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Introduction  
Narrating the Economy:  
Perspectives on the intersections between literature and economics

*1. Studying literature and economics in the wake of the global financial crisis*

This issue of *Status Quaestionis* presents eight contributions on the topic of literature and economics. Since the pioneering works of literary critics such as L. C. Knights ([1937] 1951), Marc Shell (1978; 1982), Woodmansee and Osteen (1999), and Linda Woodbridge (2003), to the reflections of economists such as William Jackson (2009) or Edward Younkins (2015), the relations between literature – or other cultural products – and economics have been explored from a wide range of perspectives. The works mentioned above, to speak only of the Anglo-American production, show that the topic has been investigated through the lenses of hermeneutics, Marxist criticism, and cultural materialism, among other perspectives, but has also encouraged experimental approaches such as those inspired by the “Austrian” school of economics (Cantor and Cox 2010). More recently, several scholars in Italy, such as Silvia Contarini (2010), Daniele Fioretti (2013), Bigatti and Lupo (2013), Lombardi and Sau (2014), Carlo Baghetti (2017), Alessandro Ceteroni (2018), and Condello and Toracca (2019), among others, have brought a different sensitivity to bear upon this line of investigation. They have explored the relationship between literature and economics mainly through case studies, focusing on problems relating to labor, globalization, poverty, debt, migratory flows, new forms of wealth production and exchange, as well as ethical, legal, and political issues that are inevitably involved when dealing with such matters.

In Italy, this renewed interest for the way in which fiction represents the economy dovetails with a renewed critical attention to realism and civil

engagement in fiction that has given rise to a long-lasting debate known as “return to reality” (Antonello and Mussnug 2009; Donnarumma, Policastro, and Taviani 2009; Somigli 2013; Contarini, De Paulis-Dalembert, and Tosatti 2016). This debate has fleshed out several phenomena that have characterized the Italian literary landscape over the last ten to twenty years: for example, the decline of postmodernism and the increase in popularity of hybrid literary forms such as auto-fiction and documentary-fiction. A quick look at sales charts and literary awards finals, however, shows that after the global financial crisis of 2008, Italian writers have increasingly observed and narrated the world around them through the prism of economic affairs.

Between 2010 and 2015, novels that revolve around economic subjects such as industry or finance, or reflect upon real-world economic events, such as the tensions between local and global businesses or the transformation of work, have obtained significant results in major literary competitions. Because novels that emerge from the circuit of literary prizes tend to receive substantial media coverage, some of those novels have ceased to appeal only to a niche to become mainstream products. Writers such as Edoardo Nesi – a former industrialist – and Paolo Di Paolo, among others, have become public intellectuals following the success of two books of the kind. The former won the Strega Prize for a novel on the downfall of the Prato industrial district; the latter obtained the Mondello prize for a novel that reflects on Italy’s recent history in terms of civil and economic decline. Walter Siti was awarded the Strega Prize too in 2013, with a novel set in the world of high finance.

Moreover, far-reaching events such as the global financial crisis, the euro crisis, and the increase in income inequality have made economics a topic of heated public debates – not only in Italy. It had not happened for decades that a book on economics – rather technical at that – would become a worldwide best-seller, as happened with *Capital in the XXIst century*, by Thomas Piketty. It is also somewhat unusual for an economist to achieve mass popularity, as is the case with Piketty himself, but also with scholars such as Paul Krugman or Joseph Stiglitz. To mention but two examples from outside Italy, the novel that allegedly inspired Siti’s celebrated depiction of the world of high finance was published in Britain. It is entitled *This Bleeding City*, it is today translated into twelve languages, and its author, Alex Preston, is a former stockbroker. More recently, in France, the Prix Goncourt 2018 was conferred to Nicolas Mathieu’s

*Leurs enfants après eux*, a book that narrates the story of a group of young people in the context of a newly de-industrialized area. Admittedly, there is a significant demand for economic subjects on the part of the average reader, and writers, including fiction writers, are responding to that demand. Interestingly, Edoardo Nesi is not the only professional businessperson to have written novels based on his experience in the industry. Following the success of Siti's *Resistere non serve a niente*, some Italian bankers and stockbrokers have entered the literary arena with books that are marketed as novels no matter the genre they actually belong to (Brera 2014; Tornaghi 2015; Innocenzi 2016; Pezzali 2018).

The scenario sketched above suggests that the times are ripe for a new assessment of the various ways in which literature, culture, and economics intertwine, inside and outside the Italian peninsula. The papers collected in this issue are the result of a bilingual call for papers that brought together a young generation of scholars who are, for the most part, already established in the so-called “literature of work” (*letteratura del lavoro*) subfield of Italian literary criticism. The first section includes analyses of novels and poems mostly based on close reading, as well as thematic or Marxist approaches. Most contributors also enrich their investigation into the texts by engaging in a dense conversation with philosophers and social theorists. The second section presents two articles that explore the relations between literature and economics in innovative ways. The authors extend the case-study approach to include critical and methodological reflections on how literary-critical methods can enrich the study of economic history or help us obtain a better understanding of present time economic issues.

### *1. Case studies on the theme of work*

The first three essays of the collection contain a general discussion on the revival of the so-called literature of work in Italy from the early nineteen-nineties onwards. Taken together, they show how Italian literature responded to a series of political reforms that took place in that decade and changed the relationship between capital and labor in the country. Carlo Baghetti compares and contrasts the representation of work in contemporary novels with traditional depictions of workers in Italian literature, going as far back as the late nineteenth century. He then moves toward investigating what he identifies

as a *topos* of the genre, the death of the father, showing how the meaning of this recurring plot incident changes over the decades that separate the present time from the nineteen-sixties, i.e., the Italian economic boom era. Baghetti's analysis reveals that the death of the father is a prominent motif of the literature of work whose meaning resonates with that of other *topoi* that characterize this genre. Among these, the author emphasizes animal metaphors, references to illness and death, metaphorical evocations of the workplace as hell, heaven, cathedral, lager, prison, or battlefield. Following this line of thought, Baghetti engages in a close reading of the works of contemporary Italian writers such as Andrea Bajani, Sebastiano Nata, Antonio Pennacchi, Alberto Prunetti, Ermanno Rea and Stefano Valenti, to conclude that the death of the father has become a narrative device that writers employ to stress the state of loneliness and precariousness of a new generation of workers. As such, Baghetti claims, the death of the father also expresses the existential anxieties that may result from the contemporary world of work.

Alessandro Ceteroni ideally takes the relay from the preceding article by focusing on a specific sub-topic of the contemporary literature of work, that of the representation of women in the workforce. His investigation begins with a close reading of two novels by Giulia Fazzi, *Ferita di Guerra* (2005), and *Per il bene di tutti* (2014). The essay concludes with an interview with the author. The central focus of Fazzi's novels is the living conditions of low-wage women workers in small-town areas of northern Italy. Ceteroni places his analysis of the two novels in the context of the debate on the "return to reality" in which, he claims, women's literature has not yet found the space it deserves. The paper reviews various themes that emerge from the novels, moving beyond the ones that stand out most, such as rape, patriarchy, and provincial close-mindedness. Ceteroni points out that the writing of Fazzi gives voice to those who are left behind by the modern transformation of work, highlighting the hardships of manual labor. Moreover, he underscores how Fazzi's language allows for a re-semanticization of the workplace in contrast with a frequently heard rhetoric that glorifies the Italian tradition of small and medium-sized enterprises cooperating closely within regional industrial districts.

Roberto Lapia and Bianca Cataldi address the theme of young intellectuals in the world of work from two different angles. They both address a novel in verses, Francesco Targhetta's *Perciò veniamo bene nelle fotografie*, together with

other works, but they take an opposite stance towards them. Lapia analyzes Traghetta's novel in conjunction with works by Andrea Inglese and Emmanuela Carbè, showing how they all bring a new perspective to the literature on the "precariat"<sup>1</sup>. Lapia argues that these novels show how that term has come to include also university workers, a category most people would hardly think of as disadvantaged. The author builds his argument on explicitly Marxist grounds, where Marxism is to be understood not only in the literary-critical sense but also in the social-political one. He frames the stories under investigation in the context of what he describes as a hegemonic ideological discourse in the service of "capital." Drawing on social theory, he evokes the existence of a public discourse that would naturalize the precarization of work by concealing the social conflicts that are believed to be at its origin. On this basis, he uncovers in the examined texts what he describes as their capacity to reveal the "ugly truths" that lie behind the institutionalization of precarious work, as well as the existential anxieties that result from it. He concludes his analysis by claiming that it is precisely in their capacity to act as political eye-openers that the literary value of such texts resides.

Interestingly, this judgment contrasts with the one that emerges from the article that follows, written by Bianca Rita Cataldi, which constitutes an example of an approach to literary criticism that is frequently found in Italy and goes under the label of *critica militante* (militant criticism). This critical school correlates the value of literary works to the degree in which they conform to specific aesthetic models and thematic priorities. In *Le intermittenze del lavoro*, Cataldi analyzes two novels on the precarization of work, one of which is the aforementioned *Così veniamo bene nelle fotografie*, while the other is *Ci meritiamo tutto*, by Danilo Masotti, and engages in a well-known Italian critical debate on the search for the "great novel of the crisis" ("*il grande romanzo della crisi?*"). Her conclusion is pessimistic. The novels, she contends, look promising both for their stylistic qualities and their chosen themes. None of the authors, however, take sides about the issues they address, nor they present an identifiable political stance. Cataldi holds this to be a weakness of the novels she discusses, notwithstanding their formal aspects, to which she recognizes some merit.

<sup>1</sup> "Precariat" is a term that has recently entered sociological discourse in the English speaking world indicating the new underprivileged classes, but is mostly referred in Italian to low-wage/fixed-term contract workers.

The articles by Carlo Baghetti, Roberto Lapia, and Bianca Rita Cataldi all show a contrast between the present “literature of work” and the legacy of the so-called “industrial literature,” which emerged after the Second World War and continued until the nineteen-seventies. Daniele Forlino takes the reader back to the nineteen-forties with his analysis of a contribution by one of the creators of the influential cultural magazine *Il Politecnico*, the poet Franco Fortini. In “*Descensus ad inferos*,” Forlino analyzes Fortini’s reflections, prompted by a visit to a FIAT factory, on the role of the intellectual in the industrial age. The text resembles that of a personal journal in which the poet transfigures factory work through a series of vivid images that make men appear subjugated by the industrial machinery that surrounds them. Forlino unravels the hidden meanings of Fortini’s text and expounds them, in English, to an intended reader that may or may not be familiar with the poet’s works. Among the various themes found in the essay, that of the moral distress of the intellectual at the sight of the modern world of work stands out. In Forlino’s reading, Fortini’s goal in writing those pages was to envisage ways to transform the role of intellectuals from “consolers” to “protectors” of the working class, which he saw as a hopeless loser in the Italian process of industrialization. In this respect, Fortini was a precursor of the ideology of the liberation from work that would inspire extra-parliamentary social movements later in the history of the country. Whether intellectuals ever were effective in their advocacy of the interests of the working class is still an open question.

Massimiliano Cappello touches on some aspects of “industrial literature” by analyzing a particular theme in the work of poet Giovanni Giudici, that of the presence of women in the workforce in the context of the newly industrialized Italy of the 1960s. Giudici’s poetry, Cappello tells us, reveals an uncommon sensitivity for the condition of women in the changing society of the time. In the passage from the agricultural to the industrial era, women of the 1960s would find themselves no longer appreciated for their housework, on the one hand, and subordinated to men in the workplace on the other. This observation would lead the poet to reflect upon the tension between production and reproduction, two keywords of the social-political discourse of the time regarding women’s role in the workforce and society.

## 2. *Experimental approaches*

The section on experimental approaches opens with an essay by Nicolás Sánchez-Rodríguez on the connections between early nineteenth-century representations of Colombia and the related trade in Columbian securities that resulted in the financial boom of the 1820s in London. Drawing on diverse sources of inspiration, from semiotics to economics, he traces the creation of networks of meaning in the public discourse of the time that would lead to the creation of the El Dorado myth and the ensuing investment rush. The paper chronicles the events that accompanied the 1822 financial boom by reconstructing the ingenious marketing strategy set up by Francisco Antonio Zea, who, according to the author, issued Colombian bonds worth two billion pounds to gain recognition for the new state of Colombia on the part of the British financial community. In so doing, Sánchez-Rodríguez also unravels the immaterial consequences of that project in the cultural and economic spheres. To do this, he resorts, ingeniously, to the Saussurian concept of “value,” establishing a parallel between financial value and linguistic value based on the common denominator of instability that, in one context, takes the name of “volatility,” and in the other, “arbitrariness.” The article also contains reflections on Classical and Neoclassical economics, from Adam Smith to Leon Walras, that will make it a worthwhile read for those who, from a humanities perspective, are looking for a primer on how cultural and economic phenomena can intertwine and influence one another.

The last article is an experiment in interpretation whereby a novel becomes the spur for a reflection on the capacity of literature to envision possible future worlds by exaggerating certain aspects of the present one. To do so, Gerardo Iandoli extracts a specific theme from Gabriele Frasca’s six-hundred pages novel *Dai cancelli d’acciaio* and traces the implications of the text with the support of the work of philosophers, psychologists and economists who have reflected upon the human condition in the contemporary world. By taking sides on the critical debate that has accompanied the novel, Iandoli emphasizes that *Dai cancelli d’acciaio* should not be taken to hold a radically anti-technology stance, but should instead be read as a warning bell to the dangers of letting some technologies interfere with the natural sensory and psychological experience of reality.

### 3. Concluding remarks

The present collection mostly contains case studies of specific themes, texts, or authors. This fact confirms a belief openly acknowledged in the field, i.e., that case studies constitute the main – if not the only – approach in which research on the relationships between literature and economics is being undertaken, at least by Italian scholars.

The contributors seem to accept, whether implicitly or explicitly, that one of the *raison-d'être* of literature is to help humans get a better grasp of the world around them; as a result, most essays attempt to assess to what extent the chosen texts fulfill that expectation. The essays show that literature can shed light on problematic – if not repulsive – aspects of reality that are sometimes ignored by the public and avoided in political debates. Accordingly, works are typically evaluated for their capacity to stimulate a critical reflection on the economic order, and some contributors go so far as to make political judgments themselves. The frequency of this approach, not only in this collection but in the field, suggests that political concern may be the main drive behind the study of economics in literature. Nicolás Sánchez-Rodríguez and Gerardo Iandoli, however, offer a more theoretical take on the topic of the collection. In *El Dorado in the stock exchange*, literary-critical tools are employed to enlighten a complex economic event that happened in the past. In *Pensare l'economia*, there is an example of how analyzing a novel's highly imaginative world may shed light on material aspects of the world in which we live and the one we might see in the future.

One thing that is surprisingly lacking from the collection is a reflection on how literary studies and economics can benefit each other in understanding their respective research objects. From the economics side, Andrew Jackson (2009) has shown how economic analysis may benefit from insights drawn from social and cultural studies; in Italy, Pierluigi Ciocca (2016) and Giandomenico Scarpelli (2015), two economists, have shown how literary narratives may add sophistication to the conventional mathematical understanding of economic forces. Over the twentieth century, literary critics have extensively refined their analytical tools in conversation with other social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and psychology. The legacy of that



methodological development is also apparent in this collection. Economics, however, seems to be perceived as irrelevant to literary analysis, except for the Marxian conception of the relationship between capital and labor – and, by extension, between other antagonistic social groups – that has found its way into literary debate mostly under the influence of political Marxism. Is it conceivable that economic notions such as “value,” “opportunity cost,” “growth,” development,” “marginal thinking,” become part of the literary analyst’s toolbox along with other social science keywords, such as “agency,” “social structure,” “self,” “alterity,” “patriarchy,” and others? The present collection shows that a new generation of scholars is starting to familiarize themselves with economic theory because works of literature are being increasingly filled with economic narratives and reflections. However, unless critics develop an interest in the “economic way of thinking” and are willing to experiment with it in their study of textual meanings, it is unclear if a conversation between literary criticism and economic analysis will ever take place in the foreseeable future, no matter how much economics may be found in literary texts. Time will tell whether the interest that literary critics are showing for economic matters is only a passing fashion or the beginning of a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue.

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