
Introduction

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,¹ 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

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,² 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)

² 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,³ 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.

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*,⁴ gradually losing faith, not so much in some of what he considers fundamental principles of the arts⁵ but, rather, in the proliferation of those “‘ismi’ contemporanei” (1898) that he regards as little more than pseudo-doctrines *à la page*.

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

⁵ 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.