John Picchione. *The New Avant-Garde in Italy. Theoretical Debate and Poetic Practices*. Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Pp. ix, 250. ISBN 0802089941. \$ 50 US.

The Italian *neoavanguardia* or New Avant-garde has received considerable critical attention in Italy since it burst onto the cultural scene in the early part of the 1960s, but it has infrequently been the subject of scholarship in the English-speaking world. One of the possible reasons for this neglect might well be the very poetics and practices produced by the poets and theoreticians of this group. John Picchione's book makes a fundamentally important contribution to the study of the Italian lyric in the mid-twentieth century and will certainly go a long way to redressing this imbalance.

The first two of the book's ten chapters are devoted to providing a historical and theoretical context for the work of poets appearing in the 1961 anthology *I Novissimi – Poesie per gli anni '60*, and for the writers who contributed to the cultural debate in the pages of such journals as *Il Verri* and *Il Menabò*. These intellectuals constituted the so-called Gruppo 63. An entire chapter is then dedicated to each of the five poets anthologized in *I Novissimi*, namely, Alfredo Giuliani, Elio Pagliarani, Edoardo Sanguineti, Antonio Porta, and Nanni Balestrini, with the final two chapters given over to examining the experimentation in concrete and verbal-visual poetry that occurred in Italy during the course of the same decade, and to evaluating the overall impact of the movement on Italian literature and society.

With his framing remarks, Picchione is masterful in identifying the aesthetic, linguistic, and political dimensions of the work of both the poets and theoreticians active in Italy during the early Sixties. The importance of the Novissimi's call for a repudiation of what they perceived to be a stale literary tradition, in the name of experimentation and radical societal and linguistic renewal, represents the group's anticipation of many crucial concerns of postmodern thinkers: the nature of language, its relationship to external reality, the role of literature and of the intellectual in the post-industrial age.

Perhaps even more significant, as Picchione argues so eloquently, are the debates involving the Gruppo 63, the most famous members of which were Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco. It is indeed in this environment of intense exchange of critical views that seminal works, such as Eco's *Opera aperta* (The Open Work) were created, with their focus on the status of the text and the collaboration of the author and the reader in the construction of meaning. Picchione's impressive achievement lies in the balanced presentation of the many views expressed in the vehicles named above (i.e. the *Novissimi* anthology, the journals, and the books written in this period). He concisely and accurately identifies the core issues in the often oppositional arguments advanced by the participants in the discourse, but he also intervenes appropriately to point out the inconsistencies or limitations to be found in some of these lines of reasoning about the nature of language and literature.

A fundamental aspect of the poetry of the Novissimi is the so-called elimination or reduction of the subject, the agent that interprets the external world and

phenomena in the traditional lyric and conveys the constituted impressions to the reader who, in traditional communication, passively accepts the information. Each of the five poets examined in chapters 3 to 7, in one way or another attempts to achieve this effect, thereby protesting the loss of the expressiveness of language. In Alfredo Giuliani's work, along the lines of Dylan Thomas, Picchione tells us, the "I" is "often assimilated into the life of the objects, thus deterring direct self-analysis" (82). In his pursuit of a lyric that privileges the objects of perception, Giuliani "begins to privilege a schizoid and paranoid language that [...] gives voice to the senselessness and the dementedness of the quotidian" (83).

Elio Pagliarani's "reduction of the 'I'" is realized not through the adoption of Giuliani's "language of pathology and disorder" (97), but through the technique of collage of voices originating in different areas of society, a heteroglossia of sorts, that conveys the realities of daily urban life. Picchione's challenge in this chapter, and indeed in the entire volume, is to articulate Pagliarani's position within an avant-garde that rejects social commentary in the name of a fossilized language even as it formulates meaningful observations that indicate social commitment and critique. In the end, Picchione manages to square the circle by arguing that Pagliarani breaks with tradition by amalgamating various genres and linguistic registers that "shift poetry towards the modern epic and dramatic verse" (106). In this project, Pagliarani is inspired by the writings of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce: icons of modernism. As a result, the positions of the avant-garde, oscillating as they do between modernism and postmodernism, become evident and are reaffirmed throughout the book.

Edoardo Sanguineti's poetry "represents a decisive turning point for post-war Italian letters" (114). The modernist leitmotif of alienation is transformed into the postmodern alienation of language itself in the work of this poet, especially in his *Laborintus*. Alluding to the labyrinth, Sanguineti formulates a desecration of contemporary society, exposing "the swamp of capitalist alienation in which the conscience is lost in the falsity and contradictions of bourgeois ideologies" (115). In this, he too would appear to indulge in a sort of realist or Neo-realist depiction of middle-class values. However, rather than achieve such a denunciation by means of conventional language, Sanguineti relies on a "plurilinguistic, babelic text in which fragments of sentences" (115) are combined into a disorienting montage.

Antonio Porta's quest for renewal of poetic language within the general parameters of the *neoavanguardia* is characterized by Picchione as "a nomadic conception of writing" (129). Influenced by the phenomenology of Jaspers and Merleau-Ponty, Porta's poetry "features a visual approach to reality and an adherence to external events as strategies for bracketing the 'I' and its inner concerns" (129). As do the other writers of this group, Porta produces what appears to be a disjointed or fragmented verse, one that communicates "a state of decay, cruelty and social atrocities" (130). Once more, experimentation and metalinguistic concerns mingle with ethical and social issues. Picchione must constantly be mindful of the delicate balance between linguistic experimentation for the sake of a new expressiveness, on the one hand, and the formulation of a comprehensible or coherent world-view, on the other, which means that the avant-garde poet is constantly in

danger of slipping back into the trap that he tries to escape. Picchioone is obliged to reconcile the statements that affirm the role of poetry as "a way of searching for some forms of truth" (132) with assertions that poetry is for Porta "a discourse reduced to zero: the reduction of language to zero corresponding to the negation of the world" (135).

For Picchioone, Nanni Balestrini's poetry is "one of the group's most radical attempts to break down literary practices tied to principles of subjectivity or to representational canons" (148). The reader finds neither the reflections of the subject nor narration in Balestrini's "revolt against all forms of poetic conventions" (152). The author gathers fragments of material strewn in the mass media and juxtaposes them on the page to generate an image of disorder and meaninglessness. As part of his strategy of sabotaging the communicative process, Balestrini composes concrete and electronic poems in which he strives to make the purpose of poetry the manipulation of the linguistic sign, separating it from its semantic properties. This direction of creativity allows Picchioone to consider the development of technological, concrete and verbal-visual poetry that parallels chronologically the work of the Novissimi.

By relating the theories and creative works of the *neoavanguardia* to the historical avant-garde, the experimentalism in Pop Art, contemporary music, and the theories of Roland Barthes, John Picchioone has produced what is clearly a most comprehensive and insightful study on the Italian New Avant-garde that is likely to remain a cornerstone of future studies.

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Alessia Ricciardi. *The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003. Pp. 266. ISBN 0-8047-4776-8.

The Ends of Mourning offers nothing less than an all-embracing hermeneutic approach to postmodernism. Based on, but not limited to, Freud's concept of mourning, Ricciardi's book argues that a culturally meaningful, morally accountable relationship to the past requires a commitment to working through historical loss. For Freud, mourning involved the progressive detachment of the libido from the lost object, a process accomplished by the reinvestment and hypercathexis of each bit of related memory. Ricciardi does not expect art works to enact the Freudian mourning process in order to establish an ethically responsible relationship to history, but she does ask that texts of memory repropose and reinterpret the past in ways that invite our active critical and moral engagement with its lessons. Mourning, for Ricciardi, thus becomes a metaphor for the ethically and cognitively demanding work of confronting historical loss.

This metaphor is developed with great richness and sophistication through a dialectical strategy in which Ricciardi reads back and forth between two sets of texts to establish either an oppositional or a complementary relationship which allows her