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

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Discovering that there is in fact – in Capuana – another and ‘counter-canonical’¹ 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

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*.² 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

² 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* Poe³ 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"⁴ 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)⁵

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

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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 numerous⁶ 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).⁷ In addition, the entanglement of no fewer than five narrative voices – the ‘impersonal’ narrator,⁸ 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).⁹ 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),¹⁰ 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

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

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

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

⁹ “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).

¹⁰ 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’ stance¹¹ 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).¹² In 1882 Capuana published the first of his collections of fairy tales, the popular anthology *C’era una volta*.¹³ 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”.¹⁴

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

¹² 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).

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ 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 orchii, 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),¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ So much so that, for Jack Zipes (2009), following the transtextual adven-

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.¹⁷ 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 storyteller¹⁸ 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),¹⁹ yet in a way that does nothing to clarify matters:

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

¹⁹ 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.²⁰ Similarly, the collection *Le ultime fiabe*, published posthumously, contains the two *fiabe* “Fata Rosa-Bianca: Fiaba sceneggiata, atto unico” (2015, 526-44)²¹ 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.²² 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

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

²¹ The collection also contains two *quadri*.

²² 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”.²³ 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 inebbrava 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 istrumenti? 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.²⁴

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

²⁴ 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*,²⁵ 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 brutto” (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 twist²⁶ - 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

²⁶ "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'²⁷ - "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 pompous "Jello Albulo [...], veramente si chiamava Rino Bianchi [...] ma non voleva essere chiamato altrimenti" (267) - is one of the elements, among others, such

²⁷ "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,²⁸ 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,

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)²⁹ 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,³⁰ the need to transcend – through *riflessione*, *fantasia* and *immaginazione* – the by-now outmoded naturalist restrictions of the *documento umano*,³¹ 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-

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

³⁰ "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).

³¹ "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 decameroncino*.³² 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),³³ 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-

³² 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.

³³ 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,³⁴ 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”³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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-

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.³⁷

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-

³⁷ 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 stories³⁸ 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,³⁹ five stories within the story,⁴⁰ and three “finzion[i] epistolar[i]” (1985, 88).⁴¹

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.⁴² 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 life⁴³ 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 narration⁴⁴ 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-

³⁸ All of these were previously published between 1902 and 1905.

³⁹ “Ma Dunque?”, “Esitanze” and “Sfogo”.

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

⁴¹ “Rettifica”, “Risposta” and “Lettera d’uno scettico”.

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

⁴³ This is discussed by biographers (Di Blasi 1968, 271).

⁴⁴ “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.⁴⁵

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-

⁴⁵ *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.

