

Ivan Tomic interviews Massimiliano Tortora

Massimiliano Tortora teaches Contemporary Italian Literature at the University of Perugia. He is director of «L'Ellisse. Studi storici di letteratura italiana» and editor of «Allegoria». Tortora has extensively worked on the major Italian modernist writers. He has written essays and volumes on Svevo, Tozzi, Ungaretti and Montale («*Vivere la propria contraddizione*». *Immanenza e trascendenza in Ossi di seppia di Montale*, Pacini, Pisa, forthcoming). He has edited an issue of «Allegoria» on Italian modernism, *Il modernismo in Italia* (2011); with Romano Luperini he has co-edited the volume *Sul modernismo italiano* (Liguori, 2012).

Massimiliano you are one of the founders of the CEMS, Centre for European Modernism Studies, which is about to start its activities. The CEMS's objective is to study European Modernism. Why such a necessity?

The CEMS project has been developed at the University of Perugia, and involves about twenty universities both Italian (such as Perugia stranieri, Pisa, Siena stranieri, Bari, etc.) and foreign (such as Istanbul, Toronto, Manchester, Chambery, Utrecht, Vienna, Malta, etc.). To answer your question, I came up with the idea of founding the Centre with Annalisa Volpone, a Joycean scholar who teaches and researches on English Literature here in Perugia. We thought it was important to establish a Study Centre, which focused on the possible transnational and European context of modernism. We discussed the project with some colleagues and friends from Perugia and also from other universities, and they all agreed in considering modernism a category much wider than Anglo-American modernism, which is usually what modernism means for the general public. Notably, all of these colleagues have joined the centre.

As you can see there are many reasons for founding the CEMS, for brevity's sake, I would like to name one of the most crucial: the ongoing critical discussion and reconfiguration of the literary periodization as well as of the literary genres. This is certainly a minor process if compared with the lively literary debate of the 60s and 70s, however it is indeed remarkable if compared with the sluggish condition of the 90s and the early 2000. Moreover, the early twentieth century – which is of course the period we would like to study– with its many contradictions, epistemological overlappings and political uncertainties has often paved the way for the rising of totalitarian regimes. It goes without saying that there are many analogies with contemporary historical period, which is another reason for the increasing attention to the modernist context.

So you are saying that indeed there is something like a “European modernism”, somehow different from the well-known British modernism. Don’t you think that perhaps you are only employing new words for a clearly dated debate?

To be dated are not the objectives of a research rather the scholars who work on them. In this regard, I’m quite proud of the research our scholars at the CEMS are proposing and conducting. To come back to modernism now, well it’s a fact that in some contexts this category has called for new attention. See for instance what’s happening in the field of Italian studies, a part from the obvious different critical approaches, scholars propose a definition of modernism that strongly diverts from that referred to British modernism. Notably this is not true only for the Italian field but also for other European literatures. As for the Italian literature, there are two options. The first one is that Italian modernism is incompatible with the British modernism (neither Svevo, Pirandello or Tozzi, not even Gadda, employ the interior monologue or the free indirect speech à la James Joyce and Virginia Woolf); by contrast, the second possibility is that there is a common element, some kind of link, of mutual cultural drive that the various European literatures share. We believe that although in different ways the various European literatures present a shared vision of the world, which is in fact the modernist one. To disclose such a vision is the CEMS’s major challenge.

While it is of course difficult to predict the outcomes of your research, you can say something about the projects and the means through which you would like to develop them.

I cannot fully answer this question. In May there will be our first workshop, to which all the founding members will take part. On that occasion strategies and means will be discussed. Our idea of projects implies meetings, study days and conferences. But we also intend to work on edited collections, and on-line forums, by the way hopefully the CEMS’s website will be put online soon. Another activity we intend to promote concerns the teaching field, we would like to increase the exchange of visiting professors, who work on modernism. Finally, we too, like other study centres, would like to create an open access data base on modernism, addressed to both scholars and the general public. But how and when will be an object of discussion in May. Undoubtedly we consider the CEMS as a multicentric network, whereby at the same time each research units maintains its autonomy and participate to the CEMS as an organic structure.

You’ve mentioned the CEMS’s possible involvement with the academic teaching activities. Next year the Department of Humanities of the University of Perugia will offer a course of European

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Modernism Studies for the Master's Degree in Comparative languages and literatures. Can you tell us something about that?

The course of European Modernism Studies is probably the first tangible outcome of the CEMS. Basically it is a course of comparative literatures within the modernist context. Lessons will be in English, although we don't exclude other languages. Each year a visiting professor will be invited to teach EMS. We already have a general agreement with our first two professors, both well-known experts on modernism. EMS represents of course a crucial turning point in the internationalization of our Department, but this is not the point. Or better this is not the only one. What we aim at is a radical change of perspective in the teaching activities, whereby the cultural exchange that the university should promote is realized first and foremost in the teaching offer. Hopefully not only our teachers, but also our students will be able to take the most from this kind of internationalization.

If the "research model" suggested by the CEMS will be successful, as I wish you it will be, it could become an interesting example to follow. The impression is that to do research in the time of crisis means to propose projects, which involve a "transnational community of scholars" that is able to share human as well as economic resources. What do you think about that?

The economic aspect is of course crucial. Nowadays to do research means to reciprocate knowledge with colleagues from abroad (and often many of them are Italian, for the reasons we know). This is true for any research field, Italian studies included. The positive side of the crisis, if there is any, has been this need to share research experience and increase collaboration, also from a financial point of view. Obviously such a mutual exchange can be possible only if at its basis there is the idea that culture is always the result of an intense dialogue and participation. These are the reasons for which we founded the *Centre for European Modernism Studies*.

The CEMS website will be available soon. In the meantime, for further information, please contact massimiliano.tortora@unipg.it or annalisa.volpone@unipg.it.