of classical texts, theatrical works that reveal links with those by Artaud, Brecht or Beckett, a love for cinema that transpires both in his theoretical tenets and in the formal organization of his poetic texts, and a dialogue with the language of the visual arts that accompanies him throughout his life.

The testimonials that bring the volume to a close are geared predominantly towards the portrayal of the man, his temperament and distinctiveness. They provide memories, anecdotes, shared experience of events and projects that add significant insights into the life and work of a brilliant intellectual. Nonetheless, as may be expected, the testimonials more often than not connect the man to his creative and theoretical work.

As a whole, this volume aims to draw a comprehensive critical evaluation of Sanguinetti's work and to capture the multi-faceted traits of his extraordinary intellectual journey. We hope that *Edoardo Sanguinetti: Literature, Ideology and the Avant-garde* can be a useful instrument for both the professional scholar who wants to explore Sanguinetti's work, and the literary enthusiast who is looking for an introduction to the writings of such an impressive writer. As an intellectual committed to the understanding of our individual and collective historical realities and a writer convinced that literature can play a role of critique and subversion, Sanguinetti has deeply influenced a vast number of critics, writers, and poets, who, following his example, have challenged, and continue to challenge, established modes of writing and, above all, thinking. Sanguinetti's legacy is, in this respect, monumental, and it goes beyond his outstanding literary *corpus*. It is to be found in his ideological and poetic coherence. For our age, it is a truly remarkable accomplishment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



We would like to express our gratitude to Anna Laura Lepschy and to Simon Gilson for their support and encouragement when the project was first proposed. Our thanks go to all our contributors who embraced the project wholeheartedly and gave their time and knowledge in writing essays and testimonials. A special thank you goes to Richard Correll, *Legenda's* copy-editor, and to Graham Nelson, the managing editor, for the great care they took in the preparation of the manuscript. We would also like to acknowledge our gratitude to Giuliano Galletta, a writer and a journalist with *Il Secolo XIX*, for the authorization to reproduce three of the photos published in the volume, to the photographer Mario Dondero, whose friendship with Sanguinetti goes back many decades, for providing us with one of the photos, and to Mrs. Luciana Sanguinetti for her assistance.

P.C., J.P., March 2013



Figure 2: Sanguineti during the last years of his life (Archives, *Il XIX Secolo*)

INTRODUCTION



Prelude for an Engaging Intellectual

John Picchione

Edoardo Sanguineti's theoretical positions and creative undertakings are deeply entrenched in a Marxist view of the world. The one element that inevitably accompanies all his work revolves around the notion that the role of the intellectual is that of promoting a counter-culture, a culture of opposition that advocates, on the one hand, a critique of the dominant values and of the aesthetic expressions of bourgeois society and, on the other, a revolutionary ethos that aspires to transform the world. He is a self-declared 'red cleric' and 'organic intellectual', terms that encapsulate perfectly the ideological postures of a writer who was raised on classic Marxist thought and its developments. In an essay entitled 'Come si diventa materialisti storici?', written in the last stage of his life with the objective of summing up the significance of his activities and contributions, Sanguineti makes the following observation:

quando mi domandano: [...] "che debbono fare gli intellettuali?" [...] Quello che hanno fatto sempre, se hanno svolto il loro ruolo. E cioè di collaborare a diffondere o consolidare, per quel tanto o pochissimo di cui sono capaci, la coscienza di classe [...] convertire, al possibile, gli intellettuali tradizionali a diventare organici al proletariato.¹

[when I am asked: [...] 'what do intellectuals have to do?' [...] [I reply...] What they have always done, if they played their role. And that is to collaborate in spreading or consolidating, as much or as little they are capable of, class consciousness [...] to convert, as much as it is possible, traditional intellectuals to intellectuals organic to the proletariat.]

Sanguineti remains committed to his Marxist views even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing crisis of the Communist Parties in Italy and elsewhere in the West. Here is how he comments on the supposed end of ideologies engendered by the crisis of Marxist thought:

L'ideologia della fine delle ideologie ha segnato culturalmente la fine del comunismo, in modo che non ci sia altro che capitalismo, trascinandosi dietro ogni pensiero critico perché, nella storia attuale, non esiste altro pensiero critico al di fuori del materialismo storico. Infatti, come diceva bene Gramsci, il materialismo storico è l'ideologia della classe proletaria al momento in cui diventa rivoluzionaria.²

[The ideology of the end of ideologies has marked culturally the end of communism in such a way that there is nothing but capitalism, dragging along every critical thought because, in our present history, there is no other critical thought besides historical materialism. Indeed, as Gramsci rightly used to say, historical materialism is the ideology of the proletarian class at the moment it becomes revolutionary.]

A sharp observer of social and cultural shifts, he knows all too well that proletarians have now lost the awareness of their class and are colonized by bourgeois values and belief systems. Nonetheless, he continues to be convinced that the bourgeois society, as Marx had stated, is only a historical phenomenon. As he states in the closing section of *Purgatorio de l'Inferno*, we live in the Marxian pre-history, enduring the alienation of a degrading human condition but confident that the utopian dream of the revolution will become a reality for future generations:

ma adesso, quale stanchezza? e quale (in questa nostra
preistoria), quale tranquillità?
ma vedi il fango che ci sta alle spalle,
e il sole in mezzo agli alberi, e i bambini che dormono:
i bambini
che sognano (che parlano sognando)

[but now, what weariness?
and what (in this prehistory of ours)
what tranquillity?
but you see the mire left behind,
and the sun in the midst of trees, and the children sleeping:
the children
dreaming (they talk dreaming)].³

For Sanguineti, art and political principles are inextricably linked. The politics of aesthetics is at the core of all artistic modes of communication. The central tenet of his theoretical orientation rests on the conviction that literary and artistic formal properties constitute ultimately a writer's ideology and worldview. The adversity towards the ruins and contradictions of capitalist society must be expressed first and foremost by a language of disorder that refuses the false harmonies and norms of bourgeois writing, whose ideological objective is to conceal class conflicts, inequalities, and power. In his view, traditional literature affirms in its verbal organization the misleading beliefs of the hegemonic class. In an essay entitled 'Per una letteratura della crudeltà' he states that 'l'esperienza delle parole condiziona [precede] quella delle cose' [the experience of words conditions — precedes — that of things] and he identifies the subversive drive of literature with the linguistic turmoil of the avant-garde. Literature, in his words, 'non è al servizio della rivoluzione, ma è la rivoluzione sopra il terreno delle parole [...] una sperimentazione critica delle gerarchie del reale, quale è vissuta nelle parole' [is not at the service of revolution, but it *is* the revolution at the level of words [...] a critical experimentation of the hierarchies of reality as it is *lived* in words].⁴

Indeed, from his early works in the 1950s, Sanguineti shows an unconditional aversion to all lyrical and naturalistic aesthetic models (the Italian literary culture of the times was essentially immersed in the Hermetic and the neo-realist modes)

and an urgency of creating antagonistic forms of writing that would steadily revolve around experiments in anti-poetry, anti-novel, or anti-theatre. The traditional linguistic and stylistic resources adopted for creating a sense of unity and harmony are displaced by the practice of multilingualism and by the assemblage of verbal fragments that combine indiscriminately the language of erudition with the colloquial. The conventional notion of linguistic order and uniformity is further dislodged by the hybridization and contamination of styles that bond the tragic with the comic or the melodramatic. The result is the production of texts whose dissonances and discontinuities put into question accepted notions of our social and emotional world. On the one hand Sanguineti looks beyond the confines of literature and, on the other hand, he exhibits the desire to reconnect with the experiences of the historical avant-garde, updated for the needs of the times. In fact, in its various stages, his poetic and narrative production manifests the necessity of transposing within the literary realm the formal tendencies achieved by Abstract Expressionism, Pop-Art, serial and aleatory music. In one of his many university talks, making reference to his second novel, he states:

Il giuoco dell'oca è un romanzo pop [...]. Questo libro è costruito a collage, un collage che può essere potenzialmente infinito: ci sono dei veri e propri omaggi a Rauschenberg, ci sono pagine in cui ho descritto un quadro di Bosch e gli ho messo accanto un fumetto, una fotografia pubblicitaria, di tutto. Anziché lavorare di forbici, lavoravo di penna, ma insomma era l'equivalente del ritaglia e incolla.⁵

[*Il giuoco dell'oca* is a Pop novel [...]. This book is constructed as a *collage*, a *collage* that can be potentially endless: there is a real homage paid to Rauschenberg, there are pages with descriptions of a painting by Bosch combined with those of a comic-strip, a commercial photograph and a lot more. Instead of working with scissors, I worked with a pen, but overall it was the equivalent of a cut-and-paste practice.]

Artists like Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Robert Rauschenberg, Arnold Schönberg, Igor Stravinsky, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage, draw his attention. This orientation, articulated in a large number of theoretical essays, is further demonstrated by the constant collaboration that Sanguineti establishes with visual artists and musicians, from Enrico Baj to Carol Rama, Antonio Bueno, Ugo Nespolo and Gianfranco Baruchello, from Luciano Berio to Vinko Globokar, Stefano Scodanibbio and Aureliano Cattaneo. Commenting on the relationship between his poetry and the work of artists he particularly valued, Sanguineti declares:

*Il mio modello era una poesia che fosse dicibile come lo *Sprechgesang* del *Pierrot lunaire* di Schönberg [...] nella musica di Berio e nella pittura di Baj trovavo l'equivalente di quello che cercavo io nella poesia [...] se fossi stato un pittore, avrei voluto dipingere come Baj e, se fossi stato un musicista, avrei voluto comporre musica come Berio.⁶*

[My model was that of a poetry that could be spoken like the *Sprechgesang* of Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* [...] in Berio's music or in Baj's painting I found the equivalent of what I was looking for in my own poetry and, if I had been a

painter, I would have liked to paint just like Baj and, if I had been a musician, I would have liked to compose music just like Berio.]

What interests him is to find verbal techniques comparable to those achieved in these other arts that could attain the sort of disorder, tension, and dissonance to counteract the deceiving order of traditional writing. In his view, the latter is unable to communicate a sense of class conflicts, tensions, and contradictions that dominate our present history.

On this quest he could not but encounter the culture of montage that had been at the centre of the historical avant-garde's subversive aesthetics. Indeed, Sanguineti identifies the true art of twentieth century with the techniques of montage, as pioneered by the early avant-garde cinema (Sergei Eisenstein) and photography (photomontages). Here is a statement that synthesizes his position:

Il Novecento è stato il secolo del cinema non solo per ragioni di cronologia [...]. Parlare del 'secolo del cinema' vuol dire parlare essenzialmente di 'secolo del montaggio'. Questo è un punto capitale: il montaggio non è un effetto del cinema, ma è addirittura congenito allo spirito dei tempi. È sintomatico che le avanguardie siano davvero contemporanee alla cultura del montaggio.⁷

[Twentieth century is the century of cinema and not only for a question of chronology [...]. To speak of 'the century of cinema' means to speak essentially of the 'century of montage'. This point is crucial: montage is not an effect of cinema, but it is actually congenital to the spirit of the times. It is symptomatic that the avant-garde movements are indeed contemporary to the culture of montage.]

A similar case can be made with the practice of collage as adopted by the first avant-garde (from Cubism to Futurism, from Dadaism to Surrealism), particularly within the context of the visual arts. These devices make it possible for Sanguineti to pursue a mode of writing centred on the accumulation of heterogeneous materials, random juxtaposition of cut-ups, dissonance of styles, a shattered and lacerated syntax, semantic and temporal discontinuities and incongruities, conflicting linguistic registers. The result is a de-familiarizing creativity that thwarts the reader's linguistic expectations and questions habitual perceptions of reality. The drastic fragmentation and the heteroglossia (the principal constitutive traits of Sanguineti's early works in particular) are directly linked to the exploration of an oneiric and hallucinatory form of writing, conceived as a way of conveying the historical alienation, the neurotic states of mind and contradictions generated by the capitalist economic and social structures. Inevitably they end up poisoning and degrading all manifestations of life.

This general tendency is actually never abandoned entirely, even when, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, his writing makes the move from abstraction to the so-called New Figuration. Sanguineti's literary orientation is guided by the principles of allegory, in Walter Benjamin's sense of the term. The allegorical writing conveys the ruins of history faced by a fallen humanity, a fragmented state of mind denoted by a dismembered language, the full awareness of an absence of totality, the mournful condition of an incomplete existence. The allegorical gaze, however, provides at the same time the essential elements for transgressing

dominant and codified ways of seeing the world. Ruination, critique, and a possible redemption form a dialectical link. As already underscored, in Sanguineti's view the political and revolutionary action of a writer is inseparable from formal tensions, disorder, and provocation. Allegory opposes the notion of a unified and organic work and consequently rejects both the possibility of a unified lyrical self (a centred and autonomous subject) and that of a non-alienated language. Ultimately, for Sanguineti literature is a metalinguistic production of ideologies. A true revolutionary writer must find verbal strategies that can function as a continuous resistance and opposition to accepted conventional models of communication. At the first gathering of Gruppo 63, Sanguineti maintains that 'Per essere autenticamente critica [...] l'arte deve energeticamente uscire dai limiti della normalità borghese, cioè dalle sue norme ideologiche e linguistiche' [In order to be authentically critical [...] art must emerge energetically from the boundaries of bourgeois normality, namely from its ideological and linguistic norms].⁸ This theoretical principle will accompany him throughout his life. Indeed, four decades later he insists that the anarchic spirit that pervades all the experiences of the avant-garde rests on the 'Assenza di modelli, assenza di regole, sovversione di regole e di modelli ereditati' [Absence of models, absence of rules, subversion of inherited rules and models].⁹ There is no contradiction in Sanguineti's mix of historical materialism and culture of anarchism. They nourish each other in different ways by taking on the role of opposition to current aesthetic and social models.

Even when, during the last few decades of his life, Sanguineti explores the unfettered flow of signifiers and embraces a playful mode of poetic writing, the objective is to force language to think the unthought, liberating it from the constraints of ordinary social moulds. A large number of texts produced during this period disclose a corporeal and eroticized language that aspires to subvert the social control tied to the production of meaning and to suggest new prospects of identities and ways of experiencing our lives. Searching out the flesh of the word, its phonic and material substance, the poet exhibits forms of creativity and imagination that press for the world to rewrite itself. Sanguineti remained faithful up to the end to a Marxist vision of the world, embodied in a poetics centred on the notion of a revolutionary praxis conducted within the territory of language. As a theorist, he enters into a crucial and fertile 'dialogue' with a number of Marxist thinkers, from Antonio Gramsci to Theodor W. Adorno, from Walter Benjamin to George Lukács, Galvano Della Volpe, and Lucien Goldmann — to mention just a few. This intellectual orientation provided him with the necessary tools for developing a theoretical framework that would allow him to confront a number of complex issues surrounding the debate on the neo-avant-garde art and literature. Indeed, Sanguineti shows an extraordinary intellectual ability in unifying under the historical materialism and the Marxist outlook all the fundamental problematics related to the status of art and literature in a capitalist society. It is important to stress that capitalism, its forms of life and artistic expressions, is investigated within the large frame of history, as the manifestation of the bourgeois system that Sanguineti, contrary to a number of postmodern postures, is obstinate in refusing as the ultimate stage of human development. Here are some of the concerns that

form the focus of his analyses: the links between literary production and fruition to the economic base and other superstructures; conventional forms of literature as means for legitimizing values and ideology of the bourgeois class; the negation of the capitalist system through the specificity of the literary work, namely language; avant-garde, commodification, obsolescence of forms and consumption; the relationship between market and museum; exhaustion and alienation connected to traditional forms of literature; the need to ideologize the neo-avant-garde.

His positions animated a debate that went well beyond Gruppo 63 and involved the entire Italian intellectual landscape. Sanguineti's commitment to an ideological expression of the avant-garde collided with the stances advocated within the group by members like Renato Barilli, Angelo Guglielmi, Alfredo Giuliani, or Giorgio Manganello, who foreshadowed postmodernist tendencies. Outside Gruppo 63, he provoked fierce reactions by writers and intellectuals such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia, and Franco Fortini. To be sure, even traditional Marxists, like Fortini, questioned the priority of form over content proposed by Sanguineti, together with the functions he assigned to the neo-avant-garde.

Sanguineti's intellectual background is complex and sophisticated, and undoubtedly Marxism alone does not suffice in delineating all its contours. No list of names and movements can do justice in identifying the intricate threads that form his critical and creative perspectives. Nonetheless, it would be safe to affirm that psychoanalysis — Sigmund Freud and Georg Groddeck in particular — played for Sanguineti another significant role. Here is how, in an interview, he comments on the importance of the father of psychoanalytic psychosomatics:

Sono stato molto influenzato da Georg Walther Groddeck. Più invecchio e più penso che Groddeck avesse capito l'essenziale e cioè che in fondo niente è casuale e che tutto in noi, anche quello che appare più accidentale, è determinato da pulsioni profonde.¹⁰

[I was much influenced by Georg Walther Groddeck. The older I get the more I think that Groddeck understood what is essential, nothing happens by chance and everything in our lives, even the most fortuitous event, is determined by deep-seated drives.]

From Groddeck, in particular, Sanguineti derives the conviction of the close relationship between unconscious desires and bodily manifestations — central themes of both his poetry and narrative. Indeed, both for Groddeck and for Sanguineti we are normally hindered in transfusing our being in ordinary language and thus unable to reveal the truth about ourselves. The language of the Es (Id) sends signals not only in the form of somatic and physiological symptoms, but also through artistic and verbal creativity. For Groddeck, words and their etymologies, literature and its stories are the spaces in which the repressed is uncovered. In his works, Sanguineti sets on an unremitting search to locate passageways into the unconscious, with the goal of freeing its drives, emotional and social censorship. It is essential to underscore that, as a historical materialist, he never detaches drives and desires from the realm of culture and social classes. In his view, social existence forms the base of the psyche itself. As historical and cultural constructs, we all live de-naturalized and de-animalized lives ('il mio corpo non è natura ma storia' [my

body is not nature but history]),¹¹ Sanguinetti affirms. Furthermore, he rejects the notion of writing tied to an emotional or a spiritual inspiration, as a flow of an internal world that precedes the verbal labour. A text is the product of an activity, the work conducted by a subject that resides within history and ideologies.

Within the context of the social sciences, Sanguinetti has often paid tribute to the teachings of an anthropologist like Marcel Mauss who impressed him with his theories on gift-giving and social relations. The analysis of the gift economies attracted him inasmuch as it made it possible to envisage alternative systems that challenged the notion of the universality of insuppressible human drives and desires behind capitalist economic theories. Mauss questioned the fundamental assumptions of the capitalist marketplace and addressed the alienation of social interactions it produces. Sanguinetti's interest in the work of another left-wing anthropologist, Vittorio Lanternari, stems from similar concerns — social, religious, and environmental realities as expressions of ideological systems. It would be useful to ascertain, within the context of another fundamental field of the social sciences, that of linguistics, at what stage of his career Sanguinetti familiarized himself with the works of Mikhail Bakhtin's circle, particularly those by Valentin Voloshinov on Marxism and the philosophy of language, written in the 1920s (a major work by this author was later attributed to Bakhtin himself).¹² The thesis of language as a reflection of ideology and social relations, together with the view of consciousness as an embodiment of linguistic material, is extremely close to Sanguinetti's stands. In any event, his attention to language, as the decisive ground both of critical analysis and literary production, derives also from a background in stylistics. Indeed, in his formative years, Sanguinetti's attention was drawn by the work in that field by scholars like Gianfranco Contini and Leo Spitzer.

It must be said, however, that we are dealing with an author who devoured an infinite number of texts: classical writers (he produced exceptional translations of Euripides, Seneca, and Sophocles), ancient and medieval philosophy, Dante and Guido Guinizelli, Teofilo Folengo and Lautrémont, Sade and James Joyce, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, Guido Gozzano and Gian Pietro Lucini, Heinrich Heine and Rainer Maria Rilke, to name a few. Sanguinetti represented a culture of dissent with which the Italian literary and intellectual establishment was forced to come to terms. The debates and the disputes it generated are at the core of the critical reflections and of the creative expressions that marked the Italian cultural landscape of the second half of twentieth century. Like few others, he radically questioned codified modes of literary communication and codified ways of seeing the world. As in any great literature these two elements are never separable.

Notes to the Introduction

1. Edoardo Sanguinetti, 'Come si diventa materialisti storici?', in Edoardo Sanguinetti: *Cultura e realtà*, ed. by Erminio Risso (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010), pp. 17–33 (p. 30). Translations in the text are my own unless otherwise stated.
2. Edoardo Sanguinetti, *Atlante del Novecento italiano: La cultura letteraria*, ed. by Erminio Risso (Lecce: Manni, 2001), pp. 43–44.

3. Edoardo Sanguineti, *Purgatorio de l'Inferno*, in *Catamerone 1951–1971* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974), p. 88.
4. Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Per una letteratura della crudeltà', in *Ideologia e linguaggio* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1970, rev. edn), pp. 133, 134–35; this essay first appeared in the inaugural issue of *Quindici*, 1 (1967).
5. The talk is recorded in *Scrittori a confronto*, ed. by Anna Dolfi and Maria Carla Papini (Rome: Bulzoni, 1998), pp. 137, 138.
6. Fabio Gambaro, *Colloquio con Edoardo Sanguineti: Quarant'anni di cultura italiana attraverso i ricordi di un poeta intellettuale* (Milan: Anabasi, 1993), p. 26, 87.
7. Edoardo Sanguineti, *Avanguardia e no*, in *Genealogie della poesia italiana del secondo Novecento. Siena 23–24–25 marzo 2001*, ed. by Maria Antonietta Grignani (Rome and Bari: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2002), p. 146.
8. The statement is reported in the section *Il dibattito*, in *Gruppo 63: La nuova letteratura*, ed. by Nanni Balestrini and Alfredo Giuliani (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964), p. 382, 303.
9. Edoardo Sanguineti, *Avanguardia e no*, p. 145.
10. Antonio Gnoli, *Sanguineti's Song: Conversazioni immorali* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006), p. 13.
11. Antonio Gnoli, *Sanguineti's Song: Conversazioni immorali*, p. 41.
12. Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. by L. Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York: Seminar Press, 1973); published in French under the name of Mikhail Bakhtin, *Le Marxisme et la philosophie du langage* (Paris: Minuit, 1977).

PART I



Critical Essays



Figure 3: Sanguineti in the 2000s (Archives, *Il XIX Secolo*)

CHAPTER 1



Between Words and Things: Intellectuals, Avant-garde, and Social Class in Edoardo Sanguineti

Marco Codebò

One of the last *maîtres à penser* in contemporary Italy, Edoardo Sanguineti was involved in poetry, fiction, theatre, translation, and criticism, not to mention teaching and politics (he was member of the Italian Parliament from 1979 to 1983). The thread running through all these pursuits was ethics, as Sanguineti's main preoccupation was to intervene in society in order to change things for the better. For him, in his writing, what mattered was 'ritrovare e riconoscere [...] "una concezione del mondo" [...] una manifestazione di "convincimenti morali", un gesto etico e sociale' [recovering and recognizing [...] a 'conception of the world' [...] an expression of 'moral beliefs', an ethical as well as social action].¹ From the very wealth of Sanguineti's interests derives a certain difficulty in isolating the theorist in him. He was one of the finest scholars in his time, with interests spanning from Dante to Balestrini and expanding into Classical Greek, Latin, German, French, and English literatures, aside from music, cinema, theatre, and the fine arts. In his scholarly writing, however, he did not assign theory an autonomous space separate from criticism on a specific author, text, or literary movement. Indeed, not a single major work in Sanguineti's monumental production can legitimately be described as purely theoretical; which does not exonerate us from the duty of individuating the philosophical lymph running through his works. I would add that this task appears even more cogent in light of Sanguineti's highly conscious approach to literary creativity. His poems and novels represent intellectual operations in which theoretical meditation creates the condition for the development of both poetry (his main creative interest) and fiction.

At the core of Sanguineti's thinking, there lie two syntagms whose structure helps to clarify his methodological principles: 'philosophy of praxis' and 'ideology and language'. The former defines Sanguineti's cognitive and operational method, while the latter designates the knot of cultural and linguistic problems that he targets through textual analysis. Both these syntagms combine components that appear somehow at odds with each other: the high ground of philosophy and the reality of practical intervention in 'philosophy of praxis', the rarefied world of ideology, and

the ebullient reality of inter-human conversation in ‘ideology and language’. The fact that these divergences are recomposed in Sanguineti’s thinking suggests that theoretical and practical concerns coexist and cooperate in his intellectual activity. This reconciliation of theory and practice (a defining trait of his persona) appears in line with the above difficulty in isolating the theoretical component of his works.

Sanguineti became acquainted with the philosophy of praxis through the study of Antonio Gramsci’s *Quaderni del carcere*; the term, coined by Antonio Labriola in 1897, defines a cognitive method in which knowing the world and the self combines dialectically with their transformation. Based on a historicist vision of individuals and societies, the philosophy of praxis denies that humanity can be defined by means of abstract criteria such as those offered by biology, religion, or idealistic philosophy. As being human means to be part of a network of social, historically determined, relations, apprehending this network also helps in reshaping it: throughout the cognitive process, the knowing subject undergoes a change, thus altering the web of relation in which he or she is implicated. Carrying out this twofold transformation, whereby intellectual meditation brings about practical consequences at the social level, is what Gramsci names the philosophy of praxis: ‘l’eguaglianza o equazione tra “filosofia e politica”, tra pensiero e azione’ [the equivalence or equation between ‘philosophy and politics’, between thought and action]. Everything is political, while ‘la sola “filosofia” è la storia in atto, cioè è la vita stessa’ [the only ‘philosophy’ is history in the making, that is life itself].² The fertile nucleus of the philosophy of praxis consists in its innate, longed-for instability, its living off conflicts, and its capacity to turn its practitioners into key parts of the contradiction:

La filosofia della prassi [...] è una filosofia liberata (o che cerca di liberarsi) da ogni elemento ideologico unilaterale e fanatico, è la coscienza piena delle contraddizioni, in cui lo stesso filosofo, inteso individualmente o inteso come intero gruppo sociale, non solo comprende la contraddizione ma pone se stesso come elemento della contraddizione, eleva questo elemento a principio di conoscenza e quindi di azione.³

[Philosophy of praxis is philosophy liberated (or on its way to liberation) from any ideological, unilateral, and fanatical element. It represents the full consciousness of contradictions; in this consciousness, the very philosopher (considered as either an individual or an entire social group) not only understands contradiction but also establishes him/herself as an element of it, thus turning this element into a cognitive, and consequently operational principle.]

The philosophy of praxis persuaded Sanguineti by its immersing of the inquiring subject into reality rather than artificially separating him or her from the external world.⁴ The urge to consider intellectual operations as lived experiences of the real informed Sanguineti’s projects from his first attempts at poetry in the early 1950s. In 1961, in an essay regarding his *Laborintus*, Sanguineti wrote that, for him, composing avant-garde poetry meant throwing himself head first in the ‘*Palus Putredinis*’ of anarchism and alienation with the hope ‘di uscirne poi veramente, attraversato il tutto, con le mani sporche, ma con il fango, anche, lasciato davvero alle spalle’ [of getting out for good after going through it all, hands dirtied, with the mud left truly behind].⁵ This statement answers Gramsci’s call on intellectuals to act in the

social sphere: ‘creare una nuova cultura non significa solo fare individualmente delle scoperte “originali”, significa anche e specialmente diffondere criticamente delle verità già scoperte, “socializzarle” per così dire e pertanto farle diventare base di azioni vitali’ [creating a new culture means not only to make ‘original’ discoveries as individuals, but also and above all to critically disseminate well-known truths in order to socialize them, so to speak, and turn them into the foundation for vital actions].⁶ The philosophy of praxis builds knowledge through a continuous, reciprocal checking of speculative ideas and practical interventions. As language represents the bridge that dialectically connects ideas and actions, the philosopher of praxis has the epistemic duty to reflect on the capacity of words to convey the extra-linguistic reality. It is language that gives ideas an intelligible form and allows for the critical evaluation of actions through their verbalization. As a consequence, two questions become unavoidable. First, is language a neutral or skewed medium? Second, and above all, is it a conduit to an external world or the sole reality we can experience? For Sanguinetti, untying these theoretical knots meant taking on the relationship between ideology and language.

Since being coined as a scholarly term by the Enlightenment philosopher Destutt de Tracy, ideology has generated a vast array of interpretations over the course of its relatively short life. In the Marxist camp, Terry Eagleton’s classic *Ideology: An Introduction* provides a convenient snapshot of these approaches. Eagleton lists six definitions of ideology:

- (1) The general material process of production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life;
- (2) Ideas and beliefs (whether true or false) which symbolize the conditions and life-experiences of a specific, socially significant group or class;
- (3) The promotion and legitimation of the interests of significant social groups in the face of opposing interests;
- (4) The promotion and legitimation of the sectorial interests of a dominant social power;
- (5) Ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interests of a ruling group or class specifically by distortion and dissimulation;
- (6) False and deceptive beliefs arising not from the interests of a dominant class but from the material structure of society as a whole.⁷

Although Eagleton’s list bears resemblance to a multiple choice quiz best answered with ‘all of the above’, it can help us grasp both the difficulty of defining ideology and the whiff of deception that surrounds the term: two of the above definitions link ideology to falsification, while the word ‘promotion’ recalls too closely the language of advertising companies. In this respect, as a philosopher of praxis, Sanguinetti rejected any demonization of ideology. Had he been forced to choose one of Eagleton’s suggestions, he would have opted for a mix of the second and third definitions. This combination has the merit of not attempting to assess the truth of ideological propositions through an aprioristic method, without submitting them to the verification of experience. What is more, by showing how ideology is shaped out of the conflict between classes, this mixed definition grasps the dynamic nature of ideology, which represents the foundation of its social productivity. A discussion of ideology in the context of Sanguinetti’s thinking, however, must proceed with caution, as my use of the conditional suggests. The problem is that Sanguinetti never produced a formal definition of the term *per se*, but always defined ideology in its

association with language. In the cultural arena, the task he envisioned for himself was to decode language as an ideological precipitate.

Two examples can clarify Sanguineti's handling of ideology and language. The first is a passage from a 2005 interview in which Sanguineti situates Giovanni Pascoli's poetry in the context of the turn of the twentieth century. That was the time when the petty bourgeoisie was organizing its vision of the world, which is exactly the historical situation that comes through in Pascoli's poetry: 'quando Pascoli dice: il fanciullino è in *voi* professore e in *te* operaio, a quel punto sta già declinando una visione del mondo' [when Pascoli says: the little child is in you, *Sir*, addressing a professor, and in you, *buddy*, addressing a worker, then he is already spelling out a vision of the world].⁸ For the reader, understanding how the text matches different levels of formality to specific social classes — as seen by comparing the way a professor and a factory worker are addressed — acts as the conduit to Pascoli's petty-bourgeois ideology.

The second example can be found in another passage of the same interview. Here Sanguineti recalls the first time he realized that a vision of the world different from the one he had learned under Fascism was possible. He was a seven-year-old child playing soccer in the streets of Turin with his middle-class friends when a young factory worker asked to join the game: 'la sua sessualità già matura, i suoi discorsi politicamente impegnati, il rifiuto della religione mi impressionarono. Fu così che scoprii l'esistenza delle classi. E cominciai il mio primo riesame della situazione perché ciò che fino a quel momento avevo considerato genericamente umano, non lo era più' [his already mature sexuality, his politically engaged talking, and his rejection of religion impressed me. Thus I discovered the existence of social classes. For the first time, I began to double-check the situation because what up to that moment I had considered generically human stopped being so].⁹ What matters in this episode is that Sanguineti's intuition of the existence of social classes was not based on a perceived difference in wealth, as usually is the case, but in culture, i.e. the way his occasional playmate dealt with sex, religion, and politics. For the first time, the ideology that is embedded in social relations appeared to Sanguineti, and the medium for this appearance was language: the body language of a street kid with an uncensored approach to sexuality, and the rebellious language of a youth from a working-class neighbourhood still permeated by socialism despite the long fascist dictatorship.

Some fifteen years after his encounter with the young worker in Turin, the reading of Gramsci's works shaped Sanguineti's understanding of ideology. We know too well that ideology is a well-discussed, perhaps even overworked, term in Marxist circles. From the 1920s to the 1960s, two distinct waves of European Marxist thinkers concerned themselves with the comprehension of ideology: firstly, in the aftermath of the First World War, those who dealt with the defeat of the working-class movement in Italy and Germany, and then, after 1945, those who had to reckon with the surge of mass consumerism and the rise of the cultural industry. While Georg Lukács and Gramsci belonged to the former generation, Theodor Adorno and Louis Althusser were part of the latter. What divides Gramsci (and Sanguineti with him) from other Marxist thinkers is his unique appreciation of the