

JOHN PICCHIONE

AESTHETIC FORMS AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT: THE DEBATE OF THE ITALIAN NEW AVANT-GARDE

In the second half of the Twentieth century, the debate over art and social commitment has been dominated in Italy by the provocative and conflicting views of the new avant-garde. The paper will argue that this movement is split in two major camps. The first, loyal to the project of modernity, assigns to literature and the arts a role of emancipation and social antagonism, by adopting an iconoclastic language as the expression of a subversive ideology. This group, guided by neo-Marxist theory and utopian thought, holds that literature must be committed to strip the world of its mythologies and disguises and it is capable of envisaging a political, social, and psychological revolution. The second, anticipating a post-modern aesthetics, sees literature and the arts completely impotent when confronted by sociopolitical realities. For this group, caught in its self-referentiality, literature shows the arbitrariness and the fictive nature of all artistic expressions. The paper will explore these positions by investigating the theoretical contributions by Umberto Eco, Edoardo Sanguineti, Angelo Guglielmi, and Renato Barilli--all members of the neoavanguardia. Their views will also be confronted with those expressed by adversaries of the movement such as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Italo Calvino. There is no doubt, this has been one of the most insightful and controversial aesthetic debates for its attempt to draw a general map of literature and the arts in relation to their specificity and social relevance.

Biography

John Picchione has been teaching at York University (Toronto, Canada) in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics since 1975. His main research interests are Twentieth-century Italian poetry, avant-garde movements, and theory of literature. He has contributed to books and encyclopaedias such as *Il Novecento*, *Encyclopedia of World Literature*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Women in Italian Studies*, *Experimental Visual Concrete: Avant-Garde Poetry Since the 1960s*, *Scrittori, tendenze letterarie e conflitto delle poetiche in Italia*, *Avanguardia e postmoderno*. He has published on numerous journals (*Il Verri*, *Strumenti critici*, *The Review of National Literatures*, *Parol*, *Studi novecenteschi*, *Otto/Novecento*, *Esperienze letterarie*, *Letteratura italiana contemporanea*, *Quaderni d'italianistica*, *Rivista di studi italiani*, *Bollettario*, *The Canadian Journal of Italian Studies*, *Forum Italicum* and others) with articles on authors and movements such as the *Novissimi* (Porta, Giuliani, Sanguineti, in particular), Gruppo 63, Gruppo 70, Ungaretti, Zanzotto, Palazzeschi, Volponi, Quasimodo. He has also written on semiotics, deconstruction, reader-response criticism, post-modern aesthetics, literature and cognition. He is co-editor of *Italian Literature in North America: Pedagogical Strategies* (Ottawa: Biblioteca di Quaderni d'italianistica, 1989) and editor of *I discorsi della critica in America* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1993), a volume that features critical profiles on Frye, de Man, Bloom, Hartman, Fish, E. D. Hirsch Jr., Said, Chatman, Spivak, Jameson. He has published (in collaboration) *Twentieth-Century Italian Poetry: An Anthology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993). Intended for English-speaking

students, the anthology, the first of its kind, provides a comprehensive overview of Italian poetry from the turn of the century to the present. In 1995 he published *Introduzione a A. Porta*, Rome: Laterza. A book on the new avant-garde movement is expected to be in print by the end of the year.