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Carlo Emilio Gadda in the Eyes of His Contemporary Critics

Summary

The aim of the doctoral thesis entitled *Carlo Emilio Gadda in the Eyes of His Contemporary Critics* is to analyse the critical reception of selected works of C.E. Gadda (1893-1973), one of the most recognised twentieth-century writers both in Italy and abroad. The analysis focuses on the reception of the first editions of the following volumes: *La Madonna dei filosofi* (*The Philosophers' Madonna*, 1931), *Il castello di Udine* (*The Castle of Udine*, 1934), *Le meraviglie d'Italia* (*Italy's Wonders*, 1939), *Le Novelle dal ducato in fiamme* (*News from the Duchy in Flames*, 1953), *Il giornale di guerra e di prigionia* (*Journal of War and Captivity*, the edition of 1955 and the expanded edition of 1965), *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (*That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, 1957), and *La cognizione del dolore* (*Acquainted with Grief*, 1963). Hence the thesis covers a long period of Gadda's 'official' career – from the 1930s to the early 1960s. The texts selected for the analysis include mostly reviews, but also a number of more extensive articles and essays published in various periodicals and journals. Furthermore, the aim of the thesis was to supplement the critics' commentaries on Gadda's writing with those provided by the author himself, who was also famous for his tendency to present critical analyses and exegeses of his own works.

The thesis consists of two large parts, entitled *The Baroque* and *Gadda the 'Classic'. Towards the Centre?*, which are divided into chapters dedicated to the critical reception of the respective books in the order of their publication. In the first part, in addition to the chronological order, the definition 'baroque' is used as the key for the analysis. It appeared early on as a description of Gadda's unique style, which, however, would also be perceived as bizarre and artificial. Throughout most of the period concerned, this definition would be used as a term of little precision. The reason why it is applied in the analysis regardless is that it was extremely popular among the critics, and that it addressed one of the key aspects

considered in that period, namely to what extent should Gadda's writing be regarded, accordingly, as an exercise in style or as a justified and functional form of expression. Capturing the critical reflection on this specific aspect was the primary objective of this part of the thesis. Another point of interest were commentaries and notes which focused more on the mechanisms of Gadda's writing – the syntactic and lexical planes and the narrative structure of his works. Hence, through the analysis of the critical reception of selected Gadda's books, the part entitled *The Baroque* allows deeper insights into his writing. It also includes brief analyses of some excerpts from the works, such as the episode of questioning of Ines Cionini in *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*.

Furthermore, the first part contains most of Gadda's self-commentaries, which are quoted in order to supplement the critical discourse. They are discussed primarily in the chapter entitled *Gadda barocco e antibarocco (Gadda: Baroque and Anti-Baroque)*. Thus it turns out that the definition 'baroque writer' is also useful because it concentrates in itself a significant part of the dialogue between the critics and Gadda. The commentaries are mostly statements and explanation provided by the writer in order to defend his works against allegations of mannerism or 'art for art's sake'.

The Baroque summarises various critical interpretations of Gadda's art and it illustrates how they changed over time. With regard to the books published in the 1930s, the period's predominant style-centred approach is presented. The period was characterised by a still-ingrained stylistic 'rigour' propagated by *La Ronda* magazine, and Gadda's work would then be evaluated in accordance with the key principles of the style known as 'prosa d'arte'. Starting from the early 1950s, after the collection of stories *Novelle dal ducato in fiamme* was published in 1953, the aspect of Gadda's realism would more and more often be pointed out by the criticism. This approach reflected the debate on realism which had intensified in Italy in particular after World War II and would prevail until the mid-1950s. The debate on realism was also present in texts dedicated to *That Awful Mess*, whose publication marked the climax in the Lombard writer's career. Another voice in the period came from the nascent neo-avant-garde movement, which tried to place Gadda apart from the literary styles of the 1930s and to interpret him through the prism of its own poetics. This voice became even more audible after the publication of *Acquainted with Grief* in 1963, i.e. in the foundation year of Gruppo 63. In the context of this work, the aim of the thesis was also to demonstrate how the interpretation, addressing various aspects – from the manner in which the reality was presented, to lyricism and tragedy – was determined by Gianfranco Contini's *Introduction* and Gadda's preface

entitled *L'Editore chiede venia del recupero chiamando in causa l'autore* (*The publisher requests forgiveness for the republication on behalf of the author*). The chapter dedicated to the reception of *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia* is of somewhat separate nature. It is when a unique work of Gadda's reached the hands of the critics: journals written by the young author on the front line of World War I and during his captivity. The critical discourse departed to some extent from the interpretations observed in the context of the earlier publications. The attention of the critics turned to other aspects, such as the literary status of the *Journal*, its documentary value, and the way in which Gadda's wartime experience fitted in with the stories of many young men who had seen the war as an opportunity to free themselves from bourgeois conventions.

The second part, entitled *Gadda «classico». Verso il centro?*, complements the first part and serves as a sort of a summary. It discusses critical commentaries focusing to a larger extent on Gadda's rise to recognition from the early years of his career until the 1960s. The purpose was to illustrate the process of Gadda's changing status on Italy's literary scene and the significance acquired in his case by the terms 'peripheries' and 'centre'. The starting point for this analysis was a polemic with Alberto Asor Rosa's article *Perché Gadda? (Why Gadda?)* of 1984, which is a reflection on the writer's position and significance in the discussed period. As an attempt to look at Gadda's critical reception beyond the assumed timeframe, a brief section is then dedicated to what was written about him ten years after his death in *Corriere della Sera* daily, followed by a discussion of selected definitions of a 'classic'. While in fact the period concerned was just the initial stage of Gadda's rise to the present-day recognition, the term 'classic' would even then be used to define him. The objective was to highlight certain aspects determining Gadda's significance, and hence to provide an additional context of the critical reception of his works in the period concerned. The above sections lead to another part, dedicated to a series of texts published soon after the writer's death in 1973, which are also short summaries of his work.

The following subsections, in turn, present critics' commentaries on the process of strengthening of Gadda's position which accompanied the publication of his respective works analysed in the thesis. In order to present a broader literary and cultural context, the main body of critical texts used for the analysis is accompanied by other publications, such as summaries of literary seasons or surveys conducted among writers and people from cultural circles. Excerpts are also quoted from articles on the literary prizes awarded to Gadda.

The final part of the thesis presents several conclusions summarising selected key aspects of the critical reception of Gadda's works in the period concerned.

Key words: Gadda, criticism, baroque, classic, war