

Diagosfera
Anglophone Linguistic and Cultural Crossings

The term derives from the Greek *diágo* (to lead through, to pass across, to live) and *sphaira* (globe, sphere, earth). By this neologism, which alludes to Jurij Lotman's *semiosphere*, we mean to delineate a work programme focused on the editing, the translation and critical interpretation of literary texts that allow the reader and the researcher to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries, to experience and promote encounters between civilizations and different forms of artistic expression. Particular emphasis is given to the translation process, seen as a transcultural practice which is able to respect linguistic and anthropological specificities and to “bear across” their experimental and mythopoietic inventive force.

Biancamaria Rizzardi

Spots of Time:
Lectures on the English Literary Tradition

Volume 1

anteprima
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*To my dear friend Carlotta
who thinks in italics and feels in capitals*



“The Weaver”, photograph by Francesca Perutelli, September 2019.

Foreword to an ‘approximate’ reading of the literary text

Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations – naturally. They have been out and about, on people’s lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today – that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages. The splendid word “incarnadine”, for example – who can use it without remembering also “multitudinous seas”?

Virginia Woolf¹

At the centre of our experience of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* are those “spots of time” where Wordsworth is endeavouring to express key moments in the history of his imagination. Strictly speaking, the “spots of time” are the two incidents introduced by Wordsworth’s own use of the phrase: “There are in our existence spots of time, / That with distinct pre-eminence retain / A renovating virtue,”² that is, the little boy’s encounter with the gibbet and his wait for his father’s horses. Yet the poet’s language implies that there were in fact many such ‘spots’ from which his mind could draw new strength, and every reader of *The Prelude* will at once associate with these two those other “passages of life” (220) which collectively establish the greatness of the poem.

During my career as a passionate scholar of English literature, I have had the good fortune and the privilege of often encountering these unique and particular moments, and this has happened – and it is still happening – every time I have read some pages from English-speaking authors. By recognizing the particular interest and the uniqueness of these “spots”, in the shape of single lectures or the reading of exemplary texts, this study intends, as a whole, to answer these questions: what sense do these crucial experiences make as we go over them in our minds? What do they appear to be about? In other words, how can we define the literary text? What can we do with literature?

It is said that Diogenes, regarding Zeno’s theories on motion – the very famous aporias that make it impossible for Achilles to reach the turtle and, in general, for

¹ 20 April 1937, BBC radio broadcast, United Kingdom.

² *The Prelude* XII, 208-210 ff. References are to De Selincourt’s edition of the 1850 version.

anyone, at any speed, to make any journey – made a silent criticism of it, by simply standing up and walking away.³

The first inference that we can draw from this anecdote is that, just as we all walk, cover distances and reach set goals despite Zeno, so all the cultures of every time and place have had and have in literature an essential vehicle of communication and an indispensable source of nourishment, despite the fact that the question of *whether* it is possible to define the literary text is still the preliminary and key question of any study on literature. I cannot avoid the impression that such an imbalance has something comic in it; but, in any case, we cannot stop at the first inference, because resigning ourselves to the separation between practice and conceptualization would be an intellectual disaster that we really cannot afford. With his intentionally gross gesture Diogenes did not *refute* Zeno; however, he highlighted the risks of a theory cut off from experience, and expressed the need for a theory, not less, but more evolved, which will take experience into account.

I will dwell a little more on the ‘Zeno case’ because I believe that this analogy can make a greater contribution than the simple conflict between theory and anti-theory. In the most eloquent of his arguments, the so-called ‘dichotomy’, Zeno maintains that it is not possible to travel any distance, because, in order to do that, you first have to complete half of it, and then to cover the remaining half you must first cover half of this half (a quarter of the total), then half of the residual quarter (one eighth of the total) and so on to infinity, since the sum of the factors of a geometric progression of reason 1/2 (1/2, 1/4, 1/8, 1/16, 1/32, 1/64 and so on) will never reach unity. Zeno’s formulation according to which an infinite space cannot be traversed in a finite time, permitted Aristotle to object that time is also infinite, because equally susceptible to dichotomy: which is only a polemically effective objection, since to the possibility of motion – David Ross, an illustrious scholar of Aristotle, states⁴ – he does not offer a solution, but a second difficulty. Aristotle’s other objection, which is much more important and pertinent (also for us), is based on the distinction between the extensive infinite and the intensive infinite, which is infinitely divisible: the former is, in fact, impassable, and generally cannot be controlled by man; of the latter we have, as something known and certain, the sum of the infinite partitions that compose it, which is precisely the unity, which we approach indefinitely, as a limit or an asymptote, as the progression extends, until at some point the gap becomes *practically* inessential.

Aristotle’s argument concerns us, because the text conceived to be read is also, I believe, an intensive infinite, because as regards composing a unit, which is

³ Aristotle (2017), *Physics*, VIII 8, p. 232 ff.

⁴ Ross (2006: 132 ff).

also known and certain (apart from philological problems), it is a whole that does not consist of quantitative partitions, but of factors of the unitary message, of intellectual and emotional values. Collecting *all* these values in a text sometimes written in another language and coming from another socio-cultural context, and thus reconstructing – analytically – the global message, is the institutional task of the reader, and in this form it is certainly impossible. But it is possible to get closer to it.

The approximate nature of reading is therefore structural, and should not be seen in terms of negativity and frustration more than what happens to other, perhaps to all, human activities: “Nor should man aim at excessive refinement in his life”; – says the nurse in Euripides’ *Hyppolytus* – “for they cannot with exactness finish e’en the roof that covers in a house;”⁵. On the contrary, approximation is rooted in the dynamic character of cultural history, its progressiveness and perfectibility, but also on the simple plurality and coexistence of critical interpretations.

In this sense, what is essential in the act of reading is the process which the aesthetics of reception – Jauss⁶ above all and Iser,⁷ with the robust philosophical support of Gadamer⁸ – identifies in the interpretation of the texts, by considering them as a virtual system, a set of full and empty spaces, which must be filled by the readers according to their historical-cultural perspectives. Gadamer’s definition of ‘classics’ falls within this dimension as a text capable of speaking to all ages, capable of telling each one of us something important about itself.

And this study is concerned with classics.

This theory, which I have tried as much as possible to apply in the course of my work, presents itself as a wise middle way between extremist historicism, the legacy of German neo-Humanism (if we do not become the same as the spectators of 458 BC we are doomed not to understand Aeschylus), and Deconstructionism in the style of Fish,⁹ where all interpretations are legitimate and equally probable, and *constitute* the text – whose original form in fact becomes specious and useless. If we can say *anything* about a text *x*, it is at least equally evident that *x*, as an original stimulus, can be replaced by any other text.

It should be borne in mind that there are solicitations which, for example, do not come “from the Renaissance” or “Modernism”, but from Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot, or rather from *Venus and Adonis* and *Ash-Wednesday*, indeed, better

⁵ Euripides (2012: 39).

⁶ Jauss (1982).

⁷ Iser (1978).

⁸ Gadamer (1975; 1986).

⁹ Fish (1972).

yet, from the individual situations of *Venus and Adonis* and of *Ash-Wednesday* which from time to time impose upon them, marking the gap, the great creative idiosyncrasy that by definition does *not* cover the totality of the expression, not even of *Venus and Adonis* or of *Ash-Wednesday*,

Moreover, in literary texts, as is well shown by those examined in this study, the words are three-dimensional, stereophonic: through them decisive cards of the staging are played. In a very famous passage of *Poetics*, Aristotle says that “the effect of tragedy holds even if there is no public performance no actors”.¹⁰ this sentence provoked a kind of storm of protest on the part of contemporary teatrologists, as if its meaning were that only verbal values matter in tragedy. On the contrary, Aristotle, who elsewhere shows himself perfectly aware of the primary importance of the performance, perhaps meant that the reading of the tragedy can be equivalent to a virtual staging, *suggested* in the articulations and in the development of a word that, at this point, deserves to be called with the very happy definition of Giuseppe Verdi: “scenic word”.¹¹ Let alone the obvious musicality of the opera, also in the narrative it is the figures and the macro figures of the rhythm which are in charge of communicating the *mythos*, to which Aristotle rightly attributed the primacy among the constitutive factors of poetry.

One last consideration. We are indebted to a great work by Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (“The Master-Singers of Nuremberg”), for the unparalleled representation of poetry as a manual fact, through the symbolic exchange of the two activities of Hans Sachs, poet and cobbler: the happy ethics of the work that inspires him – which is confirmed by the initial incomprehension of Walther, a loving tenor from the unproductive nobility – can serve as a model and, at the same time, makes us participate in the construction of meaning in front of what I have called ‘spots of time’.

Therefore, to conclude, how should we face the literary text? Personally, – and I hope I have succeeded in showing this in the course of my readings –, I have adopted a suggestion that Henry James offers in one of his splendid stories, *The Figure in the Carpet*. He refers to a game of chess: one cannot play if one does not know the pieces and the movements they can make, one cannot win if one does not know the openings, if one does not have an adequate encyclopedia of games and if one does not have the preparedness and flexibility to adapt one’s strategies

¹⁰ Aristotle, §26, (1997: 77).

¹¹ Verdi, G. (1981: 355): “I do not know if I explain myself by saying ‘scenic word’; but I mean the word that sculpts and makes the situation clear and evident.” “*Scenic word*” is a term created by Verdi in his exchange of letters with *Aida*’s librettist, Antonio Ghislanzoni. In his letter of 17th August 1870, Verdi defines this as being “the word that defines and clarifies the situation” (Transl. mine).

to the contingency of every single situation. Only in this way and not otherwise is it possible to see what is in front of everyone's eyes and that nobody sees – as we read in the story –, The “general intention” that “stretches [...] from book to book”, and that it is hidden in “every page and line and letter”, [...] “concrete there as a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap”.¹²

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¹² James (1896: 283-285).

VENUS AND ADONIS.

A thousand spleenes bear her a thousand wayes,
She treads the path, that she vntreads againe;
Her more then halt, is mated with delayes,
Like the proceedings of a drunken braine,
Full of respects, yet naught at all respecting,
In hand with all things, naught at all effecting.

Here kenneld in a brake, she finds a hound,
And asks the wearie caitiffe for his maister,
And there another licking of his wound,
Gainst venim'd fores, the onely soueraigne plaister,
And here she meets another, sadly skowling,
To whom she speaks, & he replies with howling.

VWhen he hath ceast his ill resounding noise,
Another flapmouth'd mourner, blacke, and grim,
Against the welkin, volies out his voyce,
Another, and another, answer him,
Clapping their proud tailes to the ground below,
Shaking their scratch-cares, bleeding as they go.

Looke how, the worlds poore people are amazed,
At apparitions, signes, and prodigies,
VWhereon with feareful eyes, they long haue gazed,
Insufing them with dreadfull prophecies;
So she at these sad signes, drawes vp her breath,
And sighing it againe, exclames on death.

HERO
AND
LEANDER.

By Christopher Marlowe.



LONDON,
Printed by Adam Ifflip,
for Edward Blunt.
1598.

William Shakespeare, 'Venus and Adonis', 1594, leaf F4. Purchased from the estate of George Daniel, Esq. of Canonbury, Islington, 1864.

Title page of *Hero and Leander*, 1598 edition February.



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