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La letteratura dal punto di vista degli scrittori

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The volume *La Letteratura dal Punto di Vista degli Scrittori* (2018) edited by Michele Stanco examines the writers' perspective about literature and it is organised in three parts. Part I, *Saggi e Paratesti*, focuses on the use of the essay as a genre and on other paratextual forms, such as the preface, the author's note, and the epigraph. Despite their synthetic structure, the preface, the author's note and the epigraph, represent an instrument of immediate comparison between the author and the reader, placing them in a dialogic dimension, where the former shows the kernel of his theoretical thought. Costantini, Lops and Martino present in their essays the modality through which Wilkie Collins, Joseph Conrad and T. S. Eliot convey ideas on literature.

Costantini discusses Collins' non-fictional works, in particular the prefaces to some of his novels and some essays. Since 1860 a debate developed in the UK about the aesthetic nature of the sensation novel, judged by its detractors offensive of decency, devoid of aesthetic value, educational purposes, and a substantial plot. Sensation novelists, in their turn, defended themselves by claiming their connection with the lesson of French naturalism.

Collins begins his discussion about the aesthetics of sensation novels in the *Prefaces* to the first and the second edition of his novel *The Woman in White* (1860). He manifests a total rejection of the Victorian omniscient narrator and insists on the possibility of weaving a plot that presents an effective characterisation of the characters, deepened in their psychological complexity. A few years later, Collins will shift its focus on the birth of a completely new readership. In the *Prefaces* to *Armadale* (1866) and *Heart and Science* (1883), he identifies two distinct types of readers: "Readers in general", an audience open to the merits of a work, and the "Readers in particular" with difficult tastes and prone to prejudice. His remarkable essay "The Unknown Public" (1858) traces the profile of a category of readers, the penny-novel readers, who read cheap magazines which displayed sensation tales and matching columns of doubtful taste.

The relationship between author and readers is also explored in De Giovanni's essay. In the difficult transition from nineteenth-century Realism to Modernism, Virginia Woolf investigates the ineluctable metamorphosis of the novel in *Modern Fiction* (1919), *Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown* (1924), *Phases of Fiction* (1929) and *Professions for Women* (1931). Woolf traces the profile of the new novelist, who, like a good landlady, must know how to manage both the instances of change and the moments of crisis. For Woolf the new relationship between the writer and the reader must be inclusive and balanced, without the advantage of the emotions on writing, always demanded by the readers. In contemporary times, as Esposito demonstrates in her contribution, the interaction and participation of the public in the creation of a work is particularly significant thanks to the digital platforms, through which some authors share their works. The case of the writer Jasper Fforde is emblematic. Fforde, author of the famous saga dedicated to the literary detective Thursday Next, while not disdainful to publish his works in paper form, uses his own website, edited in first person, for a cooperative and collaborative activity with his audience, which allows his characters to prolong their lives beyond the printed page. Such a strategy identifies alternative ways of survival of literature through time, space, but also through different genres, and legitimises the mechanisms of identification of the readers, who can act on the plot. As Esposito points out, these continuous exchanges of roles between author and reader create a new concept of authorship, which combines the traditional concepts of authority and originality of the writer to the ability to generate commercial and cross-media circulation success of literature.

Collins is not the only one to use the prefaces as a paratext. Lops' essay, in fact, investigates the theoretical contents of the *Prefaces* to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897 and 1916) and of the *Author's Note* to *Typhoon and Other Stories* (1903) by Joseph Conrad. In the Preface of 1897, Conrad proposes the definition of the novel as a work of art. In the construction of the work, the author must first use truth, to be understood as expressive sincerity, but also as an instrument to interpret the world. The writer, therefore, must descend into the deepest meanders of his being and shed light on the secrets of human existence. Later on Conrad abandons the preface in favor of the author's note, which shows a confidential, colloquial tone, but is still framed within the critical register. In the *Note* of 1903 he reasserts the importance of sensoriality, and in particular of orality, to provide a more immediate and personal appeal to the plot. This notion of orality is central also in the essay by Ruggiero, which

focuses on the performative poetry of the artist (poet, writer, musician and performer) of Jamaican origin Benjamin Zephaniah. We are on the contemporary British literary scene, and through his performances that combine the language of reggae music with references to political and social issues, Zephaniah creates artistic events “narrated” both through words and gestures. He believes that the *dub* poet is a real griot, the ancient storyteller of the West African tradition, depositary and narrator of the memories of his people. Similarly, the *dub* poet constitutes an example of “incarnated memory”, capable of evoking with the force of the spoken word all the demons tormenting the life of his community.

Going back to the paratexts, as highlighted by Martino in his essay, the privileged instruments through which T. S. Eliot convey his ideas on literature are the epigraphs. The theoretical and cultural apparatus that underlies the education of Eliot allows to frame the epigraphs present in his works as an interpretative act of a condition not only artistic but also social. Fragmentary, segmented, separated by texts, the Eliotian epigraphs reflect the inner chaos of the contemporary man, who has lost his own points of reference and who finds in the use of past literature an anchor of salvation. The epigraphs of the collection *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), of the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and of *The Waste Land* (1922) trigger a dynamic, multi-voiced relationship between ancient texts and the Eliotian modern text.

The essays by Coronato and Piré focus on more traditional forms of theoretical elaboration, which is an invective against the use of rhymes by John Milton present in the *Paradise Lost* edition of 1668 and the literary biographies by Samuel Johnson. In “The Verse” Milton defines the rhyme a sing-song of words ending in the same sound. He expresses himself in favour of the free verse, believing that poetry mainly originates from a wise use of syllables and accents. Such a freedom sought by Milton in the poetic composition is also to be intended as a need for freedom of interpretation, as it happens in his analysis of the sacred texts using analogy. According to Coronato, this practice allows the poet to search for and find correspondences in a divergent way that is through the variety, a way of investigating the real in search for new meanings.

Literary biography also presents itself as an investigation and a revelation of the private life of famous authors. However, for Johnson, the writing of *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779-81) has a dual purpose: on the one hand the private life of each author, on the other the possibility of being able to express critical judgments on their works. The *Lives* are not just a report of the facts of an illustrious existence, but also an opportunity to discuss talent, creativity as well as failure. Behind the critical style that distinguishes the tone of the *Lives*, there is a pedagogical intent. The reader, in fact, must be educated but also oriented towards a correct use of reason. Johnson provides sketches of private life that are nothing but moral eruditions in full assonance with the principles of the Enlightenment that claims a harmony between the universal and the most intimate and private aspects of the single life.

Essays in Part II, *Disseminations*, analyse the texts where the creative aspect is interpolated with criticism, in a mixture of literary language and critical metalanguage. As Stanco points out, Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* (1609), with their varied vocabulary which ranges from poetry to painting, contained specific terms that conveyed a metaliterary reflection about

the poetic genre. Fusella's essay remains on the poetic territory and presents the analysis of the ode *Ars Poetica* (1978) by Ivor Armstrong Richards. This composition is divided into four stanzas, each dedicated to a different theme: the development of the human embryo, the progress of poetry, the communication among human beings and the salvation of mankind. *Ars Poetica*, constructed with an urgent rhythm because of a skilful use of the meter, does not aim to provide definitive answers to the questions that each stanza underline. As Fusella notes, the urgency of the poet is not the definition of poetry is, but how it acts, operates, spreads, and proposes itself as a lifeline for the human what. Pepe's essay, while focusing on a poet, moves away from the verses and analyses a prose work by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Hand and Soul* (1850). Rossetti imagines the formation process of an artist, the hypothetical Aretine painter Chiaro di Messer Bello dell'Erma, who in the thirteenth century took his first steps in painting. At the beginning he followed his master's footsteps, but then, dissatisfied with the disastrous results of some of his experiments, he was about to renounce painting altogether. In a moment of epiphany, he realised that his heart constituted the only way to rediscover inspiration and resolve the painful antithesis between beauty and faith. Making use of this imaginary biography of Chiaro, Rossetti succeeds in delineating his own conception of the work of art as a result of an era, but also as an outcome of the creative mechanisms which generated it.

The essays by Continisio and Chialant leave the poetic dimension and analyse respectively the aesthetic theories of Thomas Middleton in *The Witch* (1615) and of George Eliot in *Adam Bede* (1859). Born as a contamination between the tragic and comic genres, tragicomedy, which has its origins in the Latin literature, had some success also in the English literary context, especially with Beaumont and Fletcher. And it is precisely to the latter that Middleton owes his first training. In fact, he wrote four tragicomedies that followed the pattern of the genre. *The Witch* constitutes a reversal of the trend, or an attempt, more than successful, to undermine the cornerstones of the genre. As Continisio points out, in order to be credible, not so much as a playwright, as a critical author with respect to the genre, Middleton employs elements in the Fletcher manner, perfectly recognisable to the public: the typical characters (such as the charitable tyrant, the noble villain, the afflicted girl), the setting, the use of the exotic. However, these cornerstones are demolished with a generalised exasperation that makes each element a caricature of itself. It is not a matter of creating a parody, but of interpreting the crisis of a genre that begins to adapt with difficulty to the palate of the public.

In analysing the aesthetic convictions of George Eliot, contained in the seventeenth chapter of the novel *Adam Bede* (1859), Chialant refers to the widespread practice among Victorian writers to propagate within their creative works their own ideas about literature and the function of the novel. Before devoting an entire chapter of a work to the subject, Eliot had already dealt with this topic in several articles, many of them published in the *Westminster Review*. In the novel, her critical analysis follows three lines: firstly, the narrator's ability to provide a faithful representation of reality. Despite the inevitable distortion of this reflected image, passed through the filters of the mind and of the writing, the author must always relate the truth. Secondly, the narrator must be able to grasp the simplicity of the daily life.

Finally, just as a component of reality, even the ugly, the deformed and the rough must find space in the representation. Such positions, as Chialant points out, originated various criticisms, which on the one hand highlighted some fundamental contradictions in Eliot's analysis, and on the other hand emphasized her attempt at an organic theorization of a genre.

Part III, *Maschere d'autore*, focuses on the phenomenon of the mask as a complex game of stratifications to which the author, hiding behind his own alter ego, recurs to expose his aesthetic theories. As Stanco remarks, pastoral poetry is a fertile ground for the creation of fictitious alter egos. The poet hides behind a shepherd who becomes a spokesman for poetic, political and religious needs. The main mask of Edmund Spenser is the shepherd Colin Clout, a serial character in the poet's work, protagonist of two pastoral compositions, *The Shepherders Calender* (1579) and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* (1595), and minor character in other works. These two poems represent two different moments in the poet's career and therefore represent two different aspects of poetry. In *The Calender* we have a young poet, still semi-unknown, who is seeking for fame, but who then does not sign his work. In the second composition, however, the poet shows his awareness of his marginal location both geographical and cultural. Colin's mask, therefore, moves on a double plane, between idealism and reality, between hope and discouragement, and demonstrates, as Stanco emphasises, a non-univocal definition of the relationship between the author and the text. On the contrary, the alchemy between author and text is perfectly realised, in the relationship between Lawrence Sterne and his favourite masks Tristram Shandy and Yorick, as Laudando highlights. Where Tristram is clumsy, unhappy, and ridiculous, Yorick is an entertainer and a sharp wit. But their lives at the limit of the tragicomic, combined with digressions, displacements, appeals to the reader, and the metanarratives, are ingredients which express Sterne's attempt to experiment with new possibilities of both narration and representation.

The masks behind the poets Lord Byron and Letitia Elizabeth Landon are interesting for their affinities. In her essay, Baiesi captures the tragic parallelism, which distinguishes both their style and destiny. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-18) and *The Improvisatrice* (1824) are two long poems, through which respectively Byron and Landon present the stories of their heroes through a skilful game of masks and revelations, which concern and involve the authors at various levels. Harold is the typical Baronian hero, tormented by the evil of living due to his biographical vicissitudes, rebellious towards a society in which he does not recognise himself, an outcast who chooses to leave in search of his real self. Byron, however, after the first two parts, puts aside Harold and speaks in the first person. Consequently, it appears as a new character, who has disguised himself as an author. The relationship between reality and fiction then becomes unstable, if not labile and liquid. Landon adopts Byron's theme and adds some aspects related to female poetic fame in a patriarchal society and her complex relationship with the public. However, unlike Byron, Landon never lays her mask, thus reaching multiple modes of representation. In fact, the *Improvisatrice*, known as a contemporary Florentine poet, does not have a proper name. Her great ability allows her to wear, in turn, other masks, of historical or literary characters, through which she amplifies and multiplies her narrative art. Such author masks allow Byron and Landon to continue to cultivate their poetic art in a society that has isolated them and from which they have distanced themselves. Both, in fact, share the tragic fate of death away from home.

Scatasta's essay investigates the possibility of considering Stephen Dedalus as a mask of James Joyce. The character of Dedalus is, so to speak, "serial" in Joyce's work, as he appears in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1904), *Ulysses* (1922) and *Stephen Hero* (1944). In addition, Joyce signed various stories and letters under the name Stephen Daedalus. However, no evidence exists that it is indeed an alter ego, not least because his reflections on art and aesthetics are present both as interpolations of his creative works and in critical writings. This appropriating and then disposing of this identity occasionally and not systematically, for Scatasta is to be attributed to a nostalgic irony, which leads Joyce to look back at the past, to a figure that perhaps has obsessed him throughout his life, the one of the artist, who unveils himself through his work.

The contributions of Martino and Chialant select works very close to each other temporally. The use of the masks in Oscar Wilde and George Gissing connotes as a tool to discuss the nature of art but also its mechanisms of practice and diffusion. Wilde entrusts to four critical essays (including "The Truth of Masks", 1885) his reflection on the role of art, on its artificial, deconstructive and reconstructive nature of life. Sometimes the reflections are rendered in the form of a dialogue between two interlocutors, as if to testify both the urgency and the substance of certain arguments. The presence of masks, however, also conveys that plurality of identity and roles covered by Wilde in his controversial existence. If society is a theatrical space, his masks are a means for a performative activity that enters and leaves the page, which co-exists between fiction and reality. As Chialant points out, the use of masks in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903) constitutes a real filter system, through which Gissing splits into different alter egos. Firstly, we find a narrator of which only the initials are known, G. G., and who is the author of a manuscript found by Henry Ryecroft, a failed writer. Subsequently an editor is added along with a brief profile of Ryecroft. In this Chinese box system there is a constant exchange between the narrative and the narrated self, through an alternation of projections and identifications, which allow Gissing to discuss also some aspects which do not directly concern the compositional field, such as the necessary isolation of the artist, the relationship between authors and cultural industry and the dispersion of great talents after the birth of the metropolis. The same game of mirrors and refractions is also present in the case of the mask adopted by Salman Rushdie in *Joseph Anton. A Memoir* (2012). What fascinates in Ciocca's essay is the multiplicity of functions of this alter ego created by Rushdie in the most difficult years of his life, when, hunted and threatened with death, he was forced to hide. If personal freedom was at risk, creative freedom found in Joseph Anton a lifeline that allowed Rushdie to pursue his authorial career. In a system of overlapping, Joseph Anton is Rushdie because he lives in his place. At the same time, Joseph Anton is not Rushdie because he is still the character of a work and subject, therefore, to the conventions of a literary genre. In this perspective, through Joseph Anton Rushdie manifests his thoughts about the meaning of power, the slavery of limits and the responsibility of narration.

La letteratura dal punto di vista degli scrittori is an extremely varied and dense critical volume, which spans across literary genres and centuries. Each contribution provides an overview of the multiple possibilities of literary interpretation, inviting the reader to consid-

er new perspectives with further interpretation keys, as Fusillo puts it in the “Introduction”, through connection, inference and valorisation of contents.

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