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

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*,¹

¹ 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’² – 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)³

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,⁴ 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)⁵

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).

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

5 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,⁶ 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.⁷ 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

⁶ 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).

⁷ 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.⁸

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.