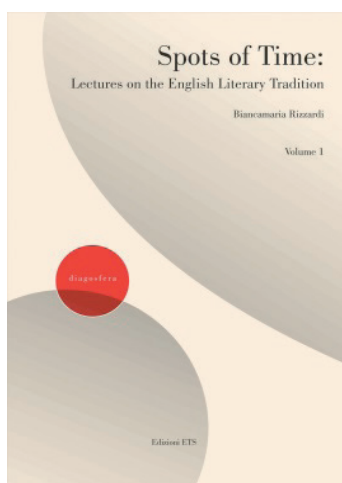


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Spots of Time: Lectures on the English Literary Tradition

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In the past two decades several methods and theories have asserted themselves in the field of literary studies. Cognitive science has offered fascinating perspectives on the psychophysical constituents of literature as well as new tools and criteria for carrying out subtle textual analyses. Due to their minute attention to socio-political context, neo-historicism and cross-disciplinary cultural studies have, at their best, made it possible both to rewrite literary histories as more inclusive (and therefore authentic) narratives, and to explore hitherto neglected elements of individual literary works. Either historically or cognitively oriented, formalism has seen a kind of resurgence, at least in certain areas of English studies. For all this plurality of recent approaches, however, the vexed question of what literature is – the fundamental mystery of verbal art – still remains essential and open. It is the urgency of this unsolved dilemma that animates the theoretical assumptions of Biancamaria Rizzardi's

book, a collection of compelling essays on pivotal authors and texts of English literature from the early modern period to Modernism.

The theoretical perspective of the volume is discussed in the introductory essay, "Foreword to an 'approximate' reading of the literary text". Its epigraph from Virginia Woolf's magisterial observations on words and their enigmatic "echoes ... memories ... associations" (9) is well chosen in that it hints not just at Rizzardi's attention to form and style, but also at her effort, as a critic, to capture and transmit the magic of experiencing literature. Such interest in the rewarding, formative, life-changing experience of reading literary works is emblematised by the titular phrase "spots of time", which, as Rizzardi points out at the very beginning of this chapter, is borrowed from William Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude*. Just as in Wordsworth's text these "spots" refer to "key moments" in the history of the speaker's imagination – crucial episodes from which one can draw "renovating virtue" (9) – in Rizzardi's use Wordsworth's phrase indicates her equally epiphanic encounters with literary works, particularly with those explored in the volume.

In order to explain her conception of literature as an infinite source of aesthetic and intellectual elevation, Rizzardi originally draws on the notorious paradox attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno and especially on Aristotle's discussion of this aporia. Rizzardi acutely concludes that, like Zeno's idea of motion, literature is at the same time theoretically elusive and practically evident – it resists abstract definitions, but has always been a tangible part of human civilization. In this sense, she adroitly likens the literary text to Aristotle's notion of "intensive infinite", a concept which he formulated partly in reply to Zeno (10). In Rizzardi's view, such idea of the infinite as something which, albeit "infinitely divisible", is perceived as a whole ("the sum of the infinite partitions that compose it") is perfectly exemplified by works of literature in that they may be divided into an almost countless number of components which are nonetheless always harmonised, or at least organised, into some degree of unity (10). (Indeed, it is worth remembering that unity is a key principle in Western aesthetics from Aristotle to the Romantics and beyond). Building on these considerations, Rizzardi works out a convincing (and reasonable) theory of approximation (11): although the literary text is made of potentially infinite elements, it is possible to read and thus describe it because, thanks to our experience of its constitutive unity, we can get progressively closer to grasping its infinitude, therefore approaching it "indefinitely, as a limit or an asymptote" (10), interpretation after interpretation. What I find particularly interesting in this perspective is that, as Rizzardi remarks, "the approximate nature of reading" satisfactorily accounts for "the plurality and coexistence of critical interpretations" as well as for their "progressiveness and perfectibility" (11). As she envisages this approach as a "wise middle way" between radical Historicism on one side, and either Deconstruction or post-structuralist hermeneutics in the style of Stanley Fish on the other, it is no wonder that she refers to the German critical school of reader-response theory, and in particular to Wolfgang Iser, whose conception of literary texts and criticism displays significant similarities with hers. Within this critical trajectory, Rizzardi rightly resorts to Hans-Georg Gadamer's definition of classics as texts "speaking to all ages" (11) in order to characterise the choice of works analysed in the book.

Indeed, the first chapter or “Lecture” (Rizzardi uses the word) focuses on two poems which definitely attained the status of classics, William Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* (1598). Rizzardi’s critical approach in this essay is shared by many other chapters of the volume, and combines the attentive reading of selected passages from the two texts with a scholarly scrutiny of their sources and parallels both in past and in contemporary literary cultures. By pointing out Shakespeare’s reworking of Ovid’s poetry and its early modern imitations, Rizzardi deftly shows how in *Venus and Adonis* the female protagonist is not merely portrayed as the goddess of love, but also as “an Elizabethan courtesan” (20) and a sensual avatar of the procreative energy of nature. Along with Adonis’s praise of something analogous to Shakespeare’s famous idea of the “marriage of true minds”, these fairly unusual characterisations of Venus indicate how Shakespeare’s poem bears the traces of some of the most innovative systems of thought of his age. Greek, Latin, and sixteenth-century European love poems were also the model for Marlowe’s text, where the focus on passions and the senses equally typifies “a new, restless era” (30). In this sense, Rizzardi interestingly notes that, as with other early modern rewritings of the myth, Marlowe’s poem gives special prominence to the moment of seduction.

Shakespeare’s four late plays traditionally known as “the Romances” are the subject of the second essay of the volume. Following a well-established critical tradition, this later phase of Shakespeare’s oeuvre is here interpreted as a return to harmony after the increasingly pessimistic tones of the previous tragedies. After discussing the various causes of this turning point in Shakespeare’s canon, Rizzardi carefully itemises the major motifs of the late plays, from the thematic centrality of travel and magic to the pervasive sense of wonder, from the recurring initiatory structure to the presence of masque-like passages based on music and dance. The essay shows how all these traits collude to create a decidedly symbolic (if not allegoric) type of drama, where “the regeneration of the old through the love of the young” (46) emblematises the victory of life and innocence over crime and corruption.

The following chapter revolves around the analysis of John Donne’s well-known poem “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”. The essay opens with a sharp and welcome discussion of the concept of metaphysical poetry, and chronicles some of the meanings attributed to this notion throughout the history of English literature, from John Dryden to T. S. Eliot. After rightly remarking the influence of contemporary theatre on Donne’s poetry, Rizzardi offers a few textual examples of the dramatic quality of his verse in her close reading of “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” and intriguingly interprets the first four lines of the poem as a theatrical scene. Somewhat ironically, it is one of Donne’s detractors, Samuel Johnson, who is the focus of Rizzardi’s fourth lecture. This chapter, which seeks to portray Johnson not as a man but as “a mind or rather a conscience” (69), furnishes the reader with a gripping overview of his poetics and major works such as *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759) and *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). By virtue of its concision and incisiveness, this lively essay would work perfectly as a first introduction to the writer.

Rizzardi, who arranged her chapters in a loose chronological order, dedicates the next two essays to two of the major Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and John Keats. After adding to the long-ingrained critical assumption that Wordsworth reworked the

poetic subgenre of the ballad as a tool to express his “romantic subjectivism” (82), the fifth “lecture” analyses the poem “Tintern Abbey” by looking at its thematic structure, choice of imagery, and linguistic features more in general, even as seen against Wordsworth’s contemporary verse. The text, which epitomises Wordsworth’s revolutionary conception of landscape, is suggestively read as a balance between Shakespearean realism and Milton-inflected abstraction. The following chapter is even more closely focused on the reading of a single Romantic poem, Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, here analysed at three different levels. If the first, more literal, step of the analysis stands out for its subtle attention to the estranging “point of view” from which the scene of the poem is presented (103), the central point of the second interpretive level, which suggests that “the urn contains within it the perfect representation of life in time, but lives outside of it” (105), is intriguingly consonant with Frank Kermode’s notion of the “Romantic Image”. While the third level of reading aptly regards Keats’s negative capability as possibly “the first modern formulation of artistic impersonality” (109), the closing quotation from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) is both illuminating and utterly refined.

The seventh chapter of the volume tackles the question of Victorian women’s poetry. Although much work has been done in this field during the past three decades, the essay manages to offer some original insights, such as when it remarks the indebtedness of many contemporary Canadian female poets to their Victorian predecessors. Rizzardi’s main argument is that Victorian women poets gained a privileged perspective on many of the constitutive ambiguities of Victorian verse. In particular, she contends that the process of feminisation which is typical of much Victorian poetry was turned upside down by contemporary women poets. Indeed, in place of the common dialectic between a male author and a female (or feminised) poetic I, many of the Victorian women’s poems display a radical and innovative fusion of the two textual functions. Rizzardi – who here as in several other places in the volume uses classical sources with remarkable ease – rightly connects this poetic condition with the influence of Latin elegy and the Victorian adoration for Sappho.

Victorian poetry and classical reception are investigated also in chapter eight and nine, which focus respectively on the laureate Alfred Tennyson and the rebellious Algernon Charles Swinburne. After providing a description of the elegiac rhythms of Tennyson’s “Ulysses”, Rizzardi insightfully explores the numerous antecedents of the poem. Tennyson’s reworking of Shakespeare’s language is aptly compared with Wordsworth’s, and Rizzardi’s discussion of Dante’s model is well-informed and deftly done. The most impressive part of the essay is probably the closing, where Rizzardi acutely draws on Pascal’s philosophical considerations on the idea of limit, a concept which, as mentioned above, is also a key point of the book’s theoretical framework. The following chapter seeks to unravel the skein of allusions to Sappho in Swinburne’s much-debated poem “Anactoria”. By directly juxtaposing this text with Sappho’s original Greek fragments, Rizzardi points out how Swinburne echoed Sappho’s verse in order to sing Sappho’s tragic passion through the voice of the poet herself. Her reference to the model of Alexander Pope and especially to the possible (and still neglected) model of Giacomo Leopardi’s “L’ultimo canto di Saffo” is exemplary. Whether Leopardi’s poem is indeed a source for Swinburne’s or simply a

European antecedent, it is undeniable that the two texts are exceptionally similar in that they do not merely share the same speaker, but are also both engaged in almost nihilistic speculations on “the cruelty of things” (168).

The last two essays of the book deal with two of the founding fathers of Modernism. In “Lecture 10” Rizzardi rightly insists on how music is the unifying principle of Ezra Pound’s *The Pisan Cantos* (1948). She succeeds in deciphering some passages of these very demanding poems, by looking chiefly at their sound effects, status of the personae, and vorticose handling of fragmented images. The final chapter accurately describes how T. S. Eliot’s *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) dramatises two parallel struggles: that of sin against salvation, but also that between “a lower and a higher ... mode of expression” (189), the earthly (if potentially poetic) word of mankind and the divine Word. Eliot’s ascetic-like aesthetic ideal is convincingly characterised as “silence beyond speech, purity beyond time” (191), and the stylistic features of the first section of the poem – such as iterations, anaphora, oxymoronic phrases, and the predominance of abstract nouns – are analysed skilfully and thoroughly.

In conclusion, it should be added that one of the points of strength of Rizzardi’s book lies in her masterful attention to visual arts and in her tendency to compare literature to coeval works of art. For instance, she draws a parallel between Shakespeare’s verse and Titian’s mythological painting, and insists on Wordsworth’s pictorial attention to landscape (87). She mentions Pre-Raphaelite paintings in her essay on Victorian women poets, and furnishes the reader with an illuminating reference to Turner’s painting *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus* in her analysis of Tennyson’s “Ulysses”. Finally, she refers to Charles Allston Collins’s painting *Convent Thoughts* in the essay on Swinburne, and points out Pound’s artistic connoisseurship. Rizzardi’s interest in visuality is attested by the images in the volume. The photograph of a weaver at the beginning of the book is almost emblematic of Rizzardi’s conception of literature, and the reproductions of manuscripts or title pages which open every chapter help to convey the historical momentousness of the texts analysed.

The book, which has a thorough index as an added bonus, is strongly recommended both to university students, for whom it may constitute a first introduction to fundamental authors and literary periods, and to scholars of literature, who may find in Rizzardi’s sensitive readings new perspectives on canonical works.

Giovanni Bassi holds a PhD from the Scuola Normale Superiore (Pisa, 2020). He is the author of “An organ for a ‘Frenchified’ doctrine”: “*The Criterion*”, *le letterature moderniste europeee e la ricezione del simbolismo francese* (2020), and co-editor of *La luce e l’inchostro: Scritture e fotografie in dialogo* (2019), a collection of essays on English literature and photography. He has published essays and articles on T. S. Eliot, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Gabriele D’Annunzio, Walter Pater, and Arthur Symons. His main research interests include English literature from Romanticism to Modernism, Aestheticism and Decadence, late nineteenth-century Anglo-French literary exchanges, flower poetics and English metre.

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