

Offprinted from
MODERN LANGUAGE REVIEW

VOLUME 114, PART 1

JANUARY 2019

authors such as Shelley and Kipling. Though some essays in this collection are more imaginative than others, there are no weak links. All are meticulous and insightful pieces of scholarship, and while they can be read individually with a more specialist aim in mind, they work together to tell a new cultural and historical story with such success that readers will also appreciate the volume as a whole.

Chivalry, Academy, and Cultural Dialogues makes a substantial contribution to early modern Italian Studies, and scholars from a range of disciplines will find it a valuable and thought-provoking read. A detailed and cohesive collection, it succeeds with great dexterity and clarity in contributing to a new paradigm for assessing the position of chivalry and the Academies in past and present culture; drawing attention to broader challenges facing scholars in this field today, it will also enable readers to consider new methods of interrogating history and cultural legacy. The book is a fitting homage to Professor Everson: engaging with and responding to areas of research she cultivated throughout her career, it forms part of a pressing conversation she started and which must no doubt be continued.

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

LUCY RAYFIELD

Ius Leopardi: legge, natura, civiltà. Ed. by LAURA MELOSI. Florence: Olschki. 2016. 111 pp. €20. ISBN 978-88-222-6474-9.

This volume, the proceedings of a conference held in Macerata in 2015, contains four essays and a transcript of three ensuing responses. Taken together, they offer an overview of Leopardi's somewhat limited, but nevertheless engaging, interest in questions of the law.

That interest appears to have coalesced in the early 1820s, stimulated perhaps by Leopardi's reading of Lamennais's *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion*, which the poet began reading in translation in the summer of 1820. Vittorio Capuzza examines the impact of this work on Leopardi in his essay. Here as elsewhere, Leopardi recorded his thinking in the *Zibaldone*, though the contributors also refer occasionally to other works that complement the ideas developed there.

Leopardi's interest in the law is often specific to the political tensions in evidence during the Risorgimento. Not surprisingly, the nature of monarchy looms large for him; he saw it as both a means to realize the *bene comune* and a risk to that same objective when it devolves into despotism. Believing that despotism had followed upon the fall of the Roman republic, Leopardi envisioned democratic republicanism as the only solid base left for nation-building. His approach to legal questions was frequently philological, as when he delved into the etymology of the word *lex* (Laura Melosi) or, even more strikingly, when his research into historical linguistics led him to quite unexpected but nevertheless evocative conclusions about the relativity of law (Capuzza).

It is Francesco Adornato who identifies in Leopardi's legal philosophy threads that weave it into a larger philosophical tapestry. Adornato points out how for Leopardi such notions as reciprocated love, fidelity, magnanimity, and justice are

‘sovrastutture ideali che contribuiscono a rendere meno intensa l’infelicità degli uomini’ (p. 52)—in other words, necessary illusions. In Leopardi’s way of thinking, in a post-lapsarian world truth is incompatible with happiness (along the same lines, Laura Melosi in her essay develops more fully Leopardi’s idea of justice as an illusion). Capuzza’s observation that for Leopardi human beings wilfully deceive themselves as a defence against harsher truths is one of the more thought-provoking points to emerge from these essays. Capuzza in fact argues that for Leopardi the whole point of the law is to temper unhappiness; it is thus that we deceive ourselves into thinking we live in an ordered world. Poetry contributes to our self-deceit, offering a subjective truth that we mistakenly attribute to objective reality as well.

Marco D’Alberti’s essay, while brief, contributes significantly to a synthetic understanding of Leopardi’s legal philosophy. D’Alberti outlines the distinction in Leopardi’s thinking between violable human law and inviolable natural law, describing how the poet saw the proliferation of the legislative state as useless without an embrace of nature, i.e. of natural law. D’Alberti cites the conflict between Antigone and Creon as exemplifying Leopardi’s thinking. Leaving aside for now the question of the status of natural law, much debated since Leopardi’s time, one might go a step further and deduce that it is precisely the failure of a Creon to heed the teachings of natural law, to adhere to a greater moral code, that leads to the sort of despotism that takes monarchy off the table and leads instead (back) to the republic. In this sense Leopardi enters into conversation with some of the greatest political philosophers to come before him.

There is, of course, much more here, and the essays repay multiple readings for their thoughtful consideration of a difficult problem. In her ‘Premessa’ Melosi notes that literature and law are both subfields of the humanities. When they intertwine in a thinker of the range of a Leopardi, they yield unique insights into the human condition.

WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST LOUIS

MICHAEL SHERBERG

Italian Women’s Autobiographical Writings in the Twentieth Century: Constructing Subjects. By URSULA FANNING. Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 2017. 261 pp. £65. ISBN 978-1-68393-031-0.

Ursula Fanning’s book investigates the function of the autobiographical mode in twentieth-century Italian women’s writings and highlights their specific contribution to and reshaping of this literary genre. Rejecting from the outset any essentialist link between autobiography and gender, Fanning argues that this link exists in practice, as ‘the sheer number of autobiographical works written by women in Italy in the past century is arresting and seems to beg investigation’ (p. ix). The reasons behind this phenomenon are identified in social and cultural conditions and in the specific position of women with respect to subjectivity and writing, which differs historically from that of men. The book features a theoretical Introduction followed by six thematic chapters, each dealing with central elements in the writers’ process