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

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

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

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

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

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

- In the early years of his career (1864-72), when Capuana is in Firenze writing for *La Nazione* and compiling his first major critical collection, *Il teatro italiano*, critical production dominates and there is no self-reflexive work (as well as very little narrative production, for that matter).
- In the following years (1873-77), dominated by the composition of the markedly self-reflexive works *Profili di donne* and "Un caso di sonnambulismo", there is indeed narrative production – the first *Giacinta* is conceived and composed in the 1875-79 period – yet little or no critical production takes place.
- In the period of the major 'naturalist' novels *Giacinta* (1879, 1886, 1889) and *Profumo* (1890-92), Capuana is responsible for four major and career-defining critical collections – *Studi 1* (1880), *Studi 2* (1882), *Per l'arte* (1885), *Libri e teatro* (1892a) – and very limited self-reflexive work, emerging only episodically and in the gaps between critical works, such as the short stories "Evoluzione" (1883), "Il piccolo archivio" (1886), "Avventura" (1888), and the hybrid form of autofictional anecdotes inserted into *Spiritismo?*.
- The same pattern is repeated more vigorously in the 1890s, a decade that opens with some pivotal critical writings (*Libri e teatro*). In the years that follow this major critical intervention (1893-97), critical writing decreases to the point of almost disappearing³ and self-reflexive publications proliferate, with the publication of *Fausto Bragia e altre novelle* and *La Sfinge*, as well as the self-reflexive components of *Le appassionate* and *Ricordi di infanzia*. The decade then closes with a period of dense critical output (two major collections, *Gli 'ismi' contemporanei*, 1898 and *Cronache letterarie*, 1899).

² "Garbato dialogo mondan-letterario" (Ghidetti 1974, XXXVII).

³ An exception is *Mondo occulto* (1896).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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