

WORLDS OF WORDS:
Complexity, Creativity,
and Conventionality
in English Language,
Literature and Culture

*Literature Section edited by
Roberta Ferrari and Sara Soncini*

*Culture Section edited by
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LITERATURE

PREFACE

ROBERTA FERRARI AND SARA SONCINI
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THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN COMPLEXITY
AND CREATIVITY IN LITERARY STUDIES:
A MULTIFACETED APPROACH

Complexity, creativity, and conventionality are vital notions in literary interpretation, and their exploration may provide substantial help in drawing a map of literary practices. The tension between convention and creativity has long been identified as the central structuring principle of literature *qua* signifying practice, the root cause behind the fascinating complexity of this polymorphic, heteroglossic, multifocal “world of words”. Despite a growing interest in literary creativity and literary complexity in recent years (Attridge 2004; Pope 2005; Swann et al. 2011), however, to date both notions continue to remain rather elusive, due to the absence – actually the impossibility – of a single, authoritative definition of their nature and workings, as well as of a systematic description of their multifarious embodiments.

The creation of literary texts involves various forms of complexity, based as it is on crucial choices at the level of language, style, and structure. Literary language is always the result of a “creative struggle” with conventional language on the one hand, and with the language of previous writers on the other. This battle – to echo Bloom’s confrontational model of literary influence (Bloom 1973) – is fought by ways of invention, contamination, manipulation, interpolation, translation, not only across genres but also across different media, resulting in an in-built intersectionality that seems to call for a horizontal-rhizomatic, rather than vertical-linear, understanding of the workings of literary creativity (Lanier 2014, here with specific reference to the paradigmatic case of Shakespeare adaptation). Moreover, complexity in the structuring of literary texts also involves such key issues as the organisation of their spatial and temporal dimensions, the choice and interplay of poetic and narrative voices, the harmonising of the aesthetic urge with other functions such as the emotional and the ethical. Literary creativity is an essential issue at stake also when considering the ways in which literature deals with life and the world, through representational strategies that range from the mimetic to the self-referential, from the documentary to the fantastic, in order to either consolidate received meanings or challenge them and provide alternative views of reality, of man, and of art itself.

The concept of creativity also plays a fundamental role in the dialectics between originality and normativity which, far from being limited to the historical paradigm of Classicism vs. Romanticism, actually constitutes one of the basic polarities presiding over the development of literature through the centuries. As an index of the statutory complexity of literary texts, the notion of creativity has had a shaping influence on the development of critical practices and ways of reading, specifically with reference to the construction and subversion of normative frameworks, the universalism/historicism binary, and the ever ongoing debate about the literary Canon (Löffler 2017).

Last, but not least, creativity and its implications for the exploration of literary complexity bear crucially on current discussions over the teaching of literature (Doll et al. 2005; Davis and Sumara 2008; Osberg and Biesta 2010; Mansoor and Ayoub 2015), in an age that is experiencing a digital revolution which calls for a continuous updating of methods and tools in order to account for the processual, convergent and often contingent nature of current as well as emerging forms of textuality, literacy and creativity (Bolter and Grusin 1999, McGann 2001; Loizeaux and Fraitstat 2002; Carson and Kirwan 2014; Kalla et al. 2018).

Inspired by the papers presented at the 28th biennial Conference of the Italian Association of English Studies, held in Pisa in September 2017, the essays collected in this volume intend to contribute to a reflection on complexity and creativity in literary works, focusing both on the diachronic development of these two concepts through different ages and literary periods, and on their synchronic occurrence within texts and across genres. The wide time span covered by the essays, ranging from the early modern period to the contemporary, enables an extensive charting, as well as an inclusive and in-depth understanding, of an extremely rich phenomenology.

The volume is divided into two sections devoted, respectively, to creativity and complexity, though the frequent overlaps militate against a clear-cut distinction between the two. The essays in Part I engage with the concept of creativity at different levels, unveiling processes at work in the manipulation of language, style, and generic conventions, as well as in the dialogue between literature and the other arts. Part II, instead, presents studies that investigate various aspects of literary complexity with a primary focus on the reception of literary works, as well as on their remediation and refunctionalisation, for instance in teaching practices.

In Part I Paolo Bugliani's essay on Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* throws new light on its often overlooked autobiographical dimension. A close reading of Browne's devotional work betrays the author's intention to share with his reader biographical details that, besides enriching the text's complexity, also contribute to delineating it as a highly creative piece of writing whose ultimate goal is to convey a personal idea of man and of human nature. The creative component of life writing is also explored by Lucia Fiorella in her analysis of J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime*, the last volume in an autobiographical trilogy that undermines the very premises on which traditional autobiography is based. In *Summertime*, the challenge of the autobiographer as a fictioneer is taken a step further by interpolating verifiable events with fabricated testimonies in order to blur the distinction between fact and fiction, thus subscribing to the typically postmodern, postcolonial, and poststructuralist problematising of the relationship between life and literature. Giuseppe De Riso's contribution likewise focuses on the postcolonial context, namely on Neel Mukherjee's 2014 novel, *The Lives of Others*, taking into account the ways in which the story thematises the dynamics of power in the complex political and social context of India in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Another group of essays address the question of literary creativity at the level of language, style and imagery. Elena Cotta Ramusino discusses the main features of Elizabeth Bowen's highly idiosyncratic style, pointing out her creative use of grammar and syntax. The essay also highlights Bowen's peculiar approach to objects which, in her fiction, are often granted far greater importance than human characters. The symbolic import of objects, in particular glasses, frames, and mirrors, is also scrutinised in Annalisa Federici's essay on Virginia Woolf's modernist prose, where she highlights the way in which such motifs function both as a metaphor for the controversial relationship between life and art, and as a structural objectivising of the very process of writing. In the area of modernist poetry, Francesca Chiappini investigates the creative manipulation of poetical language in Mina Loy's urban poetry. The essay draws specific attention to Loy's appropriation of mythical figures, whom the poetess transplants into the modern city, where they are deconstructed, annihilated, and transfigured through poetic invention. In this sense, Loy's poetry reveals itself as a privileged ground for the exploration of the tension between convention and creativity, normativity and originality.

The complex interaction between literature and the visual arts is foregrounded in Erica Maggioni's study of Isaac Rosenberg's war poetry: drawing on his artistic expertise as a painter, Rosenberg creates a

highly visual poetic language which is intended to overcome the shortcomings of words in the testimony of the tragedy of war. A different kind of remediation, that between literature and cinema, is explored by Roberta Grandi, who takes into consideration two novels by Alfred E. Mason and their film versions, showing how themes and visual elements are transformed in the transfer from one medium into the other in order to meet the needs of war propaganda.

Elisabetta Marino's and Serena Baiesi's contributions shift attention to a different field, that of drama and the theatre. Marino analyses the complexity of Shelley's *Oedipus Tyrannus, or Swellfoot the Tyrant*, which she defines as "a truly experimental text" that stretches the boundaries of conventionality as far as formal hybridity and intertextual richness are concerned. The complexity of the play is further witnessed by its ideological dimension, which links it to the political and social context of early 19th-century England. On the other hand, Serena Baiesi throws light on Leigh Hunt's activity as a playgoer and a theatre critic, investigating the close connection between his comments on performances belonging to illegitimate genres and his interest in political radicalism and cultural subversion.

Part I closes on Gerardo Salvati's rereading of Henry James's Prefaces *qua* creative spaces of artistic freedom: instead of merely providing information and advice, in James the preface takes the shape of a sort of "condensed fiction", a text in its own right which becomes completely disengaged from its ancillary position to the novel.

Maria Chiara Alessandrini's study of Neoplatonism in Coleridge's *Rime* opens Part II. Her analysis unveils the complex network of references to Neoplatonic philosophers that animates the poem, broadening its metaphysical background and nourishing its imagery. Complexity is a key concern also in Angela Andreani's discussion of the manuscript sources of Meredith Hanmer's *Chronicles of Ireland* (1633). Focusing on this case study, Andreani's contribution raises crucial questions concerning the editorial vicissitudes of early modern texts in the light of New Philology.

With a more decided slant on re-readings and mis-readings of the Canon, a group of essays in this section – by Gioia Angeletti, Maria Elena Capitani, Fernando Cioni, and Simonetta de Filippis – focus on contemporary appropriations of Shakespeare's texts. Angeletti analyses the works of two Scottish female dramatists, Liz Lochhead and Sharman Macdonald, whose rewritings of, respectively, *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* reflect the complexity of the source texts as well as the need to creatively manipulate their materials in order to address a

modern-day young audience. Capitani's essay, on the contrary, explores the ways in which Martin Crimp appropriates Shakespeare's metaphor of blindness and (in)sight in *The Treatment* (1993), a play that is seen as anticipating the in-her-face sensibility of Sarah Kane's take on *King Lear* in her landmark play, *Blasted* (1995). Cioni's investigation of two adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* by Jewish playwrights Maurice Schwartz (*Shylock and His Daughter*, 1947) and George Tabori (*The Merchant of Venice as Performed in Theresienstadt*, 1966) specifically concentrates on the character of Shylock with the aim of revealing the complex ways in which post-holocaust readings of the play have radically altered and reshaped this figure to suit a thoroughly different perception of such issues as anti-Semitism and the Jewish question. In contemporary times, Shakespeare is also frequently appropriated by novelists, as is the case with Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time* (2016). Simonetta de Filippis's contribution analyses this narrative reworking of *The Winter's Tale* by emphasising the role of time within a highly creative and deeply personal reappraisal of Shakespeare's story.

Different kinds of reception are explored in another group of essays, which tackle questions connected either with the relationship with past traditions or with the implications of the dislocation of texts in space and time. Maria Luigia Di Nisio, for instance, deals with an interesting phenomenon within late-Victorian culture, namely, the gendering of classicism by women poets like Augusta Webster and Amy Levy, whose revisionism bears witness to a creative appropriation of ancient myth that aims at reconfiguring it from a marginalised female perspective. On the other hand, Alessandra Crotti explores the way Virginia Woolf's bond with 18th-century culture and literature helps her redefine the boundaries and potentialities of life writing against Victorian biographical tradition. Adopting a more markedly transnational and cross-cultural perspective, Marco Canani investigates the dynamics of reception from a double point of view: on the one hand, he discusses the influence of Italian literature and culture on P.B. Shelley's writings, in particular on his 1818 tragedy *The Cenci*, highlighting the poet's strongly gendered remediation of Italy; on the other, the essay considers the circulation of Shelley's tragedy in Italy in the first half of the 19th century and its influence on subsequent rewritings of the Cenci story such as Giovanni Battista Niccolini's drama *Beatrice Cenci* and Domenico Guerrazzi's novel of the same title. Another member of the Shelley family, Mary, and her 1826 novel *The Last Man* constitute the focus of Andrew Brayley's essay, which offers a reading of this complex dystopian story as a response to a whole set of contemporary fears and threats, from nuclear bombs to AIDS, down to terrorism and fundamentalism.

The last two essays in Part II draw attention to the implications of the digital revolution on the transmission, fruition, and teaching of literary works, with a specific interest in Shakespearean texts. Adopting a Chaos and Complexity approach, Monica Manzolillo examines the opportunities offered by new technologies – videoconferences, chats, forums, blogs, wiki, repositories for essays sharing – for the teaching of literature. She specifically concentrates on an on-line platform, *Future Learn*, describing one of its courses in terms of its internal organisation and learning strategies. Finally, Alessandra Squeo investigates the fertile interaction between textual scholarship and new digital technologies, by stressing in particular how digital tools may help recover and reconstruct the complexity of Shakespeare’s early modern textuality in a variety of different ways.

The wide-ranging spectrum of the essays presented in this collection, together with the different methodological and theoretical approaches they propose, stand as patent proof of the fact that creativity and complexity represent two privileged standpoints from which literary texts may be not only studied and appreciated, but also shared and taught in a most captivating way.

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