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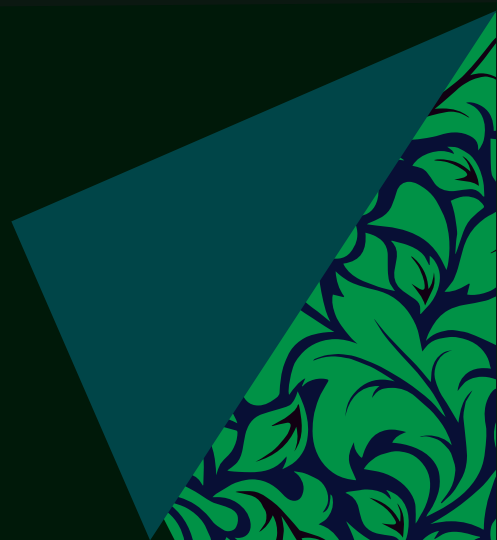
# **A Self-Reflexive *Verista***

Metareference  
and Autofiction  
in Luigi Capuana's  
Narrative

Brian Zuccala



**Edizioni**  
Ca' Foscari





A Self-Reflexive *Verista*

## **Italianistica. Nuova serie**

Collana diretta da  
Tiziano Zanato

2



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Brian Zuccala

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## **A Self-Reflexive *Verista***

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## **Abstract**

This volume is one of few monographs on Italian post-Risorgimento author Luigi Capuana, and the first one written in English in more than four decades (since Davies 1979). Pivoting on the seemingly counter-intuitive notion of creative self-reflexivity, the volume is a rereading of most of Capuana's narrative production beyond the 'canonical' *verista* framework that is still largely employed to look at the author and his works. The study opens with an overview of the landscape of *capuanistica* as it presents itself to contemporary scholars and critics. It then illustrates the methodological nuances of the notion of creative self-reflexivity and subsequently proceeds with two case studies, focusing on female characterisation and exploring 'the margins' of Capuana's work, respectively. The volume closes with a 'distant reading' of self-reflexivity in Capuana's entire *oeuvre*. Combining more traditional, historical-philological criticism with narratology and critical theory mostly developed in the Anglosphere, the volume contributes to placing Capuana into a transnational, comparative critical conversation about aspects of Italian literary culture such as issues of modernity/(proto)modernism, gender and the *fin de siècle*.

**Keywords** Luigi Capuana. Post-Unification Italy. Fin de siècle. Rereading the canon. Gender and narrative.



To Lucy

*Thinking of a series of dreams...  
Nothing too heavy to burst the bubble  
(Bob Dylan, Series of Dreams 1989)*



## Preface

Edwige Comoy Fusaro

Université Rennes 2, France

---

Writing is a “processo dall’ indefinito al finito” (Oddo De Stefanis 1990, 89) that enables one to access the dark side of reality and to render it manifest and visible. Writing – and the same is true for any other expressive/creative process – also means to translate those *invisibilia* into concrete form: namely, through words and syntactic structures. It comes as no surprise that Luigi Capuana, who was as convinced of the existence of invisible realities as he was eager to give those realities a *voice*, constantly wrestled both with the problem of finding an adequate form and his (self)perceived failure to do so. The indescribability of reality and the overall inadequacy of language and of other expressive *media* – with the possible exception of music – to give form to the indefinable were not only a *leitmotif* of the writing and poetics of *Scapigliati*, coeval to young Capuana, but also a stable feature of Capuana’s own poetological reflections throughout his career. Capuana’s reflection revolves around the urge to find that voice, that form, that tool for communicability, and yet, at the same time, the awareness that those tools are inevitably going to prove inadequate, and those endeavours are doomed to failure. For Capuana, *to translate* means necessarily *to reduce*, to mutilate, to disfigure. Therefore the literary work, for Capuana, is the result of, in Gilardino’s words, “un paziente vaglio dei mezzi espressivi e di un’innata esigenza: quella di dar voce al ben più vasto universo spirituale” (Gilardino 1990, 136).

In this volume, which comes at the end of a decade-long scholarly journey, mainly under the insightful guidance of Annamaria Pagliaro, Brian Zuccala captures this fundamental need on Capuana’s part. He does so by shedding light on a dimension, that of metareferentiality and self-reflexivity, that has been neglected thus far. In the first

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three sections of his study, Zuccala both provides the reader with a detailed overview of the *stato dell'arte* in Capuana studies and illustrates the range of methodological tools to be deployed in his own analysis. Zuccala's methodology combines the tools of 'traditional' literary criticism, including a particularly sharp use of narratology, and more recent exegetic devices, developed and borrowed primarily from the Anglosphere. That is, indeed, one of the strengths of this study. It is worth remembering that, although a conference was held in Sicily on the centenary of Capuana's death (Catania, 11-12 dicembre 2015), the only international conference on Capuana was organised in what can be considered the Anglosphere - bilingual Montréal - in March 1989.

The singularity of Zuccala's perspective comes, to a substantial extent, from his international, mostly Anglophone education (it is also noteworthy that he reads French and therefore accesses and quotes from original French sources). This explains why, amongst the studies informing his critical approach and his reading of Capuana's *oeuvre*, one finds, alongside the usual and seminal works of Italian *capuanistica* - including very recent ones or even ones still in-print -, the works of, among others, Bachmann-Medick, Waugh, Moretti, Davies, Barnaby, Wolf and Nünning.

The two chapters "Gender and Self-Reflections Beyond the *caso psicopatologico*" and "Metareference in *l'altro* and *l'ultimo* Capuana" (4 and 5) constitute the core of Zuccala's argument. In these two sections, the Italian-Australian critic convincingly shows how, from the early *Profili di donne* (1877), all the way through to the early twentieth century, self-reflexivity represents a *fil rouge* through Capuana's theoretical as well as creative journeys. The whole of Capuana's massive corpus is taken into consideration, even though the focus is on his creative writing. Zuccala's exegetic postulation, in fact, entails a deliberately holistic and unselective approach, one that goes beyond genre-based distinctions and reductions. This proves to be a convincing, as well as a compelling approach, because Capuana's fundamental motivations do not change across genres: as much in essays as in short novellas, in academic lectures as much as in fairy tales, in narrative-non-fiction as much as in novels, Capuana constantly chases after the holy Grail of the perfect incarnation of concepts into what he calls *la forma artistica*. Within such a framework, 'close reading' allows one to identify and verify the macro-tendencies that 'distant reading' highlights, and vice versa.

A consistent feature of Capuana's writing is the nexus between theory and practice. His production is certainly not ascribable to that line - be it described as a vein, a tradition, an effect, a galaxy or a mode - of humouristic and intrinsically metareferential writing that characterises a vast portion of nineteenth-century Italian culture in the field of literature and journalism, especially in the *scapigliato milieu*. Capuana is primarily a narrator ("Alle teoriche bado poco, chie-

do lavori, lavori, lavori!”, quotes Zuccala from *‘Ismi’ contemporanei* of 1898, 6), yet, when narrating virtually anything, he is actually reflecting on himself at the writing desk. When considering Capuana’s entire corpus, an increasing amount of self-reflexivity over the years becomes obvious. In the context of his reflection on creative praxis, this creates a configuration that can be understood as a system of communicating vessels: periods of intense critical production and limited creative output alternate with periods when, on the contrary, creative production abounds and theoretical work is lacking.

The original and completely convincing argument that develops in chapter 4, which is erudite and articulate, reaches a veritably “counter-canonical reading of *il femminile*” (95). Although Capuana’s female characterisation has been widely and deeply explored by other scholars, its functions as a “self-reflexive device” (74) and “catalyst for metareferential reflection” (99) have not hitherto been highlighted. Brian Zuccala fills this gap: “women are the privileged *medium* through which the metadiscourse on art [...] unfolds” (54) and “the narrative/creative act is configured quite explicitly as an act of (masculine) possession triggered by erotic desire” (54). Even though – as Zuccala rightly highlights – Capuana certainly appreciates some of the (few) charismatic women writers of his times and manifests such a high esteem in some of his critical works, the idea of the ‘spermatic ink’ seems to remain a fixture of Capuana’s conception. Similar conclusions were drawn in a study of mine, dedicated to proto-*fantascientifica* Italian literature, in which I pointed out that Capuana’s stories declaring the triumph of the ‘cerebral man’ anticipate Marinetti’s *Mann-anschauung* (Comoy Fusaro 2013). The reflections carried out in chapter 5 are equally innovative. Among those, the analysis of “Dolore senza nome” stands out: in this short story, Zuccala argues, “possibly for the first time, there is a collective voice of the artist’s *entourage* intervening to contradict what the artist thinks of himself and his work” (108). We are already at the level of Pirandello’s problematisation of the relationship between an author and their characters.

Among significant outcomes of the study is the reevaluation of the entire corpus, with, on the one hand, the rediscovery of previously neglected or completely ignored works – including the aforementioned short story “Dolore senza nome”, the short essay “L’eterno femminile”, the novel *La Sfinge*, as well as the “pagine memorialistiche” (6) of *Ricordi di infanzia e di giovinezza* (2005), recently republished by Aldo Fichera.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the importance of other better-known works comes under scrutiny in Zuccala’s analysis. By putting emphasis on works such as *Profili di donne* and *Rassegnazione*, Zuccala coun-

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**1** Fichera is also the editor of other neglected works, such as *Gli americani di Ràbbato*, as well as an enthusiastic promoter of the Casa Museo Luigi Capuana’s materials.

ters a *vulgata* that has historically celebrated the centrality of, for example, *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* (to which little attention is paid).

This study has the additional, significant merit of paving the way for new research. In this piece, I have appropriated the word *capuanistica*. However, it ought to be specified that, if Zuccala speaks of Capuana studies and of *capuanistica* (as do I, following his lead), this is due to the new impulse given in recent years to the studies of the Italian nineteenth century and of Capuana in particular, in Italy and abroad, by young and talented scholars, including the Author of this book.

These young researchers are both talented and daring: it would probably sound hyperbolic to say Zuccala has read all there is to read on and by Capuana, but certainly “the new landscape of *capuanistica* as it presents itself to scholars today” (27), and as he overviews and illustrates it at the beginning of his exegetic journey, is exhaustive. His engagement with both existing *capuananista* and non-Capuana-centred scholarship is unremitting. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that Capuana was a very prolific writer. This study by Zuccala exhibits the qualities of a genuine researcher: creativity and academic rigour, modesty and intellectual ambition, as well as, *cela va sans dire*, interpretative insightfulness, that enable him to overcome the apparent contradiction between self-reflexivity and *verista*-like mimesis, by building – and rightly so – on the hybrid and speculative quality intrinsic to any artistic representation: “self-reflexive and ‘mimetic’ creative writing are not at all mutually exclusive and [...] represent in fact specular, interrelated instances of a vision of the real that is not simply reproductive but always – to some extent – a ‘re-creation’” (19).

Among the new research pathways opened by this study is one that seems particularly promising to me: the extension of the exploration of self-reflexivity, through combined close and distant reading, so as to reach and incorporate some of its most metaphorical instances. An example of the further scholarly possibilities attached to self-reflexivity could be that of focusing on the early short story, “Il dottor Cymbalus”. This text, albeit much less explicitly than in “Il piccolo archivio” and the ‘rejected’ “Un caso di sonnambulismo”, already appears to display traces of the *sperimentale-speculativo-metaletterario* model that will later become dominant and fully-fledged in Capuana’s *oeuvre*. Likewise, applying Digital Humanities’ tools to the whole of Capuana’s production, including too often neglected paratextual materials, appears auspicious. There is, in other words, work to do, and I hope Brian Zuccala will continue to pursue this kind of scholarly exploration, so as to continue enriching the field of *capuanistica*.

Université Rennes 2, France  
18 February 2020



## Author's Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is a comprehensive study – the first in English since 1979 – that revolves around Luigi Capuana. It is also a book on pre-twentieth-century self-reflexive narratives as well as, more collaterally, a single case study-centred approach to gender and narrative, focusing on strategies of female characterisation in Liberal Italy (1861-1915). It is the result of over a decade of reflection, which began at graduate level and then has continued at post-graduate and post-doctoral levels across four continents, on two core themes, variously intertwined: the increasingly debated theme of Capuana's relationship with Naturalism, *Verismo* and realism in general, on the one hand, and the rather more neglected theme of his rendition of female characters and gender dynamics on the other. A third line of inquiry has become progressively more involved with those two themes: the way in which theory is negotiated in Capuana's creative writing and vice versa.

In a few other circumstances, over the past years, I have attempted to reflect on these defining research questions individually, and in a way that tended to be rather compartmentalised. Here, I attempt to bring all these thoughts together, whilst at the same time taking the ideas further. I will endeavour to compensate for obvious partialities – e.g. not considering works such as *Rassegnazione* (1907), *Le appassionate* (1893), *Ricordi di infanzia e di giovinezza* (1893) or the numerous fairy tales. I will also try to correct what I by now regard as previous shortcomings, and to strengthen the link between Capuana's conceptualisation of the genre of the novel and his narrative construction of gender.

For what I consider to be a positive and interdisciplinary progression in the way I have come to think about Capuana and Capuana's work within the context of post-unification Italian literature and culture, I must thank, among others, Anita Virga, Annamaria Pagliaro, Edwige Comoy Fusaro, Victor Houlston, Paul Barnaby, Chris Fotheringham, Samuele Grassi, Franco Savarino Roggero, Kamalini Govender, Linda Parkes, and I am certainly forgetting someone, to whom, nonetheless, goes my deepest gratitude.

Wits University, South Africa  
18 February 2020



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## Introduction

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To 'read against the grain' means [...] [to] resist authority, resist hermeneutic inertia: the authority of the commentary tradition, the authority of "it must be read thus because it always has been read thus". Put hermeneutic pressure on the text.

Teodolinda Barolini (Gilson 2008, 141)

In the context of a critical and methodological rediscovery of the Italian nineteenth century and of the cultural and artistic production of newly-unified Liberal Italy (1861-1915) - including, but not limited to, 'canonical' authors - Luigi Capuana's *oeuvre* has also come to attract renewed exegetic attention. A necessarily cursory glance at the recent history of Capuana studies gives the impression that such an increase, both in Italy and elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> is partially, yet not exclusively, linked to the attempt to separate the extremely eclectic profile of this Catanese intellectual from the label of "*strenuo campione del naturalismo in Italia*" (Capuana 1899, 247; emphasis in original). This is a labelling tendency that - under the influence of Benedetto Croce (1905), which is hard to overestimate in relation to Capuana - has dominated *capuanistica* throughout over half a century of scholarship, at least until the seminal monograph by Judith Davies (1979). The more recent lines of study, on the contrary, seem to direct their attention to the other experimental facets of Capuana's *oeuvre*, those that anticipate literary, thematic and cultural tendencies that, it is commonly thought, only become fully fledged in the modernist *primo novecento*, and explode with the advent of postmodernity and postmodernism. The monographic works - incidentally, all in Italian - that follow this

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**1** See Bocola's bibliography (2016).

direction are by Anna Maria Damigella (2012), Lara Michelacci (2015), Anita Virga (2017b) as well as, recently, Pagliaro and Zuccala (2019). The primary objective of these works is precisely that of ‘testing’ different and *prima facie* counter-intuitive methodologies in relation to Capuana’s *oeuvre*, with the aim of foregrounding new and nuanced readings of his work, and to link those readings to cultural and intellectual trends in post-unification Italy as well as, more broadly, *fin-de-siècle* Europe. The same approach seems to have been followed, over the last decade, both at the level of doctoral dissertations – it will suffice to mention Christina Petraglia (2012), Valentina Fulginiti (2014a), Giordana Poggioli-Kaftan (2016), Gabriele Scalessa (2016), Brian Zuccala (2018a) – and at the level of panels and conferences,<sup>2</sup> with all these initiatives promising further publications in the same vein. This essay will unfold along the lines of the aforementioned works and will rely once again on a methodological corpus that is largely either Anglo-American, or Anglophone but German-produced. It will draw on narratology and literary theories to reread, from what appears to be a new angle, an author who belongs to the Italian ‘tradition’ and yet has been unjustly neglected by that very tradition.

Associating an author like Capuana, who for decades has been ‘canonised’ – albeit simplistically – as a naturalist with the concept of *self-reflexivity* could appear, at least on the surface, almost paradoxical. The very notion of self-reflexive writing, that is, of narrative that focuses primarily on (its own) writing, is apparently in contrast with the fundamental principles of *verista* and naturalist as well as, more generically, realistic writing. The first of these principles is the notion of mimesis, that is, of the aesthetic illusion generated by what reaches the reader as a supposedly objective and ‘unfiltered’ rendition of the real. This is expressed well, in general terms, by Will Slocombe (2010) and more specifically by Alessio Baldini (2015), in relation to the Italian Naturalist *par excellence*, Giovanni Verga:

Of all the literary forms and tropes possibly related to realist writing, perhaps the most unlikely is metafiction. (Slocombe 2010, 227)

It might seem counterintuitive to look at *Fantasticheria* in order to find aspects of self-reflexivity, intended either as a form of self-writing, or as a textual commentary on the fictional or narrative dimension of the text [...]; one should thus not be expected to find in Verga’s *Verista* works any metafictional and metanarrative comments, which are intended to make readers aware of the perspectival nature, hence the mediacy and opaqueness of narrative. (Baldini 2015, 370)

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<sup>2</sup> It will suffice to recall AAIS/CAIS 2017 and AAIS 2018 (<https://aais.wildapricot.org/conference-program-2018>), with 5 panels and overall 15 papers on Capuana.

Yet, both critics then proceed – through close reading – to show how, on the contrary, in their respective case studies self-reflexive and ‘mimetic’ creative writing are not at all mutually exclusive. In fact, they represent specular, interrelated instances of a vision of the real that is not simply reproductive but always – to some extent – a ‘re-creation’, therefore, *a fortiori*, self-reflexive. The very same presupposition can be found in critical masterpieces on the notion of realism. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin hints at the fact that the novel, any novel, even the most realistic one, is always, to some extent, self-reflexive (see Bakhtin 1981, 49 and Santovetti 2015, 316). Jameson, too, stresses, in one of his most recent books, *The Antinomies of Realism* (2016), the co-presence of contrasting, often antithetical impulses within realistic narrative. Likewise, for Linda Hutcheon, self-reflexivity is “the perennial [and necessary] counterweight to the mimetic impulse of narrative” (2005, 494).

Despite such an apparent incompatibility – one that is clearly the product of an over-generalisation – this essay will try to illustrate the overall modes and the functions of what can be broadly and temporarily defined as *self-reflexivity* within Capuana’s narrative production. It will do so by building on those critical contributions – not very numerous, in fact – that have hitherto taken (at least partial) notice of self-reflexive instances in Capuana’s *oeuvre*. This study also aims to go one step further than previous contributions. My purpose is to ‘map and chart’ – loosely drawing on Franco Moretti’s notion of “distant reading” (Moretti 2013) – the overall chronological relationships between self-reflexive narrative instances and non-fictional critical writing in Capuana’s production. This hermeneutic operation is aimed at trying to make sense of what is in fact a very prominent component, however counter-intuitive and overlooked, of the work of an author who has been ‘canonised’ for precisely the opposite reasons.

More specifically, then, after some due terminological clarifications with important methodological connotations, I shall focus, in the first two sections of the book, on the self-reflexive instances that are, in my opinion and for reasons that I will clarify *in itinere*, most relevant in the whole of Capuana’s output. In the concluding part of the essay, I shall present the reader with a self-reflexivity-centred overview of the half-century of Capuana’s creative production,<sup>3</sup> attempting to demonstrate how such instances are intertwined with his critical writing in a way which is anything but accidental.

I will highlight how a chronological progression emerges, in which critical essays and self-reflexive creative writing rarely ever overlap.

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**3** Capuana’s career begins and ends as a *novelliere*, a writer of short stories. See Ghidetti: “L’attività di Capuana novelliere si sviluppa lungo un arco di tempo che dall’ottobre 1867 arriva al marzo 1915, allorché nella rivista romana ‘Noi e il Mondo’ fu stampata *Gioie Precluse*” (Ghidetti 1974, IX).

I will then attempt to give ‘internal’ evidence for these newly foregrounded patterns in the light of the very theoretical principles that will have arisen from a combined reading of self-reflexive narrative and critical writing. I will thus demonstrate how self-reflexive narrative progressively becomes the preferred artistic response for Capuana, who, decade after decade, becomes increasingly *antiaccademico*,<sup>4</sup> gradually losing faith, not so much in some of what he considers fundamental principles of the arts<sup>5</sup> but, rather, in the proliferation of those “‘ismi’ contemporanei” (1898) that he regards as little more than pseudo-doctrines *à la page*.

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<sup>4</sup> Even though, somewhat paradoxically, those are the most intense years of his university career. See Comes 1976 and Carli 2011 for further reading.

<sup>5</sup> Principles such as the notions of *impersonalità*, quasi-erotic creative struggle and seamless merging of form and content, to be examined further on in this study.

# 1 **Capuana *naturalista* malgré lui: 'Classics' and 'New Turns' in Capuana Studies**

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**Summary** 1.1 'Genre Studies' in Early Criticism and 'Classic' Monographs. – 1.2 History and Philology. – 1.3 Ideology. – 1.4 Gender and Intermedial 'Turns'. – 1.5 Occultism. – 1.6 Structure of This Study.

Before delving into a close reading of a selection of Capuana's texts, it is appropriate to show why such a far-reaching self-reflexive approach is more than just exegetically useful. By reflecting on those recent 'turns' in Capuana's criticism that have aimed to break away from a long-standing *Verismo*/Naturalism-centred line of enquiry, it must be shown how such an approach is critically needed at this stage of *capuanistica*. In other words, it is important to focus on why and how the issue of (self-)reflexivity increasingly appears to position itself at the point of intersection of many still-open and cogent questions in Capuana studies and to offer itself as a potential answer to a significant proportion of those questions.

## **1.1 'Genre Studies' in Early Criticism and 'Classic' Monographs**

With the exception of individual magazine reviews of specific works and an insightful 1896 overview by Luigi Pirandello, Capuana criticism begins with the well-known, widely investigated and enormously influential essay by Benedetto Croce, "Luigi Capuana - Neera" (1905).

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Croce's essay addresses Capuana's theoretical activity and creative writing separately, and argues that Capuana's primary literary merit was that of theorising *Verismo* and promoting the *verista* work of fellow writer, Giovanni Verga, rather than being a result of his own creative writing.<sup>1</sup> Yet, even in the formulation of Capuana's artistic theories there are, for Croce, some rather significant contradictions. These discrepancies are best exemplified by the two epigraphs on the front page of the critical collection *Studi sulla letteratura contemporanea: Prima serie*, by Francesco De Sanctis and Camillo De Meis respectively, which Capuana himself defined as a summary of his artistic theory.<sup>2</sup> For Croce, the concept of the autonomy of art that Capuana derived from De Sanctis somewhat contradicts De Meis' Hegelian affirmation of the necessary and historical 'evolution' of artistic forms, and, for Croce, such a contradiction betrays, in turn, the theoretical inaccuracy and inadequacy of Capuana's own aesthetical thinking and poetics. However hasty such an allegation of theoretical unsoundness might seem to a contemporary reader, it accompanied the author's (scholarly) reputation throughout the twentieth century and even fed through to recent critical appraisals and textbook editions and anthologies.

As for Capuana's narrative, Croce argues that it is fully shaped by "[la] dottrina dell'impersonalità" and progresses rather uneventfully as a sequence of "studii di casi [patologici]". Indeed, this "atteggiamento da naturalista" is, for Croce, the reason for Capuana's work being "generalmente, un po' fredd[o]", and its "scarsa vena di sentimento" turns into "un difetto artistico". The case of *Giacinta* is, for the critic, paradigmatic: the novel's primary objective is descriptive – "rifare oggettivamente il processo di una situazione psicologica" – rather than being driven by any authentic "ispirazione poetica". Accordingly, Croce sees Capuana's style as "artificioso", and prefers "quelle parti [...] nelle quali il proposito dell'impersonalità è stato dimenticato o non è messo pienamente in atto" (1905, 342-72).<sup>3</sup> Among later critics, Croce's view prevailed over – for instance – the perceptive, yet antithetical, views earlier formulated by Luigi Pirandello. The Sicilian critic, as early as 1896, acknowledged how negatively Capuana had been affected by the *verista* label imposed onto his work a few years earlier, which he himself had vehemently questioned, along with all other labelling classifications (Pirandello 1896, 366-75). Among the

1 "Le teorie artistiche del Capuana e la sua propaganda del Verismo e del naturalismo valsero a spingere il Verga più oltre sulla via nella quale era entrato" (Croce 1905, 341).

2 "Il mio credo critico è tutto in queste parole di così grandi maestri" (Capuana 1880, VI).

3 Croce's essay was later collected in the third volume of *La letteratura della nuova Italia* ([1915] 1922).



various and substantial issues touched on in the essay, the one that has possibly exerted the greatest effect upon later criticism is Croce's neat separation of Capuana's theorising activity from his creative endeavours, and the priority he gives to Capuana's theoretical contribution to the *verista* cause, however fundamental, to the detriment of the role and the actual quality of his narrative. To put it in Giovanni Carzaniga's terms: "[There is] the widespread myth that in Italian *Verismo* [...] Luigi Capuana was the theoretical mind and Verga his disciple" (2003, 70). Or, as Domenico Calcaterra writes: "È opinione che ha trovato largo consenso, la preminenza da accordare al Capuana critico rispetto al più che prolifico narratore" (2015, 85). Even though Capuana strongly disputed the definition of his being the "campione" (Capuana 1899, 247; 1888b, XI) of Italian Naturalism, the critical premise persisted that Capuana was little else but a fine critic and the literary theorist who promoted Italian *Verismo*.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, critics depreciated what was in fact an interestingly ambivalent approach to Naturalism, questioned the very relevance of his 'post-*verista*' theoretical work and undervalued the technical quality of most of his vast creative production, often comparing it negatively to the work of the writer who is still seen as the greatest exponent of the *Verismo* movement, Giovanni Verga.<sup>5</sup> Croce's critical strategy of carefully distinguishing between the on-the-whole insightful, albeit fallible, critic and the me-

<sup>4</sup> Scalia's early monograph had begun questioning the "pigeon-holing" (Scalia 1952, 121) of Capuana by early critics. However, it had little impact. Interest in Capuana's 'narratology', although most prominent and unchallenged in the early stages of Capuana studies, has, to date, not disappeared. See also Scuderi 1970, 9-21. Longo (1978) curated one unpublished "Prolusione" for *Critica letteraria*, while an analysis of Capuana's "itinerario accademico" appears in Comes 1976, 41-106. Amongst the more recent work on his theory, see Storti Abate 1993; the Capuana section in Patruno 1985 as well as the section titled "Critica e teoria letteraria in Capuana" (1996, 55-110), as well as Carta 2008 and 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See also Re, for whom "Capuana stesso però non ha avuto la fortuna critica di Verga, né la sua posizione nel canone è paragonabile a quella del suo conterraneo e amico, rispetto a cui viene sempre visto come secondario. Spesso definito in senso negativo 'naturalista' invece che autentico verista" (2009, 94). Indeed, Carzaniga writes: "It is doubtful whether anyone would now read his fiction had he not taken such a vigorous and controversial role in the literary debates of his time" (2003, 70-1). The discrepancy between Verga's and Capuana's popularity is proven also by the discrepancy in number and relevance of the attempts to translate their work. Translators such as Santi Buscemi (Capuana 2013a), have recently been trying to fill the gap. Interestingly, some of Capuana's collections of fairy tales, such as *C'era una volta* (1882), and a few short stories, such as the Gothic story "Un vampiro" ([1904] 1974c, 203-21), have been slightly more appealing to translators from shortly after their publication, as shown by the existence of the anonymous collection of translations *Once Upon a Time: Fairy Tales Translated from the Italian of Luigi Capuana* (1892b) and an early translation of *Nimble-Legs. A Story for Boys (Scurpiddu, 1898)*. The point about the overall scarcity of Capuana studies in the Anglosphere is made clearly by Hiller (2009, 168). This argument can be supported by looking at the comparatively limited space dedicated to Capuana in comprehensive overviews of Italian literature such as the *Cambridge History* ("The Literature of United Italy, 1870-1910") in which no more than half a page

diocre novelist forms the basis of early neo-Crocean biographical profiles such as Luigi Russo's ([1923] 1951), histories of literature such as Attilio Momigliano's ([1935] 1962), and critical analyses in genre studies such as Paul Arrighi's *Le vérisme dans la prose narrative italienne* (1937). The same imbalance is to be found in many of the later seminal and, to varying degrees, Marxist-informed genre studies on *Verismo* as a literary movement, such as those by Mario Pomilio (1963), Roberto Bigazzi (1969) and Marina Musitelli Paladini (1974) as well as the two volumes of proceedings *Naturalismo e Verismo* (1988). A Marxist approach, increasingly popular in the post Second World War Italian intellectual *milieu*,<sup>6</sup> had revived interest in socio-economic reality in general and therefore 'realistic' literature in particular, which was regarded, however naively, as the cultural artefact that best allows one to reflect on that reality. Those essays thus appear to be intrinsically more preoccupied with investigating the literary category of realism and its (mostly) class-related implications than exploring Capuana's fiction-making endeavours themselves. These contributions focus mainly on his critical work and discuss the part played by Capuana's seven major collections of essays in "la nascita d[ella] [...] poetica veris[ta]" (Musitelli Paladini 1974, 9), while making very clear that "tra la teoria e la pratica" (90), of Capuana the narrator "il passo è [...] lunghissimo" (90). But even the largely (Post) Marxist-informed Italian criticism of the Sixties and Seventies, and more sporadically, the Eighties, which focused more extensively and 'monographically' on Capuana, persisted in assessing him and his *oeuvre* in a rather reductive and ultimately unproductive light: in the works of such critics as Gaetano Trombatore (1949), Vittorio Spinazzola (1970) and Enrico Ghidetti (1982), Capuana's narrative work, once again, comes across as the output of a mediocre narrative talent and, what will prove to be even worse for his future reception, the output of a rather narrow-minded, right-wing conservative, land-owning bourgeois.

Such a (comparative) marginalisation of the figure of Capuana as a narrator and a creative writer in those years and in that Marx-

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(Dombroski 1997, 463-4) is dedicated to Capuana, as opposed to the five pages dedicated to Verga (1997, 464-9).

**6** The increased popularity of this critical approach was partly due to the translation of György Lukács' *Saggi sul realismo* (1950) and *Il marxismo e la critica letteraria* (1953). Whilst the early debate on *Verismo* was particularly lively at mid-century - with comprehensive works such as Marzot 1941 - the categories of *Verismo* and Naturalism have continued to be studied in monographic contributions in more recent years: it will suffice to mention Carnazzi 1996; Pagano 1999; Petronio 2003; Luperini 2007; and Pellini 2010, among others. In all these works, too, Capuana is taken into consideration primarily for his theoretical production and, amongst these, Pellini's view of Capuana is a rather exemplary one: a "narratore modesto e teorico tutt'altro che originale" (2010, 11), characterised by a "disimpegno [...] ammantato di scrupoli formalistici" (76). See also Merola 2006, particularly the chapter "Modernità del romanzo naturalista" (21-53) and, on Capuana and Pirandello in relation to the *Verismo* movement, Salsano 2005, 2006.

ist cultural terrain is, in fact, not only of a ‘technical’ nature, as is made apparent for instance by Gaetano Trombatore’s classic *Riflessi letterari del Risorgimento in Sicilia* (1970), which expresses perplexities of an ideological kind about Capuana’s contribution to the *verista* cause. *Riflessi letterari* praises the civic engagement of “il verismo economico del Verga” (30),<sup>7</sup> while, at the same time, criticising Capuana for his social and ethical detachment: “[il] non [avere visto] mai nel verismo nulla più che un fatto strettamente letterario” (76). The basis of Trombatore’s appraisal is a synthesis of the theory of *Verismo* in three elements: “documento umano, procedimento scientifico e linguaggio” (81). *Verismo*’s potential was enormous, because “un saggio uso della [sua] formula” could have led to a deep understanding of the whole human condition as being dependent on “una particolare struttura economico sociale” (84). However, Capuana circumscribes the *verista* formula exclusively, “nell’ambito [...] della sua accezione scientifica” (82), and represents “fatti di ordine [...] eccezionale e patologico [...] con accento [...] obbiettivo e scientifico” (83) but without an adequate socio-economic perspective, or, even worse, he deliberately avoids any socio-economic implications.<sup>8</sup> Such a contention also informs the major monograph by Carlo Alberto Madrignani (1970). Madrignani’s work remains invaluable for its contextualisation of Capuana’s *naturalismo* and the analysis of pivotal naturalist works such as *Giacinta* and it can be regarded as a testament to the pervasiveness of some ‘ideologically biased’ views in relation to Capuana’s works. What is symptomatic of Madrignani’s biases is the actual period covered by his book, which is directly determined by the ideological stance informing his work. *Capuana e il naturalismo* (1970) based its rather narrow selection of narrative texts, which revolves around the novels *Giacinta* and *Profumo* and the short stories written in-between, on the assumption that Capuana had little to offer after *Profumo* (1890; 1892c), either from the standpoint of theoretical insightfulness, narrative complexity or ideological coherence (Madrignani 1970, 248).

A paradigm-changing hypothesis that helped reorient the direction of Capuana studies was put forward by Judith Davies (1979). Davies’ monograph, the third and last one in English after the far less influential works by Traversa (1968) and Scalia (1952), encompassed all five of Capuana’s major novels, including *La Sfinge* (1895 in episodes and 1897 in volume), *Rassegnazione* ([1907] 2000), and his widely recognised masterpiece, *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* ([1901] 1999b). Davies’ appraisal partly contested the so-called *involuzione*

<sup>7</sup> And Trombatore 1970, 84. A similar argument is to be found in the almost coeval Tanteri 1971, 4, 49 and in Pomilio 1963, 124.

<sup>8</sup> These words echo Patruno’s (1985, 53).

(7) of an author who had been regarded, after *Profumo*, as culturally irrelevant in the rapidly changing *fin-de-siècle* literary landscape (Mazzamuto 1969, 986; Mauro 1971, 13; Luti 1954 and 1973, VII). Davies' major thesis is twofold: on the one hand, she takes issue with this assessment of a "career which may be divided chronologically" (153). She maintains, rather, that there is continuity in Capuana's ideological positioning and, at the same time, that there is a persistent duality involving his positivist rationalism inflected by Hegelianism, which surfaced, in varying degrees, as the Italian and European cultural scenes shifted and presented new challenges. On the other hand, Davies claims that for just over a decade Capuana pursued what has been critically regarded, in what is in itself a rather reductive way, as an 'orthodox' naturalist practice *à la* Zola. In this period he wrote, along with the 1877 collection *Profili di donne*, his first naturalist novel, *Giacinta* (in at least three main editions: 1879, 1886, 1889), dedicated to Zola himself, and a number of short stories about psychopathological cases (mostly female), such as "Storia fosca" (1879), "Precocità" (1884), "Tortura" (1888), to be grouped together in two collections: the early *Storia fosca* ([1883] 1974a, 171-231) and, later, *Le appassionate* (1893). Davies highlights "how brief was in fact [the 'naturalist period'] the period when scientific materialism seemed to offer Capuana a total approach to reality", and yet how: "Capuana was involved not so much in an ideological *volte-face*, as, right from the beginning, in [...] the compromise of his *hegelmismo scientifico* which remained constant throughout his career, though the changing climate of the times served to emphasise its different components in succession" (1979, 7). In so doing, her work bestows upon the 'rest' of Capuana's body of work a literary 'dignity' and status it had, on the whole, never before enjoyed.

Davies' study marked what may be described as "La riscoperta di Capuana" (Colicchi 1980). It managed to reignite a critical interest in the author that (very) gradually extended to incorporate the totality of his work, including the until then semi-ignored essays on the themes of Spiritualism and the Occult (Capuana [1884] 1995 and [1896] 1995), the several collections of fairy tales, the theatre in Italian and dialect, the idealist experiments *La Sfinge* (1897) and *Rassegnazione* ([1907] 2000), the eclectic *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* ([1901] 1999a), and his children's novels, *Gambalesta* ([1903] 2010), *Scurpiddu* ([1898] 2013b), *Cardello* ([1907] 2009a), *Gli americani di Ràbbato* (1912). Critics also gradually came to acknowledge the existence of a corpus of short stories that ranges well beyond the two traditional themes of physiopathology – epitomised by *Le appassionate* ([1893] 1974a, 253-499) – and rural Sicilian peasant life – epitomised by *Le paesane* ([1894] 1974b, 3-255) – and covers a wide variety of topics, from science and science fiction (for example, in the collection *Un vampiro* [1904] 1974c, 199-236) to psychological investigation

and (overtly) self-reflexive fiction (particularly the collections *Il decameroncino*, 1901, *Coscienze*, 1905, and *La volontà di creare*, 1911).

All of these eclectic materials were gradually brought to light again in a critical scene that was not only increasingly curious and oriented towards (perceived) 'minor writers' but also increasingly ambitious from a theoretical standpoint. As a peculiar consequence of re-discovering new 'primary sources' at a time of overall shifts in Italian studies (and in literary studies and the humanities by and large), for a number of years now, Capuana scholarship has also been developing in diverse methodological directions, through a few monographic studies (the little-known Guarnieri 2012,<sup>9</sup> and the aforementioned and by-now widely disseminated Michelacci 2015), conference proceedings (*Capuana Verista* 1984; Picone, Rossetti 1990; Marchese 2015), edited collections (Scarano 1985) and some translations (Capuana 2013a, 2014, 2016), but mostly through individual essays. Each of these works, in its own way, has emphasised the presence and 'weight' of Capuana in *fin-de-siècle* Italian culture and literature. They have also clarified his contributions in pioneering the modern and contemporary style of "giornalismo letterario" (Oliva 1979, 187) with his work for *La Nazione*, and, with his *Semiritmi* (1888a), the form of the "verso libero",<sup>10</sup> as well as the fairy tale genre, the Italian *giallo* and the genre of *letteratura fantascientifica*, which developed in Italy when the traction gained by Positivism declined.

Whilst I have attempted elsewhere, and in different settings, to give an overview of the new landscape of *capuanistica* as it presents itself to scholars today, my aim here is simultaneously 'narrower' – in that I omit a detailed discussion of some individual titles – and yet more ambitious theoretically, in that I attempt an illustration, however necessarily cursory, of how the individual methodologies and the individual themes that have been the building blocks of the subfield of Capuana studies have progressively come closer to one another and mutually hybridised in a way that renders *capuanistica* more relevant within Italian studies and this study's chosen angle of self-reflexivity more compelling within *capuanistica* itself. In fact, proving this very hybridisation consolidates the 'status' of Capuana studies itself within the landscape of Italian studies, by showing how studying Capuana is far from an archaeo-philological indulgence towards a *minore*. It is an exegetic tool to cut through the entire breadth of intellectual production in Liberal Italy, both chronologically (1865-1915) and from the point of view of literature and culture. It also pro-

<sup>9</sup> Alberico Guarnieri's *Sulla narrativa siciliana di Luigi Capuana* (2012) is worth mentioning with regard to Capuana's explicitly Sicilian works. Yet, in my view, it is far less useful critically, owing to its almost complete lack of theoretical framework and somewhat impressionistic approach to the texts. The same applies to Montanari 2006.

<sup>10</sup> On *Semiritmi* (1888a) see, for instance, Morace 1999 and Miliucci 2014.

vides a way to traverse and expand upon the many methodological facets of contemporary Italian studies.

## 1.2 History and Philology

Despite the fact that the Archivio of the Biblioteca Capuana in Mineo has long been difficult to access (Palermo 1979, 23), the work of the Fondazione Verga and the Italian academy in general, following a mainly, but not exclusively, historical-philological orientation, has led to discoveries of new authorial materials even in very recent years, as well as to accurate and comparative *studi delle fonti*. Over the years, a number of special issues have been published by the *Annali della Fondazione Verga*, featuring work on manuscripts from the Archivio, as well as contributions on specific topics such as the remarkable volume on the *Risorgimento*, edited by Giuseppe Sorbello, *L’Unità d’Italia nella rappresentazione dei veristi* (2012b).<sup>11</sup> Capuana has also recently been at the core of a welcome, however belated, ‘institutional’ interest – the same interest that has already involved major figures of *Verismo* such as Verga: in 2009 the monumental series of volumes of the *Edizione nazionale delle opere di Luigi Capuana* opened with a collection of his *Cronache teatrali*, edited by renowned ‘Capuanist’ Gianni Oliva.<sup>12</sup> From the angle of bibliographical investigation, in 2016 Mario Bocola updated the first full bibliography on Capuana by Gino Raya (1969), with his extremely comprehensive *Bibliografia di Luigi Capuana: 1968-2015* (2016), which had the additional merit of going beyond national boundaries. Yet, history and philology have become increasingly intertwined with other, less philological approaches: an essentially philological *ratio* is, for example, at the basis of some otherwise pervasively thematic contributions revolving around (female) characterisation such as that by Paul Barnaby (1991), who reinterprets some aspects of the novel *Giacinta* by following the ‘authorial variations’ throughout its three major editorial versions (1879, 1886, 1889). A similar approach also informs Enrica Rossetti’s “Il romanzo teatrale nei saggi critici di Capuana”

<sup>11</sup> Fondazione Verga has been the publisher, since 1984, of the *Annali della Fondazione Verga*, quantitatively still the most important source of publications not only on Capuana, but on *Verismo* in general. In this context, works by such scholars as Bertazzoli (1983); De Cesare (1992, 1997); Durante (1998); Bocola (1999); Sardo (2008); Bellini (2011); Meli (2012); Di Silvestro (2012); Marchese (2015); and Cassola (2015) should be noted. The Fondazione has also worked ‘monographically’ on Capuana’s theatre, on which see the contributions by Muscariello (77-90), Nay (91-134) and Pasquini (135-52) in *Il teatro verista* (vol. 1, 2007), and individual essays such as the lengthy Sanfilippo 2008, as well as Morace 2015 and Nicastro 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Under the direction of philologist Gianvito Resta. Among Oliva’s important contributions on Capuana’s theatre, see also Oliva 1999 and Capuana 1999c.

(1990) and, more recently Ambra Carta's *Il romanzo italiano moderno: Dossi e Capuana* (2008), both of which, drawing on Davies, investigate the idea of Capuana's prose as shifting progressively towards an intermediate form of 'theatrical novel', through mapping the varying proportions between direct and indirect discourse in the main editions of *Giacinta*.

Likewise, along lines that can also be regarded as partly historical-philological and partly 'cultural', Capuana's intellectual background and the philosophical influences on his poetics have been another crucial feature of the renewed interest in the author and his *oeuvre*. Croce's initial argument, stressing the alleged theoretical contradictions implicit in Capuana's choice of mentors – the Positivist thinker Angelo Camillo De Meis and the idealist philosopher Francesco De Sanctis, author of the 1866 *Saggi critici* – had long been the foundation for assessing the author's poetics. Drawing on Croce's early argument, Trombatore (1949), Palermo (1964) and Navarra (1968) endeavoured to further examine the nuances of that hybrid mentorship. Palermo suggested that a way of understanding how Capuana could integrate such different philosophical traditions into a relatively coherent system is that of looking at the common matrix of his two inspirations. Palermo's essay is the first to highlight that "nonostante una precisa testimonianza diretta, quella del Capuana stesso [...], quasi nessuno degli studiosi che si sono occupati di lui ha dato il necessario peso all'incontro Capuana-Hegel" (350), which played a central role in instilling in Capuana's poetics "il concetto delle forme artistiche e del loro svolgimento nella storia" (350). Palermo claims that Capuana's undoubtedly articulate but sometimes contradictory attempts to accommodate materialism and idealism holistically into the same theory of artistic forms began after encountering Hegel first-hand, and benefitted greatly from the encounter with De Meis' philosophical novel *Dopo la laurea* (1868 and 2005 in English, see Traversa 2005). In fact, De Meis' idea of equating the (Hegelian) evolution of the forms of art in history with the biological development of a living organism (which Capuana assimilates) can be regarded as the most striking evidence of this attempt to merge two fundamentally different philosophical inspirations. Despite Palermo's contention, most later critics – starting with Madrignani<sup>13</sup> – have argued that Capuana never really dared to address the monumental Hegelian system directly, filtering it exclusively through De Sanctis' and De Meis' appropriations. In order to dismiss the hypothesis of a direct influence of Hegel's texts on Capuana's, it has been customary to refer to Capuana's essay *Spiritismo?* (1884), in which Capuana claims to be a *dilettante* when it comes

**13** See Madrignani: "Rimane il fatto che una vera svolta hegeliana non si avverte durante gli anni delle recensioni teatrali [...] il che non esclude che a Firenze sia avvenuta una qualche lettura hegeliana, magari saltuaria" (1970, 50).

to philosophical speculations.<sup>14</sup> These arguments, however, seem to deliberately overrate the quasi-Horatian *protestationes modestiae* on Capuana’s part, while overlooking those instances in which his intellectual indebtedness to Hegel’s texts is most clearly declared.<sup>15</sup>

In line with Palermo’s argument, recent critics, such as Silvio Balloni, have provided philological evidence that Capuana may have engaged with Hegel’s works in a more direct and, perhaps, deeper way. For Balloni, “la lettura degli scritti di Hegel fu attenta e approfondita, poiché poté svolgersi nella traduzione italiana di Antonio Novelli” and “non avvenne solo tramite *La Poétique par W.F. Hegel* di Charles Bénard” (2007, 136-7).<sup>16</sup> Christina Petraglia’s “*Il marchese-contadino*” (2010; emphasis in original), once again combining historical-philological close reading and a philosophical take enriched by cultural studies, has suggested an insightful ‘Hegelian’ reading of the master-servant dynamics in Capuana’s *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*. Petraglia’s close textual analysis draws on a specific section of Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), the famous “Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage”, in which the German philosopher expresses his well-known theory of the master-slave dialectic. This reassessment of Hegel’s *oeuvre* as directly and heavily woven into Capuana’s fictional and non-fictional work alike is of particular consequence for this study. Its importance cannot be overstated, as it lays the philosophical foundation on which the core interpretative proposition presented in these pages is built.

### 1.3 Ideology

In line with the steady rise of cultural studies and of what can be generally termed ‘ideological criticism’ in recent decades, the cultural features of gender, class and race – and intersectional combinations thereof – have also been gaining prominence within the field of Capuana studies. In particular, just as a certain degree of ideological ‘bias’ was a very important factor in shaping the field of Capuana studies in its early stages, ideology has remained topical at the (present) moment of attempting to disentangle the field from those very biases.

<sup>14</sup> “In filosofia ero la medesima cosa che in storia naturale, [...] cioè un curioso e nient’altro, un dilettaante e nient’altro” (Capuana 1884, 131). “Mi ero buttato alla filosofia [...] [a] *La fenomenologia dello Spirito* del gran pensatore di Stutgarda, benché mal masticata e mal digerita [...]. Non afferravo (ci voleva ben altro che i miei denti!) tutta quella meravigliosa astrazione” (130).

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Sportelli 1950, 39.

<sup>16</sup> To support his argument, Balloni quotes directly from Capuana’s private correspondence (2007, 137).



The reassessment of Capuana's ideological critique is a major element of Annamaria Pagliaro's essays, "Aspetti tecnici e continuità tematica ne *La Sfinge* di Luigi Capuana" (1989) and "*Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* di Luigi Capuana: Crisi etica o analisi positivistica" (1997), as well as in most of Paul Barnaby's 'Italianist' work (1997, 2000, 2001, 2004). Barnaby endeavours to expand on both Trombatore's and Pagliaro's post-*Risorgimento*, nation-building angle (1997), through emphasising the allegorical levels and religious backdrop of some of the novels, such as *La Sfinge* ([1897b] 2012), *Profumo* (1890, 1892c) and *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* ([1901] 1999a). The same nation-building approach has also been followed by Franco Manai,<sup>17</sup> who extensively and primarily explored Capuana's conceptualisation of class. Similarly, Salvina Monaco (2012b) and Lara Michelacci (2017) have also focused on the question of Capuana's purportedly conservative ideology as it is reflected in his quasi-scientific explorations and/or his representation of the Sicilian working-classes within the context of the coeval political upheavals in Sicily. Monaco (2012a, 2019) in particular delivers a detailed historical analysis of Capuana's political leanings and his increasingly inflexible and belligerent "crispismo" at the turn of the twentieth century, that is, his Francesco Crispi-inspired right-wing conservative ideology.

Similarly, 'ideological' work has been done on Capuana as a writer of fairy tales. This scholarly line draws on early works by Gabriella Congiu Marchese (1982), Giuseppina Romagnoli Robuschi (1969), Anna Barsotti (1984); Enrico Malato (1990) and Roberto Fedi (1990, 1997). More recently Gina Miele, with her essays "Through the Looking Glass: A Consideration of Luigi Capuana's *fiabe*" (2009b), and "Luigi Capuana: Unlikely Spinner of Fairy Tales?" (2009a), has highlighted the *verista* aspects of Capuana's *fiabe*, and also their thinly veiled social commentary. These works, on the whole, explore Capuana's techniques in relation to the values promoted more or less explicitly by his texts.<sup>18</sup> The educational features in some of Capuana's *romanzi per ragazzi* have been compellingly analysed by Rosaria Sardo (2010), while Alberto Carli has focused more broadly on the intersection of journalism and children's literature (2007, 2012, 2015) and also on their connection with Capuana's involvement in education (2011).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See Manai 1992, 1995, 1997; and, to a lesser extent, also 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Along the same lines, one should also mention Nicolò Mineo (2015), who focuses specifically on Capuana's last published collection of fairy tales.

<sup>19</sup> On his collaboration with the educational publisher Rocco Carabba, see Luciana Pasquini's "Introduzione" to Capuana's *Racconti per ragazzi, 1901-1913* (2010); Oster (2015), who analyses Capuana's representation of Sicily within a discussion of North vs South Italian and European public narratives; and the contributions on Capuana and the *Risorgimento* movement by Durante (2012) and Longo (2012).

The latest development in this ideological debate has been provided – within a postcolonial framework and drawing, to some extent, on earlier works by Lucia Re (2009) and Pietro Mazzamuto (1996) – by Virga's recent monograph (2017b, see also 2017a and 2019) as well as individual essays such as those by Zuccala (2018b) and Poggioli-Kaftan (2018). Here some of Capuana's texts are reread, poststructurally, not as the obtusely conservative reactions of a threatened exponent of the conservative elite but as the product of the hybrid socio-ethno-cultural position of an intellectual torn between the ideological framework of the hegemonic national ruling elite and the peripheral world of the rural Sicilian subaltern classes. This postcolonial approach is indeed only one of the cultural turns<sup>20</sup> that have invested Capuana studies after affecting Italian studies as a whole.

#### 1.4 Gender and Intermedial 'Turns'

Another very significant area of investigation, prompted by the consolidation of gender studies within Italian studies over the last few decades, is the analysis of female representation and, more broadly, gender dynamics in Capuana's texts. As seen, in early criticism and 'classic' monographs, the attention to these themes was, on the whole, in the form of scattered references, thematic clusters and individual, 'canonised' characters such as Giacinta. Likewise, it is within the conceptual and chronological boundaries of the naturalistic 'phase' of Capuana's fictional production – as canonised by Madrignani, Traversa and Davies (in the 1880s) – that gender-focused contributions have proliferated in recent years.

Scholars such as Annamaria Cavalli Pasini (1982, 2015), Federica Adriano (2010, 2014), Edwige Comoy Fusaro (2007, 2019), Valeria Pappalardo (1995), Dora Marchese (2009), Lara Michelacci (2015)<sup>21</sup> and Ambra Carta (2019) have explored what earlier critics had classified generically as a 'scientific' interest or 'psychological' approach. Cavalli Pasini and Adriano suggest detailed linkages between the symptoms mostly manifested by Capuana's female characters and the findings of medical science in the late nineteenth century, which – as Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978) illustrates – had deeply permeated European cultural and literary discourse. Along the same

<sup>20</sup> I draw on Ponzanesi 2012. For a more comprehensive take on cultural turns, see Bachmann-Medick 2016. Amongst other recent contributions using 'turn' in relation to Italian studies see Bond 2014.

<sup>21</sup> See Pappalardo 1995; and Michelacci 2015, especially the chapters on *Giacinta* (45-77) and *Profumo* (79-115).

lines, such works as Pappalardo (1997),<sup>22</sup> Comoy Fusaro (2001), and Olive (2001) suggest that Capuana not only assimilated and applied the then most advanced physiological notions to his literary investigations of the human psyche, but also reelaborated and expanded upon these notions in a way that foreshadowed Freudian and Jungian intuitions. These critics argue, for instance, that there is an Oedipus complex at the basis of *Profumo's* mother-son bond, and that the Freudian notion of "la reminiscenza del trauma" (Comoy Fusaro 2001, 125) can be seen in Giacinta's behaviour after being abused, while "l'esistenza della sessualità infantile" (126) can be found in the flashback to Patrizio's childhood in *Profumo* as well as in the short story "Precocità" ([1884] 1974a, 333-42).<sup>23</sup>

In tune, once again, with a general shift in Italian studies – and in the study of modern languages, for that matter – towards interdisciplinarity in general and intermediality in particular, scholars have begun to look at Capuana's writing in relation to other art forms. The studies by Antonio Di Silvestro (1999), Sarah Hill (2004), Giuseppe Sorbello (2008, 2012a, 2014), Giuliana Minghelli (2009), and very recently Comoy Fusaro (2018) as well as, more tangentially, Gussago and Zuccala (2019) argue that the appreciation for the new *medium* of photography that Capuana shared with his fellow *veristi* is most useful in understanding some features of *Verismo* itself and its ambition to 'capture' reality objectively and without bias but not merely as an exact 'photography-like' reproduction. Anna Maria Damigella's monograph, *Capuana e le arti figurative* (2012) – along with essays such as Annamaria Loria's "Luigi Capuana e Sebastiano Del Piombo" (2005) – extends this line of research to Capuana's overall relationship with the visual arts and adds to the already established image of an eclectic Capuana, at once photographer, "disegnatore e pupazzettista" (Damigella 2012, 13) and performer of "esperimenti di incisione" (21). Among the aspects that these studies have brought to the fore is the predominance of women as privileged artistic subjects for all of his activities, from photography to drawing and printmaking.<sup>24</sup> In so doing, this line of enquiry, too, cor-

<sup>22</sup> See also 2003.

<sup>23</sup> The same psychoanalytical approach is also at the basis of Mazzoni 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Similarly, recent critics such as Laura Marullo have acknowledged the importance of the female characters in Capuana's theatrical production. Marullo firstly observes that "il teatro costituisce una presenza costante dell'affollata, operosa officina di Luigi Capuana" and that "scorrendo la produzione teatrale del mineolo è possibile tracciare l'evoluzione di una poetica, delineare un percorso" which is "specchio fedele del periodo di crisi e di lento mutamento di gusto" (Marullo 2011, 1) in *fin-de-siècle* Italian literature. Secondly, she outlines a close connection between theatrical practice and female representation, affirming that "vi si accampa, protagonista assoluto, l'universo femminile con le sue convulsioni psicologiche, con le sue accese passioni, col suo ipertrofico sentire" (1). This 'double correspondence', which closely links female figures and theatrical production and the latter, in turn, with Capuana's overall artistic devel-

roborates the earlier but undeveloped contentions and intuitions (see for instance Mazzamuto 1996; Madrignani 2007) that “la miriade di personaggi femminili” (Ghidetti 1982, 71) might, in fact, be the catalyst of Capuana’s poetics<sup>25</sup> beyond the Crocean canonised paradigm of the female *caso psicopatologico* epitomised by *Giacinta*.<sup>26</sup>

## 1.5 Occultism

An additional and, for the purpose of this relatively concise overview, concluding example of how ‘traditional’ and ‘philological’ Capuana studies have been evolving both by revising the primary sources taken into account and by hybridising and merging with different methodologies, often ‘imported’ (from the Anglosphere), is constituted by the study of Capuana’s interest in *occultismo*. The then popular theme of *il mondo occulto*, the unknown world of supernatural beings, the comprehension of which escaped (official) nineteenth-century scientific knowledge, was fundamental to Capuana’s intellectual quest and well-represented in his entire *oeuvre*, but it has captured critics’ attention only in recent times and only in a rather compartmentalised fashion. Nearly non-existent until the mid-Nineties, this line of enquiry in-

opment, works in itself as a supporting element for claiming, as this study aims to do, the centrality of female characterisation in the evolution of, and the changes within, Capuana’s literary theory (and practice).

**25** Pietro Mazzamuto, for instance (1996, 107-12), sharply frames his study of the short story “Parola di donna” ([1902] 1974c, 5-44) within a broader discussion of the ideological relevance of Capuana’s female characters: “Il personaggio femminile è forse quello che rinvia, meglio del personaggio maschile, a tutta la poetica narrativa e teatrale del Capuana, perché è, tra l’altro, il personaggio che scandisce via via il suo itinerario ideologico e documenta appieno la mobile immagine psicologica e culturale dello scrittore mineolo” (1996, 107). In this observation, an explicit correspondence – though cautious and undeveloped – is drawn between female characterisation and different stages of Capuana’s fictional production, poetological ideas and ideological leanings. Others have since pointed out this very correspondence. For example, Madrignani, in his later *Effetto Sicilia* (2007), comments: “Fra i meriti di Capuana c’è di aver intuito con il suo fiuto di *conteur à la page* che il tema-donna si offriva come una zona di frontiera e di sperimentazione e di aver cercato, con temeraria facilità, di penetrare nei fantasmi dell’‘altro’ – per identificarli, ed esorcizzarli” (85). Lara Michelacci (2015) also speaks of “la donna che è misura di un’identità conflittuale” (16). So does Monica Farnetti’s “‘Pathologia amoris’”: “Capuana sembra non esente dalla tentazione di assumere a sua volta la donna quale possibile figura di interpretazione di un’epoca: a giudicare almeno dalla frequenza con cui i personaggi femminili si presentano alla ribalta della sua narrativa” (1992, 254). Madrignani’s, Michelacci’s and Farnetti’s remarks on women’s centrality in Capuana’s shifting artistic and social conceptualisation, like Mazzamuto’s, point to the scholarly need, here addressed in part, of investigating further such link.

**26** Enrico Ghidetti’s *L’ipotesi del realismo: Capuana, Verga, Valera* (1982) still represents a good example of a critical tradition that has constantly explained female characterisation in a rather cursory and univocal way. It has highlighted Capuana’s “accentuata predilezione per la psicologia femminile” (69), and acknowledged that, among his many female characters, “un posto eminente occupa [...] *Giacinta*” (71).

creased substantially following both Simona Cigliana's critical edition of Capuana's works related to Spiritualism (1995) and Mario Tropea's extensive exegetic work spanning two decades (1994, 2000, 2015). This interest engendered a particularly productive, progressive examination of Capuana's *spiritismo*-related practices in conjunction with the development of his artistic theories and, later, his fiction.<sup>27</sup> Capuana's short stories on the topic are countless and range - in Mario Tropea's words - "dalle teorie della reincarnazione [...] al vampirismo [...] al sonnambulismo [...] alle magnetizzazioni [...] alle presenze misteriose nelle case infestate [...] alle apparizioni [...] alle animazioni di statue e osmosi di vite nelle opere d'arte [...] alle premonizioni [...] alle sopravvivenze fluidiche dei corpi" (1994, 20). These short stories and their *occulto*-related themes have been investigated either individually or collectively by critics such as Della Coletta (1995), Leone (1998), and Tropea himself. Within the same investigative stream, other critics, such as Giannetti-Karsienti (1996), Loria (2006), Foni (2007) and Comoy Fusaro (2009, 79-160)<sup>28</sup> have progressively endeavoured to highlight the link between the *occulto* and the theory of art, by connecting Capuana's reflections on the mystery of the supernatural world with those on the impenetrability of the creative act. This line of criticism has very recently hinted at the link between the theme of the Occult and female characterisation, most explicitly in Michelacci's latest essay (2019), where the critic draws a parallel between Capuana's experiments with evocation, by means of a female *medium*, and his literary, naturalistic representations of female *documenti umani*. This threefold tangle of *occulto*, theory of fiction and female characterisation - however still undeveloped, especially regarding the limited spectrum of primary sources considered - will prove very useful as a foundation for the following portion of this study. It will function as a springboard for my analysis of Capuana's narrativisation of his theories as it emerges - with various degrees of clarity and sophistication - from his early work until his latest collections, completed and published well into the twentieth century.

In sum, what seems to have characterised the critical discourse in Capuana studies in the last few decades is a concerted attempt to re-configure both the spectrum of Capuana's production and the variety of scholarly approaches to it, following criteria other than adherence to the principles and practices of *Verismo*. This approach has brought to light many lesser known texts by Capuana and led to a critical reas-

<sup>27</sup> The republication of the essay was followed by editions of some of his collections of short stories, such as *Novelle inverosimili* (1999b), *Novelle del mondo occulto* (2007) and *Quattro viaggi straordinari* (1992). These testify to the renewed interest in both *occultismo* and *fantastico*. On Capuana and the themes of 'otherness' and 'double', see also Pappalardo and Brunetti 1981.

<sup>28</sup> See also Corradi 2019, 210, which offers a broader contextualisation.

assessment of single works or even clusters of works, previously ignored or dismissed. Critics have also followed the numerous ramifications of Capuana’s interests in order to highlight how the author’s “production culturale hybride” (Comoy Fusaro 2010) and his “sperimentalismo” (Storti Abate 1989, 107; Cenati 2007) have had a lasting effect on the Italian literary and cultural scene. The profile that emerges from this latest phase of Capuana studies is, in Corrado Pestelli’s words, that of a “post-*verista*” author (Pestelli 1991, 14), who certainly played a key role as a theorist and fiction writer in the heyday of *Verismo*, but did not cease to contribute significantly to the literary debate once *Verismo* started to fade. In their analyses, most of these critics have not only foregrounded Capuana’s experimentalism but also ‘applied’ their own, by deploying various and innovative critical approaches – ranging from enhanced philology to postcolonial theory and translation studies – and thus acknowledging the diverse and intriguingly complex nature of Capuana’s production. In so doing, *capuanistica* has been further hybridised geographically, insofar as it has incorporated methodologies developed (as well as scholars working) outside the Italian academy for the most part. Moreover, the importance of both the theory-practice intersection and female characterisation as a “catalizzatore” (Cedola 2006, 160) have been progressively emphasised as being necessarily at the centre of any further investigation into *capuanistica*.

On these bases, this study sets out to further develop this phase of enquiry into the multifarious nature of Capuana’s work. It does so from an angle – that of self-reflexivity – that is as apparently counter-intuitive to the notion of *Verismo* (see above) as it is methodologically ‘foreign’ to the Italian tradition, but which is also self-evidently right at the core of the theory-practice-female characterisation tangle. The study therefore attempts to (re)examine in an ever more nuanced way how Capuana’s experimentalism and eclectic interests respond to one another as well as to late nineteenth-century intellectual trends.

## 1.6 Structure of This Study

Following the way *capuanistica* itself has progressed in recent years, this study is organised along two main exegetic trajectories: one developing the questions of “gender and narrative”<sup>29</sup> – or, rather, the three-fold knot of gender, narrative and theory – in Capuana, and the other looking diachronically at the link and, as will become pro-

<sup>29</sup> This formula, taken from LHN, can be retailored specifically for Capuana: “The (historically contingent) ways in which sex, gender, and/or sexuality might shape both [Capuana’s] narrative texts themselves and [...] [his] theories through which readers and scholars approach them” (Lanser 2013).

gressively apparent, the tension between theorisation and practice in Capuana's production.

As to the former hermeneutic link, Capuana studies as a whole have clearly and convincingly moved beyond an exclusive *naturalista* framework and towards a more articulate set of approaches, concerned with the nuances not only of Capuana's theory but also of his narrative techniques and his social conceptualisation. Yet the same cannot convincingly be said of the studies of his female characterisation. These remain, with a few, albeit notable, very recent exceptions, restricted to the works of the naturalist period: mainly *Giacinta*, *Profumo* and the *racconti* in-between.<sup>30</sup> Acknowledging recent intuitions on the theme of gender, in fact, is not to say that gender is now to be considered exhaustively covered by *capuanistica*. On the contrary, the overarching scholarly answer to the question of what part female characterisation plays in Capuana's narrative seems, after all, to have remained by and large quite univocal. Women are – the critical corpus seems to assert – either the primary focus (*Giacinta*, naturalist *racconti*, most of his theatrical pieces), or the collateral objects (*Profumo*, *Il Marchese*, *La Sfinge*) of Capuana's scientific *études de femme*.<sup>31</sup> It seems, in fact, that much work remains to be done with regard to periods and narrative works that are beyond the (perceived) boundaries of *naturalismo* and it is precisely this 'counter-canonical' route that the first part of this work will take, through the lens of 'metanarrative tension'.

On the other hand, as far as the theory-practice dichotomy goes, the sheer number of Capuana's creative and non-creative efforts has meant that there are still comparatively 'minor' works – or those perceived as such, for example the collection of short stories *Fausto Bragia e altre novelle* (1897), as well as the isolated autobiographical piece *Ricordi di infanzia e di giovinezza* ([1893] 2005) – to which insufficient critical attention has hitherto been paid. The second portion of the body of my analysis is devoted to this particular line of enquiry, once again through the lens of narrative self-consciousness.

Finally, in the context of the aforementioned 'grand' methodological shifts that have been taking place in *capuanistica*, one line of criticism does not seem to have been explored as thoroughly as it could be. One could argue that such an impressive corpus could potentially be approached along the lines of the increasingly pervasive methods that are commonly referred to as "distant reading" (Moret-

<sup>30</sup> Most critics seem to have retained the naturalist criterion even in addressing, for example, such characters as those of Agrippina Solmo in *Marchese* or Fulvia in *La Sfinge*, who would not belong to the naturalist phase from a rigidly chronological standpoint. Such characters, therefore, end up among the environmental causes – the Zolian *milieu* – or the symptoms of a pathology that triggers the (often) male characters' self-destruction.

<sup>31</sup> See also Michelacci 2016.

ti 2013). While the discursive nature and internal economy of this specific study do not lend themselves, in my estimation, to the direct application of Information and Communication Technology and Digital Humanities per se,<sup>32</sup> in the concluding part of the study I nonetheless attempt to retain the insights gained from the idea of distant reading, which are indeed those of distance and 'distancing oneself' (Moretti 2017) from the individual close reading of the individual text. I do so with the aim - once again, through the prism of self-reflexivity - of foregrounding overarching patterns and 'mapping' or 'charting' trends in a literary corpus - Capuana's - spanning over half a century and several hundred pieces of writing.

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**32** I have in fact recently attempted to do exactly that elsewhere: see Musgrave, Zuccala 2019.



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## 2 Self-Reflection as Metafiction, Metanarration... and Autofiction: Terminology and/in Methodology

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In order to adequately approach the theme of self-reflexivity in Capuana and to do so from angles that are relevant to some of the open questions of *capuanistica* – what place female characterisation and gender dynamics have in his theory and narrative and how the very relationship between literary theory and literary practice in Capuana's body of work is (re)negotiated across the decades – a few methodological/terminological clarifications are in order before addressing the individual texts. Within the framework of the geographical and methodological hybridisations informing these reflections, such considerations are to be carried out through a comparison between the Italian academic context and the Anglosphere, which is where the study of self-reflexivity has been conducted most thoroughly. In particular, given that the literary tradition that will be dealt with here is the Italian one, it is especially beneficial, right from the outset, to highlight a discrepancy between the Italian and Anglo-American terminologies. Such a clarification also serves to support the choice of conducting this study (which is nominally published in Italy and by an Italian publisher, albeit in a digital-first, open-access manner) in English.

The seemingly unproblematic and rather self-explanatory definitions of the popular Italian terms *metanarrativa* and *metaromanzo*,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Italian the terms *metanarrativa*, as a genre, and *metaromanzo*, as a product, are the popular ones – without further distinctions. This is demonstrated by the terminol-

used when referring to metaliterary tendencies that are commonly understood as characterising postmodernity and postmodernism – “a hallmark of postmodernism” for Neumann and Nünning (2014), but stemming from the modernist questioning of consciousness and ‘reality’<sup>2</sup> – encompass at least two distinct compositional practices, which are often confused. Indeed, English-language narratology captures these nuances better than Italian, with two terms, *metafiction* and *metanarration*, as explained by Neumann and Nünning:

Metanarration and metafiction are umbrella terms designating self-reflexive utterances, i.e. comments referring to the discourse rather than to the story. Although they are related and often used interchangeably, the terms should be distinguished: metanarration refers to the narrator’s reflections on the act or process of narration; metafiction concerns comments on the fictionality and/or constructedness of the narrative. Thus, whereas metafictionality designates the quality of disclosing the fictionality of a narrative, metanarration captures those forms of self-reflexive narration in which aspects of narration are addressed in the narratorial discourse, i.e. narrative utterances about narrative rather than fiction about fiction. (2014)<sup>3</sup>

ogy adopted by the relatively few Italian comprehensive works on self-reflexive narrative, which usually focus on the second (and some times on the first) part of the twentieth century, such as the pioneering study by Perniola (1967) and the more recent work by Patrizi (1996), Turi (2007) and Neri (2007). As far as studies in English on Italian self-reflexivity go, it is important to mention the 2015 special issue of *The Italianist*, which is particularly interesting for his non- and pre-modernist contents. ‘Classic’ contributions in English include Booth 1952; Scholes 1970; Bal, Tavor 1981; Prince 1982; Waugh 1984; Hutcheon 1987, 2001; Barth 1982; Federman 2006; and Nünning 2004. For a more accurate overview, see Santovetti 2015, 315-16. See also Bianconi 2014, who focuses on the intersection between characterisation and metanarration through the analysis of the imaginary character of the writer in – with Rimmon-Kenan 2002 – the storyworld.

**2** This is made explicit by the title of the second chapter of the by-now classic essay by Waugh (1984): “Literary Self-consciousness: Developments. Modernism and Post-modernism: The Redefinition”. See also, for example, Masoni (2019): “The rampant experimentation in this period and attention to the role of the text as a tool for interpreting reality pushes modernist authors to manipulate their texts in ways that allow them to use the textual construct itself as a literary device. On the one hand, this means that there are acknowledgements in a novel that it is a novel, and acknowledgements in a play that it is a play. However, in addition to this kind of metatextuality, authors begin to manipulate the form of their texts in such a way that the novel or play itself almost becomes a character” (73). See also Cangiano (2018), who points to the intrinsic self-reflexivity that characterises Italian Modernism, “in questo lavoro [his] interpretata come autocoscienza speculativa del modernismo letterario” (15). See also Castellana: “[L]’ideologia postmodernista [...] ha spesso enfatizzato la continuità tra modernismo e postmodernismo sotto l’aspetto dell’autoriflessività e del carattere metatestuale della letteratura” (2010, 25), who singles out Jameson (i.e. 2007) as an exception.

**3** Santovetti expands upon this definition: “Metanarration is defined as the narrator’s reflections on the act of narrating, while metafiction concerns the fictionality (that is, the artifice) of narrative. Metafiction – which may refer to specific techniques includ-

The metafictional element intrinsic to the notion of *metanarrativa*, then, necessarily shatters the aesthetic illusion, interrupts and breaks the mimetic immersion of the reader, making the fictional nature of the story in which the reader is immersed evident.

On the contrary, it can be argued that the act or moment of *metanarration*, the *metanarrative* element within any given text, does not necessarily disrupt such an illusion, insofar as it works as a commentary on one or more aspects of the narrative practice. It does so by adapting itself to the plot of the text, however realistic it might be. To complement this terminological and conceptual range, it is important to mention Werner Wolf's work (2009). Wolf, aiming to indicate how both the aforementioned self-reflexive phenomena have an intrinsic multimediatic potential, uses the term *metareference*.

Given that all three of these terms and the concepts they define are useful when applied to Capuana, and do not have adequate equivalents in Italian, adopting this methodology partly determines the choice of the English language for this study.

One further category that has lately been associated with the discussion on self-reflexivity is the notion of *autofiction*. Elaborated by and large within the French academy,<sup>4</sup> this notion, as Olivia Santovetti puts it, also addresses the realm of self-reflexivity, yet from a slightly different perspective:

[A phenomenon recently given the label of *autofiction*] is self-reflection in the literal sense of reflection of the self in texts that ambiguously mix fiction and autobiography. (Santovetti 2015, 310)<sup>5</sup>

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ing digression, metalepsis, mise-en-abyme, parody, intertextuality, metaphors, narrative embedding, authorial alter egos, dialogue with the reader, or representations of reading and writing – highlights the constructed nature of narrative, undermining its realism, and can therefore be conceived as ‘fiction about fiction’. (Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*, which starts, ‘You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*’, is a typical example). In contradistinction, metanarration may even reinforce the narrative's illusion of authenticity and includes devices such as introductions and conclusions to storytelling (frame narratives) in which the narrator comments on the circumstances of the composition of the narrative, its content and/or reception (the metanarrative comments on the art of storytelling in Boccaccio's *Decameron* fall into this category)” (Santovetti 2015, 310).

<sup>4</sup> Seminal works are Lejune 1975 and 1980. On *autofiction* see Gasparini 2004 and 2008; Marchese 2014.

<sup>5</sup> The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* offers an equally basic yet serviceable definition: “A kind of novel or story that is written as a first-person narrative and that commonly presents itself fictionally as an autobiography of the narrator or as an episode within such an autobiographical account. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is one among many classic novels that fall into this category. The term emerged from modern French narrative theory, but has sometimes been borrowed in English” (Baldick 2008, 30).

Likewise, for Lorenzo Marchese (2014), author of the work that possibly gives the best account of the term *autofiction* – coined by French critic Serge Doubrovsky, with reference to his 1977 novel *Fils* – autofiction is “una forma paradossale” (2014, 7) which could be defined, albeit “con formula tutt’altro che esaustiva” as:

Componimento in prosa di varia lunghezza in cui un autore scrive quella che in apparenza è la propria autobiografia, ma nel contempo fa capire attraverso strategie paratestuali e testuali che la materia della storia che si racconta è da interpretarsi come falsa, cioè non corrispondente alla realtà dei fatti avvenuti e non credibile come resoconto testimoniale [...] la “storia vera” del discorso autobiografico si mostra come un’invenzione in alcune delle sue parti, e il paradosso di una storia insieme veridica e inventata è accentuato dal fatto che non è mai agevole, e in certi casi impossibile, discernere i fatti inventati da quelli invece avvenuti realmente. (7-8)

While, as we will see, Capuana did not write a ‘proper’ autobiography as such, nor an overtly fictionalised one, there are nonetheless a few texts in his corpus that incorporate variously fictionalised autobiographical aspects. While the most obvious amongst those is certainly the juvenile and comparatively understudied *Ricordi di infanzia e di giovinezza* (1893), it will also become apparent how the hybrid notion of *autofiction* may become a useful exegetic tool in other portions of his work, to decipher some of Capuana’s poetological reflections rendered in a narrative form.

While introducing the notion of *metareference*, Wolf’s theorisation is also important to my objectives because it underlines the overall principle that self-reflexivity is “a gradable phenomenon” (Wolf 2009, 58), which depends on and varies according to many contextual factors. Predicting and measuring reader-response is particularly difficult, if even possible, because the response of a single reader to a specific textual trace or textual stimulus cannot be foreseen with certainty. There is therefore no way to guarantee – Wolf’s argument suggests – that each and every self-reflexive instance will be recognised by all readers or read in the same way. By the same token, however, it is plausible to postulate, as this essay will do repeatedly, that the progressive self-reflexivity of a text or, more generally, an artwork is predictable: it can be maintained that, within a given text or a corpus of texts, the more elements that focus on the act of narration itself and/or direct the reader’s attention to the compositional techniques of either that text or any other text, the more plausible it becomes to postulate that the text might be considered, on the whole, as a highly-self-reflexive artistic product.

Within this methodological and terminological framework, it will be possible to address the issue of self-reflexivity, or metareferentiality in

Capuana's work, beginning by reviewing the most relevant instances. While the four concepts outlined above are all useful in relation to the whole of Capuana's *oeuvre*, none can be traced within Capuana's body of work in isolation,<sup>6</sup> with most of Capuana's works containing passages that are at once metafiction and metanarration, metareference and autofiction or different combinations of these. In other words, it would seem inappropriate to subdivide the book according to these rather slippery terminological definitions, so I have opted for a more holistic approach, whereby I will use the problems of *capuanistica*, such as female characterisation and the critical-creative production knot, to shape and organise the analysis of these narratological categories of self-reflexivity, rather than the other way around.

Before progressing to the close and then increasingly 'distant' analysis of the texts, one further methodological clarification is needed, one that stems directly from the strong focus on the narratological facet of self-reflexivity that I have highlighted thus far. As will become progressively clearer, the strong investigative bond offered by both the 'monographic' focus on Capuana alone and the notion of self-reflexivity itself, absorbs most of the exegetic 'thrust' of this research, which therefore cannot afford to venture into a broader genre-based discussion. That is to say, while this study aims to strip Capuana of a *verista* 'straight-jacket', it does not endeavour to put him into a new one, such as a hypothetical 'modernist' one.<sup>7</sup> By stopping short, so to speak, at the threshold of the aforementioned definition of "post-*verista*", as elaborated by Corrado Pestelli, and going no further, this book's goal is not to rewrite the Italian genre-categories themselves

<sup>6</sup> See also Santovetti's resolution with regard to treating separately thickly intertwined concepts: "This volume is born from [our] belief that a rigid classification of these concepts does not help in understanding the phenomenon of self-reflexivity in its complexity. This belief is more than a theoretical assumption because it is constantly reconfirmed in the analysis of our texts: texts in which the categories of metanarration, metafiction, and autofiction always appear in conjunction and interrelation with each other. Therefore, rather than dividing our texts into three groups representing equally the three different categories, we would like to propose a more flexible approach which considers metanarration, metafiction, and autofiction together. Some texts address all three categories, while others explore a combination of metanarration and metafiction, or metanarration and autofiction, or autofiction and metafiction, which means that these categories should be studied in conjunction" (2015, 310).

<sup>7</sup> See recent studies on periodisation such as Mazzoni (2011, in English 2017) which - against the grain of the by-now well overcome *Barriera del naturalismo* theorised by Barilli (1964) - stresses the continuity and fluidity of the "transizione al modernismo" (Mazzoni 2011, 291): "La crisi del modello ottocentesco avviene dunque per tappe: fra il 1850 e il 1890, compimento e dissoluzione si mescolano dentro le opere degli stessi autori; a partire dagli anni novanta dell'Ottocento, la rottura inizia a prevalere; attorno al 1910 'cambia il carattere umano', l'arte perde la sua ovvietà e comincia l'epoca del pieno modernismo. Ma le metamorfosi che, tra il 1910 e il 1940, trasformano il volto del romanzo non giungono dal nulla: nascono quasi sempre da processi che erano già emersi, talvolta in modo vistoso, nel secondo Ottocento [...] fra i tre momenti vi sono sovrapposizioni e ibridazioni continue" (307-8).

or even less 'rethink' an entire periodisation on the basis of one, however intriguing, case study and one, however (post)modernist, narrative element. What the study will strive to do is contribute to rethinking Capuana's position and, thereby, provide a starting point for those who may wish to address such a periodisation.<sup>8</sup>

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**8** See the fairly recent and seminal works Pellini 2004, 2016; and Luperini, Tortora, Donnarumma 2012; in Italy, Somigli 2011; Somigli, Moroni 2004; and Cangiano 2018 as well as, more 'monographically', Masoni 2019, for Pirandello, Donnarumma 2006 for Gadda, and Luperini 2005 and Baldini 2012 for Verga.

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### **3 Gender and Self-Reflections Beyond the *caso psicopatologico*: From Fasma to Fulvia... Through L'Ignota and Faccia Bella**

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**Summary** 3.1 Delfina, Giulia, Fasma, Ebe, Iela, Cecilia... and the Struggle Between Form and Content. – 3.2 “Evoluzione”’s Fasma and a ‘Small (Metatheatrical) Archive of the Heart’. – 3.3 L'Ignota, Faccia Bella and Female ‘Visitations’. – 3.4 La Sfinge-Fulvia and the Historical Progression of Art.

If one does a dance, it is not easy to indicate that one means to say something about the general practice of dancing. Others will assume that you are simply doing a dance, not producing a meta-dancing commentary (Rimmon-Kenan 1997, 12)

As seen in the previous section, female characterisation in Capuana has been commonly understood – until very recently and with exceptions that still occur episodically – mainly as the testing ground for Capuana's theory, thus quintessentially ‘a place of practice’, as opposed to a place of narrative (meta)reflection. It is the creative locus in which Capuana puts into ‘mimetic’ literary practice the theoretical insights progressively developed in his numerous critical reflections: from the early work *Il teatro italiano* (1872) to the later collection *Cronache letterarie* (1899), which closes, with minor exceptions, the corpus of his major critical production. While that is certainly the case for *Giacinta*, *Profumo* and many of the *racconti* during his naturalist period, the aim of this chapter is to show that, in several crucial instances, the link between female characterisation and theory is

deeper and diachronically more multifaceted than has previously been acknowledged. Strong hints towards such further, ‘deeper’ meaning of female characters are provided by Capuana’s early short stories and this continues throughout his literary career. Female characterisations not only help, but even prompt him to articulate theoretically and negotiate the issues at the core of his (meta)literary thought: the form-content knot, the quasi-sexualised encounter between artist and form, and the historical progression of Art. While his very first work, the short story “Il dottor Cymbalus” ([1865] 1974a, 231-352), does not contain references to either female characterisation or self-reflexivity, traces of both appear in his first collection, *Profili di donne* (1877).

### 3.1 Delfina, Giulia, Fasma, Ebe, Iela, Cecilia... and the Struggle Between Form and Content

*Profili*, composed between 1872 and 1876 and published in Catania<sup>1</sup> by Fratelli Giannotta in 1877, was, in Giusi Oddo De Stefanis’ words, “la prima opera organica di Capuana narratore” (1990, 81). It consists of six short stories relating brief and ill-fated love experiences, each titled with the name of a woman and recounted in a first-person narrative voice. Explicitly constructed as masculine, the narrative voice owns a different name in each portrait and narrates his experiences retrospectively, representing the only prominent male character in each *profilo*. The collection has been mostly, and, I maintain, rather flippantly, disregarded by critics. Nearly all major critical contributions, such as Scalia (1952), Madrignani (1970) and Davies (1979), have considered it a rather mediocre and uninteresting example of naturalist and psychological narrative.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for the overall dismissal by most critics lie ultimately in what all of them consider major mimetic weaknesses: an insufficient degree of descriptive complexity and verisimilitude in the way the characters, especially the numerous female ones, are conceived, for which the many French allusions try to compensate unsuccessfully.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the whole collection is assessed as lacking a cohesive principle linking the portraits to one another. This supposed anti-realistic ‘fragmentation’ and excessive Gallicisation leads Judith Davies to consider *Profili* excessively “disdainful of a plot” (Davies 1979, 22) and Michelacci to con-

1 Composition dates are given only for “Fasma” (1874), and “Iela” (1876).

2 Neither Traversa (1968) nor Guarnieri (2012) mentions it.

3 These reasons are well summarised by Giovanni Carsaniga: “Capuana’s *Profili di donne* (*Profiles of Women*, 1877) is a series of portraits of women whose irredeemably conventional and novelettish style belies their pretence of psychological insight” (2003, 70).



clude that ultimately “i *Profili* non mettono in moto una esperienza [narrativa] innovativa” (2015, 123).

However, it would appear that the collection has been assessed on the basis of what it lacks rather than what it contains. It has been considered simply as a preparatory ‘draft’ of *Giacinta* and *Profumo*, without reaching the level of naturalist analytical accuracy of the two novels: “il laboratorio dei *Profili*”, as Michelacci has recently argued, “sta proprio a testimoniare la sua forma di ‘incunabolo’, di banco di prova per i concetti e per la forma narrativa breve dello scrittore siciliano. E si tratta in questa prima fase di uno studio prevalentemente fisiologico” (Michelacci 2015, 137).<sup>4</sup> Yet in recent years, many critics have come to touch upon the hypothesis that the most prominent elements in the collection might be actually those that hint at the presence of a (meta)artistic reflection in narrative form, albeit a quite rudimentary one, on the mode of literary/creative production, rather than the attempt to (re)produce ‘verisimilarly’ often pathological “psycho-sexual” (Davies 1979, 101) cases of masculine and, more frequently, feminine passions.

For Oddo De Stefanis, the protagonists of these *Profili* “sono tutte emblemi della donna in senso astratto” (1990, 82) and the central point of the collection is not that of depicting them in the most accurate way. Rather, the objective is to allow them to function as a (meta)narrative exemplification, depicting precisely the difficulties of representing/rendering on paper “una realtà enigmatica e sfuggente” (82). Similar considerations were proposed by Galvagno (2005), which I shall readdress below in relation to *Spiritismo?*, and by Forni (2015), for whom in “l’esperienza dei *Profili* [...] l’analisi della passione s’interseca con una filosofia delle ‘forme’ artistiche moderne” (86) in a way which is too overt not to be metareferential.<sup>5</sup>

Since those readings touch upon, but do not delve into the self-reflexive element, it is appropriate to review in depth the most relevant textual instances, with the aim of better foregrounding the metareferential value. This will be done specifically in relation to the progression and increased level of sophistication of Capuana’s theoretical thought, of which *Profili* constitutes the first stage. These tex-

<sup>4</sup> To support their argument, all these critics have referred to a web of intertextualities echoing exclusively French models, from the romantic memories of Dumas *filis*, Balzac and Benjamin Constant to the pseudo-scientific pretensions of Stendhal’s *De l’amour* (1868) and the diluted sociological/moral reflections of Michelet’s *La femme* (1860). For Raffaele De Cesare, for instance, in *Profili* “la familiarità, appassionata ed intelligente, di Luigi Capuana con il mondo letterario francese [...] è una realtà che [...] non può essere in alcun modo trascurata o contraddetta” (1992, 89). For the critic, Stendhal’s notion of *crystallisation*, explained in *De l’amour* and explicitly recalled in *Profili*’s “Prefazione” (1877, VII), constitutes the most obvious of these intertextualities, as do a few reminiscences of Balzac’s *Le lys dans la vallée* (1997, 62-3).

<sup>5</sup> But see also Giannetti-Karsienti 1996, 280.

tual instances are too numerous to be listed here, because the full breadth of intertextuality demands a separate discussion.<sup>6</sup> The focus here will be the way in which core theoretical points are articulated. The point of this analysis is to persuade the reader, following Wolf, of the collection's high 'self-reflexive coefficient'.

To start with, this collection of six short stories of unhappy love is anticipated by a *prefazione* – often either unduly ignored by critics<sup>7</sup> or mutilated by editors – that functions as a metanarrative framework, in which the narrator/author (Capuana) illustrates the fundamental characteristics of his art to the reader, thereby orienting their reading process:

Due parole per dire al lettore che queste novelle sono state scritte con l'unico intento di farne un'opera d'arte [...] sono delle sensazioni vere, dei sentimenti veri [...], l'autore si è prodigato di renderli [...] schiettamente, sinceramente [...] quando qualcuna di queste figure [femminili] gli è riapparsa innanzi limpida e quasi vivente si è messo a imprigionarla entro una forma semplice e schietta [...], è riuscito imperfettamente, nessuno lo sa meglio di lui. (Capuana 1877, V, VII)

Taken in isolation from the text it introduces, this *prefazione* is nothing but a textbook paragraph of *poetica verista*. Yet, if read contextually with the six short stories that follow, it becomes what Ansgar Nünning defines as a "paratextual" metanarrative passage (Nünning 2004, 23), one that alerts the reader – at least implicitly – to the need to pay attention not only to the content and to the story but also to its discursive rendition (*narration*: I terminologically follow Rimmon-Kenan 2002): that is, how the author has technically succeeded in turning the inspiration derived from those allegedly 'true' emotions into an effective narrative.

It is with this level of awareness that readers will encounter a series of intertextualities, mostly Goethean-Faustian, but also Hegelian and, to a lesser degree, Shakespearean, which increasingly endeavour to semiotise the female character and bring her progressively closer to the literary form. In so doing, these intertextualities establish and progressively strengthen an allegorical parallelism between the complexity of the female character and the difficulty, in art, of reaching perfection in crafting the form. Intertextuality in these *profili* is not always a self-reflexive element in itself, but one that becomes

<sup>6</sup> I discussed this topic more exhaustively in a philological piece on Capuana *germanista* (Zuccala 2019b).

<sup>7</sup> Even Ghidetti, in his crucially important modern edition of Capuana's *Racconti* (1974) reports the text in a truncated version and set apart from the rest of the collection (Capuana 1974a, 3-5).

such – as in some of the cases examined below – when it steers and prompts the reader to focus on the fictional nature of what they are reading (see Wolf 2009, 63-5), shifting their attention from the mimetic level of the content to that of the composition.

In the opening scene of the first *profilo* – titled “Delfina” – the narrator-protagonist witnesses the scene of the waltz in the third act of *Faust* by Gounod (1859),<sup>8</sup> where Faust acknowledges his love for Margarete, whilst searching through the crowd for his lover. What follows is a linguistic signpost, one that works both in Italian and in German, pointing to the identification of woman and flower: “Quei popoli che chiamano il fiore e la donna con lo stesso nome hanno indovinato un mistero” (Capuana 1974a, 14).

This metaphor is part of a series of correspondences that align the manner in which Delfina and her lover acknowledge their mutual attraction, in the garden of Catania’s Villa Bellini, to the way in which the same happens in *The Garden* scene in *Faust I* (15.3073-3205). In these texts, Margarete is both the name of the flower and the woman and, in *Faust*, Margarete realises that she loves Faust as she tears the petals off a daisy, playing the children’s game of ‘he loves me, he loves me not’.

Goethe appears again in the third *profilo*, in which Oreste, while gazing at the image of the mysterious guest, Fasma, finds himself thinking – “per una strana associazione di idee” – of “una di quelle serene e meravigliose pagine che Omero fra gli antichi e Goethe fra i moderni ebbero, quasi soli, la fortuna di poter scrivere” (Capuana 1974a, 59). Oreste then quotes a passage from the *Iliad* about the quasi-divine beauty and nature of Helen, who, in *Faust*, takes the symbolic role of guide towards the realm of ideal forms. Capuana’s *profilo*, as Galvagno points out, engages very productively with the feminine

<sup>8</sup> Capuana’s interest in the story of *Faust* and its main character matches the rise of attention paid to the play among Italian intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth century. Capuana’s first collection of critical works, *Il teatro italiano contemporaneo* (1872), in which Goethe is mentioned several times, was published after numerous Italian and French *mises en scène* of *Faust*: among others, Doinet’s *Faust et Marguerite* (1846), Adolphe d’Ennery’s *Faust* (1858), Arrigo Boito’s *Mefistofele* (1868) as well as the above-mentioned version of *Faust* by Charles Gounod (1859). This increasing intellectual interest in Faust is in turn reflected in Capuana’s personal collection, which includes a copy of Andrea Maffei’s 1866-69 translation of *Faust*, a copy of his version of *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (1874) and Riccardo Ceroni’s translation of *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1898) as well as a French copy of *Poésies de Goethe* (1885) and Ettore Gentili’s translation of Ettore Berlioz’s *La damnation de Faust* (1846). In relation to Capuana’s narrative, Goethe’s name appears only in Folco Portinari (1976) and in Barnaby (2000). Portinari’s portrait of the Marquis of Roccaverdina as “una sorta di Faust economico” (251) is expanded on by Barnaby’s suggestion of a network of allusions to Goethe’s *Faust* (110). No critics have mentioned *Faust* in relation to *Profili* nor has any critic focused on the connections between Capuana and the nineteenth-century German literary milieu. Interestingly, instead, some of the *Profili* were translated into German by Paul Heyse immediately after publication and included in his anthology of *Italienische Volksmärchen* (1914).

polarisation of its (in this case) two pre-texts in that Capuana “delinea nel racconto due ideali di donna che sono agli antipodi” (2005, 97). Such a dichotomy becomes patent when the narrative voice, Oreste, immediately after calling her “Dea”, in apparent contradiction states: “Elena! Elena! È la massaia!” (Capuana 1974a, 60). *Profili’s* hybrid, “interfigural” (Müller 1991, 115) account of Helen incorporates, then, through the lens of Oreste’s masculine focalisation, both her classic and her Faustian attributes of essentialised femininity and acknowledges how both poles of her characterisation conspire equally to exclude her from the worldly (male) sphere of action.

The link between Goethe’s pre-text and female characterisation is further strengthened at the end of the portrait of “Ebe”, in one of the most pathos-laden exchanges to be found in the collection. While the narrative voice, Alberto, recalls witnessing Ebe’s death, a maxim by Goethe is quoted in combination with one by Hegel:

Una sentenza dell’Hegel mi si presentava [...] limpidissima alla memoria, e me la ripetevo macchinalmente: “La necessità della morte è quella del passaggio dell’individuo nell’universale”. Rrammentavo un’altra sentenza del Goethe: “La nostra vita non è una vera vita, ma la morte della vita divina che viene ad estinguersi nella nostra. (1974a, 96)

This is further evidence to corroborate the hypothesis that these intertextualities allude, in *Profili*, to a (meta)literary discussion – filtered by the feminine and, more generally, by gender-dynamics – of the ideal-real in art. This double quotation is also embedded in a Faustian frame, as the unfolding of the whole scene echoes *The Prison* at the end of *Faust I*. That scene portrays Faust as being torn between abandoning Margarete to be executed, after deflowering and inducing her to commit infanticide, or attempting to rescue her from prison. The same inner struggle is portrayed in the *profilo*, where Alberto finally opts for a reconciliation that might save Ebe’s life. Alberto, as Faust, after a frantic drive in a carriage, reaches Ebe’s sickbed only to witness her death. Ebe, as Margarete, in the last moments of her life, commends herself to God as her ultimate consolation: “Iddio le ha concesso una tranquillità ch’ella stessa non sperava. Dimenticata la terra, tutti i suoi pensieri sono ora rivolti al cielo”, which “accoglie la sua anima afflitta” (1974a, 96). This image of salvation recalls Margarete’s resignation to divine judgment: “Oh my God, I bow to your righteous judgment” and the voice from heaven announcing that she has found God (Goethe, *Faust I* 25.4605; 25.4612) and has been saved.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In addition, Capuana’s citations of Hegel and Goethe both recall lines from Goethe’s poems. In the Hegelian quote, two verses of Goethe’s philosophical poem “Eins und Alles” [“One and All”] resound: In boundlessness to lose and find | Themselves, the sin-

Far from being a mere display of Capuana's erudition, these sophisticated intertextual 'dialogues' with the (two) classics strengthen the connection between the female characterisation in *Profili* and Goethe's masterpiece. The intertextuality, which insists on grouping together the woman and the work of art, can be better understood metareferentially when contextualised amongst the many Goethe-related notes scattered throughout Capuana's essays, bearing in mind, in particular, the way in which the topic of "the feminine" is dealt with in the little-known essay, "L'eterno femminile" ([1885] 1994, 79-83). As noted by Scrivano (1994, 5-16), "sotto l'apparenza di divagazioni sul tema della donna nell'arte, con gli effetti di incanto e di sensualità ch'essa può generare" (9), the essay actually addresses "un aspetto centrale della riflessione di Capuana: quello del comporsi in unità dell'Astratto e del Concreto, o desanctianamente dell'Ideale e del Reale" (9). In "L'eterno femminile" (then also in *Cronache* 1899, 89), Capuana explains how the concluding image of *Faust II*, *Das Ewig-Weibliche* (5.23.12104-11) lends itself to an allegorisation precisely of those form-content and ideal-real relationships. In Goethe, according to Capuana, woman becomes the almost incorporeal principle through which universal values, often of an abstract nature, are explored (Capuana 1994, 81-2). "L'eterno femminile" describes the agency of the Eternal Feminine in *Faust* as passive and unconscious, whereby any "azione diretta, immediata, volontaria della donna amata sull'amante" (1994, 81) is excluded. It also points to the substantial interchangeability deriving from their instrumental role. Despite appearing in the fashion of 'living' characters, they all perform an equally allegorical function. For instance, when "Margherita" reappears at the end of the fifth act as "*una poenitentium* once known as Gretchen" (Goethe, *Faust II* 5.23.12069), "avrebbe potuto rappresentarla qualunque altra figura: la *Magna peccatrix*, la *Mulier samaritana*, la *Maria Aegyptiaca*, la stessa *Mater Gloriosa*" (1994, 82). Owing to their essentialised gender features, they all participate in Faust's grand allegory of human struggle towards "[l]'ignoto" and "[l]'ideale" (82). Therefore, the very reason for Margarete appearing in a worldly, 'realistic' fashion is that Goethe endeavoured not to overtly expose the figurative meaning of his characters: "[Goethe] voleva sempre dare [...] qualcosa di concreto e di reale sotto cui l'astrattezza potesse nascondersi [...] e lasciare indovinare [...] la sua arida essenza" (82). In *Faust*, as elsewhere, Goethe endeavours not to leave those values at the level of abstraction, but rather, to imbue them in living characters.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely this ability of masterful

gle are inclined (1983, 69, lines 1-2). The final tercet of the same poem seems to provide the reference for the second quotation from Goethe: The eternal works in all that's wrought: | For all to nothingness is brought | If changeless being is its will (lines 22-4).

**10** This view is substantially shared by contemporary studies on the feminine in Goethe, amongst which see at least Jantz 1953, Hamlin 1994, Dye 2001. As Ellis Dye puts it,

ly merging form and content so as to bring the abstraction of the idea to life, that reveals Goethe's stature, "lo scrittore dalla forma perfetta" (Capuana 1882, 202):

Le creazioni fantastiche, ed anche, se così vuoi, le strane esuberanze della fantasia goethiana non riuscirono quindi un semplice ornamento poetico, sotto cui si cela il concetto filosofico dello scrittore [...], esse non ci scoprono la figura del poeta in lotta con l'idea astratta del suo tema ed affannato a concretizzarla, bensì ci appaiono esseri viventi. (Capuana 1872, 412)

These critical pages follow Faust's fictional journey from the flesh to the spirit, from sensuousness to knowledge and from the female allegorical forms to the abstraction of *Das Ewig-Weibliche*. Faust's attempt to capture the abstract essence of what appears before him in a worldly fashion (as a concrete form of the abstract eternal feminine) in "L'eterno femminile" becomes an allegory of the "travaglio della creazione artistica" (Muoio 2019, 137) entailed in Goethe's fiction-making process, to which "L'eterno femminile" looks from a reader-oriented perspective. Its reader (Capuana) follows and enjoys Faust's path towards the Ideal 'mimetically', but meanwhile decodes Goethe's allegorising technique. In this way the reader can "indovinare" the abstraction concealed in Margarete's realistic *forma* (and in that of the other female characters) without losing anything of the aesthetic/mimetic experience. "L'eterno femminile" thus uses Faust's 'theme' of the Eternal Feminine as a springboard to illustrate how such a successful process of fiction-making and character-designing as *Faust*, works.

Capuana does something almost identical in *Profili*. Like "L'eterno femminile", *Profili* under "la sua apparenza di divagazioni sul tema della donna" (Scrivano 1994, 9) also conceals a poetological reflection. Yet, it does so narratively rather than in the form of an essay. Its 'theme' is neither the mechanics of love nor the depth and mystery of the female psyche, but rather the narrativisation of some crucial elements pertaining to his conceptualisation of the mechanics of fiction-making. All the women in *Profili* are equally participative in this tension between the abstract concept and the living character, as are Goethe's and Homer's female characters. Beneath the thin veil of the superficial realism of their depiction as suffering lovers, all of

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the female characters in *Faust* are either "type[s]" or "allegori[es]" or "symbol[s]" in a "chain of signifiers" (111) of the Eternal Feminine, for they embody "the Transcendence in the World, [...] the Absolute in Nature [and] the Ideal in the Real" (102). Vittorio Mathieu notes that this unanimously acknowledged instrumental role of 'the Feminine' in *Faust* is tied to their characterological traits. What characterises *Faust*'s female figures is an "individuazione debole" (Mathieu 2002, 68), whereby "la donna è [per Goethe] meno *individuata* del maschio [...] e semmai più *individuante*" (68). She is necessary for man's progressive self-individuation, acting as his Schopenhauerian "*principium individuationis*" (68).

them stereotypically recline their beautiful heads (Capuana 1974a, 15, 47, 49, 53, 63, 93, 149, 139), their skin is “morbida”, “vellutata” [...] “fina”, “lucente” (32, 83, 132), their eyes are beautiful and filled with tears (18, 28, 95, 136, 143), their lips are rosy and trembling (16, 48-9, 40, 70): each and every one of them indeed allegorises, as they do in *Faust*, abstract universals such as sin (Giulia), mystery (Fasma), devotion until death (Ebe).

What increases the self-reflexive ‘coefficient’ of the collection, triggered by all these predominantly metafictional elements of self-reflexivity, are the (many) explicitly metanarrative passages. The third *profilo*, “Fasma”, is especially laden with such metacomments. Among the most obvious references is a literary text by Verga published shortly before Capuana’s writing of the *Profili* (Galvagno 2005, 100). The eponymous protagonist finds her lover-narrator Oreste reading *Eva* (1873) and a debate ensues on the relationship between art and reality, of which the narrator recounts:

L’immaginazione traduceva, interpretava, a suo modo quelle pagine appassionate. Eva e Fasma si confondevano bizzarramente: [...] l’opera dell’artista toglieva ad imprestito dalla realtà; la persona vivente dall’opera d’arte. (Capuana 1974a, 68)

And Fasma herself, overwhelmed by raging jealousy, comments on the nature of the artistic product, which not only imitates but even outperforms reality:

Quell’Eva par viva e commuove ed interessa e si fa amare come a una vera donna riesce di rado. Che infamia è l’arte! Possiamo noi entrare in lotta con la sua potenza, che spoglia la realtà da ogni triviale bassezza, da ogni accidentale stonatura e la rende immortale?! (Capuana 1974a, 69)

In addition, the fact that an excerpt from this fictional argument refers to a historical debate in which Capuana was a participant, regarding whether the arts should bear a moralising message, further increases this metareferential coefficient. “Quel libro è cattivo”, Fasma explains, and Oreste responds: “Credetti accennasse al falso concetto della moralità di un’opera d’arte che è in voga tra noi” (Capuana 1974a, 69).<sup>11</sup>

The passage in which Fasma quotes from *Romeo and Juliet* seems to have a similar function. To Oreste, who is asking her name, Fasma elusively replies, in English: “What’s in a name? ... That which

<sup>11</sup> See for instance *Per l’arte*, where Capuana comments on the critics’ scandalised reactions to his *Giacinta*: “La gente avrebbe dovuto discutere d’arte, e si è messa a strillare per la morale” (1994, 35).

we call a rose, | By any other name would smell as sweet!” (Capuana 1974a, 53). This Shakespearean intertextuality, too, serves “as a *medium* for poetological and aesthetic self-reflection” (Nünning 2004, 43) on the relationship between the concept and the object (*il contenuto*) and the literary sign (*la forma*) representing such a relationship.

Besides the specific contribution made by these self-reflexive instances to the coeval and historical debates – which one may even be inclined to consider rather vague and tautological at this stage – what all these passages make very clear, above all, is how at this point women are the privileged *medium* through which the metadiscourse on art of *Profili* (and elsewhere in Capuana) unfolds. Protagonist Oreste explains how art and woman are inextricably linked and how – in his relationship with ‘the feminine’ – “il sentimento dell’arte c’entr[*i*] spessissimo per più di tre quarti” (Capuana 1974a, 45). These love stories, which all end unhappily, come to represent allegorically that wrestling between form and content, and between writer and writing, that becomes a quasi-erotic dance where the form only extremely occasionally lends itself to the artist, and of which Capuana often speaks in his essays:

Tra il concetto e la forma vi è una lotta continua; che la forma non arriva sempre a imprigionare nel suo organismo le mille gradazioni di un’idea. (Capuana 1880, 162)

La *Forma* [...] cresce, si sviluppa, fiorisce e quando è pronta [...] cerca e trova il fortunato individuo che le occorre [...] e gli si concede, in un fecondo abbraccio spirituale. (Capuana 1994, 47)<sup>12</sup>

From the very early stages, then, it seems that in both Capuana’s essays and (meta)narrative, the narrative/creative act is configured quite explicitly as an act of (masculine) possession triggered by erotic desire. The very association of desire and the creative spark, in turn, immediately calls into play the vast contemporary corpus of critical works, informed by psychoanalysis, “preoccupied with questions of desire” (Stanford Friedman 1998, 134).<sup>13</sup> Given, however, that this scholarly corpus largely pivots on the myth of Oedipus, this specific

<sup>12</sup> See also *Diario Spiritico* (1870, first published in 1916); where the ghost dictates to Capuana what follows: “Creati, per così dire, un mondo a parte, e di tutti i cari fantasmi della tua immaginazione fattene dei *compagni amorosi*, e coltiva la loro compagnia come di amici reali” (1916, 340; emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> “Doesn’t every narrative lead back to Oedipus?” (Barthes 1975, 10), asks Roland Barthes. Variations of and additions to this view, deepening Barthes’ intuition, range from his own *S/Z* – and its known statement: “At the origin of narrative [is] desire!” (1974, 88) – to Scholes’ *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979, 26) to Peter Brooks’ “Narrative Desire” (1984) and Teresa De Lauretis’ “Desire in Narrative” (1987, 104-57), to Adriana Cavarero’s “La Storia di Edipo” (1997, 15-26).



link is best discussed in relation to the far more sophisticated novel *La Sfinge*, in which it is also far better metanarrativised. What is indeed relevant at this stage is that, as a consequence of linking female characterisation and fiction-making, *Profili* seems ultimately to talk primarily about fiction itself. It does so by narrativising intertextually and insistently what, in that chronological phase, is for Capuana the centre of the fiction-making process: the tension between form and content,<sup>14</sup> and the constant and often disappointing struggle of the artist to balance the concrete and the abstract, ideal and real in the literary form. In *Profili* none of the stories ends happily, as in none of these “abbracc[i] spiritual[i]” has the forging of the perfect characterological *forma* taken place. All of the women in *Profili*, these “figure gentili, forme aeree e tremolanti” (1877, VI), ultimately disappear without their ‘essence’ being fixed on the page as a *forma viva*.<sup>15</sup> The “Prefazione” had, after all, preemptively, self-reflexively conceded that “[l’autore] è riuscito imperfettamente, niuno [sic] lo sa meglio di lui” (VII), and the extreme difficulty of reaching such a Goethean balance and *perfezione della forma* is reiterated, one last time, as a metanarrative comment in “Ebe” by the narrator Alberto. He explicitly, yet wistfully, affirms: “Accade sempre a questo modo, nella vita, nell’arte, in ogni cosa; la giusta misura riesce impossibile e all’uomo e alla natura: è l’ideale che non arriva ad attuarsi” (Capuana 1974a, 88).<sup>16</sup>

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Albeit as stable and central as Capuana’s focus on characters (see Michelacci 2015, 2016), the concepts of *personaggi* as living embodiments of philosophical/poetological abstractions and an *amorosa unione* between *forma* and *contenuto* narrativised by *Profili* do not exhaust Capuana’s multifarious ‘narratology’.<sup>17</sup> In the twenty years after *Profili*, Capuana became increasingly articulate as a theorist and sophisticated as a (meta)narrator. Meanwhile, during those years, these themes are reworked over and over and to various degrees of detail in several short stories, where the ostensibly ‘mimetic’ quality of the love story underpinning the plot overshadows a self-reflexive preoccupation with the compositional labour. In the years

**14** See Capuana (1872): “[È] tempo ormai di riguardar [...] con animo più tranquillo, e di stabilire tra la forma e il concetto quell’adeguata proporzione ed armonia che rendono ad un’opera letteraria la sua vera sembianza” (10).

**15** Galvagno had asked: “Il lettore ha ragione di chiedersi perché mai tutti gli incontri irresistibili [...] portano a una fatale separazione [...] insomma che cosa impedisce questo amore?” (2005, 93).

**16** See Zuccala 2019b.

**17** The term is Scaravilli’s (2017).

during which Capuana was writing and publishing *Profili di donne* (1872-1876) and conceptualising *Giacinta* (1875-1879, see Capuana 1972), the female character-centred self-reflexive tension of *Profili* spills over onto some of the short stories of the period. “Contrasto” ([1877] 1974a, 192-8) features, like “Iela”, a male protagonist, Alberto, who longs for a female lover who, as in “Iela”, does not ever materialise. This agonising wait, however, albeit in a very short text, is interspersed with revealing glimpses of the poetic power of female inspiration – “Ah quella bionda testa di donna! Gli accendeva l’immaginazione di riflessi dorati, di rosei fulgori [...]. E il salotto gli s’illuminava di un vasto incendio di sole, e il pianoforte aperto in un angolo vibrava da tutte le sue corde un fremito armonioso, senza che nessuno lo toccasse, per sola virtù della presenza di lei!” (Capuana 1974a, 193). The *attesa* also hints, more explicitly, at the fact that reality is re-created from – *à la* Stendhal – the ‘crystallisation’<sup>18</sup> of memory:

Al brontolio del caminetto, al guizzo delle fiamme azzurrognole, ai bagliori d’oro che montavano ondulanti in alto quasi volessero scappar via per la gola affumicata, tutto il passato gli si risvegliava nella memoria, viveva una vita quasi più reale di quella vissuta una volta! (1974a, 196)

These rather tenuous glimpses unfold in a more sophisticated manner in “L’ideale di Piula” ([1879] 1974a, 199-208),<sup>19</sup> published the same year as *Giacinta*, where the protagonist is an artist of sorts, an ‘unconventional’ poet, consumed by an unattainable ideal:

L’ideale lo consumava, la natura lo aveva impastato male: un sensitivo, un poeta! Non già che egli avesse la debolezza di scrivere dei versi, nemmeno per sogno; i suoi studi, fortunatamente, non gli permettevano di poter distinguere un endecasillabo da un settenario. La poesia l’aveva tutta dentro, nelle sue viscere di sensitiva. Bisognava sentirlo ragionare della donna dei suoi sogni! Venivano le lagrime agli occhi. Una lirica di tenerezza, un idillio, un cantico di adorazioni e di mistici rapimenti...! Ma quel sogno tardava troppo a trasformarsi in realtà. (1974a, 200)

The daydreaming, idealistic Piula – who unsuccessfully yearns for his ideal woman – is described by the narrator as having a ‘poetic nature’, despite being completely untrained in literary composition.

<sup>18</sup> See Michelacci 2015, 118-19 and Ciavarella 1976.

<sup>19</sup> For Ghidetti the *novella* is published in 1880, and is the very first of the *paesane* stream (1974, XLII).

This is due to two personal qualities, which, combined, render the portrait of *Profili's* 'metaliterary' lover: on the one hand, his suffering/struggling nature, on the other, the fact that he is in constant search of an ideal in the real, despite – with Lukács – the daily 'prose' in which his ordinary (love) life unfolds. His short-lived, unsuccessful love quest takes on, albeit very briefly, the metanarrative quality of the ideal-driven, literary-poetic quests of the Faust-like narrators and protagonists of *Profili*. In these two early short stories there is little textual elaboration of the female characters, who, unlike *Profili's*, are both unnamed<sup>20</sup> and do not even appear physically. However, the gender dynamics as a whole – the 'love stories' themselves – acquire a self-referential tinge, in which the relationship between the lovers overshadows the relationship between concepts that are crucial, according to Capuana, to the art of fiction-making.

Along the same lines, particular emphasis is put on the "penoso lavoro" (Capuana 1888b, XXX-XXXI) of the creative struggle, in two short stories composed significantly later, towards the end of the Eighties. The device of the epistolary exchange,<sup>21</sup> intermittently attempted in *Profili*, is deployed more thoroughly in "A una Bruna" (1887). Here, seven letters are reproduced "Dalle lettere di Giorgio \*\*\*\*" – an 'evocative' name (see Sardo 2017 and more comprehensively Muoio 2019, 140)<sup>22</sup> that d'Annunzio had made famous since *Tigre Reale* (1875, G. La Ferlita) and would reuse in a few years time in *Il Trionfo della morte* (1894). The one-sided exchange between the male lover Giorgio \*\*\*\* and his mistress is intertwined with metanarrative reflections on trans-medial artistic composition. Giorgio's metacommentary ranges from the insufficiency and inadequacy of photography as a truly artistic method<sup>23</sup> – a cogent topic in *fin-de-siècle* 'verista vs antiverista' debates<sup>24</sup> and here entwined with speculations on the passing of time and the afterlife<sup>25</sup> – to the discussion of *occulti* phenomena. Occultism emerges

**20** For the link between name and character see Barthes: "When identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created" (1974, 67).

**21** For an overview of the links between epistolary fiction and aesthetic illusion, see Koepke 1990.

**22** Muoio focuses on the relevance of the change of name from Renato to Giorgio (Muoio 2019, 140).

**23** "La fotografia potrebbe forse darmi la malizia che deve brillarvi negli occhi quando mi scrivete certe cose? Potrebbe darmi il vostro sorriso quando me ne scrivete certe altre? Potrebbe rivelarmi quell'aria indignata" (Capuana 1897a, 194).

**24** See Sorbello 2008, 2014 as well as Gussaga, Zuccala 2019.

**25** "L'altro mondo! È la mia vivissima curiosità. Esiste? Non esiste? Confesso francamente di non saperne nulla. Se non esiste, mi sento anticipatamente rassegnato a dormire per tutta l'eternità. Se esiste, ne avrò un gran piacere" (Capuana 1897a, 206). The afterlife links death and photography in a way which is reminiscent, to a contem-

as particularly prominent, with the description of a (fictional?... imagined?... dreamed?... hallucinated?) *visita spirituale* turning into Giorgio's longing for an actual, either physical or 'spiritual' visitation from his interlocutor. The artistic quality of this tangle of reflections and speculations is enriched by Shakespearean quotations (so common in Capuana's *Profili*) and references ranging from Plato to Swedenborg's latest scientific publications. This multilayered, if unsystematic, allusive narrativisation of quasi-artistic phenomena peaks, once again, in a most explicit metanarrative comment, with the acknowledgment of both the centrality and the unattainability of the form-content knot:

Volere o non volere, il passaggio del concetto pensato nella forma letteraria, anche in questa, umilissima, epistolare, è proprio uno sforzo, una fatica da far disperare ... Ah, se sapeste che bei libri ho qui composti in certi quarti d'ora, all'ombra di un ulivo, sdraiato sull'erba!... E come me li sono goduti, solo solo, cogli occhi socchiusi, fumando una deliziosa sigaretta, felice di pensare che non avrei dovuto mai scriverli, mai!... (Capuana 1897a, 195-6)

In the midst of all this lies the semiotisation of Woman, who is no longer just the *Giacinta*-like case study to be dissected under the *microscopio* and *bisturino* of the "scenziato dimezzato" (Capuana 1994, 30) that is the naturalist writer. After all, a woman acquires enough 'active' literary agency to trigger mystery, temptation... inspiration.

Another short story with a female protagonist, titled "Avventura", appeared one year later (1888). "Avventura" is the story of two artistically self-reflexive subjects, "due pittori", Alberto and Giannuzzi (Capuana 1974a, 324). Here the thematisation of the characterisation process of the woman blends into a self-reflexive discussion. The two painters, upon seeing the "apparizione a cavallo" of a Russian *amazzone* by the name of Blichoff, discuss the "abbozzo" of her that one of them had drawn:<sup>26</sup>

Capolavoro d'abbozzo! - ripeteva il Giannuzzi, ammirando. - Oh! Tu intendi consolarmi... - No... - Quel bel corpo di donna, mezzo affondato tra la giubba d'una pelle di leone, già palpitava di vita, con le carni fine, candidissime, inondate di luce in mezzo al gran

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porary reader, of Barthes (see Gussago, Zuccala 2019): "Come mi addormenterò per l'altro sogno? Ho voluto averne un'idea, e mi son fatto fotografare da morto, col capo abbandonato sui cuscini, cogli occhi stravolti e la bocca semiaperta. Non ho, per dire il vero, un viso proprio da morto, scarno, abbattuto dalla malattia" (Capuana 1897a, 207). The contemporary reader is also immediately prompted to link these fictional reflections to Capuana's own playful "autoritratti da finto morto" (Comoy Fusaro 2018).

<sup>26</sup> The trope of the *femme fatale* has been extensively canvassed. See, for instance, Dijkstra 1986; Doane 1991; Stott 1992; Hanson, O'Rawe 2010.

verde della serra, tra le larghe foglie delle piante esotiche [...]. E negli occhi cerchiati di azzurro, nuotanti in voluttuoso umidore; e nelle labbra semiaperte, avido di baciare e d'esser baciato; e nelle brevi narici rigonfie, aspiranti i forti profumi di quell'aria greve, c'era, proprio [...] l'angoscioso desiderio di piaceri acri e nuovi, voluto esprimere dal pittore, isterica smania di donna che cerca di forzar la natura a ibridismi intentati. (Capuana 1974a, 324-5)

Yet, the painter was not able to complete the sketch, as his desire seamlessly shifted from achieving a full representation of the object, to seizing the object itself: "Ma il quadro è secco - osservò il Giannuzzi, passando il dito su la tela. Non vi lavori da un pezzo. - Da tre mesi, da che l'ho vista la prima volta! - E c'era un singhiozzo nella voce d'Alberto. - Che pazzia!... Ti compiangio" (Capuana 1974a, 326). The desire of "possederla" (326) reaches the point where he uses art - a well-crafted letter - to propose a kiss in exchange for his own life (326). Once the encounter is consummated, he commits suicide by poison (331-2). "Avventura"'s Alberto is the first of Capuana's artists to kill himself after an artistic failure, but not the last one, and here the ground is laid for the same theme to be fully developed in *La Sfinge* (1897b).

The tragic undertone of this metaliterary love links it to two short stories published a few years later, "Fausto Bragia" (1897a, 1-50) and "Ofelia" (1897a, 89-108), both released in 1893 and both featuring a prominent component of female character-centred metanarration. The eponymous protagonist of "Fausto" is a thirty year-old decadent artist, *à la* Andrea Sperelli, and one amongst a significant number of Capuana's musician characters, who tries to rivitalise his stagnating musical inspiration by experiencing real passion for an aristocrat, "la non mai sospettata signora Ghedini" (Capuana 1897a, 2). Passion soon wanes, overshadowed by another and temporarily more powerful attraction for a younger woman, one who is also seemingly more useful to his art: "La graziosa civetteria di Cornelia lo eccitava, gli risvegliava nell'animo la passione della musica, se non la scintilla creatrice del compositore" (1897a, 30). The artist ends up committing - not a fashionable suicide like the protagonist of *Il piacere* (1889) - but a homicide to reach that meta-artistic objective, in what is, for Barnaby, a polemical attempt to resituate the decadent artist in the material and bourgeois context (2004, 17). "Ah, la terribile idea! [...] A quali infami accessi lo riduceva colei, spingendolo alla disperazione con la insopportabile gelosia!" (1897a, 34). The *crescendo* of Fausto's homicidal delusion - to be carried out by means of a poison stolen from a doctor-friend's cabinet - is mirrored in metaliterary terms, through the parallel conceptualisation of a sinister *sinfonia*:

[Fausto to his friend Dr Anguillieri:] Ho riflettuto su quella tua idea... bellissima... della Sinfonia dei baccilli, o della Morte. - Ah! [...] Vo-

glio farne proprio qualcosa di grandioso e di terribile, come tu hai detto. Ho già abbozzato... in testa... i punti principali, s'intende: Un crescendo, capisci?... dopo un pianissimo di violini e viole.... Poi, un unisono di ottoni.... Vengo per ispirarmi. – Mi hai fatto paura! – esclamò il dottore, stupito di quell'aspetto sconvolto, di quegli occhi che luccicavano sinistramente evitando lo sguardo altrui, di quelle parole pronunziate ora a scatti, ora esitando. (Capuana 1897a, 38-9)

Fausto's *delitto*, however, is doomed to remain uncommitted. The poisonous candy prepared for his lover ends up in the hands of her husband, who dies after consuming it, and thus, in a twist of fate, leaves her free to marry Fausto himself.

Similarly, in "Ofelia" the (anti)'hero' is the renowned painter Procci<sup>27</sup> who, in the opening scenes, charges himself with murder: "– In che modo? Perché l'ha uccisa? – Per gelosia. L'ho annegata" (Capuana 1897a, 90). He writes, in the form of a confession to a police officer, of how he has been looking for artistic inspiration in a 'real' woman, with whom he falls in love and of whom he becomes morbidly jealous. The starting point is once again an *abbozzo*, for which Procci is seeking a worthy model in a Rome dense with Dannunzian echoes. Here too, a metaliterary attack is detected, however poorly performed (Barnaby 2004, 18-9), on the fashionable motifs of d'Annunzio, the Uberman and the aestheticisation of life: "E che amavo in costei, che cosa? La sua bellezza, il suo fascino, oppure la mia opera d'arte, di cui ella era la riproduzione vivente, quella maledetta Ofelia sognata, idolatrata due anni con la gran passione dell'artista per la propria creatura?" (Capuana 1897a, 102). Here, too, are references – "il mago Donato" – to the fashionable *fin-de-siècle* circle of *sedute spiritiche* that features in the work of coeval writers ranging from Fogazzaro (*Piccolo mondo antico*, 1895) to Pirandello (*Il fu Mattia Pascal*, 1904).<sup>28</sup> Exposed to this cultural *temperie*, Procci decides to hypnotise the woman, not to force her to be faithful,<sup>29</sup> but to extract an honest confession. When the suspected betrayal is confirmed, hypnosis turns into a deadly weapon in the hand of a now completely humiliated Procci – "Io udivo poco; capivo pochissimo... Il cuore mi scoppiava..." (Capuana 1897a, 105) – and the artist is able to mesmerise the woman into drowning herself in the sea. The murder happens in the form of a double killing of both the artwork and the woman so as to stress the duality of the story:

<sup>27</sup> "L'ultimo suo quadro ebbe l'onore d'essere comprato da Sua Maestà il Re, all'esposizione della primavera scorsa" (Capuana 1897a, 94).

<sup>28</sup> See also Comoy Fusaro 2009, 89-90.

<sup>29</sup> "Avrei potuto imporle d'amarmi... Fui onesto; non volli. Che valore avrebbe avuto per me un amore così ottenuto?" (Capuana 1897a, 100).

E nello stesso tempo, rivedevo il mio quadro: Ofelia che affonda lentamente nella riviera tranquilla; Ofelia coronata di fiori, ancora sorretta a fior d'acqua da le vesti che le si gonfiano attorno... E vedevo pure Anna. La vidi sbalordire, smarrirsi, venir meno, affondarsi e sparire fra l'ondata che avvolse tutti in quel momento... (Capuana 1897a, 107)

### 3.2 “Evoluzione”’s Fasma and a ‘Small (Metatheatrical) Archive of the Heart’

The rather monothematic metareflection(s) of the aforementioned works - revolving around the theme of seizing the form - begins to be rearticulated in a more substantially multifaceted guise in two critically overlooked, female characterisation-centred short stories from the Eighties. After the first edition of *Giacinta* and two important collections of critical essays, *Studi sulla letteratura contemporanea (Prima and Seconda serie)* - “tra i quali si annoverano i memorabili saggi su Zola Balzac, Verga, Dossi” (Ghidetti 1974, XXX) - we encounter the short story “Evoluzione” ([1883-84] Capuana 1974a, 406-26). This story features a (relatively) newly married couple, Oreste and Fasma, two “transtextual characters” (Richardson 2010) who unmistakably echo *Profili*.<sup>30</sup> At a structural level, and even before considering the narrative/story, what strikes the reader is the number of framing devices Capuana-the narrator experiments with, largely by subdividing the text into sections belonging to different ‘genres’. The four sections consist of either an indirect narrative or (fictional) reproduction of fragments of correspondence between the two spouses. This quite lengthy piece opens with a narrative section, “Anniversario” (406-10), in which Oreste and Fasma are portrayed together, enjoying early spring. While the two spend a few days in the country, he is, in fact, emotionally distant and thinking about the sixteenth ‘anniversary’ not of his marriage, but of his past love for Iana (reminiscent of Iela in *Profili*). His *rêverie* unfolds along the self-reflexive lines of *sogno-realtà* and *ideale-reale*, which had become so central to Capuana’s work since *Profili*.

Oh, quel suo primo amore! [...] Ma tutti gli altri, affollatisi scompigliatamente nella sua scapata giovinezza, [...] erano stati soltanto prove mal riuscite dell’attuazione di quel sogno!... Din, din, don, don! Ed eran passati sedici anni! Gli pareva ieri. Ogni anno, in quel giorno sempre così. Intanto perché oggi il cuore gli era ri-

<sup>30</sup> Sardo (2017) refers to an “esplicita coscienza metalinguistica” specifically with regard to Capuana’s onomastic choices (128).

masto freddo freddo, e solo i nervi aveano provato il sordo risveglio delle care impressioni? Che voleva dire? [...] In quella malinconia dell'intera giornata, metà del suo organismo non c'era entrata per nulla?... Possibile?... Din!... Din!... Din!... Le ultime ondulazioni delle campane morivano lentissimamente per la calma notturna. - Che hai? - gli domandò Fasma, gettandogli le braccia al collo. Oreste esitava a rispondere. [...] Né poté aggiungere altro [...] non osava confessarle che in quel momento il dolce sogno del suo primo amore si era confuso con la bella realtà tremante di commozione fra le sue braccia! (Capuana 1974a, 410)

After "Anniversario" has thematised the *sogno-realtà* dichotomy, the second section steers this still seemingly 'abstract' discussion about past lovers and the way distant memories of them resurface, onto a more explicitly literary ground, by reproducing excerpts of Oreste's notebook ("Dal taccuino di Oreste", 410-16); the effect is that of weakening, at this point, mimetic immersion and illusion, both by shifting from 'unframed' third-person narration and by now referring to what is in fact a piece of fictional text within the text:

Le imposte della sala erano tempestate di nomi, di date. Altre persone che si volevano bene [...]. C'erano anche dei versi del Byron, che ora più non rammento. - Chi può essere questa Jenny [...] ? - Una vecchia zittellona brutta, sdentata, dagli occhiali verdi - dicevo io. - Una miss Chiaro-di-luna - dicevi tu. Sciocchezze! [...] [C]i venne l'idea di scrivere anche i nostri nomi su quell'album di legno verniciato. E tu scrivesti: Fasma (nome di adozione) col tuo bel caratterino. Io, Oreste, con le mie orribili zampe di gallina; e mettemmo la data, data indimenticabile! [...] Ti rammenti che io vi scrissi alcuni versi in lingua russa che tu volesti tradotti? "Ho visto passare l'Amore | Con un gran fascio di cure. - Dammene, Amore, - gli dissi - Dammene un po' - Ma egli tirò dritto". Sì, sì, versi russi, cara mia! Invece erano motti foggiate lì per lì, di nessuna lingua, senza alcun senso, che io ti tradussi sfacciatamente a quel modo. Quando penso che qualche *tourist* li copierà per cercare di farseli tradurre anche lui! (Capuana 1974a, 414-15)

Besides the striking temporal ambiguity generated by the uncertainty regarding whether the 'you'-addressee in the excerpt is his wife or his lost love, what is further intriguing in terms of textual 'self-consciousness' (Waugh 1984) is that the content of this excerpt is itself, to a large extent, metanarrative. The metanarrativity of this passage is increased through a passing reference to Byron, for example, and, more importantly, by mentioning an episode of pseudo or 'ludo'-translation of imaginary "versi russi" that, Oreste reveals, were nothing but his own creations disguised as translations. For any coeval reader acquainted with



the literary scene, or for a contemporary scholar, this is a rather overt reference, well beyond the fictional realm of the storyworld, to Capuana's own pranks played on the literary scene of the time, particularly to the "pseudo traduzione parodica" (Fulginiti 2014b, 150) that he had written a few years earlier, later published in *Semiritmi* (1888a) and discussed in the collection *Per l'arte* (1994, 131-8). The text was first published in 1882 in *Fanfulla della domenica* with the initials G.P., but in the 1885 essay "Un poeta danese", Capuana explained the prank, intending to satirise "i tanti pretesi cultori di letteratura straniera che in Italia traducono, o fingono di tradurre, da tutte le lingue europee moderne" (1994, 138). "È inutile aggiungere", Capuana continues,

che, come non è mai esistito un poeta danese chiamato Getziier, così sono un'invenzione i canti che si dicono tradotti e i giudizi dei critici citati. Al *Fanfulla della domenica* giunsero parecchie cartoline che incoraggiavano il presunto traduttore; nessuna che avvertisse il giornale di essere stato messo in mezzo da un burlone. Se qualcuno dei tanti nostri *traduttori di traduttori* [emphasis added] di poeti stranieri ha già, per caso, versificata la mia prosa, ora è pietosamente avvertito. (Capuana 1994, 138)<sup>31</sup>

Capuana uses this *escamotage* both to criticise the Italian habit of subserviently, almost obsessively, translating foreign poetry - implying also the principle of the language ethnicity and the 'dogma' of untranslatability<sup>32</sup> - and to experiment with a then virtually non-existent *verso libero* (Fulginiti 2014b, 143, drawing on Lombez 2005; and Miliucci 2014, 3). While in "Evoluzione" there is no breach, at this stage, of the veil of mimesis (the actual historical *burla* on Capuana's part is not mentioned), the allusion would be apparent to any reader of either *Fanfulla della domenica* or, from 1885, *Per l'arte*.

In the section "Presentimenti" (1974a, 416-21) the narrative pace/mode reverts to extradiegetic narration - describing Fasma's illness and her questioning of her husband's feelings - and then leaves room for one further, epistolary section, comprising three letters, two to his wife Fasma, within which the one to his friend Giorgio is nested. This framing structure juxtaposes truth and mystification in a way

<sup>31</sup> See also Miliucci (2014, 3), who explains the possible reasons for deploying such a device: "La traduzione da autori stranieri, specie se fittizia, è un espediente per cui vengono a scontrarsi in una terra di nessuno prosa e poesia, anticipando un movimento tipico del passaggio fra i due secoli, e aprendo lo scenario a una terza via che sembra costantemente in controllo nella nascita di ritmi nuovi". On this episode see also Fulginiti 2014a and 2014b.

<sup>32</sup> See Fulginiti: "Capuana prende di mira la moda della traduzione dalle letterature nordiche e delle 'traduzioni di traduzioni' da lingue non conosciute direttamente - una pratica di cui lo stesso autore si macchierà nel 1891, traducendo Ibsen dal francese" (2014b, 152).

which is in itself enticingly self-reflexive: in the two letters to his wife, the portrait of a devoted husband is evident, one who is disappointed to be kept away from his spouse by business obligations. Yet in “A Giorgio B\*\*\*”, Oreste surprisingly writes: “Con mia moglie è andata benissimo. Sono stato un commediante di prim’ordine, sublime a dirittura” (1974a, 424) and then discloses the stratagem that allowed him to spend time with his mistress Gilda.<sup>33</sup> He describes his ‘performance’ when, after receiving the letter from a fake client Bucci, the sending of which has been orchestrated with a friend, he pretends he must immediately depart and head back into town. The juxtaposition of ‘reality’ and fiction, both embedded in what is very clearly an ‘artwork’ (a fictional letter embedded in a sequence of letters, in turn embedded in a multi-section short story) stresses the importance of fictionality itself, both in dealing with a marital situation and, more fittingly, in dealing with writing: writing not only ‘constructs fiction’, but re-creates reality in some sense. In 1883-84 Capuana’s thought is still at a relatively early stage, but this will become a crucial principle from *Per l’arte* onwards. For Madrignani, from Capuana’s theorisation it emerges how:

La realtà illusoria che l’artista deve saper imporre [...] ha l’apparenza dell’altra realtà senza esserne la copia, ed anzi superi la natura attraverso una ricercata naturalezza artificiale. (1970, 120-1)

As Scrivano points out: “L’idea dell’opera d’arte come organismo succedaneo e parallelo [e superiore] della realtà è forse il più alto punto che la riflessione critico-estetica di Capuana raggiunge” (1994, 15). Capuana himself is quite explicit about the fact that his art “non sarà mai la fotografia” (1882, 129) but rather re-creation, mediated not only by reflection – as it is inevitable in a time of massive scientification and medicalisation of culture – but also by *fantasia* and *immaginazione*:

Dal momento che la realtà passa nel mondo della rappresentazione artistica, ha già perduto qualche cosa della sua natura materiale, e non è più precisamente quale può vedersi aprendo gli occhi; è più elevata. (Capuana 1994, 165)

However, on the basis of the already prominent self-reflexive (meta-fictional + metanarrative) aspect of the work, it could be argued that the structure of “Evoluzione” itself stages not the sentimental evolution suggested by the title, but rather the repeated sequences of ‘unframed’ narrative-‘paratextual’ narrative, suggesting an evolution in

**33** A mistress named Gilda is to be found in the late novel *Rassegnazione* (1907). Here too the name refers to one of the protagonist’s short-lived Milanese affairs.

the direction of, and a systemic gesturing towards, self-reflexivity. “Evoluzione” then represents, in a certain sense, a progression from *Profili*’s insistence on the sole theme of *forma* and *contenuto*, insofar as it introduces – albeit in an extremely allusive, undeveloped fashion – another, and somewhat broader, crucial path of metareflection on the evolution and macro-shifts occurring in ‘genres’ and ‘kinds’ of literary production, in which the notion of *realità ricreata* is also imbued. While in these early stages this macro-progression is still *in nuce*, by the end of this study it will be seen to reveal a pattern that allows one to account diachronically for the entirety of Capuana’s artistic experience.

Whilst compiling another very major critical (non-fictional) collection – the pivotal *Per l’arte* (1885) – Capuana returned to creative writing with a short story that deserves more attention than it has hitherto received, and for reasons akin to those that make “Evoluzione” an extremely intriguing piece of self-reflexive writing. The short story “Il piccolo archivio”,<sup>34</sup> which is dismissed by Ghidetti as nothing better than an “esercitazion[e] salottier[a]” (Ghidetti 1974, XXXIV), displays its metanarrative content in a very articulate manner. The title itself suggests a connection with the notion of meticulous storage, if not production, of ‘literary’ materials more explicitly than “Evoluzione” does. The case of this specific short story is rendered even more interesting because of its “transmodalisation” (Genette 1997, 277-8 and Boselli 2011, 53). It exists, as a “giocattolo a doppio fondo” (Zappulla Muscarà 1984, 169), in both a novelistic and a theatrical version, published in 1886: the *atto unico* “written before the short story with the same title, [yet] [...] published later” (Boselli 2011, 64 and Raya 1969, 72).<sup>35</sup>

The short story – whose latest title is the self-explanatory “Visita” (Raya 1969, 72) – is, once more, about two lovers ‘captured’ by the narration during one of their last meetings, before parting due to Maria’s husband being transferred to Napoli. Maria comes to Ludovico’s home while he is arranging his *archivio* of little collectables – “fiori secchi, lettere ingiallite, pezzettini di nastri, gingilli” (Capuana 1974a, 362) – which remind him of his diverse range of past flirtations: the daughter of his *fattore* (in 1866), then a classy woman, then an eager letter-writer, then a *marchesa*. This display irritates the nameless guest, who fears that the same destiny of ‘public’ revelation could be reserved for her own letters. She leaves embittered, hence revealing the actual depth of her now-betrayed feelings.

<sup>34</sup> Dated 1884, published in 1885 (and Raya 1969, 70, entry 1026) and later included in *Le appassionate* ([1893] 1974a, 362-74).

<sup>35</sup> This is a variation on the usual progression in Capuana, with Ghidetti, “[un] abile manipolatore, in sede teatrale, delle più fortunate delle sue novelle” (Ghidetti 1974, XLII).

The most interesting insights into what appears as an otherwise entirely unexceptional<sup>36</sup> story are provided by Stefano Boselli. The critic focuses not so much on the short story itself, but on the play composed just before (Capuana 1999c, 3-12). He does so from the (often self-reflexive) perspective of intertextuality, building on a comparison with Verga's "Cavalleria Rusticana" (short story: 1880, 125-40, the play premiered in 1890), which is corroborated by paratexts where Capuana comments on its adaptation and vice versa. As a way of emphasising the versatility of the one-act format, Boselli points out that, while, on the one hand, in the context of realism, the one-act play was appreciated for its 'hypnotic' qualities, which allowed the hiding of the author's presence in a quintessentially *verista* fashion, on the other hand, the short play "offers a precious alternative, with a stronger role of intertextuality, at the theatre" than longer plays, which are inherently weaker when it comes to the presence and relevance of intertextuality (Boselli 2011, 51). Boselli continues:

Thanks to its brevity, [the one-act play] [...] may be used as a flexible tool that can dramatised dialogue between works before the eyes of the spectators, in the here and now of the performance [...]. By staging at least two short plays within the same event, a director is in the position to offer not an authorial sentence, but a series of utterances and a vision of dialogic interrelation, thereby leading the audience to ponder the larger intertextual matrix. (51)

The one-act play has an intrinsic self-reflexive potential, then, that can be exploited as much by a hypothetical 'director' as by a scholar seeking to find metareferential comments/traces. In the play, as in the text, "piccolo archivio" refers to the cataloguing of his lovers that the protagonist maintains - "il riordinamento del vostro piccolo archivio del cuore" (Capuana 1999c, 19) - through examining, one by one, the items that remind him of a specific woman. And yet, the purpose of this *spolio* is more subtle: "*Il piccolo archivio* is remarkable [...] as a collection of layers and motifs within an intricate intertextuality that connects not only to the *Verismo* school, but also to the dramatic tradition, which Capuana knew well thanks to his job as theatre critic" (Boselli 2011, 65). Firstly, the piece incorporates many explicit transmedial hints, "including writers Byron, Sévigné, Fogazzaro, and painters Raffaello and Correggio" (65). Even more crucially, it is the enumeration of "love samples" themselves that, for Boselli, contributes to metanarrativity: each love piece is linked

36 For Pasquini: "Due personaggi, due amanti, come ce ne sono tanti nella letteratura e nel teatro ottocentesco" (Capuana 1999c, 8).

both to a ‘type’ of female individual<sup>37</sup> and, through it, to a theatrical tradition beyond realism:

His first woman was the daughter of his steward. When he comments “Allora amavo il rustico, l’ideale dell’ideale!” (20) he is in fact referring to the utopian portrayals of Arcadian societies that influenced the theatre as well. The next woman, the first real “lady” belonging to modern times, “fu così bestia [...] da provocare il mio rivale e buscarmi un bel colpo di punta al braccio, guaribile in dieci giorni” (21). It is easy to associate the events with *Cavalleria*, with the exception that the “hero” here did not (could not?) die. The third episode was an opportunity for Federico to vindicate himself of feminine volubility (“Tradii per tradire” 21) and reflects the tradition of bourgeois drama the verists were trying to supplant. Finally, the last abandoned woman is a clear example of emotional excesses: she writes too much and in a style suitable for Fogazzaro, but might at the same time anticipate D’Annunzio.

[...]

All the letters (i.e. types of sensibility and dramatic types) have now found their place in the little archive, and the play is actually a hypertext that not only alludes to, but playfully satirises the texts it quotes [...]. We are reminded of Capuana as critic: “C’incalza ancora l’accademia, l’arcadia, il classicismo e il romanticismo. Continua l’enfasi e la retorica, argomento di poca serietà di studi e di vita. Viviamo molto sul nostro passato e del lavoro altrui. Non ci è vita e lavoro nostro” (*Il teatro* xxi-xxii). (Boselli 2011, 65-6)

Therefore, Boselli concludes, “Capuana’s play alludes to the other [“Cavalleria Rusticana”] directly and attempts to archive it” (68) in a way that is eminently self-reflexive, as an *archivio* not so much of love memories, but rather of literary and, specifically, theatrical forms. As in “Evoluzione”, the focus of this (meta)reflection seems gradually to become broader, to go from the particularity of the quasi-sexualised act of creating fiction to the more ambitious reflection around liter-

**37** I borrow here from Capuana himself: “Noi creiamo dei tipi! - dice lei. Peggio per loro. Il tipo è cosa astratta: è l’usuraio, ma non è Shylock; è il sospettoso, ma non è Otello: è l’esitante, il chimerizzante, ma non è Amleto, e via via. Potrei facilmente moltiplicare gli esempi; ragionando con lei, basta un semplice accenno. Dei tipi! Ma tutta la letteratura moderna è la negazione di questo principio estetico classico, già sorpassato; lo afferma involontariamente lei stesso quando parla di individualismo. L’arte, signora, oggi crea (quando riesce a crearli) individui, non tipi. L’artista moderno si è convinto - e a questo convincimento l’ha indotto la scienza - che ogni creatura umana è un mondo a parte, immensamente ricco, immensamente vario, quasi altrettanto infinito quanto l’universo” (Capuana 1898, 46).

ary forms as such and their interrelation. If that is the case, though, it raises the question of what the subsequent shift to narrative form might signify. In fact, the primary concern is whether the short story not only ‘archives’ preceding dramatic forms but also the theatrical form itself. After all, Capuana had declared the demise of (Italian) theatre very early on: “Nella storia dell’arte drammatica la nostra parte noi l’abbiamo già avuta [...] il vero, l’unico teatro italiano fu già la commedia dell’arte” (1872, XXV). Boselli’s sophisticated appraisal fails to acknowledge that, in Capuana, this reflection is central and philosophically grounded in a Hegelian framework of historical progression, which only fully manifests itself (meta)narratively a few years later. What is significant here, in anticipation of that discussion, is that in the transition to the *novella* – a transition that, according to Luciana Pasquini (Capuana 1999c, 8) is “più semplice del previsto [...] [i]l passaggio da un genere all’altro è pressoché automatico” – there is the addition of a further and fundamental layer, which appears to bracket the theatrical art form itself. Nevertheless, it is only in *La Sfinge* that this very point is made metanarratively in a convincing manner and is therefore best discussed in full in relation to that novel.

### 3.3 L’Ignota, Faccia Bella and Female ‘Visitations’

The twofold piece, “Il piccolo archivio”, is a testament to both metareference and transmediality (from short story to theatre). In Capuana, self-reflexivity traverses both media and genres, being able to reach and infiltrate seemingly non-fictional and (quasi)autobiographical writing. In this category, firstly, one finds the very highly cited *Spiritismo?* (1884).<sup>38</sup> On the surface, *Spiritismo?* is a long essay, dedicated to Salvatore Farina, on the manifestations of the Occult such as medianic “comunicazioni e apparizioni” (Capuana 1884, 1).<sup>39</sup> Yet, one notices how its argument frequently unfolds through the parallels between these pretended and mysterious supernatural phenomena and the equally mysterious processes of artistic creation (see Giannetti-Karsienti 1996; Galvagno 2005; Mangini 2007; Foni 2007). The eminently literary quality of the piece can be seen in the very first lines, where the opening quotation comes not from a medical/scientific treatise, as one might expect from Capuana’s previous practice, but from his beloved Shakespeare, often used for (meta)narrative purposes:

<sup>38</sup> This was composed in a decade rich in narrative works (at least three renditions of *Giacinta* - ’79, ’86, ’89 -, the composition of *Profumo, racconti appassionati*), but in which the self-reflexive production is scarce.

<sup>39</sup> See Tropea 1994 and Cigliana 1995 for a contextualisation of the work and a critical commentary.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, | Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*, I. 5 (Capuana 1884, 1)

Then, after a passing review of some recent publications in the field of Spiritualism the text quickly turns to the topical issue of *scrittura medianica*, one that is closer to Capuana's own creative interests. The essay recounts how Capuana began by performing experiments of magnetism/mesmerism and hypnotism on the landlord's daughter in Firenze (1864), and how he soon tried to turn her into a means through which he could 'produce' literature:

Covavo, da mesi, una *Vita di Ugo Foscolo*, il mio idolo letterario giovanile, ed ero arrabbiatissimo di certe lacune incontrate qua e là, che non trovavo modo di riempire [...]. Fu così che mi venne la cattiva idea d'indirizzarmi allo stesso Foscolo, facendolo evocare dalla Beppina. (Capuana 1884, 93-4)

The description of his own, 'literature-driven' experimentations with magnetism then leads to a journalistic reportage of variously documented episodes of somnambulist writing. The metaliterary, self-reflexive quality of the work peaks at the centre of the collection. Within an argument that supposedly demonstrates the existence of the Occult, Capuana places an anecdote, presented as autobiographical, of a "caso di allucinazione artistica [...] complicata" (Capuana 1884, 226). Here the author (Capuana) recounts how, after seeing Van Dyck's painting *Ritratto d'ignota* in a museum in 1875, he is haunted by that image, which demands to be accepted and loved as a 'real' woman would:

Ogni notte [...] la fantasticata allucinazione della novella diventava quasi una realtà. Sentivo in quello stanzone di Via Ripetta la presenza della Ignota. [...] Aveva un tal fascino che io non sapevo più resisterle. (Capuana 1884, 232, 235)

The anecdote, writes Capuana, gave him the idea for a "novella fantastica" revolving around precisely this phantasmagoric 'persecution'. And yet, although tormented for days by the phantom of his inspiration, he cannot – unlike what, to some extent, happens in *Profili* – convincingly incorporate the feminine inspiration into the literary form:

Un bel soggetto di novella fantastica! Sì... Ma la chiusa? La catastrofe? E mi addormentavo nel cercarla. E così ogni notte, da capo, vivevo per qualche mezz'ora in uno stato strano, né di completa realtà né di allucinazione completa; talché, a volte, non sapevo più distinguere se fosse l'idea della mia novella che mi producesse quella piccola allucinazione, o se quell'idea fosse la semplice

sensazione di un fatto a cui io assistevo, spettatore ed attore nel punto stesso. Ma la chiusa? la chiusa? [...] quel fantasma di donna scappa[va] via appena accennavo di volerlo imprigionar nella forma e renderlo visibile agli occhi altrui. (Capuana 1884, 234, 235, 238)

The anecdotal-narrative quality<sup>40</sup> and self-reflexivity of this passage have not escaped some of those critics who have focused on this, in truth, rather widely known episode of *Spiritismo?*. According to Cedola, notwithstanding the ‘pretended’ artistic failure, what is left is *de facto* a (short) novel nesting in the pages of the essay:

Naturalmente la novella risulta invece essere stata scritta [...], proprio la storia non narrabile è raccontata di riflesso, con un operazione (forse consapevolmente) iperletteraria - trasposta in quest'altro contesto che è il saggio sullo spiritismo. (Cedola 2007, 32-3)

In the same vein, there is also a metanarrative passage in *Spiritismo?* that retraces the compositional process of the last of the *Profili* (Giannetti-Karsienti 1996, 282). Here Capuana narrativises his creative experience, adopting a non-autobiographical third person - “il caso seguente [...] tratta d'un tale che allora stava per pubblicare un giovanile volume (249)” - and transforming it into a narrative excerpt, which - as in *Profili*, to some degree - describes how the author of the *caso* was prey to an eroticised relationship with the (feminine) form-object of his narration:

Per due giorni, una vera ossessione lo aveva posseduto; e la creatura della sua fantasia, più viva, più evidente d'una creatura reale, gli avea ripetuto dentro [...] il lungo processo d'una passione morta di sfinimento poco prima. Col cuore sconvolto, col cervello in fiamme, egli avea lavorato dodici ore al giorno, di seguito. [...] Aveva amato e posseduto, nella sua allucinazione artistica, l'adorato fantasma; e quel processo di passione così rapidamente ripetutosi nella sua immaginazione e nel suo cuore, avea prodotto gli effetti della passione reale. (Capuana 1884, 253-4)

These hybrid inserts, in what remains fundamentally and primarily a critical essay with an autobiographical undertone, infuse *Spiritismo?* with sections of narrative that have a high self-reflexive com-

<sup>40</sup> For Failli: “Non può certo essere trascurato il fatto che anche questo testo non è compreso in un volume di narrativa, ma in un testo di interesse scientifico; questa collocazione e un'esplicita dichiarazione di esperienza autobiografica fanno sì che il lettore si trovi di fronte a un testo che non possiede la realtà arbitraria propria dei testi letterari, ma che d'altra parte non è possibile considerare pura e semplice cronaca vera” (1985, 155).



ponent, rather like that of *Profili*. This is further corroborated by the fact that even the main claims for autobiographical truth are on occasion undermined by hints of the narrator's unreliability: "Senti, caro Farina; io ti racconto l'impressione schiettissima del fatto, come fu allora provata; non l'analizzo, non la commento; e mentirei se ti dicessi di esser proprio sicuro che in quel momento non fossimo, anche noi, sovraeccitati in sommo grado e mezzi colpiti di allucinazione..." (Capuana 1884, 120).<sup>41</sup>

It is, therefore, by ultimately walking the line between scientific essay and 'autofiction' that *Spiritismo?* negotiates 'the (meta)fictional' into the space of the non-fictional. This experiment both precedes and is conducive to the self-reflexivity of *Ricordi di infanzia e di giovinezza* ([1893] 2005),<sup>42</sup> the only text by Capuana that has explicitly autobiographical ambitions.

In *Spiritismo?* he mainly uses divulgative non-fiction to underpin metareference. It is along the same lines that the first chapter of the little-known *Ricordi*, where self-reflexivity liaises more heavily with the genre of (quasi) autobiographical writing, should be analysed. While the whole of *Ricordi* is useful and informative, especially in regard to the depiction of Capuana's precocious pro-*Risorgimento* convictions, it is in the opening chapter (1839-1845) that Capuana describes his infantile, recurring vision/dream of a woman entering his room and embracing him. In this story, a very young Capuana first encounters a 'fictional' character and the product of his imagination, who takes the shape of a flesh-and-blood 'visitation' (Davies 1979, 100):

Ricordo [...] un fenomeno, notevolissimo di cui serbo netta memoria, come se si trattasse di caso recente; avevo tre o quattro anni. In quella camera, su quel lettino, ho fatto, notte per notte, lo stesissimo sogno. Oggi che fin la scienza comincia ad occuparsi di visioni, di apparizioni forse non dovrei dire sogno, tanto più che anche allora lo credevo proprio una realtà. Non ne ebbi mai pau-

<sup>41</sup> This kind of occasional bracketing of the certainty of truth does not seem to be, after all, too far from what 'canonical' authors of contemporary Italian autofiction produce. See for example Giulio Mozzi: "Anche questo ricordo è inventato, e io sono costretto a chiedermi che cosa sto facendo. Sto raccontando cose vere e false insieme, sto fantasticando cose che non sono accadute e forse sto cercando di convincermi che sarebbero potute accadere, e che ciò che allora desideravo accadesse erano appunto queste cose. E allora non so se ciò che sto raccontando è solo ciò che mi è accaduto [...], nel qual caso dovrei fare qualche tentativo per limitare l'invenzione, per costringermi a raccontare esattamente ciò che è stato, oppure se ciò che sto raccontando è una mia fantasia che riusa senza scrupoli ricordi veri e ricordi falsi, invenzioni vecchie e invenzioni che mi vengono in mente nel momento stesso in cui scrivo" (1998, 125).

<sup>42</sup> See Fichera's introduction (2005) for the editorial history of the work: "Le pagine memorialistiche dei *Ricordi di infanzia* non sono il risultato di una pulsione nostalgica o di una rievocazione appagante del mondo conosciuto, ma sono a pieno titolo un esempio di letteratura verista tout court, di cui il nostro fu teorizzatore" (6).

ra, non ne parlai mai né alla mamma né ad altri; mi compiacevo di quel segreto; e vistolo replicare per più notti di seguito, la sera affrettavo l'ora di andarmene a letto per vedere se continuasse a riprodursi identicamente; si riproduse ripeto, notte per notte, due anni o poco meno. (Capuana 2005, 13)

Using the anecdote to build suspense, Capuana stresses the recurrence, the almost obsessive nature of the visitations – which go on for a staggering ‘almost two year’-period – as well as the ‘realistic’ quality that characterises them: “lo credevo proprio una realtà”. Then, he goes on to recount the episode, and the *visitatrice* in vivid detail:

Una notte, dunque, *sognai o vidi* [emphasis added] un luccicore che s'insinuava nella mia camera [...] diventando di mano in mano più intenso; poi, senza che l'uscio si aprisse, apparve una bellissima signora, vestita di raso bianco [...]; i biondi capelli le splendevano attorno al capo come un'aureola, ma i lineamenti della faccia e gli occhi erano immobili. S'inoltrò lentamente fino al mio letto, guardandomi fisso, mi prese *ignudo* [emphasis added] su le braccia, e mi portò via con sé, facendomi passare per l'uscio chiuso. Alla luce blanda, quasi lunare, che si diffondeva dalla sua persona. [...] La bella signora mi fece passare a traverso [lo stanzone] [...] tenendomi sempre su le braccia, e sentii lo stento del passaggio; poi non vidi né sentii più niente. Né sveglio potei ricordare altro. Ogni notte così [...], il sogno dimenticato lungo la giornata mi tornava vivissimo alla memoria, e attendevo impaziente l'apparizione di colei che avevo soprannominata *Faccia Bella*. La notte appresso, d'acapo. Mi rimane di questo sogno o visione un ricordo così preciso che scrivendo mi è parso di rivedere, come allora, il fiavole luccicore che diventava di mano in mano più intenso, e poi l'apparizione della bellissima donna. (Capuana 2005, 13-14)

The way in which these numerous visitations take place vaguely recalls how the “forme aeree e tremolanti” of *Profili* (Capuana 1877, VII) invade the narrator-author's memory. Even more strikingly, however, the mechanics of these encounters echo almost verbatim the above-illustrated, self-reflexive anecdote in *Spiritismo?*. Whether or not, in the fictionality of the story, the young Capuana-character makes the literary association with *Faust*, what is significant is that Capuana-the mature narrator<sup>43</sup> explicitly does so: “Ora, anzi, posso dare un'idea più precisa del suo costume. Il lettore rievochi il fantasma di qualche prima donna vestita da Margherita per le rappresentazio-

**43** For a case study-based analysis of how Capuana exploits the device of splitting narrating- and narrated-self, see Carta 2011, 59.

ni del *Faust* o del *Mefistofele* e vedrà la mia *Faccia Bella*" (Capuana 2005, 14). Although constantly reassuring the reader about the truthfulness of the anecdote – "Particolare importantissimo, allora io non avevo nessuna idea di un costume simile, né d'altro che avesse potuto suggerirmene qualche immagine approssimativa" (14) – Capuana cannot refrain, towards the end, from associating even the very first episodes of his infancy with the 'production of an artwork': following the visitations, a depiction of the Holy Mary magically appears, which is, in turn, quasi-sexualised in a way that is at odds with the infantile focalisation of the episode:

Al capezzale del mio lettino era apparsa una Madonna dipinta sul vetro: visino roseo, dagli occhi cilesti, contornato dalle pieghe di una mantellina azzurra che non lasciava vedere altro. Quella Madonna è stato il mio primo amore. La guardavo rapito, la baciavo come persona viva e non con sentimento religioso: le volevo bene perché era bella, perché quei grandi occhi cilesti erano più belli di tutti gli occhi da me visti e mi pareva mi guardassero e sorrisessero nel guardarmi. *Faccia bella*, benché fosse trascorso solo qualche anno, era già una visione lontana [...] e la Madonnina rappresentava qualcosa di più concreto; di queste prime rivelazioni del cuore m[i] [...] è rimasto un senso vago. (Capuana 2005, 14-5)

Yet, in this instance too, the narrator cannot help but introduce a *caveat* regarding the absolute truthfulness of what he is narrating:

Dormivo o ero ancora sveglio quando l'apparizione si rinnovava sempre allo stesso modo e con le identiche circostanze? Qualche volta, ripensandoci nella giornata, mi pareva che non avevo [*sic*] affatto sognato e *Faccia Bella* diveniva soggetto di breve fantascienza infantile. (Capuana 2005, 13-4)

In so doing, *Ricordi di infanzia e di giovinezza* realises the tension not so much between 'fiction and reality' as between 'truth and reality' (Marchese 2014, 7), to the extent that Marchese's generic formulation of autofiction can be reworked on the basis of this chapter of *Ricordi*. In *Ricordi*: "Non è mai agevole, e in certi casi impossibile, discernere i fatti inventati da quelli invece avvenuti realmente" (8) with the testimony that "si inquina alle radici" (8) and "reale e fittizio [...] si presentano agli occhi del lettore [...] come i due bracci di una forcella che non riusciamo a focalizzare [...] è [Capuana] [...] l'unico ad avere una visione esatta della forcella, ma non mostra alcuna intenzione di condividerla" (8). Such a tension is, in *Ricordi*, espoused to the issue of fiction-production, and bent to serve metanarrative purposes.

While this already tenuous autofictional impulse in Capuana's work appears to fade after *Ricordi*, what peaks in the Nineties is fe-

male character-centred self-reflexivity. The motif of the female visitation and/or of the woman semiotised into a self-reflexive device, in fact, can be traced, in the most sophisticated way, in *La Sfinge* (1895-1897).

### 3.4 La Sfinge-Fulvia and the Historical Progression of Art

As I have pointed out more comprehensively elsewhere (Zuccala 2019a), *La Sfinge* represents the most complex theorising effort carried out by Capuana in a single self-reflexive narrative piece. Here, Capuana's narrativisation and comments on his artistic theories reach maturity. The many, partly undeveloped, female characterisation-centred self-reflexive threads that have intermittently come to the fore in previous works are here recomposed in a vastly superior narrativisation, one that by its very existence counters some critics' claims of theoretical approximation<sup>44</sup> on Capuana's part, particularly in his 'post-*verista*' phase. As in some of his earlier stories, *La Sfinge's* plot revolves around the story of a Roman playwright, Giorgio Montani, who, in a fit of inspirational crisis, contemplates exploiting his own love affair with the seemingly candid widow Fulvia, as a source of narrative material. Fulvia, however, turns out to be more and more mysterious and contradictory (i.e. Capuana 1897b, 43, 46, 66), to the point where Giorgio is prompted to identify her by association with a symbolist painting of the Sophoclean Sphinx that dominates the wall in his study.<sup>45</sup> "La Sfinge mitologica; sei tu, siete tutte, è la donna, l'enigma insolubile!" (Capuana 1897b, 95), screams Montani,<sup>46</sup> before killing himself with a shot-gun. After decades of being utterly disregarded, the obvious, and yet not unproblematic, meta-artistic theme was tackled for the first time by Annamaria Pagliaro.<sup>47</sup> For Pagliaro, the novel's self-reflexive elements are to be found mainly in Giorgio's (meta) literary comments, which are mostly directed to his only interlocutor in the story, his lover Fulvia. Given the prominence of such comments in the narrative, and the correspondence one finds between them and Capuana's critical pieces, it seems to Pagliaro that in *La Sfinge*, Cap-

<sup>44</sup> See at least Azzolini 1988.

<sup>45</sup> For Barnaby (2004, 19) it is a metareference to *Le Sphinx Vainqueur* by Moreau (1886). The pattern of female characterisation that emerges from the story is that, put in Rimmon-Kenan's terms (2002), of an increasing or developing 'complexity'. For a more complete synopsis of the novel, see Zuccala 2019a.

<sup>46</sup> These words are overtly reminiscent of Fausto's: - "Ah! La mia Venere infernale è proprio lei! - esclamava Fausto disperatamente".

<sup>47</sup> For a review of earlier critical appraisals - Fuller 1897, Scalia 1952, Marchese 1964, Caccia 1962, Tonelli 1928, Lucini 1971 and Davies 1979 - see Zuccala 2019a.

uana “fa[ccia] del suo protagonista il portavoce della propria ideologia artistica” (1989, 67). However, the realistic plot, the many and excessively overt metanarrative comments and equally excessive symbolism, render *La Sfinge* a less than satisfactory work, from many points of view, realistic, symbolist, and self-reflexive:

Nella *Sfinge* il lettore invece di trovarsi partecipante, di fronte a un brano di vita, si trova a cercare di mettere insieme un puzzle che dovrebbe corrispondere alle macchinazioni della mente alterata del protagonista. (Pagliaro 1989, 70)

Such “uso di simboli un po’ forzato” (69),<sup>48</sup> revolving around the image of the Sphinx, inharmoniously combined with Giorgio’s too explicit artistic reflections, mars both the reader’s possibility of aesthetic immersion and that of appreciating the novel metanarratively. In Pagliaro’s view:

Sia il dramma del protagonista, sia l’ambiente sono così artefatti che riesce impossibile al lettore sentirsi di fronte ad una rappresentazione di vita immediata o ricostruirsi nella mente il procedimento della creazione artistica. (1989, 69)

In the case of *La Sfinge*, any analysis intending to shed new light on this dimension of the novel cannot dwell on an all-too-obvious metanarrative layer, but, rather, ought to examine how the numerous, openly self-reflexive comments, combined with the intricate symbolism of the Sphinx in the Oedipus myth, allow for the exegetic path opened by Pagliaro (1989; and enlarged by Barnaby 2004), to be expanded. This, in turn, leads to reconsidering *La Sfinge* as a substantial piece of self-reflexive writing, one that at once narrativises and puts into practice crucial theoretical principles, as they were being articulated by Capuana in his critical pieces with increased clarity, and as we have seen them self-reflexively emerge, more or less convincingly, in the works analysed earlier.<sup>49</sup>

In the light of all that has been discussed above, it is possible at this point to understand how Capuana’s theory – one that unfolds with increasing complexity decade after decade – can be understood in relation to two core, intertwined principles, the first of which is the principle “delle forme artistiche e del loro svolgimento nella sto-

<sup>48</sup> This is reminiscent of Caccia 1962: “Una simbologia un po’ falsa, che non piace [...], non è possibile non rilevare la gratuità di certi atteggiamenti e motivi. [...] Una raccolta, potremmo dire, di cattive cose di pessimo gusto” (2907-08).

<sup>49</sup> This narrativisation has been discussed in a more complete manner in Zuccala 2019a.

ria" (Sportelli 1950, 39).<sup>50</sup> Capuana conceives Art as one unified and evolving macro-organism of the literary genres, that is, Art itself as a historically progressive form. For Capuana, genres are like biological organisms, which are born, grow and decay.

Le forme artistiche sono quasi identiche alle forme naturali, e non capricciose, accidentali; ma svolgonsi con un logico processo, arrivano alla loro perfetta applicazione, decadono e muoiono. (1950, 39)

La storia d'un'opera d'arte va calcolata preciso come la storia d'un organismo. Il dramma degli indiani, la tragedia dei Greci e i lavori di Shakespeare non sono da reputarsi una cosa affatto diversa. (Capuana 1872, XVII)

This organic progression of art leads artists to abandon 'exhausted' forms spontaneously in favour of newborn ones. More specifically, in Capuana's times, this principle is what had led to – see the hints in "Il piccolo archivio" – the exhaustion of theatrical art (especially drama, which was most appreciated during the *Risorgimento* in that it was infused with historical patriotism) – and to the increasing prominence of the "incipiente forma del romanzo moderno".<sup>51</sup> Each stage of this evolution represents a natural stage of the pseudo-Darwinian artistic progression from 'sentiment' to 'reflection'.<sup>52</sup> If reflection played a bigger role in contemporary naturalist (and post-naturalist) literature than it had done previously, that did not imply that the imaginative function was dead and art had become a fully speculative endeavour, but rather, that the proportion of imagination and fantasy and reflection had shifted.

This very stable and solid principle in Capuana's theorisation<sup>53</sup> was found in the works of the French Positivists, Taine and Bernard, but it can actually be traced back to Hegel. The philosopher, in the *Aes-*

**50** On the importance of this metaphor and some important distinctions regarding its use, see Fishelov 1998.

**51** But, Capuana clarifies: "Questo non vuol dire che la produzione teatrale non continui o non possa continuare anche dopo; ma vuol dire però che continua come accidente, come forma vuota di contenuto reale, più retorica che arte" (1872, XIX). On this matter see Balloni 2007, 147.

**52** As Capuana explains in *Teatro*, "Ostinarsi nella ricerca dell'Epopea [...] vuol dire non accorgersi che le forme dell'arte, in generale ed in particolare, abbiano subito straordinari e radicali cambiamenti [...] non avvedersi che noi possediamo al giorno d'oggi un'opera d'arte non meno difficile dell'epopea e popolare quant'essa al suo tempo, ma più seria, più variata, più efficace, diremmo quasi più eccellente, e questa è il romanzo" (389).

**53** The durability of this principle is well illustrated by Anna Storti Abate (1993, 35) and also emerges from Giorgio Luti's overview of the collection *Gli 'ismi'* (1973, XV-XXI).

*thetics* (1831), uses the Sphinx as a “symbol of symbolism itself” (Hegel 1975a, 360), of the progression of the human Spirit in history and the progression of genres in the history of art: from the ‘primitive’ epic of Homer to the speculative thought of nineteenth-century philosophy, through *commedia dell’arte* and Shakespearean tragedy. For Hegel, this symbolism is intrinsic to the hybrid form of the Sphinx (see also Regier Goth 2005, 120), with the human head (i.e. human reasoning) emerging from the primitive and twofold animality of the eagle’s wings and the lion’s body.

Out of the dull strength and power of the animal the human spirit tries to push itself forward, without coming to a perfect portrayal of its own freedom and animated shape, because it must still remain confused and associated with what is other than itself (Hegel 1975a, 361)

Capuana absorbs the Hegelian theory of the historical progression of the arts, not only from De Sanctis’ *Saggi critici* (1866) and Camillo De Meis’ *Dopo la laurea* (1868, 126, 180), but also by reading Hegel directly (see Patruno 1980, 1996; Pupino 2004, 23-39; Balloni 2007, 139);<sup>54</sup> it, therefore, does not come as a surprise that, much like Hegel in the *Aesthetics*, Capuana decides to pick precisely the image of the Sphinx to symbolise that progression in the novel. The human (feminine) head progressively emerging from the animal body perfectly signifies the struggle of a superior, more ‘reflexive’<sup>55</sup> art form – the modern novel initiated by Zola and, before him, Balzac – to overpower the ‘animality’ of prior, more ‘primitive/sensuous/imaginative modes of artistic expression. Furthermore, as Regier Goth remarks, the Greek Sphinx – like her sister,<sup>56</sup> the Chimera – has in fact a “tripartite anatom[y]” (2005, 79): she is partly human and partly bestial, with her bestial part in turn subdivided into two, between lion and raptor. Inconsequential though this nuance may appear, this ‘disunity’ even within the unity of the animal part appears signifi-

<sup>54</sup> Patruno (1996) and Pupino (2004, 23-39) both examine in further detail the way in which Capuana’s theory merges the Darwinian struggle for life with the Hegelian evolution towards speculative prose.

<sup>55</sup> See *Spiritismo?*: “la riflessione entr[a] oggi nell’opera di arte in maggior quantità che non pel passato” (1884, 216); and *Per l’arte*: “Questa benedetta o maledetta riflessione moderna, questa smania di positivismo di studi, di osservazioni, di collezione di fatti, noi non possiamo cavarcela di dosso. È il nostro sangue, è il nostro spirito; chi non la prova può dirsi un uomo di parecchi secoli addietro smarritosi per caso in mezzo a noi. Ed è naturale quindi che dal nostro sangue e dal nostro spirito la riflessione positiva passi a rivelarsi anche nell’opera d’arte” (1994, 43).

<sup>56</sup> Pasquini gives a minimalist account of the relationship between the Sphinx and the Chimera: “il mostro chimerico è generato, come la Sfinge, dai rapporti incestuosi della comune madre Echidna, quindi partecipa appieno del suo mistero enigmatico” (Pasquini 2012, 19).

cant when associating the anatomy of the Sphinx with the ‘anatomy’ of the modern artwork as it emerges from both the novel, *La Sfinge*, and Capuana’s critical works. In Capuana’s essays, an artwork is the combination not of two, but of three components: *riflessione*, *fantasia* and *immaginazione*. “Fantasia” and “Immaginazione”, as Enrica Rossetti shows (1974, 99-119), are often used in combination in Capuana’s essays (for instance *Per l’arte* 1994, 40-2), appearing as the twofold opposites of *riflessione*: “l’immaginazione è una delle forme nella quale [sic] si esprime il pensiero; la riflessione ne è un’altra” (1974, 106). Capuana’s essays show the reader that *fantasia* and *immaginazione* are really two facets of the same non-reflexive pole: “per rappresentare [un soggetto] [...] ci vogliono sempre quelle due divine facoltà: la fantasia, l’immaginazione, che potrebbe anche darsi siano un’identica cosa” (1994, 45). The duality of the concept of *immaginazione*, then, seems to be captured well by the duality of the Sphinx’s animal body.

Art forms, explains Capuana in *Cronache letterarie* (1899), appear, “proponendo ai giovani scrittori, come la mitica Sfinge, enimmi insolubili [...] e colpendoli fatalmente se non riescono a risolverli” (158).<sup>57</sup> In such a progression, theatre is the exhausted form, one that after peaking with Shakespeare’s tragedies, decays. Indeed, Capuana states very clearly:

Io mi son rifatto per conto mio e secondo cotesto piano semplice e naturale tutta la storia dell’arte drammatica nelle sue linee più larghe, ed ho visto uscirne fuori la rigida conchiusione [sic] che la forma tragica raggiunse, è già tempo in Inghilterra, il suo ultimo sviluppo con Shakespeare e la forma comica in Francia con Augier e Dumas figlio ai di nostri. (1972, XXV)<sup>58</sup>

These critical pages by Capuana are echoed by Giorgio Montani’s metareference in the novel, where the protagonist explains to Fulvia – who is unsuccessfully trying to “urge Montani back to his writing desk” (Barnaby 2004, 23) to make him finish drafting his play, *Arianna*:

I capolavori [teatrali] son tutti già fatti. Noi siamo arrivati troppo tardi. Rifarli è cosa stupida; dovremmo accorgercene facilmente. (Capuana 1897b, 84)

<sup>57</sup> See *Cronache*: “O Romanticismo, chimera della generazione che precedette la nostra! O Verismo o Naturalismo, che sei stato anche la mia chimera. [...] O idealismo, o Simbolismo, chimera della generazione presente! [...] O unica e sola Chimera, che assumi diversi aspetti, iridando le penne delle tue ali ad ogni nuovo riflesso di luce, e che sei stata Romanticismo e poi Verismo e oggi idelismo e Simbolismo e assumerai domani chi sa quale inattesa e più lusinghiera sembianza!” (1899, 154-5).

<sup>58</sup> As Ghidetti’s above-mentioned essay, *L’ipotesi del realismo*, highlights, Capuana was referring to his project of writing a universal history of theatre, which, however, he would never complete (1982, 82-3). See also Capuana 1872, 389.



Indeed, it is due to such an inherent exhaustion of theatre as an art form that the creative efforts of the protagonist are inevitably doomed to fail. What may look simply like the evidence of a pessimistic stance is in fact the affirmation of the historically determined superiority of a genre. Giorgio personifies the inherent exhaustion of theatre as an art form, as postulated by Capuana's critical pages. Theatrical works as such are seen as intrinsically incapable of capturing the vitality of reality in its outmoded and insufficient forms. This is the reason why, in the story of *La Sfinge*, the composition of the *Arianna* play is not completed and, instead, procrastination is endless. In contrast, the novel *La Sfinge* is successfully completed and published. The failure of Giorgio as a playwright is not, in this instance, the failure of Capuana the novelist.

The choice of the Sphinx as a central symbol in the long *racconto*, therefore, is more than a naive homage to a fashionable symbolist trend. It is, in embryo, the fundamental principle of the biological-idealistic evolution of literary genres, one that, as has been shown, previous short stories had only been able to touch upon metanarratively.

The presence of one particular intertextual reference further reinforces this thesis, a "mezzo verso dello Shakespeare" from Act Five of *Othello*: "Eccolo! Io son colui Che Otello fu!" (53) [That's he that was Othello: here I am]<sup>59</sup> (Shakespeare 2005, 205). Here Giorgio is talking about himself as a disappointed suitor and refers to himself as a 'new' Othello. In a self-reflexive light, Giorgio comparing himself to a Shakespearean character makes Capuana's theoretical point: Giorgio, one of Capuana's best-crafted fictional characters, represents the natural evolution postulated by Capuana's own evolutionary theory of genres, according to which Shakespeare's dramatic characters (e.g. Othello) become living characters of fiction. Immodest though this claim may sound on the part of both Giorgio and Capuana, it is nonetheless perfectly aligned to Capuana's theory.

In *La Sfinge*, the other crucial aspect of Capuana's theory, the 'micro-theory' of the individual act of artistic creation (on which previous works also focus in a self-reflexive manner, but without an adequate content basis), is effectively narrativised. In all the works discussed above, the self-reflexive focus is almost exclusively on the eroticised struggle, on the artist's part, to merge *forma* and *contenuto*: on 'desire', as contemporary critical theory would put it, as a basis for narrative. Overviewing the scholarly corpus, from Barthes to Cavarero, it is noticeable how crucial the image and the story of the Sphinx are. In particular, De Lauretis and Cavarero seem to focus most thoroughly on the unfolding of the encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx.

<sup>59</sup> Barnaby regards the quotation as a "self-aggrandising Shakespearean imagery" combined to "Hackneyed decadent rhetoric" (2004, 21).

By doing so, De Lauretis' erudite discussion reaches the conclusion that what underlies Western narratives of all times is the universal (masculine) desire of the (male) hero - the mythical (male) subject - to gain knowledge (and therefore power) through penetrating, trespassing into the (feminine) regions of the mysterious, the unknown and the forbidden. The myth of a male Oedipus defying and defeating the female Sphinx so that he can reach the object of his desire is thus paradigmatic of the key role played by desire in any narrative (De Lauretis 1987, 104-5). Cavarero's reading, too, points out that the knowledge Oedipus craves is itself the knowledge of a narrative - his own story - and that both the Sphinx who speaks in riddles, symbolising the obstacles to the hero's desire, and the (incestuous) object of that desire, Queen Giocasta, are feminine. Thus, narrative generates and is generated by desire, and vice versa (1997, 15-26). It is all the more plausible, then, to expect *La Sfinge* to provide some sort of self-reflexive hint in this direction, as well as for the symbolic power of *La Sfinge* to unfold through the story of Giorgio and Fulvia, particularly one framed explicitly as Giorgio's attempt to penetrate Fulvia's riddle.

When approaching Capuana's conceptualisation of the creative process in his critical work, it becomes obvious that his critical pages explain its phenomenology not only as a heterosexual struggle/intercourse, but also as a sort of "allucinazione artistica" (1884, 356), and that they do so by drawing - in the manner of *Spiritismo?* - a scientific parallel between artistic inspiration and somnambulist and hypnotic states.<sup>60</sup> Following Richet's studies on the human psyche in *L'homme et l'intelligence* (1884) and Taine's *De l'intelligence* (1871), Capuana describes the artistic spark as a "sdoppiamento di coscienza" (Giannetti-Karsienti 1996, 277), in which the artist experiences a state of intermittent lucidity, consisting of a series of very brief "amnesie dell'io cosciente".<sup>61</sup> These *intermittenze* take place in a semi-conscious state, very similar to that of the *medium* in the experiments of *somnambulisme provoqué*, as described in *Spiritismo?* and metanarratively touched upon in some of the works hitherto examined. While in this state, the artist's mind transforms the "fantasmi" floating in the recesses of its memory in "figure" (279); when emerging from this condition, the artist tries to fix, to imprison these 'figures' in artistic form. Owing to its semi-conscious nature, the very core of the creative process remains for Capuana "forse per sempre un fenomeno inesplicabile nella sua essenza" (269), not only to those who study it but also to the artist himself: "C'è sempre un punto, nell'atto della produzione, in cui la facoltà artistica agisce con

<sup>60</sup> On this parallel in both Capuana and Verga see also Mangini 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Giannetti-Karsienti 1996, 269, 278. See also Cigliana 1995; Foni 2007; Michelacci 2015.

completa incoscienza [...] il vero punto della creazione si avvolge [...] nelle misteriose oscurità dell'incoscienza" (Capuana 1884, 216-17).

In examining the love-story between Giorgio and Fulvia, one finds that it is indeed characterised by such "intermittenze" of consciousness, as Giorgio's jealousy obscures, at times, his lucidity. But it is again an intertextual reference, at the very beginning of the story, that enables the reader to connect the description of the creative process in Capuana's critical pages more compellingly with its (meta)narrative rendition in *La Sfinge*. The key element here is not a quote, but rather a place, the Pincian Hill in Rome, where Giorgio had first seen Fulvia. This intertextual element points directly towards Capuana's writings: the pages recalling how the inspiration to draft the first version of *Giacinta* came to him:

Fu certamente in una dolce serata di ottobre del 1875, lungo un viale del Pincio, che la irresistibile tentazione mi si presentò tutt'a un tratto alla mente [...] così m'apparve all'immaginazione per la prima volta Giacinta, seducente visione, a traverso la calda parola di un senatore del regno. (Capuana 1972, 32)<sup>62</sup>

By beginning with this intertextual element, the narration links the tormented liaison between Giorgio and Fulvia/*La Sfinge* to the turbulent 'love story' between the writer and his beloved character, Giacinta. The more the affair unfolds in the novel, the more the impression is reinforced that it must carry a metanarrative meaning related to the fictional process of sign-production, owing to the progressive semiotisation of Fulvia. In Giorgio's eyes, she progressively turns from a flesh and blood woman into, literally, a written 'sign' and a writing tool. She loses her surname first: "Fulvia Fiorelli-Crispi era divenuta soltanto Fulvia per lui" (1897b, 39). Then her forehead turns into a page to be read:

La guardava con occhi dilatati, frugandola con lo sguardo. Era dunque proprio innocente o affatto impenetrabile colei? Non leggeva niente di quel che si attendeva di leggere in quella fronte ombrata da riccioli [...] Ah, potessi leggere qui dentro! Le picchiava delicatamente con le dita d'una mano su la fronte, spalancandole in faccia gli occhi ansiosi. (Capuana 1897b, 95)

On Fulvia's 'page' a question mark is 'carved': "due fossette, rileva[vano] leggermente le gote sotto quelle caratteristiche pinne nasali, simili a un punto interrogativo tracciato orizzontalmente" (64). When Giorgio discovers that her page has been written on by

<sup>62</sup> Ghidetti's *L'ipotesi del realismo* also comments on this anecdote (1982, 60-1).

others, such as when Dottor Butironi tries to kiss her hand, he states that it must be erased and rewritten: “Ma egli l’aveva già presa per una mano – per la mano baciata da colui! [...] Vo’ scancellare! Vo’ scancellare! [...] Nessuno deve toccarti, neppure con un dito!” (146).

However, it is not even the semiotisation itself that matters the most, but the fact that it is Fulvia who spontaneously lends herself to such a gender-based instrumental function: “Per un uomo come te, la donna non può, non dev’essere uno scopo, ma un mezzo” (Capuana 1897b, 100). This act of self-surrender and self-objectification echoes Capuana’s theory once again: a female character who portrays herself as a *medium* is immediately reminiscent of the instrumentalisation of a woman for literary purposes, as described in *Spiritismo?*’s experiments, where Capuana “aveva voluto mettersi in contatto, tramite la sua sonnambula, con lo spirito di Ugo Foscolo, per chiarire alcuni episodi di una biografia che aveva in mente di scrivere” (Cigliana 1995, 30). Such a consonance with both Capuana’s essays and his previous short stories is further corroborated by the fact that in the novel, in order to activate Fulvia’s inspirational power, Giorgio repeatedly asks her to visit his studio:

Vieni a farmi una visita, vieni a lasciarmi nello studio, assieme col profumo del corpo, il tuo lieto fantasma in tutti gli angoli, su le poltrone, su le seggiole. Vieni a toccare, a rovistare i fogli dell’*Arianna*. (Capuana 1897b, 87)

The sketch of the Sphinx – as Barnaby points out – is already in Giorgio’s room when he first meets Fulvia, but, crucially, it is unfinished, as often occurs in Capuana’s work: “figure appena delineate, [...] contorni indecisi, [...] segni tracciati con mano febbrile e che in qualche punto bisognava interpretare per intenderli” (Capuana 1897b, 21-2). As a result of Fulvia’s “visitations” (Davies 1979, 101), in his moments of lucidity Giorgio stares at the piece of art<sup>63</sup> – “S’era distratto un istante, stupito della vivissima e nuova impressione che gli veniva da quelle note figure” (Capuana 1897b, 44). In those interludes of consciousness, he works creatively on those hallucinatory images: “gli era parso che la impassibile e bellissima faccia della Sfinge si fosse animata e negli occhi e sulle labbra le fosse balenato un sorriso, oh! Il sorriso di Fulvia” (48).

The device of the unfinished painting of the Sphinx that comes to life perfectly objectifies the phases of Giorgio’s creative process: after he has reworked his memorial impressions of the observed object (Fulvia), he vivifies the sketched artwork while semi-conscious.

**63** “Lasciatosi cascare sulla poltrona, di faccia all’abbozzo della Sfinge, incrociando le mani dietro il capo, socchiudeva gli occhi desolatamente, abbattuto da colpo mortale” (43).

This rather unoriginal<sup>64</sup> narrative device, however, does more than simply echo Wilde's and Poe's theme of the *tableau vivant*. The way in which Giorgio's mind (almost) vivifies the artwork also fictionalises the future trajectory of art that Capuana envisions in *Cronache*. In *Cronache* he foresees, following Hegel and De Meis, a time when pure thought will translate into art without the need of a material *medium*:

Immagina dunque cosa potrà essere l'opera d'arte quando il pensiero non incontrerà più ostacoli nel marmo, nella tela, nei colori, nei suoni, nella parola, quando l'opera d'arte si formerà, si esplicherà con la stessa rapidità e la stessa nettezza dell'idea [...] cioè quando il pensiero diventerà visibile, tangibile. (1899, 29-31)

Thus, in *La Sfinge*, Capuana's framing theory of genres and 'internal' phenomenology of fiction-making masterfully intertwine, and eventually coalesce. The "fantasma artistico individuale" intermittently haunting Giorgio's mind and triggering the artistic creation effectively fictionalises Capuana's theorisation of the creative process. In the Hegelian 'life-like' evolutionary scheme, however, art is not yet at that point, either in the historical present in which Capuana lives, or in the *fin-de-siècle* narrative present which Giorgio Montani inhabits. The literary work in the age of symbolism and of Decadentism still needs a physical support, however imperfect and finite. For this reason Giorgio Montani's completion and vivification of the painting just by sheer power of thought are realised and performed only at the level of somnambulist hallucination, and neither the sketch of the Sphinx in his studio nor the new theatrical piece he is working on, *Arianna*, ever reaches completion. What is written and published quickly is the novel *La Sfinge* itself, which best represents - with its high metareferential coefficient - this tectonic shift of art as a whole, towards philosophical and aesthetic (self)reflection revitalised by form.

<sup>64</sup> On the currency of this topic in nineteenth-century literature see Pellini 2001.



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## 4 Metareference in *l'altro* and *l'ultimo* Capuana

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**Summary** 4.1 Self-Reflexive Collections: “Un caso di sonnambulismo” (1874) and *Storia fosca*. – 4.2 Self-Reflexivity and Genre: *Il racconta-fiabe* (1882-1908). – 4.3 Self-Reflexive Periods: *Le appassionate* (1893), *Mondo occulto* (1896) and *Fausto Bragia* (1897a). – 4.4 The Twentieth-Century Collections and *Rassegnazione* (1907).

Discovering that there is in fact – in Capuana – another and ‘counter-canonical’<sup>1</sup> line of female characterisation that can be understood as ‘peaking’ with *La Sfinge* prompts the question of whether the various self-reflexive triggers that female characters set off in many of Capuana’s short stories and novels occur in a *vacuum* within the broader context of Capuana’s corpus, or whether they might reflect a wider, substantial trend. Moving along these contextual lines of enquiry, it becomes apparent that often what appears to be just a single, isolated, gendered iteration of a self-reflexive impulse is, in fact, figuratively at the epicentre of what can be understood – to borrow a famous image from Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* ([1964] 1994) – as a self-reflexive intertextual “reverberation”. Such a ‘spatial’ effect expands into the editorial vessel – often a collection of previously published short stories – in which the single short story is contained or embedded, and dominates it so as to awaken its ‘dormant’ self-reflexive potential. On this basis, this second section will move from the consideration of the single short story as an isolated phenomenon and

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**1** I mean it not in the sense of replacing ‘canonical’ reading, but in the sense of an exegetic line that might dialogue with and complement more canonical ones. See at least Ciugureanu 2011. Within the scholarly context of postcolonial Italy, see Venturini’s 2010 elaboration of this notion.

will explore precisely what surrounds these gendered self-reflections at the level of entire collections or otherwise 'homogeneous' clusters of Capuana's writing. This operation of (partial) distancing from the specificity of a particular short story may lead to a reassessment of a collection, of Capuana's work in a particular genre or even of an entire chronological portion of his production.

#### 4.1 Self-Reflexive Collections: "Un caso di sonnambulismo" (1874) and *Storia fosca*

Taking a comprehensive, diachronical, combined overview of both Capuana's career and *capuanistica*, an element that clearly emerges is the coexistence, from the very outset, of Capuana the theorist and Capuana *narratore*.<sup>2</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that, from the very beginning of his career, the paths of reflection on art on the one hand and of creative writing on the other are closely intertwined and influence each other - no matter how inadvertently - to the point where their ongoing mutual interference generates a self-reflexive intersection, a (meta)narrative *Spannung*, even, a *plateau* in the Deleuzian-Guattarian sense of "a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities" (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 2): a multifaceted layer of reading, reasoning and decoding through which Capuana's *oeuvre* can be accessed from virtually any angle and to which one is led, regardless of one's entry point into Capuana's corpus. Such an intersection - variously negotiated, unevenly distributed chronologically and often, but not exclusively, catalysed by female characterisation - seems to run transversally through his whole career, from the exordium to the collections still prolifically produced by "l'ultimo Capuana" (Palermo 1990).

On examination of what 'surrounds' the female characterisation-centred short stories "L'ideale di Piula" and "Contrasto", included in the early collection *Storia fosca* (1883), it can be seen that in neither the opening piece, "Storia fosca" (Capuana 1974a, 173-85), nor in the following short story, "Un bacio" (Capuana 1974a, 186-91), is there a detectable self-reflexive component. However, in the short story that follows "L'ideale di Piula", titled "Un caso di sonnambulismo" (Capuana 1974a, 209-30), the self-reflexivity of the collection manifests itself at its fullest. This point is illustrated very effectively by Comoy Fusaro (2009) in her most recent and innovative analysis of the short story and, thus, my own analysis does not require a radical rethinking but only a commentary aimed not at confirming

<sup>2</sup> Capuana began to write for *La Nazione* in '64 and started off as a narrator with "Il dottor Cymbalus" in '65.



the presence of a poetological level but, rather, at refining our understanding of it in relation to specific facets of Capuana's 'narratology'.

"Un caso" is the story – on the surface 'merely' science-fictional – of a murder *à la* Poe<sup>3</sup> that is solved by the somnambulist Belgian detective, Dionigi Van-Spengel. The investigator foresees the homicide of the aristocrat Marchesina di Rostentain-Gourny (216), the night before it actually occurs, and unconsciously writes it down: "Era meravigliato di trovar alcune carte sul suo tavolino [...] eppure non l'ho fatta io, no davvero [...] scusi *Mossiú* deve ricordarselo" (213).

Then, overwhelmed by the inexplicability of the event, he loses his mind and, thus, becomes the subject of the Foucauldian "clinical gaze"<sup>4</sup> of the psychiatrist Dottor Croissart, who also writes a clinical report. It is, therefore, a text that is "apparentemente poliziesco e scientifico" (Comoy Fusaro 2009, 131), but one that has actually a very marked self-reflexive component, if analysed in depth. On the surface, it takes the 'impersonal' form of a scientific document – a medical report by the court medical expert – that the young *naturalista* narrator/author (Capuana) is ostensibly reporting verbatim, with no interpolation:

Fra i tanti casi di sonnambulismo dei quali la scienza medica ha fatto tesoro, questo del signor Dionigi Van-Spengel è certamente uno dei più meravigliosi e dei più rari. Compendierò l'interessante memoria pubblicata recentemente dal dottor Croissart; spesso per far meglio, adopererò le stesse parole dell'illustre scrittore. (Capuana 1974a, 209)

The tone of the extradiegetic narration endeavours to adhere to this allegedly objective report, with an austere, factual description of the subject. By juxtaposing the two passages where the homicide is described in Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1900) and Capuana respectively, Melani shows how the evidences are, *a posteriori*, unmistakable. Yet, the consonances stop there because of the divergences in the way the mystery is solved:

Mentre nel racconto di Poe l'orribile delitto viene risolto grazie all'abilità analitica di Monsieur Dupin [...] nel [caso] di Capuana il direttore in capo della polizia, il signor Van-Spengel, risolve il caso grazie alla propria veggenza durante un periodo di sonnambulismo. (2006, 58)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For both Costanza Melani (2006, 56) and Enrico Ghidetti, "evidenti sono le tracce di *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*" (Capuana 1974a, 207).

<sup>4</sup> Clinical gaze is described by Foucault, in the preface to *The Birth of the Clinic*, as the alliance of seeing and saying (Foucault 1976, XII), by means of which 'seeing' clinically turns into 'verbalising' scientifically.

<sup>5</sup> On (*pre*)*veggenza* see also the classic study by Gallini 1983.

There is also no textual or paratextual element to alert the reader to the intertextual presence of Poe – neither *prefazione* nor *dedica*, for example – and the self-consciousness of the text is to be found only in other textual markers. It ought to be pointed out that here the mimetic illusion is one that rests not on the absence of framing devices, but rather on the very credibility of the authenticating apparatus: the Sartrean narrative pact that triggers immersion here is based on the notion that the reader is, in fact, reading a narrative, and that narrative is a faithful rendition of what has happened in the ‘real world’. Yet, to begin with, those very authenticating remarks/notes that are supposed to corroborate the authenticity of the story are so numerous<sup>6</sup> that the reader starts doubting them due to their very intrusiveness. Furthermore, some of these notes are easily identifiable as fictional (Madrignani 1970, 85; Comoy Fusaro 2009, 112).<sup>7</sup> In addition, the entanglement of no fewer than five narrative voices – the ‘impersonal’ narrator,<sup>8</sup> the intruding-omniscient narrator, the doctor, the detective, the victim, plus at least two identifiable court witnesses (Comoy Fusaro 2009, 113-4) – alongside “indiz[i] rilasciat[i] al lettore” (120), such as the occasional narratorial intrusion of the *compilatore*, leads the reader progressively to question the ‘scientific’ credibility of the documentation on the basis of which the realism of the case should stand. Indeed, the reader’s attention is drawn towards realising the fictional nature not just of the psychiatrist’s report but virtually all presented ‘documents’ – from the detective’s somnambulist report, to the reconstruction of the trial, to the court expert’s report – and, as a consequence, ultimately, to focus on – with Wolf – “the opacity of discourse” (Wolf 1990, 285).<sup>9</sup> the very ambiguity between what is presented as reality and what is presented as narration of a true story. It is pivotal to remind ourselves that, as Comoy Fusaro points out, Capuana harshly rejected this short story of his (even though both Treves and Verga thoroughly liked it),<sup>10</sup> not only owing to the breaches of the notion of *impersonalità* created by narratorial intrusions, but also precisely because it had failed to reproduce a reliable authenticating apparatus, and therefore, for having

<sup>6</sup> For example, there is an extended bibliographical note to the work of Dr Croissart, that reveals it to be entirely untrue/fictional.

<sup>7</sup> But other critics did not pick up on such a fictionality, see Farnetti 1992.

<sup>8</sup> The impersonal narrator’s voice orchestrates the shift in focalisation with *registra*-like statements such as “Lascio la parola al signor Croissart” (220).

<sup>9</sup> “The opacity of discourse disturbs illusion not by undermining the story from within, but rather from without, by detracting the reader’s attention from the fictional world and focusing it on its making” (Wolf 1990, 285).

<sup>10</sup> See Capuana 1974a: “[Verga:] Il tuo *Caso di sonnambulismo* mi piace assai e piacquero assai anche a Treves” (209).

rendered it a “speculativ[o]” (Comoy Fusaro 2009, 146), self-reflexive product, rather than a ‘realistic’ and ‘mimetic’ one.

This rejection suggests that, at this early stage, self-reflexive writing – even though already pioneeringly attempted by Capuana – is still seen, in Capuana’s critical reflections, as a ‘lesser’, insufficient form when compared to the naturalist target. On the one hand, what appears as a ‘counter-discursive’ stance<sup>11</sup> does not detract from the presence of a significant cluster of self-reflexivity in the story and in the overall collection. On the other hand, notwithstanding this initial rejection, decade after decade, the self-reflexive turn in Capuana’s *oeuvre* will become increasingly prominent, more deliberate, and fully embraced by the author not only in his creative, but also in his critical work.

## 4.2 Self-Reflexivity and Genre: *Il racconta-fiabe* (1882-1908)

In light of the breadth and diversity of Capuana’s corpus, contextualising seemingly isolated instances of gendered self-reflection results in following not only collection-bound lines but also genre-bound pathways, as happens when attempting to approach his fairy tales from the angle of self-reflexivity. As is known, Capuana thought very highly of his *fiabe*, to the point of writing, in a rather famous letter to Corrado Guzzanti: “Fairy tales will probably be the work through which my name will live on” (see Miele 2009b, 247).<sup>12</sup> In 1882 Capuana published the first of his collections of fairy tales, the popular anthology *C’era una volta*.<sup>13</sup> The collection is prefaced by an authorial intervention where the (implied) author reminisces about the compositional process: “In quel tempo ero triste ed anche un po’ ammalato, con un’inerzia intellettuale che mi faceva rabbia, e i lettori non immagineranno facilmente la gioia da me provata nel vedermi, a un tratto, fiorire nella fantasia quel mondo meraviglioso”.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> I use counterdiscourse as Terdiman does (1985, 13), building on Foucault (Foucault, Deleuze 1977, 209).

<sup>12</sup> That might have prompted some frankly excessive statements, such as the editor’s contention that “Capuana non è stato *anche* un editore di fiabe, lo è *stato soprattutto*” (Capuana 2015, IX; emphasis in original).

<sup>13</sup> This first collection is preceded by the single short story *La Reginotta* (Sardo 2015, 5-13), which, as Sardo explains, was composed independently of and prior to the collection (1881).

<sup>14</sup> The way in which the author describes the creative moment in this *prefazione* reflects the ever present theme of visitations in the female character-centred short stories examined above: “Vissi più settimane soltanto con essi, ingenuamente, come non credevo potesse mai accadere a chi è già convinto che la realtà sia il vero regno dell’arte. Se un importuno fosse allora venuto a parlarmi di cose serie e gravi, gli avrei risposto, senza dubbio, che avevo ben altre e più serie faccende pel capo; avevo Serpentina

The presence of a *prefazione* as an attempt to influence reader response before crossing the threshold to the fictional storyworld is not surprising. More noticeably, alongside a “mondo meraviglioso di fate, di maghi, di re, di regine, di orchi, di incantesimi” (Capuana 2015, 70), Capuana includes an overtly self-reflexive tale with the intrinsically self-conscious title of “Il racconta-fiabe” (113-17), as the last short story of that collection.

The story concerns “un povero diavolo, che aveva fatto tutti i mestieri e non era riuscito in nessuno” (113). Following his many professional failures, “un giorno gli venne l’idea di andare attorno, a raccontare fiabe ai bambini” (113), and the *povero diavolo* ventures into a new and exciting profession, that of ‘children’s storyteller’. Yet, after unsuccessfully trying to narrate a few widely known stories – “Bella addormentata nel Bosco”, “Cappuccetto Rosso”, “Cenerentola” – he finds himself hopelessly lost in a Dantesque dark forest. Here *le fate* suggest he consult the wizard “Mago Tre-Pi” – whom critics have identified as the fictionalised *alter ego* of prominent Italian ethnographer (see Pitré 1888, 1965, 1968) and personal friend, Giuseppe Pitré (Miele 2009b, 248),<sup>15</sup> whose works were familiar to Capuana. The wizard suggests that he should approach “fata Fantasia” (116) for help and inspiration. Fantasia gives the storyteller a number of common items – “una stacciata, un’arancia d’oro, un ranocchino, una serpicina, un uovo nero, tre anelli, insomma tante cose strane” (Capuana 2015, 116). Supported by these props, the struggling storyteller suddenly finds himself capable of producing the very stories that are contained in the collection itself and which a(n ideal) chronological reader would have just finished reading before reaching the last *fiaba*: “Spera di sole, Ranocchino, Cecina, Il cavallo di bronzo, Serpentina, Testa-di-rospo” (117).

In an instance of the transtextual (and transmedial) characterisation (Richardson 2010) that has gradually emerged as a prominent feature of Capuana’s writing since *Profili*, the character of the storyteller becomes both a *leitmotif* of Capuana’s fairy tale narrative and the signpost for a lurking, and occasionally surfacing, self-reflexivity.<sup>16</sup> So much so that, for Jack Zipes (2009), following the transtextual adven-

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in pericolo, o la Reginotta che mi moriva di languore per Ranocchino o il Re che faceva la terza prova di star sette anni alla pioggia e al sole per guadagnarsi la mano di un’adorata fanciulla” (Capuana 2015, 17).

**15** For Zipes, “In some ways, just as the character of the wizard Tre-Pi is an allusion to Giuseppe Pitré, the great Sicilian folklorist and Capuana’s friend, the storyteller himself is somewhat of a self-portrait” (2009, 368).

**16** Sardo (2015, XXI) explains how “nell’arco di un trentennio, Capuana sia riuscito a trasformare la consolidata struttura della fiaba tradizionale italiana [...] in un testo multimediale e plurisensoriale, guidato da una consapevolezza scrittoria sempre presente (dalla lettera/Prefazione alla reginotta dell’1881, alla Prefazione, del 1882, a *C’era una volta ... Fiabe*, a quella, del 1893, al *Raccontafiabe*, o all’ultima, del 1908, a *Chi vuol fiabe, chi vuole?*)” (2015, 21).

tures of the storyteller is key to deciphering Capuana's innovative approach to the genre.<sup>17</sup> This approach is one of revitalising old and trite plots and patterns through immersion in local subject matter derived from ethnography. The character of "Il Racconta-fiabe" feeds through to the preface of the second collection, which is itself titled – in a progression and intensification of self-reflexivity – *Il racconta fiabe*:

Rammentate voi, bambini, il racconta-fiabe, colui che vi raccontò le storie di *Spera di sole*, di *Ranocchino*, [...] di *Testa-di-rospo*, e di altra gente meravigliosa? [...] [D]ovete anche rammentarvi che egli pensò di regalare le sue fiabe al mago Tre-Pi, visto che voialtri non volevate più sentirle [...]. Egli sperava che il mago Tre-Pi conservasse quelle fiabe nei cassetti del suo museo, imbalsamate insieme con le altre fiabe antiche. Il Mago disse: – Ah, sciocco, sciocco! Non vedi che cosa hai in mano? Il racconta-fiabe guardò: aveva in mano un pugno di mosche. E tornò indietro scornato; e di fiabe non ne volle più sapere, dopo che le Fate gli avevano ripetuto: – *Fiabe* nuove non ce n'è più; se n'è perduto anche il seme. Ora avvenne che non sapendo egli a qual altro mestiere darsi, rimase lungamente disoccupato. (Capuana 2015, 121)

The narration is explicitly framed 'beyond the story', and its very title bridges storyworld and compositional level in a self-conscious manner, allowing and even prompting the reader to speculate on the referential links to the historical present, in which the composition and circulation of the work take place.

Here the narrator-Capuana might be referring to the decade-long interval between the first (1882) and the second collection (1893), which is nonetheless explicitly presented as a "continuazione di *C'era una volta*" (Capuana 2015, 119). The framing short story is titled "Prefazione" (121-2), and what distinguishes it from the introduction to the first collection is the fact that it is ideologically and stylistically aligned to the stories that follow, insofar as it is explicitly addressed to a youthful readership – to "le [...] piccole menti" (Capuana 2015, 17-8) of his *bambini lettori*. Capuana's commitment to the principle that "la natural forma" be linked to each and every subject (Capuana 1899, 247-8) extends to metanarrative reflection and compels him to blend his 'digression' into the style of the rest of the collection. In this guise, Capuana's (implied) author bestows upon the narrator a privileged role

**17** "To understand exactly how Capuana sought to 'renew' the fairytale genre in Italy, it is necessary to follow the amusing figure of the storyteller that he created while writing his first collection [...]. By 1882, Capuana had tried his hand at many different kinds of writing – the short story, novel, poetry, essay, and drama – but he had not written fairy tales. In his tale "The Storyteller", his comic invention of the man who had tried many trades and had not succeeded in any, is an ironic depiction of his own situation, even though he himself had been successful in other "trades" (Zipes 2009, 368).

of mediator between the adult world of the storyteller and that of his young readers and proceeds to highlight how, after a while and 'inexplicably', the storyteller manages to find his inspiration again:

Ed ecco un'altra fiaba nuova nuova, ch'egli si raccontò da sé, divertendosi come un bambino.

Il pover'uomo, dall'allegrezza, non capiva nella pelle. Gli pareva mill'anni che si facesse giorno, per andare per le piazze e per le vie:

- Fiabe, bambini, fiabe! Chi vuol sentire le fiabe!

Raccolse delicatamente nel sacchetto tutta la polvere del mortaio, senza perderne un granellino; e, appena fatto giorno, uscì di casa.

Non era tranquillo però:

- Chi sa se queste fiabe piacciono quanto quell'altre?

E gli tremava un po' la voce nel gridare:

- Fiabe, bambini, fiabe! Chi vuol sentire le fiabe!

I bambini accorsero e si divertirono:

- Un'altra! Un'altra!

E ne mise fuori più d'una dozzina. Chi non le ha udite dalla bocca del racconta-fiabe, può leggerle con comodo in questo libro.

Sono proprio le ultime. (Capuana 2015, 122)

Noticeably, what is also different in this second collection is that self-reflection is not retrospective but, rather, preemptive, as the *prefazione* analyses the sixteen *racconti* to follow. The same ploy is used again, more than a decade later, in 1908, to introduce the third collection (*Chi vuol fiabe, chi vuole?*) to his "bambini lettori":

Ora il povero Raccontafiabe è molto invecchiato e passa, al solito, le sue giornate davanti a l'uscio di casa, a godersi il sole, d'inverno, e il fresco, d'estate.

*Io che lo vedo spessissimo* - siamo vicini da anni - sentendolo borbottare in questi ultimi mesi, avevo creduto, da prima, che si dollesse di qualche malanno. Invece, m'accorsi che fantasticava a occhi chiusi, e borbottava:

- Se state cheti, bambini...

Gli sembrava di andare attorno, come tempo addietro, a raccontar fiabe per le vie:

- Chi vuol fiabe, chi vuole?

E infatti, sottovoce... Ed erano fiabe nuove!

Io gli ho fatto il tradimento di trascriverle

[...]

Abbatele care, bambini miei: sono proprio le ultime. (Capuana 2015, 233; emphasis added)

Besides featuring yet again the self-reflexive character of the *raccontafiabe*, *Chi vuol fiabe, chi vuole?* includes the heavily self-re-

flexive, doubly framed “Comare Formica” (3rd). Gina Miele mentions this as a case in point to prove how “the literary nature of Capuana’s *fiabe* [...] [is] apparent in the highly self-conscious narrative techniques present in certain tales”. Miele continues: “While many plots respect [...] the simple, linear style of oral folktales, [...] ‘Comare Formica’ [...] offers the significantly more complex structure of a ‘tale within a tale’” (Miele 2009b, 251). “Comare Formica” is the story of a puzzling “povera donna”, who seemingly “viveva del suo lavoro” as a seamstress. Not unlike *La Sfinge*, however, the story unfolds as one of increasing characterological complexity (Rimmon-Kenan 2002). “Con quella comare Formica non ci si capiva nulla” (Capuana 2015, 275): she is old-looking but energetic, poor but always happy, married but alone and relentlessly pursued by an ogre who wants to marry her, vulnerable but capable of defeating, through magic, a gang of thieves – hired by her envious “sei comari” neighbours, who “si struggevano di sapere chi fosse costei” (269) –, barely able to earn a living but capable of building a sumptuous palace for herself overnight. To thicken the “mistero” surrounding this puzzling character there is the fact that Comare Formica is herself a storyteller<sup>18</sup> who entertains the town’s children with a multi-episodic story – “la mia fiaba non ha fine” (277) she explains – about a naughty “Reginotta”, punished by being turned into a “vecchina”. She is also persecuted by an ogre wanting to marry her, and *nonna maga* gives her a shiny palace as a gift. Then abruptly, amidst one of such storytelling sessions, “le vesti e la pelle di comare Formica si squarciarono e ne usciva fuori una bellissima giovinetta” (278). Yet, as Miele points out, at this point the lengthy story reaches a somewhat underwhelming conclusion:

[La giovane] aveva nell’aspetto e nei modi tanta dolcezza, tanta bontà, tanta modestia, da allontanare ogni sospetto che la Reginotta vanitosa, superbiosa, disubbidiente, cattiva, gelosa, disperazione della nonna, fosse stata proprio lei, come aveva detto quella vecchia, e che il gastigo l’avesse cambiata.

Era o non era dunque?

La fiaba non lo chiarisce e si arresta qui. (278-9)

Here the narrator – blurring the line between text and paratextual comments – addresses “his disappointed audience directly” (Miele 2009b, 251),<sup>19</sup> yet in a way that does nothing to clarify matters:

<sup>18</sup> She is, in addition, a self-conscious storyteller commenting on her own craft: “Le fiabe son come sono e non si possono mutare” (278).

<sup>19</sup> Miele then moves on to point out how this is “A feature derived from the oral tradition and quite common in Capuana’s fairy tales” (2009b, 251).

Se poi volete saperne di più, mettetevi la via tra le gambe, andate nel paese dove comare Formica si fece fabbricare il bel palazzo di cui forse rimane qualche vestigio, se pure il vento, che allora apportò sassi, rena e calcina e acqua, non l'ha, dopo tanto tempo, spazzato via. Ma forse fareste inutilmente questo viaggio... E poi, bambini miei, non è bene essere eccessivamente curiosi. (Capuana 2015, 278-9)

Another story that is written along similar lines of self-reflexive experimentalism is “Milda: Fiaba in un atto. Musica di Paul Allen”, at the end of *Si conta e si racconta* (1911-1913, subtitled *Fiabe minime*). This *fiaba* is conceived of as an *atto unico*, a theatrical as well as a musical piece.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the collection *Le ultime fiabe*, published posthumously, contains the two *fiabe* “Fata Rosa-Bianca: Fiaba sceneggiata, atto unico” (2015, 526-44)<sup>21</sup> and “Re Mangia Mangia”, a “fiaba sceneggiata in due parti” (545-619), both also ‘experimental’ insofar as they are presented in the form of theatrical scripts.<sup>22</sup> In these three instances, as Sardo (2015) points out, fruition in a theatrical form emphasises mimesis and an immersion corroborated by images and soundscapes. However, reading the *fiabe* triggers the opposite effect, as the emphasis placed on the theatrical structure of the script functions as a constant reminder of the fictionality and the elaborate constructedness of these artistic artifacts.

*Le ultime fiabe* also contains “La fiaba del Re” (2015, 460-5), a story that both points towards its fictional nature in its title and contains a reference to an earlier ‘autofictional’ character designed by Capuana, the “Faccia Bella” of *Ricordi di infanzia*. In this short story, the king-protagonist is literally dying of boredom, and he seeks a ‘quid’ - “una cosa... che” (514) - capable of bestowing some sense of purpose to his undoubtedly privileged, but otherwise meaningless, existence. No-one can cheer him up, with the exception of “una vecchina” (515), an odd, eccentric creature who somehow manages to reach his bedside repeatedly:

- Io ti ho voluto sempre bene! Ti ho visto nascere, ti ho visto crescere. Venivo a trovarti nei sogni. Ricordi? No? Mi chiamavi Faccia Bella. Ricordi? No? Scherzo. Penso che i bambini vedono tante cose nei sogni; e che forse potresti aver veduto anche

<sup>20</sup> Sardo explains, in a philological guise, how “Milda” represents the arrival of a long journey that begins in 1883 with “Rospus”.

<sup>21</sup> The collection also contains two *quadri*.

<sup>22</sup> See also Sardo (2015, XX-XXI). It is precisely because of their experimental and cross-generic nature that Sardo groups these three titles together at the end of her 2015 edition, in the “Fiabe musicali e teatrali” section. On the contrary, other editions, such as the 1993 Newton Compton, maintain the original partition.



me, o persona che mi rassomigliasse. No?... No?... Non sognavi da bambino? Per questo sogni ora, anche ad occhi aperti; ti si legge in viso!

Il Re stava ad ascoltarla sbalordito. (516)

The storytelling and entertaining prowess of the elderly woman, whose appearance changes even while she speaks - “come se [...] gli si trasformasse davanti, ora bionda, ora bruna, ora giovanissima, esile, ora di forme piene, robuste; ora vestita di rosso, o di giallo, o di bianco, o di celeste, di stoffe tramate di oro” (516) - restores the inner *giovinezza* of the bored royal. Capuana’s *fiaba*, then, becomes progressively, as Sardo describes it, a “territorio di sperimentazione narrativa” (Sardo 2015, XL), where traditional tropes and styles are reworked in a “parabola stilistica [and tematica]” (XL) of irony and antiheroism. In so doing, Capuana also progressively exposes his own strategies, yet in a way that is not easily compartmentalised or restricted to a specific collection. Across the *Cinque volumi originali* (Sardo 2015), self-consciousness repeatedly surfaces in a seemingly random fashion, although it may be postulated that this tendency becomes more marked towards the end of his career. What can also be noted is that the motif of female characterisation, as a catalyst for self-reflexivity, is strongly present in the genre, contributing to a strengthening of the hypothesis of a counter-canonical reading of *il femminile*, the compositional reverberation of which, nonetheless, extends beyond itself.

#### 4.3 Self-Reflexive Periods: *Le appassionate* (1893), *Mondo occulto* (1896) and *Fausto Bragia* (1897a)

Starting with the notion of the gradability of self-reflexivity, as derived from Wolf, may lead us to reassess not only a single collection or a *genre*, but also an entire section or chronological portion of Capuana’s *oeuvre* through the lens of narrative self-consciousness. The already mentioned short stories “Evoluzione” (1883-84), “Il piccolo archivio” (1886) and “Avventura” (1888), in which self-reflection and female characterisation are tightly intertwined, can be reconsidered within their editorial context, which goes beyond the female link, however pivotal that may be. This approach permits a quite radical reevaluation of the whole collection of *Le appassionate* ([1893] 1974a, 253-499). This is the collection that has been most unanimously regarded as revolving around the investigation of cases of pathological female psychophysiology. Suggesting a reevaluation through the lens of self-reflexivity is not to deny or underplay the obvious presence of such a dimension, but to stress the fact that it can be complemented by a different one. “Tortura” (1st, 1974a, 255-78) is, in fact,

mainly devoted to the investigation of pathological inwardness, as are “Povero Dottore” (2nd, 1974a, 279-96), “Raffinatezza” (3rd, 1974a, 297-307), “Convalescenza” (4th, 1974a, 308-316), and, towards the end of the collection, “Mostruosità” (375-88), “Adorata” (389-405), “Ribrezzo” (427-74) and “Anime in pena” (475-99). However, alongside these female-centred and ‘naturalistic’ short stories, “Un melodramma inedito” ([1888] 1974a, 317-23), the fifth story in the collection, explicitly thematises the artistic process, albeit that of musical composition rather than of the literary or visual arts addressed in so many of the works examined earlier. The protagonists of this dialogic story are the musician Merlini “wagnerista fanatico”, and his musically illiterate friend Ludovico, whose name is itself allusively self-reflexive. The two are portrayed reminiscing about an extraordinary experience, which happened to Ludovico during a carriage ride, loudly echoing that in “Ebe”.<sup>23</sup> The troubled inner state of the narrator, his “grave dolore” (318), the rapidly changing nocturnal views from the window, the broken, simple tune whistled by the coachman, are all conducive to a true *allucinazione artistica*:

Non lo dimenticherò più, vivessi cent'anni. [...] La monotona melodia dello stornello già mi sembrava lontana, lontana, quasi m'arrivasse all'orecchio [...] trasportata dal vento; e [...] mi inebbrivava talmente la fantasia, mi commoveva a tal punto che, poco dopo, non canticchiavo più reminiscenze, ma facevo un'improvvisazione. Io che non conosco una nota musicale, sì, improvvisavo musica nuova, bella, meravigliosa... N'ero stupito io medesimo, e l'ascoltavo quasi venisse cantata da un altro. Cantata? Non è esatto; dovrei dire suonata e cantata a vicenda. Le mie labbra imitavano i vari strumenti di un'orchestra [...] e poi la voce cantava, per ceder di nuovo ai violini, al flauto, ai bassi il lor posto negli accordi. Provavo l'assoluta illusione di quegli strumenti, la piena delizia di quel magnifico concerto, organico intreccio di voci e di suoni. (319)

The sensation of experiencing musical creation is interspaced with (self)reflection on that very process, which is all the more surprising coming from Ludovico, someone who admits not knowing “una nota musicale”:

E durante il *godimento* dell'incredibile sensazione, *riflettevo* che dovrebbe [*sic*] accadere la stessa cosa nella mente d'un maestro quando comincia a svilupparvisi la creazione musicale. [...] Orecchiante, ero arrivato a gustare le astruse bellezze dei quartetti

**23** “Viaggiavo solo, con l'animo terribilmente turbato. Una persona a me cara trovavasi in pericolo di morte; accorrevo in fretta al suo capezzale e temevo di non giungere in tempo” (317).

beethoveniani, delle sinfonie dei vecchi e nuovi maestri, dove l'idealità artistica ha raggiunto la più alta manifestazione... Quelle sensazioni [...] si ridestavano, forse, nello stato d'eccitamento nervoso in cui allora mi trovavo? E si mescolavano, si confondevano, si coordinavano, fino a diventare una specie d'organismo nuovo, da facilmente ingannarmi? No, te lo assicuro. Avevo dimenticato ogni cosa. [...] Quell'inattesa creazione m'assorbiva interamente; e l'essere attore cantante, orchestra e spettatore nello stesso punto, mi produceva qualcosa di così straordinario, di così ineffabile, che non avrei voluto, a ogni costo, sentirlo cessare. Che cantavano quelle voci diverse? Che rispondevano quegli strumenti? L'impressione [...] era stata confusa, indefinita. Le voci cantavano ma non pronunziavano parole: soprano, contralto, tenore, baritono, basso, cori, erano quasi varietà di strumenti; giacché c'erano pure i cori, mirabilmente fusi con le altre voci e con l'orchestra... Allucinazione assurda, ma evidente quanto la stessa realtà. (319; emphasis added)

This reflection does not imply a wildly innovative meta-artistic approach; rather it offers yet another version of the theory of the creative spark as an *intermittenza della coscienza*, while the change of *medium* implicitly points to the fact that the substance of the creative process does not change across media. Therefore, if read alongside “Avventura” (with its suicide to achieve “l'ideale nel reale”), as well as “Il piccolo archivio” (with its narrative intertextual cataloguing of theatrical forms) and “Evoluzione” (with its transmodal staging of the divide between reality and fiction), the artistic hallucination of “Un melodramma” permits a better understanding of the metaliterary, compositional processes behind the “casi passionali” (Ghidetti, in Capuana 1974a, 253) and “lo scavo delle psicologie di donne offese nell'onore” (Ghidetti, in Capuana 1974a, 253) presented in the other short stories making up the collection. The collection cannot then be regarded as heavily self-reflexive in its entirety. Yet, the presence, within *Le appassionate*, of a significant number of works where the metaliterary theme figures prominently can be understood as functioning as a metanarrative commentary on... itself. For such a commentary to develop properly, the structure of the collection is not irrelevant, with the four highly self-reflexive pieces quite evenly interspersed amongst the remaining, predominantly non-self-reflexive nine pieces.<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, a similar and context-sensitive analysis allows for a re-reading of the individual female character-centred stories “Ofelia” (1893) and “Fausto Bragia” (1893) within the broader framework of the

<sup>24</sup> The sequence is the following: 4 ‘non-self-reflexive’ pieces; “Un melodramma inedito” and “Avventura”; 3 ‘non-self-reflexive’ pieces; “Il piccolo archivio”, 2 ‘non-self-reflexive’ pieces; “Evoluzione”; then 2 ‘non-self-reflexive’ pieces.

little-known volume titled *Fausto Bragia e altri racconti*,<sup>25</sup> published in 1897. This volume was disregarded by critics and even omitted, for no apparent reason, from the 1974 Edizione Ghidetti. Paul Barnaby has brought it back to the attention of scholars, partially due to its self-reflexive content, and the collection has recently been republished by Ilaria Muoio. On reading the two *racconti* in the broader context of the whole collection, we find that the same range of (meta)artistic themes, found in “Ofelia” and “Fausto Bragia”, also informs, to various degrees, the greater part of the rest of the collection. Out of the twelve short stories, at least six – including the two already mentioned – explicitly discuss one aspect or another of the artistic process. “Zampone” (1897a, 117-34) tells the story of an aristocratic “artista moralista” (129), who writes historical novels with which he attempts to entertain guests in his *salotto*. While doing so, he progressively establishes a parallel between the fictionalised reality of the unfaithful protagonists of those novels and the painful, hidden reality of his wife’s love affairs, in an attempt to cathartically sublimate his sorrow. The same happens in “Il primo maggio del dottor Piccottini” (135-43). The story is set in 1866 and unfolds as the narrative analysis of the relationship between the intellectual-narrator, who “[si] occupa di letteratura” (135), and his new acquaintance and neighbour, the austere and reserved man of science, Dottor Piccottini. The story addresses, in an explicitly self-reflexive way, the theme of the intricate relationships between science, rationality and emotion, with abundant nods to the neuroses and the historical decadence of turn-of-the-century Italy and Europe, *à la* Nordau ([1892] 1968) as well as *à la* Mantegazza ([1887] 1995).

“Il primo maggio” calls to mind an epistolary novel that was very dear to Capuana, *Dopo la laurea* by Bolognese professor Camillo De Meis, published in 1868. In this short story, the doctor proposes a sensational thesis to counterbalance the overwhelming power of science and speculation in contemporary positivist society: he advocates a provocative programme of eugenics, which he pompously calls “Coscrizione per l’amore” (Capuana 1897a, 140), aimed at cross-breeding the over-intellectual with “[un] bel bruto” (Capuana 1897a, 142). As far as art goes, however, the doctor voices many of the concerns of positivist society, including the explicit affirmation of the historical superiority of science, that is, of the superiority of thought over art.

Amo la poesia, il teatro, il romanzo... – Sciocchezze indegne di una creatura intelligente! Quando avrete scritto (e sarà un po’ difficile) un poema bello come la *Divina Commedia*, una tragedia uguale all’*Amleto* o all’*Otello*, un romanzo più interessante del... del...

**25** This work is dedicated “Alla gentilissima signorina Adelaide Bernardini”, soon to become Mrs. Capuana.

*Conte di Montecristo*, che avrete conchiuso? Tutte queste cosettine sono già state fatte: hanno divertito l'infanzia dell'umanità, l'hanno anche rovinata. Ora bisogna salvarla. L'umanità è in grave pericolo di degenerazione; soltanto la medicina può impedire che non arrivi allo sfacelo verso cui è già avviata. (1897a, 137)

The trenchant nature of this statement is reminiscent not only of Giorgio's mournful resignation in *La Sfinge*, artistically blocked by the conviction that "i capolavori son tutti già fatti" (1897b, 84), but also of Capuana's firm acknowledgment:

Questa benedetta o maledetta riflessione moderna, questa smania di positivismo di studi, di osservazioni, di collezione di fatti, noi non possiamo cavarcela di dosso. È il nostro sangue, è il nostro spirito; chi non la prova può dirsi un uomo di parecchi secoli addietro smarritosi per caso in mezzo a noi. (1994, 43)

Likewise, in "La vendetta di un baritono", the musical element of the (meta)artistic theme briefly resurfaces; the story centres around the musician and *second[o] bariton[o]*, Eliseo Bellacoscia, a devoted, yet cuckolded husband (1897a, 153-63), who, after years of blissful ignorance, seeks revenge. His *vendetta* unfolds as a dramatic *crescendo* interspersed with operatic references such as "le stupende note del *Lohengrin*" (159) and also with an impressive amount of mimetic illusion-breaking appeals to the reader - "Io, col permesso dei lettori [...] ne convengano i lettori [...] agli occhi dei miei lettori [...] notino i lettori" (Capuana 1897a, 159-61). What renders this short narrative even more self-referential is an attempt to 'double-frame' the unorthodox *vendetta*, insofar as the reader witnesses it only through the words of Eliseo himself, for whom - in a painfully bitter-sweet, quasi-Pirandellian humorous twist<sup>26</sup> - an adequate *vendetta* goes no further than pranking his wife's lover by stealing his clothes while they are together (162).

A contextual rereading of these short stories highlights the fact that the 1890s, far from being the beginning of the "involuzione" postulated by some critics, are, on the whole, a very sophisticated, very self-reflexive decade as far as Capuana's creative production is concerned, and one accompanied by an equally substantial critical production at the beginning (1892) and at the end of the decade (1898-99). It is equally noticeable that, while female characterisation remains a powerful catalyst for metareferential reflection, self-reflexivity is

<sup>26</sup> "Da prima nessuno rise, credendo ognuno che il dolore avesse fatto ammattire il povero baritono" (1897a, 161). Although the relationship between Pirandello and Capuana has been properly eviscerated (see, especially, Sipala 1974) Davies' claim that "the theme of [Capuana's] own *umorismo* lies untouched" (Davies 1979, 150) remains valid.

also increasingly vehiculated through different means. The progressive disentanglement from female characterisation is seen in the progression from *Spiritismo?* (1884) to *Mondo occulto*, the other, shorter collection of essays written “in modo da poter servire da appendice a [...] *Spiritismo?*” (Capuana 1995, 165), over a decade after the publication of his first collection on the Occult (1896).

The link between Spiritualism and artistic production can in fact be seen in *Mondo occulto*, albeit in passing and not with the anecdotal depth of *Spiritismo?*. Here Capuana describes an illustrious artistic household, the Bach family, in what proceeds as a thread of self-reflection mediated by music rather than, as happens in *Spiritismo?*, by creative writing: “Quest’altro fatto lo riassumo da una narrazione di Alberico Secondo pubblicata nel «Grand Journal», numero del 4 giugno 1865” (183). Unlike in *Spiritismo?*, the claim here is grounded in verifiable bibliographic references (on this episode, see also Vartier 1972), so what is interesting is the decision to include precisely these materials and not others, as well as to paraphrase the anecdote rather than quoting it directly and/or in translation. In Capuana’s rendering of this *documento umano*:

Il figlio del maestro Bach, pronipote del gran Sebastiano Bach, aveva regalato al padre una spinetta stupendamente scolpita. Un giorno il maestro scoprì nell’interno dello strumento una data - aprile 1664 - e il nome del luogo dove essa era stata costruita: Roma. La sera, appena addormentato, gli parve di vedere presso il letto un uomo con lunga barba, scarpe con punta rotonda, calzoni molto larghi, gran collare, e cappello appuntito a larghe falde. Costui gli disse: - La spinetta che tu possiedi mi apparteneva, ed ha servito più volte a distrarre il mio signore e re Enrico III. Una volta egli scrisse dei versi che io musicai.

Awakening from the dream, the artist discovers that musical scores have mysteriously been produced:

Te li farò sentire. - E suonò e cantò. Il maestro Bach si svegliò, commosso. Guardato l’orologio - erano le due e mezzo - si addormentò di nuovo. Ma svegliandosi all’ora solita, grande fu il suo stupore trovando sul letto una pagina di musica, piena di scrittura così fina che gli occorre una lente per decifrarla. Musica e parole erano proprio quelle sentite suonare e cantare da quell’uomo durante il sonno. L’ortografia musicale era altrettanto arcaica quanto l’ortografia delle parole. (183)

Strikingly, this narrative reflection does not ‘need’ female characterisation to develop, as the character of ‘Ignota’ in *Spiritismo?* is replaced by an allusive historical figure, “un uomo dalla lunga barba” who claims to

have played for Henry III of France. The episode definitely converts Bach, as Capuana had been won over, to a Spiritualism 'without question marks'<sup>27</sup> - "da quel momento divenne uno spiritista convinto" (Vartier 1972, 172) - and the anecdote closes with a reference to more scientific literature, should the reader wish to learn more about Bach's subsequent career as a *medium*:

Se qualcuno volesse sapere il seguito di questo fatto, di come il maestro Bach divenuto, alcuni anni dopo, *medium* meccanico scrivente, di *medium* che non ha coscienza di quel che scrive, riuscisse ad avere altre comunicazioni ancora più stupefacenti, riguardanti la spinetta e colui che se ne diceva proprietario ricorra al «Grand Journal» del febbraio 1866 e sarà soddisfatto. (Capuana 1995, 183)

#### 4.4 The Twentieth-Century Collections and *Rassegnazione* (1907)

The same pattern of production with a high self-reflexive coefficient and decreased reliance on female characterisation as a poetological device, can be found in the latter part of Capuana's career, particularly in the collections *Il decameroncino* and *La voluttà di creare*, published in 1901 and 1911 respectively, but, as will become clear, also in the other collections published in the intervening years.

As suggested by its allusive metanarrative title, *Il decameroncino* - dedicated to Vittoria Aganoor - contains ten short stories distributed across ten *giornate*, recounted, in the elite *salotto* of the aristocrat Baronessa Lanari, by an elderly intellectual, Dottor Maggioli - for Ghidetti "una proiezione sia del dottor Follini [...] di Giacinta [...] che del dottor Mola di *Profumo* (Capuana 1974b, 259). The ironically Boccaccian framework and themes that intertwine literature and fantasy (Giabakgi 2011) raise the overall level of self-reflexivity of the collection, beginning with "Seconda giornata: L'aggettivo" (*giornata 2*, 266-71), a tale that dramatises the artistic desire for lexical perfection. It tells the story of Jello Albulo - *nom de plume* of aspiring poet Nino Bianchi - who, at his mentor's suggestion, searches for the ideal adjective to perfect his latest poetical composition - "Tutto va bene, caro Jello, ma vi manca l'aggettivo!" (267). The gently satirical tone of this concise short story - the pompuous "Jello Albulo [...], veramente si chiamava Rino Bianchi [...] ma non voleva essere chiamato altrimenti" (267) - is one of the elements, among others, such

<sup>27</sup> "Il punto interrogativo di [*Spiritismo?*] significava allora [in 1884] prudente riserbo. Da allora in poi però i fatti cosiddetti spiritici [...] hanno assunto tal valore scientifico da permettermi di uscire dal riserbo parsommi necessario quando affrontavo [...] lo scabroso soggetto" (Capuana 1995, 165).

as the title, that may have contributed to the critical assessment of *Il decameroncino* as an exquisitely *désengagé* piece of writing that proves not only Capuana's *disimpegno* but, at this advanced stage of his career, his lack of literary and creative drive:

Un giorno, in un sonetto alla sua Liliana (l'aveva ribattezzata con questo purissimo nome, ma i parenti di lei continuavano, con vivo sdegno del giovane poeta, a chiamarla borghesemente Giuseppina) in un sonetto alla sua Liliana egli aveva scritto. (Capuana 1974b, 269)

Beneath the ironic attitude towards the self-imposed *gravitas* of a young, possibly mediocre artist, there is the extremely serious business of form and content, the quintessentially 'Capuanian' endeavour of putting together

Quattro, sei versi che dovevano essere il non plus ultra della perfezione della forma; cioè, venti, trenta parole così superbamente allineate e con tale sapiente combinazione e con tale miracoloso impasto, che il ripeterli sotto voce doveva produrre un'estasi deliziosissima [...] [e] unicamente in grazia di quel vergine aggettivo. (270)

Once again, the overwhelming power of artistic creation, combined with what implicitly emerges as a consciousness prone to both neurosis and more generally *fin-de-siècle* degeneration,<sup>28</sup> prevails, and the artist *in fieri* loses, if not his life, then at least his mind: "[M]ugolava suoni incomposti, parole senza senso, povera vittima dell'aggettivo!" (271).

Along similar lines, "Il giornale mobile" (*giornata* 4, Capuana 1974b, 278-84) describes a literary-journalistic form of the future:

Il giornale dell'avvenire - disse il dottor Maggioli quella sera - è già venuto al mondo, un po' prematuramente, come accade spesso, e perciò non è riuscito [...]. La trovata geniale consisteva in questo: che la materia delle cinquanta colonne variava secondo il desiderio giornaliero dei compratori spiccioli; settimanale o mensile degli abbonati, che dovevano manifestare il loro desiderio col preavviso di un giorno. (Capuana 1974b, 278, 280)

Once again, the minimalist form of this short story does not allow for a thorough metanarrative discussion of the publishing market,

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**28** "E il maestro e gli amici lo videro arrivare un giorno nel santuario [...] curvo sotto il peso dell'idea fissa che gli rodeva il cervello" (270).



but it certainly provides a revealing glimpse into what had been, for several decades, Capuana's thoughts on the artist's task of practically wrestling with audiences and readers. In particular, a poignant page from *Per l'arte* comes to mind, where Capuana, in relation to the shifting nature of readers' taste, states: "Non sono i lettori che fanno i libri; sono i libri che fanno i lettori" (Capuana 1994, 46). Such a fundamental hypothesis is in fact reversed in this early sci-fi short story, where the physical making of one's daily news 'diet' is literally left to the reader:

Ogni striscia, stampata a due facce, conteneva una sola materia: articoli di fondo; notizie politiche; notizie commerciali; fatti diversi; cronaca mondiale; varietà letterarie, scientifiche, religiose; avvisi commerciali; corrispondenze private, ecc. ecc. E ogni giorno venivano pubblicate cinque strisce diverse di ogni materia. Così, chi non amava gli articoli di fondo poteva lasciarli da parte, e supplirli con fatti diversi, per esempio, o con la cronaca mondiale, o con le varietà, e via dicendo. (Capuana 1974b, 280-1)

"Il sogno di un musicista" (*giornata 7*, 1974b, 296-302) returns to intermediality and metareference by stressing the mutual influence of (musical) art and life. The story is that of a musician, allusively named Volgango Brauchbar, who is very fond of Bach. Volgango dies after remembering the last note of his own best composition, written in a semi-conscious, dream-like state:

Ho fatto un sogno! [...] Mi pareva di essere in mezzo a una fitta nebbia, illuminata da luce bianca bianca, assai più bianca della luce lunare. Ero atterrito di trovarmi così sperduto, [...] quando tutt'a un tratto una dolcissima voce mi disse, piano, all'orecchio: "Ascolta!" Un coro di voci femminili; prima lento, quasi lontano, poi incalzante, incalzante, con una melodia larga, ma piena di fremiti, di lagrime... Oh! Oh! Una cosa ineffabile! Avevo coscienza di sognare; e ascoltando intenzionalmente, dicevo tra me e me: "Potessi ricordarmene sveglio! Potessi trascriverlo! Basterebbe a immortalarmi! Signore, Signore, fate che io me ne ricordi! Che non ne perda una nota!" E intanto il coro sembrava allontanarsi, diveniva più fiavole. (Capuana 1974b, 299-300)

Whilst Volgango remembers and proudly reproduces the first part of his musical composition, the same chorus of female voices warns him of his impending death, should he recall the remainder of the song - "Se ricordassi anche la seconda [parte], morresti!" (300). For the sake of his loved ones, the newly engaged Volgango ceases to search his memory for the missing piece of music, until the fatal night of his wedding: "Oh Dio! Oh Dio! - mi disse con un fil di voce. - Ricor-

do!... Oh Dio!" he confesses in a whisper, before collapsing dead on to his piano (302). He thus becomes another of the many victims of Art, a Keatsian *belle dame sans merci*, described in Capuana's self-reflexive corpus.

In *Il decameroncino*, it is especially the "Conclusione" (320-7)<sup>29</sup> that strengthens the overall perception of self-reflexivity in the most substantial way, when the narrator, Dottor Maggioli, abruptly concedes:

[N]on ho mai riflettuto un istante attorno al soggetto delle mie novelle [...] l'immaginazione a un tratto mi si schiarisce e veggio i miei personaggi, osservo i loro atti, per qual processo essi mi si trasmutano subito in persone vive [...]? Non saprei dirlo né mi son mai curato di saperlo. (321)

From this comment onwards, Maggioli's speech is a textbook example of Capuana's 'narratology', one that touches on all the aspects dear to his theorising: the distillation of concept into form,<sup>30</sup> the need to transcend – through *riflessione*, *fantasia* and *immaginazione* – the by-now outmoded naturalist restrictions of the *documento umano*,<sup>31</sup> the quasi-Pirandellian *vivificazione-visita* of characters. Maggioli relates an anecdote regarding Capuana's writing efforts and his inability to complete a *novella* whose characters haunt him, indeed "pirandellianamente" (Giabakgi 2011):

Riecco la figura dei due amanti, che quasi mi sembrava di scorgere nel buio della camera, con l'aria dolente di chi invoca soccorso e pietà: "O dunque? Ci lascia così, né in cielo né in terra; con le mani in mano, in questo stato? Una fine dobbiamo farla, non possiamo rimanere perpetuamente innamorati, e nelle circostanze in cui ha avuto la crudeltà di abbandonarci!" [...] Quell'idea diventava una fissazione, una persecuzione. Me li sentivo attorno, dovunque, imploranti: "O dunque? Ci lascia così? Né in cielo, né in terra?" [...] l'allucinazione aveva preso tale intensità che io vedevo e udivo quei due quasi fossero persone vive. (326)

This leaves the narrator perplexed and uncertain about the boundaries between *verista* reality and literary invention, wondering: "Non ho po-

<sup>29</sup> For Tonelli and Ghidetti (footnoted in Capuana 1974b, 320) this "Conclusione" is foundational to Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921).

<sup>30</sup> "Spesso, quel che mi dà la spinta è un concetto astratto, un principio morale, o anche una nozione scientifica. Per qual processo essi mi si trasmutano subito in persone vive" (321).

<sup>31</sup> "Ora, invece, mi sentivo impacciato dal maledetto verismo o naturalismo, dalla maledettissima teorica dell'osservazione diretta. Avevo io mai badato a queste sciocchezze? E in quei giorni me ne sentivo oppresso" (324).

tuto mai sapere con certezza se quella sera egli mi abbia detto la verità e [sic] si sia burlato di me con quest'altra improvvisazione" (327). The conclusion thus works, as Giabakgi (2011) notes, as a "passaggio di testimone tra il 'narratore' Maggioli alle prese con la seduzione della scrittura e il 'trascrittore' Capuana".

Capuana then makes use of the same model in *La voluttà di creare* ([1911] 1974c, 239-309), including a slightly modified introduction, and with ten new stories added to those from *Il decameronino*.<sup>32</sup> The artistic theme emerges prominently in these additions, too, where it is variously negotiated and deepened along the lines of the form/content and ideal/real binaries.

In "Il busto" (1974c, 274-80), a model almost reaches the point of surrendering his own personality to the bust that a sculptor has made of him. "Doneglia, scultore valentissimo", persuades Maggioli to pose for a bust and the artist manages to produce a sculpture that resembles the model to a staggering degree – "la guardavo con stupore quasi mi fossi sdoppiato" (Capuana 1974c, 276). Maggioli recalls being dazzled to learn that the sculptor has used an actual human skull to facilitate the process of sculpting the head. The closer the artwork approaches completion, the more Maggioli-the-protagonist – Maggioli-the-narrator recalls – perceives "un crescente malessere" (278), almost as if the skull were influencing the model's inner life: "Non mi sentivo più io, ma un po' quell'altro che doveva pensare dentro la testa del busto sotto l'involucro di creta che lo copriva" (1974a, 279). In an outburst of anger and fear, Maggioli destroys the almost completed piece.

The penultimate story of the new *racconti*, "L'invisibile" (1974c, 295-302), is explicitly based on the intertextual model of H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* (1897),<sup>33</sup> and recounts a successful experiment in disappearance – "Era sparito, e non l'ho più riveduto" (1974c, 302). It is the most 'aggressively' metanarrative tale, insofar as it critiques its model while, at the same time, claiming to improve upon it:

*The Invisible Man* [...] l'ho letto anch'io che non soglio legger romanzi, ed è stata una gran delusione, mi aspettavo di trovarvi ben altro. L'uomo invisibile non è un'assurdità, è una realtà, ed io credevo che quell'autore avesse voluto raccontarci la storia vera. (1974c, 296)

[...]

l'uomo invisibile del quale voglio parlarvi era diverso, meno incoerente senza dubbio dell'eroe del romanziere inglese. Poteva render-

<sup>32</sup> See Ghidetti in Capuana 1974c, 239, for whom only six stories carry through. That is not congruent with what emerges from examining the (OA) 1920 Treves Edition.

<sup>33</sup> See Ghidetti in Capuana 1974c, 295.

si invisibile quando gli faceva comodo, e interamente, corpo e vestiti. (297)

Lastly, “La redenzione dei capilavori” (1974c, 261-6) offers one further version of the Wildean *tableau vivant*, which was already found in *La Sfinge* (Pellini 1998). This is the story of a scientist who endeavours to vivify, through Mesmerism, the portrait of an “ignota” by Sebastiano del Piombo (Loria 2005), echoing Van Dyck’s *Ignota in Spiritismo?*. Here the painting is not used for the production of art but, rather, for the production of life. Needless to say, the process is unsuccessful and is abruptly ended by the death of the *professore*. Thus, the contingencies of personal history prevent the artistic work from achieving autonomy, in a further sign that, as in *La Sfinge*, the times are not yet ready for the identification of *arte* and *vita*.

Much as in *Il decameroncino*, it is the structure that determines our overall reading of the collection, meaning that, as Failli notes, “ci troviamo di fronte non a novelle isolate e autonome, ma a parti di una raccolta organica, che esibisce marcatamente la propria strutturazione narrativa” (Failli 1985, 131). Challenging the merely fictional reading proposed by Ghidetti (1974) among others, Failli convincingly shows how it is the very accumulation of frameworks that provokes the weakening of the effect of reality: the narrator is supposedly reporting Maggioli’s anecdotes, presenting them as ‘true stories’, but at the same time, recasting them in an incredulous, skeptical light, which is shared by the rest of the *salotto*. The sense of incredulity is increased by the fact that the narrator himself, despite puzzling declarations of veracity – “Ogni volta che io racconto in questo salotto qualcuna di quelle che lei chiama storielle, io racconto fatti da me veduti, dei quali posso affermare, fin con giuramento, la veridicità” (296) – is often just the confidante of somebody who tells the story, rather than a direct witness. These multiple levels of “mediazione di realtà” (Failli 1985, 144) greatly interfere with the mimesis and “è proprio l’interdipendenza fra cornice, racconti, prefazione e *Conclusion* [...] che sembra proporre una discorso marcatamente meta-narrativo” (149). Whilst, in the storyworld, Maggioli’s ambiguity might legitimately puzzle his (post)naturalist *fin-de-siècle* audience when compared to his apparent scientific credibility, beyond the storyworld this ‘final’ revelation cannot come as a surprise to the reader, who has already been alerted quite explicitly by the opening paratext: “Quel caro vecchietto del dottor Maggioli [...] seppe [...] inventare lì per lì tante novelle senza mai far sospettare che le improvvisasse” (Capuana 1974b, 260).

Highlighting the high self-reflexivity of the two collections that respectively open and close the first decade of the new century encourages further enquiry into the works produced in-between. Critics have also noted how in the ‘intermediate’ collections *Delitto ideale*

(1902) and *Coscienze* ([1905] 1974c, 1-198) the striving for mimesis that one would expect, on the basis of the *appassionati* or *paesani* themes of most of the short stories,<sup>34</sup> is significantly reduced.

Ferrara shows how, in *Delitto ideale* (Capuana 1974c, 329-454), three elements concur to shape the collection. Two of these elements point directly to self-reflexivity: alongside the “emarginazione netta del racconto in terza persona”, there is the “complessità dell’impianto enunciativo” and the “macroscopica interferenza tra i piani del racconto e del discorso” (Ferrara 1985, 63), which jointly allow a “tematizzazione delle tecniche narrative” (Vannocci 1985, 119). This is achieved either – in first-person narratives such as “Oh, che silenzio” or “L’inesplicabile” – through blurring the monologic line between the time of the story and the time of its narration – or through the opposite procedure, overemphasising the dialogic nature of the *racconto* itself to the point where, again, the narration prevails over the ‘story’. This creates, Ferrara believes, “una struttura a incastro” (1985, 66), juxtaposing either two or even three “livelli narrativi”. Stories like “Delitto ideale”, “La evocatrice”, “Suggestione”, and “Un consulto” adhere to this model. According to Ferrara, the departure from the previous *Appassionata* (whose self-reflexive element has, nonetheless, been ignored by critics) lies in the emphasis on the compositional level of the collection (*narration*), corroborated by the strong thematic presence of the ideal/real binary:

L’opposizione tra reale e immaginario [...] fissa l’attenzione soprattutto sulle modalità di tale rappresentazione. Lo sperimentalismo dichiarato di questa raccolta di novelle ha infatti la conseguenza più vistosa ed importante nel carattere allusivamente metanarrativo del libro, che ha i suoi precedenti più diretti in *Spiritismo?* e che costituisce a sua volta un precedente fondamentale di *Coscienze*. (Ferrara 1985, 85-6)

In this syncretism of themes, where all previous tropes are brought together with partially new ones, the “gender and narrative”<sup>35</sup> link resurfaces briefly in the short story “Dolore senza nome” (Capuana 1974b, 393-9), where “il giovane scultore Vittorio D’Areba” wrestles with a *bozzetto* he has vastly underestimated.<sup>36</sup> The proliferation of *livelli narrativi* that characterises the collection is made manifest in the same way that the (perceived) creative failures of Vittorio manifest themselves: “[L]a tormentata figura femminile apparsagli dinan-

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**34** See Croce, for whom these too are, as seen, *studii di casi*.

**35** I use this formula as codified by the above-mentioned *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. See Lanser 2013.

**36** “Si era illuso di poter terminare il bozzetto in due o tre giorni” (393).

zi, come balzata a un tratto fuori dal nulla” quickly becomes a “bozzetto” with which the artist subsequently struggles unsuccessfully for weeks and months. He is incapable of completing either *il bozzetto*, which is in itself by definition an incomplete version, a preparatory work for what then has to be rendered in marble, or the final sculpture. What distinguishes this work from the previous stories is not so much the prominence of the levels of *tormento* and *dolore* that accompany the inability of an artist to complete his work, which were already very prominent in the suicidal conclusion of *La Sfinge*, but the fact that, possibly for the first time, there is a collective voice of the artist's *entourage* intervening to contradict what the artist thinks of himself and his work. Upon seeing this incomplete sculpture, his friend Giulio Nolti - who echoes *in nuce* many of the views Capuana expresses in his essays - finds it “un portento [...]: Hai fatto il tuo capolavoro. Non farai niente di meglio in avvenire, te lo dico io”, and continues, elucidating: “quest'opera ha un solo irrimediabile difetto [...] dovrà rimanere quel che è, un bozzetto. Nessuna abilità di esecutore potrà tradurlo in marmo conservandone la freschezza del tocco”.

In Capuana, post-*Decameroncino*, capturing the incompleteness of the idea is at once the best and only path that is left to the artist. Vittorio should not despair, nor must he take his own life. On the contrary, he can, and will ‘baptise’ his work in a self-reflexive, meta-compositional fashion “Dolore senza nome”, indeed ‘unnamable pain’, foreseeing success with both public and critics: “Sentirai che scoppio alla prossima esposizione!” (Capuana 1974c, 399). To corroborate and strengthen this metalevel of the collection, an element that has escaped critical attention must be noted: the greater use of dedications. Uniquely in Capuana, in fact, fourteen out of the fifteen short stories that comprise the collection are individually dedicated to prominent intellectuals with whom Capuana was known to have professional and personal relations, ranging from Federico De Roberto to Grazia Deledda.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, the presence of meta- and paratextual elements and of strategies to highlight the level of narration at the expense of aesthetic illusion and immersion - such as, most noticeably, irony - characterises *Coscienze*, published three years later. In this case too: “Il distacco dalla psicologia delle *Appassionate* si esprime in direzione più esplicitamente metanarrativa” (Vannocci 1985, 120). Unlike *Le appassionate*, there is no authentic thematic unity amongst the nine-

<sup>37</sup> The full list of dedicatees is: Federico De Roberto, L. Antonio Villari, Jolanda, Guelfo Civinini, Amilcare Lauria, Jane Grey, Salvatore Li Greci, Grazia Deledda, Mariano Salluzzo, Bruna (surname-less), Giuseppe Costanzo, Fanny Zampini Salazar, Cordelia, Giuseppe Dragonetto. A 6/14 female ratio is significant, albeit admittedly not impressive by modern standards.

teen short stories<sup>38</sup> in the collection. Acknowledging a thematic fragmentation that is taken even further than in *Delitto* – to the point where only five short stories can be grouped together on the basis of a *paesano* theme – Vannocci astutely groups the short stories by compositional strategies: two dialogues, three monologues,<sup>39</sup> five stories within the story,<sup>40</sup> and three “finzion[i] epistolar[i]” (1985, 88).<sup>41</sup>

It is apparent how, in texts like “In vino veritas” (the second short story, 1974c, 45-51), for example, Viosci’s drunken account of his alleged murder is doubly framed within a first-person narration that, on the whole, produces the usual ‘bracketing effect’ towards reality:

Aveva detto la verità? Nel suo cervello offuscato dai fumi del vino i fatti si erano alterati? Risetta era stata davvero salvata all’ospedale da quel tentativo di soffocazione? O neppur il tentativo era avvenuto? Non ho mai avuto coraggio di accertarmene. (51)

In “Eligio Norsì” (52-61) it is again a double narratorial frame that encloses a rather macabre metanarration of art and death, in which a painter rescues his young muse from drowning, falls deeply in love with her and initiates her into the visual arts.<sup>42</sup> He subsequently finds himself driven to take his own life as a result of his inability to provide for both of them: “Povero Eligio Norsì, a cui l’arte non ha saputo all’ultimo dar tanto da sfamarlo ogni giorno!” (61). “Eligio” highlights a facet of the artistic profession – the financial constraints – that marred Capuana’s life<sup>43</sup> as well as that of many fellow writers, such as Verga and Pirandello. In “Esitanze” (1974c, 77-81), the theatrical script-like layout of the narration<sup>44</sup> frames a woman’s hesitation about surrendering to the advances of a charming *barone*: the mimetic depth reached by her thoughts contrasts starkly with the systematic piercing of the “fourth wall” of the imaginary stage for which this short story seems conceived.

Therefore, the self-reflexivity of collections such as *Delitto ideale* and *Coscienze* emerges – through an uneven combination of (a few) metanarrative hints and a dense, sustained layer of experimen-

<sup>38</sup> All of these were previously published between 1902 and 1905.

<sup>39</sup> “Ma Dunque?”, “Esitanze” and “Sfogo”.

<sup>40</sup> E.g. in conversations within which a story is recounted: “In vino veritas”, “Eligio Norsì”, “Sorrisino”, “Un suicida” and “Il caso di Emilio Roxa”.

<sup>41</sup> “Rettifica”, “Risposta” and “Lettera d’uno scettico”.

<sup>42</sup> “Erano bastati pochi mesi perché in lei si sviluppasse un finissimo senso di arte” (56).

<sup>43</sup> This is discussed by biographers (Di Blasi 1968, 271).

<sup>44</sup> “Elegante gabinetto da toilette. Clelia De Mauris, trentenne [...] [è] ferma davanti a una specchiera [...] all’improvviso si toglie la toque” (77).

tal framings and structural strategies – in a way that is perhaps less deliberate and less obvious than in works such as *Il decameroncino*. Yet, along the framing lines of Wolf's notion of gradable metareferentiality, and even without going so far as to consider these late collections as 'fundamentally' works of self-reflexive creative writing, the above-cited critical opinions and textual evidence undeniably contribute to the idea that the last phase of Capuana's career is marked by a heavy self-reflexive and metareferential component.<sup>45</sup>

This empirical intuition, to be fully explored and theorised in our concluding remarks, is corroborated by an examination of Capuana's last and, until very recently, little considered novel, *Rassegnazione* (1900, partial, in journal sections; 1907 entire, in volume). Davies believes that this novel is a clunky attempt, on Capuana's part, "to associate himself with the new avant-garde [...] and it is a work which betrays the intellectual weariness and the melancholy of the period" (1979, 106). Davies essentially sees the novel as another (after *La Sfinge*) polemical exercise against the fashionable author of the moment, d'Annunzio, and stresses how the episodes inspired by d'Annunzio's *Le vergini delle rocce* "form a weighty central section of the novel (Chapters 9 to 20)" (109).

Oliva (1979, 105-29) also focuses on the intertextual contaminations from d'Annunzio's *Le vergini delle rocce* (1895) and, less significantly, *L'innocente*; and Storti Abate, while substantially ascribing the work to the genre of the 'philosophical' novel, reads it in an anti-Dannunzian key (1989, 136).

However, Paul Barnaby (2017) has truly brought to light the depth of the Dannunzian hypotext by meticulously tracing d'Annunzio-related patterns, crucially underlining how the novel neither uncritically accepts, nor simply rejects, nor just mocks, nor merely pays homage to d'Annunzio. This "most ambitious response to the challenges presented by D'Annunzio's work" (433) comments (meta)narratively on d'Annunzio's aesthetic progression, by implicitly privileging the earlier *Romanzi della rosa* over the later d'Annunzio of the Superuomo. Barnaby argues that the *dannunzianesimo* of the novel is itself not a monolithic assessment but rather a multifaceted commentary (437), showing how the novel promotes a discourse presenting an articulate critique of "a combination of positivist analysis and a vestigial idealism which renders that analysis destructive" (439). Each section thematically alludes to a different work by d'Annunzio. To be specific: Chapters 1 to 8, describing Dario's childhood, allude to *Il trionfo della morte*; Chapters 9-14, containing the "first attempt to father a superuomo", thematically borrow from *Le vergini delle rocce*; Chap-

<sup>45</sup> *Il decameroncino* is now in Capuana 1974b (257-328). *Delitto ideale* is now in Capuana 1974b (329-454). *Coscienze* is now in Capuana 1974c (1-198). *La volontà di creare* is now in Capuana 1974c (237-309).



ters 15-21, which describe the second procreational attempt, borrow from *L'innocente*; Chapters 21-22, devoted to Dario's Milanese quest for pleasure, allude to *Il piacere*. From a self-referential point of view, neither d'Annunzio nor his works are mentioned or alluded to in a way that breaks through the boundaries of the storyworld. The intertextual level might therefore be picked up only by a reader who is familiar with Capuana's key critical works on d'Annunzio, such as the pivotal essay on *Il piacere*, in *Libri e teatro* (1892).

In the apparent absence of metafiction, it may be judicious to consider the plausibility of a metanarrative formulation that is indeed clear and prominent. In particular, in this novel of formation, the metanarrative making of a poetological point is enabled through the juxtaposition of two characters. There is the character of the *inetto* protagonist, the *Bildungsheld*, who, despising his father's lucrative trade, ineffectually aspires to a life of literary glory, and therefore pursues the life of a 'decadent' in an attempt to create art through life itself. Then there is Bissi, a childhood friend who has found success as a novelist by doing precisely the opposite: by turning life experiences into art. What Bissi does, in other words, is to start from the *documento umano*'/case study' of life experience and rework it through the power of *riflessione*, *fantasia* and *immaginazione* in order to re-create those experiences in the superior form of literature. Even at a metanarrative level that does not account for referential links either to the *fin-de-siècle* literary scene or the works by d'Annunzio - and even without the (obvious) 'polemical' layer of *antidannunzianesimo* being worked into the equation by contemporary scholars keen to dissect Capuana's text - *Rassegnazione* appears to succeed in reinforcing Capuana's lifelong commitment to a universal message regarding how a successful, a 'living' piece of fiction ought to be produced. By applying this formula, Bissi 'post-*verista*' succeeds in his literary endeavours, much as, metafictionally, the post-*verista* author of *Rassegnazione* succeeds in bringing his novel to completion.



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## Concluding Remarks: 'Distant Reading' Capuana Self-Reflexive *Verista*

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A close examination of the main instances of metareference and/or autofiction in Capuana's narrative works demonstrates an intrinsic "hermeneutic pressure" (borrowing from Barolini) towards a progressive departure from the specifics of the single art piece. Analysing at the level of the single piece of writing invites a contextualisation that is either editorial (within a collection), generic (within a genre), or chronological (within a period or section) and, at the same time, none of these partial contextualisations seem fully exhaustive from an exegetic perspective.

The way I have approached the discussion of self-reflection in Capuana's *fiabe* is a case in point. There, metareferential tension surfaces intermittently in ways not clearly restricted to a single collection, nor to one neat time frame (such as a specific decade). Thus, the best way to make sense of it would be to look at it across the entire *oeuvre*. An 'ultimate', all-encompassing contextualisation is precisely what these concluding remarks aim to achieve, in an attempt to make sense of self-reflexivity as an overarching creative choice in the work of Capuana.

When "distant reading"<sup>1</sup> self-reflexivity by approaching it at this macroscopic level (1865-1915), two basic trends emerge: first, the

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**1** As Moretti himself explains on several occasions (see at least 2017) the notions of 'distance' and 'distancing' are the crucial ones and precede the use of Information Technology, to which 'distant reading' as a literary methodology has nonetheless been largely associated.

sheer amount of self-reflexivity overall appears to increase progressively; second, the obvious and immediately accessible term of comparison for narrative theorisation is critical writing, in which Capuana was prolific. In this regard, there is a counter-trend in his production of critical works, which decreases to the point of virtually disappearing after 1899, with the exception of the relatively minor collection *Lettere alla assente* (1904)<sup>2</sup> and some university lectures. If we juxtapose these two tendencies and analyse them in combination, an interesting joint pattern emerges: Capuana appears to produce self-reflexive narrative intermittently, and almost in alternation to his theoretical production: his highly self-reflexive texts continue his theoretical discourse in the intervals of his critical production:

- In the early years of his career (1864-72), when Capuana is in Firenze writing for *La Nazione* and compiling his first major critical collection, *Il teatro italiano*, critical production dominates and there is no self-reflexive work (as well as very little narrative production, for that matter).
- In the following years (1873-77), dominated by the composition of the markedly self-reflexive works *Profili di donne* and "Un caso di sonnambulismo", there is indeed narrative production – the first *Giacinta* is conceived and composed in the 1875-79 period – yet little or no critical production takes place.
- In the period of the major 'naturalist' novels *Giacinta* (1879, 1886, 1889) and *Profumo* (1890-92), Capuana is responsible for four major and career-defining critical collections – *Studi 1* (1880), *Studi 2* (1882), *Per l'arte* (1885), *Libri e teatro* (1892a) – and very limited self-reflexive work, emerging only episodically and in the gaps between critical works, such as the short stories "Evoluzione" (1883), "Il piccolo archivio" (1886), "Avventura" (1888), and the hybrid form of autofictional anecdotes inserted into *Spiritismo?*.
- The same pattern is repeated more vigorously in the 1890s, a decade that opens with some pivotal critical writings (*Libri e teatro*). In the years that follow this major critical intervention (1893-97), critical writing decreases to the point of almost disappearing<sup>3</sup> and self-reflexive publications proliferate, with the publication of *Fausto Bragia e altre novelle* and *La Sfinge*, as well as the self-reflexive components of *Le appassionate* and *Ricordi di infanzia*. The decade then closes with a period of dense critical output (two major collections, *Gli 'ismi' contemporanei*, 1898 and *Cronache letterarie*, 1899).

<sup>2</sup> "Garbato dialogo mondan-letterario" (Ghidetti 1974, XXXVII).

<sup>3</sup> An exception is *Mondo occulto* (1896).

- This progression where self-reflexive narrative occurs in place of criticism *stricto sensu*, in the years of diminished or no critical production, intensifies in the last phase of his career. In this period, Capuana reduces his critical production to a few, rather unoriginal university lectures, restating the same core creative principles, and some scattered articles (such as Capuana 1902b; [1905] 1989; [1907] 1988).

Once this pattern has been identified, it becomes plain that it is not at odds with Capuana's supposedly 'naturalist' creative convictions nor does it mark some sort of intellectual decay. It is, in fact, aligned with, and can be examined through, the critical and metanarrative ideas previously illustrated. Capuana, at the turn of the century, expresses his anti-academicism vigorously and somewhat pessimistically: "[La] selvaggia fioritura di scuole, di chiese, di chiesole [...] veristi, idealisti, simbolisti, impressionisti, intuitivisti, sinceristi [...] presentano oggi uno spettacolo doloroso" (1902b, 19); "Io [...] sono naturalista, verista, quanto sono idealista o simbolista" (1899, 250); and "alle teoriche bado poco, chiedo lavori, lavori, lavori!" (1898, 5). On the contrary, he reiterates the need for attaining a "forma viva e solida" (1899, V), embodying an idea in a character, so as to touch the reader's nerves and emotions: "Un'emozione [artistica] è affare di nervi [...] un'opera d'arte che non desti nessuna emozione [...] non è più un'opera d'arte!" (1994, 46). It is on this basis that he praised Goethe, Shakespeare and a few other masters of the artistic form.

By combining these statements with those examined above on the progressive and inevitable penetration of speculative thought into art (see also Capuana 1884, 216, and 1994, 43), it is possible to venture an answer to the question that arises when observing this phenomenon: why does Capuana progressively seem to abandon critical writing and invest all his energies - not only creative, but also theoretical - in self-reflexive writing?

For Capuana, contemporary novelistic form is suffused with speculative thought, which may also be self-reflexive because, as he clearly states in *Studi sulla letteratura contemporanea: Prima serie*: "[L'] opera d'arte [moderna] [è] un tutto vivente che [h]a in se stesso gli elementi e la ragione della propria vita" (1880, 290). It would thus also seem logical for a good artwork to 'use' - more or less explicitly - its constitutive theoretical principles to fuel its own narrative. If art is destined to dissolve into pure thought, then, by extension, pure thought, the speculative thought of (artistic) reflection, not only can, but inevitably will itself become art, and it should therefore be expressed by artistic means, that is, with as balanced a synthesis of form and content as possible. At the turn of the century, with art still tied to its imperfect material support, only self-reflexive writing seems able to position itself at the intersection of these two pro-

gressions: it is certainly art that engages readers and their emotions, yet the blending of form and content expresses, to some extent, 'pure thought'; that is: reflection on art itself. In confirmation of the advanced nature of this 'narratological' intuition on Capuana's part, one needs only to recall how Werner Wolf illustrates artistic self-reflection from the point of view of reader-response:

When metaphenomena occur in the media, as a rule they are not merely offered as (elements of) a theoretical metadiscourse to the recipients' reflection such as argumentative articles on literature, music or the arts, but enable the recipients to *experience* metareference so that metaisation in the media becomes 'applied metareference'. (2009, 33)

A conceptualisation of this kind demonstrates how self-reflexivity is exactly what Capuana has been searching for, a 'felt' reflection that is in itself experienced as an artistic phenomenon. Narrative, then, intrinsically presents itself to Capuana as the most perfect and historically advanced synthesis of form and content: 'perfect' because it provides the 'sensations' and 'impressions' that are indispensable – in Capuana's theory – for an authentic and "viv[o]" work of art. It also represents that degree of reflection, of 'pure thought' that would become increasingly important – again, according to Capuana himself – in the future evolution of art. It is self-reflexive narrative (more than 'just' narrative) that provides the ultimate answer to Capuana's pessimism and potential aesthetic disorientation. Self-reflexive writing represents the first step towards the further evolution of genres anticipated by his theory: if 'pure thought' is what literature is fated to become,<sup>4</sup> and this pure thought is nonetheless authentic Art, capable of touching the sensibility of readers and stirring their emotions, then a speculative discourse on the very essence of art, successfully incarnated in living characters, appears as the quintessential realisation of such an artistic principle. In the light of these theoretical and (meta)narrative considerations, it is logical, then, for Capuana progressively to lean towards the artistic form that might initially seem most incompatible with *Verismo* as the definitive choice for his career as a narrator.

<sup>4</sup> See also the lecture *La scienza della letteratura*: "Il Pensiero [...] saprà trarre lui, dalla babelica confusione presente [...] altre forme letterarie più elevate, più perfette di quelle prodotte finora; se pure [...] non butterà sdegnosamente via l'ingombro di ogni forma per funzionare ed agire soltanto come puro Pensiero" (Capuana 1902b, 19).

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## **A Self-Reflexive Verista**

Metareference and Autofiction in Luigi Capuana's Narrative

Brian Zuccala

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With a Preface by Edwige Comoy Fusaro, this volume is one of few monographs on Italian post-Risorgimento author Luigi Capuana, and the first one written in English in more than forty years. Narratology and critical theory are combined with more 'traditional', historical-philological criticism to offer a radical rereading of the author's narrative. Central to this study is the seemingly counter-intuitive notion of artistic self-reflexivity, which represents an innovative take on an author like Capuana, who has long been 'canonised' as a *verista*.

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