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Madame Bovary in Italy:
Forms of Realism in the Late Nineteenth-Century Italian Novel

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Abstract

The final thirty years of the nineteenth century – which coincide with the first decades of the unified Italy – are the golden age of the Italian novel: for the first time 'Italian' and 'novel' combined to produce an "authentically Italian novel" (Asor Rosa). This extremely rich period is characterized by lively debates and great experimentation as well as by two main elements: the adoption, almost universally, of the realist mode, and the reference to French literature as a model. This chapter looks, first, at Franco-Italian cultural transfer; then, it analyzes the influence that Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* had in Italian literary practice and in the rise of Italian Realism. I pay special attention to four realist novels which reworked the bovarystic theme and explored the 'dangers' of novel-reading. I argue that in the age of realism the woman reader character becomes a self-reflexive device which enables the novel to reflect critically on its status, fictional and illusory, on its function and its readership, real and implied. My case studies offer a sample of the forms of realism in the late nineteenth-century Italian novel and address the following questions*:* the issue of morality in the novel (Antonio Fogazzaro's *Malombra*, 1881), the ambivalent power of fiction (Matilde Serao's *Fantasia*, 1884), the difficult legacy of romanticism (Federico De Roberto's *L'illusione*, 1891), and the adoption of realist poetics (Marco Praga, *La biondina*, 1893).

Key words: Bovarysme, self-reflection, woman readers, morality and literature, Franco-Italian cultural transfer, romanticism, *Verismo*, naturalism

The final decades of the nineteenth century – which coincided with the first decades of the unified Italy – were the golden age of the Italian novel: for the first time 'Italian' and 'novel' were combined together to produce, as the critic Alberto Asor Rosa has put it, a "*vero* romanzo e *autentico* italiano' [a proper and authentically Italian novel] (Asor Rosa 2009, 73). It is an extremely rich period, characterized by intense debates and great experimentation. The variety in the novelistic production is impressive: from the mystical novels of Antonio Fogazzaro to the *verista* novels of Giovanni Verga and Federico De Roberto, from the domestic fiction of the new women writers – Marchesa Colombi (Maria Antonietta Torriani), Neera (Anna Radius Zuccari), and Matilde Serao – to the psychological novels of Luigi Capuana, and from the decadent novels of Gabriele D'Annunzio to the naturalistic novels of Italo Svevo. Two main elements unify this variety: the adoption, almost universally, of the realist mode, and the reference to French literature as a model.

An interesting place in the Italian critical debate was occupied by Gustave Flaubert's

Madame Bovary (1857). *Madame Bovary* acted as the litmus paper which divided or united critics and novelists according to their position in the contemporary debate on the status of the novel and the meaning of realism in literature. In this essay I will analyze the influence that *Madame Bovary* had in Italian literary practice. I will pay special attention to a series of realist novels which reworked the bovarystic theme, exploring in their fiction the 'dangers' of novel-reading and the issue of literary identification. The woman reader was a popular theme in the literature and iconography of nineteenth-century Europe well before Flaubert's novel; however, with *Madame Bovary* this character was turned into a cliché in which the act of reading novels came to characterise Romantic dreamers par excellence, women who lost perception of reality by living out the illusions of the novels they read.

By using the woman reader character, and in particular the bovarystic cliché, the novelists questioned the trope of the novel as a corrupting genre (incidentally they also thematized their own ambivalence towards the novel's seductive power). The confusion of the fictional and the real and the effect that this could have on readers was a concern for all nineteenth-century Italian writers (and indeed was the key question at the heart of the European debate on the novel). This was all the more so since the recognized maestro, Alessandro Manzoni, the author of *I promessi sposi* (1827; *The Betrothed*, 1828), famously abandoned the novel because, as he argued in his essay *Del romanzo storico* (1850; *On the Historical Novel*, 1984), by mixing "storia" [history] and "favola" [fable] the novel is "intrinsecamente contraddittorio" [intrinsically contradictory] and betrays the commitment to the "vero" [truth] which was Manzoni's primary concern (Manzoni 1997, 210). The Italian novelists of the second half of the nineteenth century could not ignore Manzoni's impasse and kept reflecting on, and having mixed feelings about, the deceptiveness with which the novel mixed facts and fiction and its effects on the readers. The woman reader character and the reading scenes in these Realist novels become therefore "a mise en abyme of the performative immorality of the novel" (Calabrese 2001, 581). My case studies will show how four post-unification Italian novels pondered and addressed the issue of morality in the novel, the ambivalent power of fiction, the difficult legacy of romanticism, and the adoption of realist poetics.

Before dwelling on the different case studies, which could be seen as representing different strands of Italian realism, I shall make some preliminary remarks: first on the status of the Italian novel in post-unification Italy, and then on the peculiarities of the cultural exchange between Italy and France (and more specifically on the influence of authors such as Émile Zola and Flaubert).

1. The novel in post-unification Italy

The decades that go from the Unification of 1861 to the *fin de siècle* form a remarkable period in the history of Italy, in which great political and social upheaval occurred, accompanied by great changes and also enormous tensions in the cultural sphere. At the time of the Unification, Italy was predominantly rural and troubled by a low literacy rate of 25%, which compared unfavorably with the rates in England, France, and Germany, all greater than 70%. An additional complication for readers and authors was the 'language question,' whereby Italian was a language with a great literary tradition but with little day-to-day use. Only 2.5% of the population of 26 million spoke Italian (the majority in Tuscany and Rome), while the remainder used dialects (De Mauro 1970, 43). In the post-unification period the country underwent intense transformations and by the end of the nineteenth century parts of Italy were becoming a modern society with the emergence of a middle class, linguistic and cultural unification, improved literacy, and industrialization. These changes allowed the publishing industry to flourish – book production increased by 325% between 1820 and 1890 (Borghi 2003, 101) – and develop in line with the needs of the emerging mass market and a modern reading public. Among the books published in Italy in the 1840s only 16% were literary works (and of these only a small percentage were novels), by the 1880s the cultural industry was well established and "in larga parte romanzo-centrica" [largely centered on the novel] (Ragone 2002, 344), the new and successful consumerist genre.

However, the developments were sufficiently uneven that not all tensions and contradictions apparent at Unification could be resolved. In fact it is mostly because of these tensions and these delays that Asor Rosa described the history of the Italian novel as 'anomalous'. One of the main problems, Asor Rosa continued, was the link between the novel and modernity:

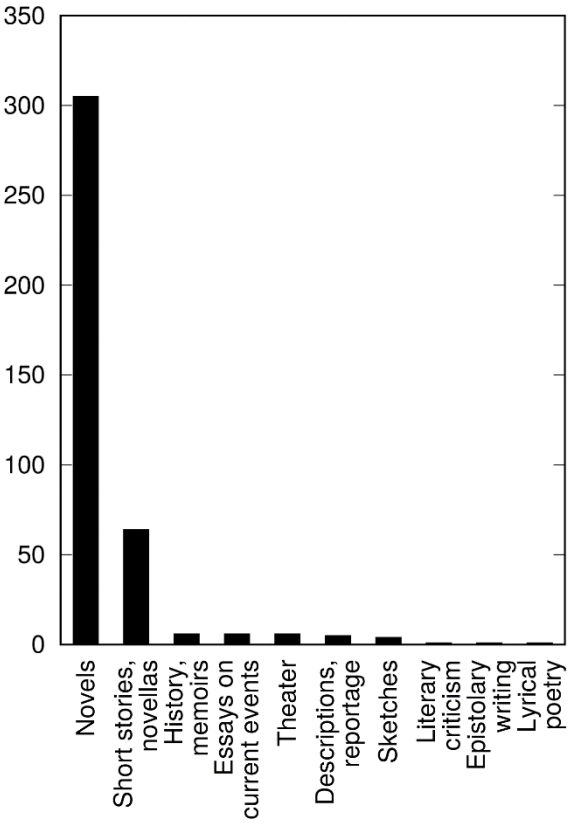
> Modernity is the end of the ancient regime, the birth of a society divided into classes, the hegemony of the bourgeoisie, the emergence of a mass market. All of this happened in Italy with extreme delay, often in an approximate and imperfect manner, and with colossal internal contradictions. (Asor Rosa 2002, 256)[1]

The geographical and cultural history of fragmentation and the slow evolution of the middle classes also meant that Italy lacked the social context and the realist mentality congenital to the bourgeoise that was instrumental in the building of a national identity. Italy's main problem was that of creating a national culture. Hence, the Italian post-unification novel on

[1] All translations from the Italian are my own unless indicated otherwise.

one side tried to address the problem of a national tradition – reflecting on and looking towards the 'romanzo italiano' of which there were so far few examples, among which was Manzoni's celebrated but isolated *Promessi sposi*. On the other, it strove to find its collocation in what had become a remunerative and diverse publishing venture. It is in this period that the novel diversified and specialized according to different audiences and different value systems which – to use Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the literary field in *The Rules of Art* (1996) – were inversely proportional: one aimed at commercial success and the other at literary prestige. In the years between 1870 to 1899 Milan became the undisputed center of novelistic production in the new Italy, where 36% of the national production between 1870 and 1899 was published (Perozzo 2013a, 388; Perozzo's database comprises all novels published in Italy in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, a rich corpus of 2545 novels and 1054 novelists). Milan was also the site of the major nineteenth-century Italian literary movements (Romanticism, the Scapigliatura, and *Verismo*; even the Sicilians Verga and Capuana lived and published in Milan). The two major publishers were Sonzogno and Treves: in 1866 Sonzogno funded the most successful Milanese newspaper, *Il secolo*, as well as a series of weeklies and magazines, including four editorial series all devoted to light literature, the great majority of which was in translation, and mostly from French. Valentina Perozzo (2013a, 103) takes as an example the year 1884 in which Sonzogno published 33 novels, of which 32 were translations, 25 of them from French. Treves in 1866 began the publication of the famous series "Biblioteca Amena" which for the following fifty years was to become "the collection point of what Benedetto Croce considered the official narrative of the 'New Italy'" (108).

"Biblioteca Amena" made an important contribution to the creation of the Italian literary canon dominated by the novel (figure 1). Its catalogue illustrates also the absolute domination of French literature in the Italian market. In figure 2 Erminia Irace (2012, 211) clearly shows that almost half of the books published in "Biblioteca Amena" were French (189 of 399, compared with 115 Italian books).



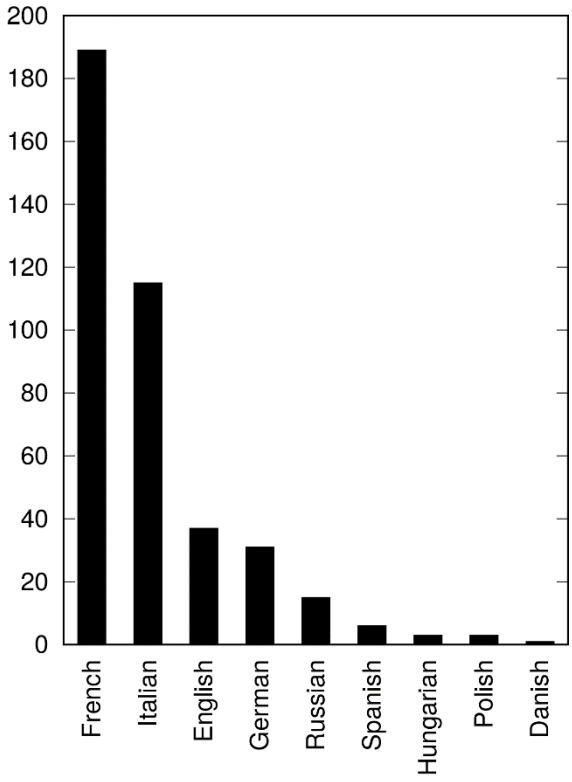


Figure 1. “Biblioteca Amena” from Treves (1868-1900). Works divided by literary genres. (The reprintings have not been considered.) Figure 2. “Biblioteca Amena”: original languages of the works published by Treves in the series (1868-1900). Source: Irace 2012, 211; reproduced and translated with permission of the author.

Moreover, the French domination was almost absolute when it comes to light literature: Perozzo (2013a, 388) speaks of a “French monopoly”; her sources provide evidence that 95% of the serialized fiction in Sonzogno’s *Il secolo* were French, leaving practically no room for the development of a home-grown Italian serialized tradition. As Donald Sassoon puts it:

> There were Italian readers of *romans feuilletons*, and there were journals carrying serialised novels (*Romanzo mensile, Domenica del corriere, Tribuna illustrata, Il Mattino illustrato*), but what they published was French authors who had emerged victorious from keen competition, leaving behind them a large number of forgotten novels and failed authors. (Sassoon 2006, 486)

However, the exceptionality – or anomaly, as Asor Rosa described it – of the Italian situation should not be overstated. In his *Atlas of the European novel 1800-1900* Franco Moretti makes the point that the predominance of French and English models was the norm in most European countries, hence not unique to the Italian case. This was a “consequence of centralization” of the literary market:

> With the novel, then, a common literary market arises in Europe. One market: because of centralization. And a very uneven market: also because of centralization. Because in the crucial century between 1750 and 1850 the consequence of centralization is that in most European countries the majority of novels are, quite simply, foreign books. Hungarian, Italian, Danish, Greek readers familiarize themselves with the new form through French and English novels: and so, inevitably, French and English novels become models to be imitated. (Moretti 1998, 190).

And yet in the "underdeveloped" Italy (the adjective is used with inverted commas by Moretti) perhaps there is something more. For Giovanni Ragone, who produced a seminal monograph on the publishing industry in the nineteenth century, the dependence on French consumerist genres is again an "'anomaly' of the Italian market" (Ragone 1999, 50). The reasons for this are varied and include: the previously mentioned delayed rise of the novel; the geographical and cultural vicinity between France and Italy that fosters an exchange between intellectual communities (it was common practice, before and after the Unification, for Italian writers and artists to spend a few years in Paris); the linguistic fragmentation in Italy and the language question; and, finally, the fact that Italy was a Francophone country: educated Italians read in French, they were easily able to buy French books in local bookstores, French was taught in schools and at university and was used as a language of communication as well as a "major social marker" (Muller 2010, 151) among the upper and middle classes, among which we find also the new and growing female readership who were crucial for the success of the novel (on Francophone readers see Perozzo 2013a, 368-74).

What then was the relationship of Italian writers with France? Luigi Capuana, the Sicilian writer, literary critic, and founder of *Verismo*, wrote in 1899: "We read everything that comes from France; we know their contemporary literature almost better than ours: our magazines, our literary journals, even our political newspapers regurgitate, so to speak, essays, studies, and reviews of French books" (Capuana 1899, 293).[2] Indeed both readers and critics were up to date with what was happening in the French literary scene as if Paris was the capital of Italian culture (similarly Italian periodicals reported weekly on the latest French fashion or most recent elegant gatherings in Paris). Italian critics followed particularly closely the French debate on the function of literature; so much so that when the debate on Zola and realism broke out in France, it immediately bounced over to inflame the pages of Italian literary journals. This happened in 1877 with the wild success of Zola's *Assommoir* and in 1880 with the simultaneous publication of *Nana*, *Le roman expérimental* and *Les soirées de Médan*,

[2] "Noi leggiamo tutto quel che ci viene dalla Francia; noi conosciamo la loro letteratura contemporanea quasi assai meglio della nostra; le nostre riviste, i nostri giornali letterari, i nostri stessi giornali politici rigurgitano di saggi, come si dice, di studi, di recensioni di libri francesi."

which coincided with the apogee of naturalism. In Italy Zola already had a coterie of faithful followers, such as the critic Felice Cameroni who in the pages of *Il Gazzettino Rosa* began reviewing all of Zola's work since 1873 and became one of the few strenuous supporters of realism in literature on the peninsula (Costa Ragusa 2003, 17-29). In 1877 the influential literary critic Francesco De Sanctis wrote eleven articles on Zola in the Neapolitan journal *Roma*, underlining the progressive and democratic character of naturalism, which, though, in his interpretation was to remain within the remit of a pedagogical conception of art (still influenced by the romantic debate and Manzoni's idea of a true and useful literature): in short, for De Sanctis realism should always be "at the service of the 'moral sense' and the 'ideal'" (Tellini 1998, 146).

The novels of Zola, the literary phenomenon of the time, were translated in Italy almost as soon as they came out in France and "before long entered the common imagination and constituted a frame of reference for everything that was published in Italy" (Perozzo 2013b, 20). Curiously, the success of Zola was what marked, at least officially, the beginning of Flaubert's fortune in Italy: the first translation into Italian of *Madame Bovary* was published in 1881 by Treves and presented in "Biblioteca Amena" as the precursor of the Rougon-Macquart. And yet *Madame Bovary* was already known in Italy. It had been reviewed as early as 1859 by Eugenio Camerini and 1861 by Paolo Lioy (Tellini 1998, 141-43), and "spread among artists and more sophisticated readers", writers and critics, who did not need the mediation of a translation (Lugli 1959, 19). In his study "Bovary italiane" Vittorio Lugli reconstructs the writers' interest: Capuana recommending *Madame Bovary* to Verga in 1873, Verga's objections in 1874 (he later changed his stance), De Sanctis's articles in 1877, Carducci ordering a copy from Paris in 1878 (Lugli 1959, 19). *Madame Bovary* is celebrated today as the "first modern novel", the one in fact that "did away with romanticism with one stroke and inaugurated the realist movement" (Vargas Llosa 1986, 214, 147). However, the novel puzzled its first Italian readers, who failed to understand the novelty of Flaubert's project. Pierluigi Pellini (2010, 61) notes that "*Madame Bovary* is the first novel in which the distinctions between good and bad characters becomes complicated until they blur together; the meaning cannot be decided". What was difficult to accept was the radicality of Flaubert's realism (he did not 'idealize' enough for Camerini and Lioy) with the implication that behind the impassibility and neutrality advocated for the narrator Flaubert was going against "that pedagogical and ethical current according to which historical truth and artistic truth are inseparable, and which assigns literature the responsibility of educating people ideologically" (Vargas Llosa 1986, 229). Perozzi's database (which surveyed five of the most important

Italian literary journals for the years 1870-1899) clearly shows that the debate on the novel in Italy was heavily centered on (and obsessed with) the relationship between morals and art, and this continued to the end of the nineteenth century. With the exception of a few, most Italian critics and literary journals had difficulty in accepting a division between art and morals and were uneasy with realism in literature.

Interestingly, the same cannot be said for the Italian writers who as a consequence all started experimenting with the realist mode either by following and updating the Realist tradition inaugurated by Manzoni or by engaging with and embracing the new naturalist poetics coming from France. Moreover, my research on the *fin de siècle* novel shows an interesting phenomenon, which is the fascination exercised by Flaubert's character on Italian writers, in spite of the small number of review articles dedicated to Flaubert and the strikingly low number of translations of Flaubert's works in the nineteenth century: *Madame Bovary* being the only novel by Flaubert translated into Italian (and only in 1881) against the 104 translations of Zola's novels (figures from CLIO 1991). However, the long-lasting impact Flaubert had on Italian writers and on the debate surrounding the novel can be retraced – I am arguing in this essay – in the reverberations, imitations and reworkings that the character of Emma Bovary as the woman reader elicited in Italian literature.

2. "Madame Bovary" in Italy

In Italy the phenomenon is remarkable: no fewer than twenty novels, all written in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, reworked the character of the woman reader and the bovarystic theme, exploring the dangers of novel reading and the issue of literary identification. These are: *Fosca* (1869; *Passion: A Novel*, 1994) by Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, *Evelina* (1873) by Cesare Tronconi, *Malombra* (1881; *The Woman* (*Malombra)*, 1907) by Antonio Fogazzaro, *No* (No, 1881) by Alfredo Oriani, *Il marito di Elena* (Elena's Husband, 1882) and *Mastro-don Gesualdo* (1889; *Mastro-don Gesualdo*, 1928) by Giovanni Verga, *Fantasia* (1883; *Fantasy: A novel,* 1890) by Matilde Serao, *Serate d'inverno* (1879; *Winter Evenings*, 2006), *Prima morire* (Before dying, 1881), and *Il tramonto di un ideale* (The decline of an ideal, 1883) by Marchesa Colombi, *Teresa* (1886), *Lydia* (1887) and *L'indomani* (The day after, 1889) by Neera, *L'Illusione* (The illusion, 1891) by Federico De Roberto, *L'innocente* (1892; *The Intruder*, 1898) by Gabriele D'Annunzio, *La biondina* (The Blond, 1893) by Marco Praga, *Le tre Marie* (The three Marys, 1894) by Jolanda, *L'arte di*

prender marito (1894; *The Art of Taking a Wife*, 1894) by Paolo Mantegazza, *Una vita* (1892; *A Life*, 1963) and *Senilità* (1898; *As a Man Grows Older*, 1932) by Italo Svevo. Most were mainstream authors (two-thirds of these texts are still in print today and at least half of them have an English translation). I will extract four case studies from this list through which to show how the reworking of the bovarystic theme became a way to test and challenge the key question at the heart of the debate, this being the morality (or 'immorality') of the novel as the genre of 'make believe'. My argument is that the woman reader character in the age of Italian realism was deployed as a self-reflexive device which enabled the novelist to reflect critically on the genre's status, fictional and illusory, on its function and on its readership, real and implied. What is intriguing is the degree to which this reflection was carried out through the forms and the structures of the realist novel, anticipating, as I suggest, the meta-reflection as we know it from the modernist novel. On the one hand, I argue that there is less discontinuity between naturalism and modernism than is usually assumed, on the other I wish to challenge the assumption that this discontinuity is the most appropriate category for the classification of the Italian late-nineteenth-century novel.

2.1. French novels: "Malombra" (1881) by Antonio Fogazzaro

The trope of the novel as a corruptive genre is simultaneously reiterated and challenged by Antonio Fogazzaro (1842-1911) in *Malombra*, his first and highly successful novel. The writer's ambivalent attitude towards the genre (novels as dangerous in stirring imagination but also as a means to reveal the truth about ourselves) prompts an investigation of the act of reading and in particular of the mechanisms of literary identification, which affect his female protagonist, Marina. She is clearly modeled on Flaubert's Emma Bovary, the literary character that best exemplifies, after Don Quixote, the dangerous consequences of the reader's involvement in the fictional illusion. Marina is an insatiable reader and, like Emma, is said to possess a vivid imagination, a tendency toward daydreaming, a heightened sensibility and a nervous constitution: "My nerves are out of tune like a boarding-school piano" (Fogazzaro 1907, 59; "ho i nervi scordati come un pianoforte di collegio"; Fogazzaro 2000, 43). These are all traits which make her prone to mood swings, hysterical fits and hallucinations. Hysterics are one of the hallmarks of the cliché of the woman reader and are particularly central to *Malombra* (interestingly most of the patients in Freud's pioneering 1895 psychiatric study *Studies on hysteria* were insatiable readers). One insatiable reader was

"Dora" in Freud's later *Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905), who in her youth "tried to avoid social intercourse, and employed herself [...] with attending lectures for women" (Freud 1953, 23). As I have argued elsewhere (Santovetti 2013), Fogazzaro used the cliché of the woman reader to postulate an affinity between the experience of reading (and more in general the aesthetic experience) and mystical rapture: a totalising experience, detached from reality and beyond rational thinking in which the self dissolves its boundaries and experiences a sense of fusion and identity loss. The importance given to the act of reading and writing as aesthetic and mystical experiences is the ground on which Fogazzaro's literary experimentation, which is here anticipating modernist approaches, meets and is enriched by his theological modernism.

There are two things I would like to underline about Fogazzaro's novel: one is the polemic against French novels; the other is the polemic against realism. On both issues Fogazzaro is ambivalent. The penchant for Romantic French novels – "Her beloved French authors" (Fogazzaro 1907, 80; "I suoi cari romanzi francesi"; Fogazzaro 2000, 58) – is for Marina (and all the other Italian fictional readers) combined with contempt for the Italian novel: "Marina had the lowest opinion of Italian fiction" (Fogazzaro 1907, 111).[3] This can be seen as reflecting the uneasiness and dissatisfaction of Italian novelists towards the "Italian novel" (or the acknowledgment of its anomalous tradition). Some of them, like Matilde Serao, even believed that "the *Italian* novel couldn't exist at this time" (Serao interviewed by Ugo Ojetti in Ojetti 1987, 235). Fogazzaro was also of course referring to the domination of French literature at the time in Italy (as he stated in the 1874 essay "Dell'avvenire del romanzo in Italia" [The future of the novel in Italy]: "Not only the spirit, but the customs and habits, everything is French in the most select part of our society" (Fogazzaro 1983, 63).[4] However, the French novel can be seen as a topos within the topos of the woman reader, which serves as "an instant signifier of immorality" (Flint 1993, 287). The catalogue of Marina's library – "un fascio di ogni erba, molto più velenose che di salubri" ["a collection, be it said, of every kind of plant, and with more poisonous than health-giving specimens among them"] – confirms this but also tells us something more:

> In the next room, which had inspired such terror in poor Fanny, Marina placed her Erard, a souvenir of her stay in Paris, and her books, a collection, be it said, of every kind of plant, and with more poisonous than health-giving specimens among them. English authors were represented by Shakespeare and Byron in magnificent illustrated editions, the gift of her father, by Poe, and the novels of Disraeli, her favourite author.

[3] "Marina non aveva punto stima de' libri italiani" (Fogazzaro 2000, 81).

[4] "Non solo lo spirito, ma i costumi, le abitudini, tutto è francese nella nostra società più eletta."

> Not a single German book was there, and the sole Italian one was a Monograph History of the Crusnelli Family, published at Milan on the occasion of her father's marriage. […] There was a copy of Dante, but in the French garb given him by the Abbé Lamennais, which rendered him much more pleasing to Marina. She had all George Sand's novels, many of Balzac's, all De Musset's works, all Stendhal's, Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*; Chateaubriand's *René*; many volumes of the *Chefs d'oeuvres des Littératures Étrangères*, and the *Chefs d'oeuvres des Littératures anciennes* published by Hachette. She had made her selection in a spirit of research, paying little heed to obvious dangers. Bound volumes of *Revue des deux Mondes* completed her library. (Fogazzaro 1907, 76)[5]

The list of books allows us to make some distinctions among French novels: as Franco Fido observed, with François René de Chateaubriand, Alfred de Musset and Charles Baudelaire we see emerging "a more nocturnal and murky strand than the official Romanticism of Lamartine and Victor Hugo" (Fido 1994, 421), which is that inaugurated by Emma Bovary who reads Eugène Sue, George Sand and Honoré de Balzac; secondly, there is no mention of Flaubert and this is, according to Fido (1994, 421), "a true suppression, deliberately orchestrated". In his 1874 essay Fogazzaro confessed to being a devourer of literature exactly like Marina (he also insisted that he did not want to repeat "the anathemas many times thrown by the Italians against the French novel, sterile as are all anathemas" (Fogazzaro 1983, 54).[6] He did not record his thoughts on *Madame Bovary*, but we know that he found *L'Éducation sentimentale* "detestable" (Fido 1994, 421).

This brings us to the question of realism. Both in *Malombra* and in his 1874 essay on the novel, we find a polemic against the then prevailing mode of realism: "the exact representation of the truth without choice and without ideas […] is the negation of Art, a product of *impotent brains trying to be original*" (Fogazzaro 1983, 66).[7] Against the realist novel Fogazzaro set the "contemporary psychological novel" by arguing that the duty of the novelist was "the deep examination of oneself and of the obscure drama that passions and

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5 "Nella stanza vicina, che aveva ispirato tanto orrore a Fanny, Marina fece collocare il suo Erard, ricordo del soggiorno di Parigi, e i suoi libri, un fascio di ogni erba, molto più velenose che di salubri. D'inglese non aveva che Byron e Shakespeare in magnifiche edizioni illustrate, regali di suo padre, Poe e tutti i romanzi di Disraeli, suo autore favorito. Di tedeschi non ne aveva alcuno. Il solo libro italiano era una una monografia storica della famiglia Crusnelli pubblicata in Milano per le nozze del marchese Filippo, nella quale si facean risalire le origini della famiglia a un signore Kerosnel venuto in Italia al seguito della prima moglie di Giovan Galeazzo Visconte, Isabella di Francia contessa di Vertu. C'era pure un Dante, ma nella tonaca francese dell'abate di Lamennais, che lo rendeva molto più simpatico a Marina, diceva lei. Non le mancava un solo romanzo della Sand; ne aveva parecchi di Balzac; aveva tutto Musset, tutto Stendhal, le *Fleur du mal* di Baudelaire, *René* di Chateaubriand, Chamfort, parecchi volumi dei *Chefs d'oeuvres des littèratures étrangères* e dei *Chefs d'oeuvres des littératures anciennes* pubblicati dall'Hachette, scelti da lei con uno spirito curioso e poco curante di certi pericoli; parecchi fascicoli della *Revue des deux Mondes*" (Fogazzaro 2010, 55).

6 "gli anatemi tante volte fulminati dagli Italiani contro il romanzo francese, sterili al paro di tutti gli anatemi."

7 "[la] rappresentazione esatta del vero senza scelta e senza idee […] è la negazione dell'arte, parto di cervelli *impotenti in traccia di originalità*."

events unroll in the mystery of any soul" (Fogazzaro 1983, 56 and 59).[8] It is this focus on the unconscious (prior to Freud's theories), this emphasis on psychology and the inner and more obscure life of the self ("hidden stirring of passions"; Fogazzaro 1983, 53),[9] from the spiritual and mystical dimension to the irrational (exemplified by the psychotic illness which affects Marina), that for the readers of today places his narrative experimentation not in opposition to but rather in parallel with Realist experimentation: a sort of "spiritual realism".

2.2. Too much imagination: "Fantasia" (1883) by Matilde Serao

Having too much imagination, similarly to reading Romantic French novels, is another key trait of the cliché of the woman reader. It is certainly what makes Lucia Altimare, Matilde Serao's protagonist in *Fantasia,* stand out among the other girls in their boarding school – "You have too much imagination" (Serao 1890, 14; "Voi avete troppa fantasia"; Serao 2010, 31) – and particularly in respect to her best friend, Caterina, who, on the contrary, "[has] no imagination" (Serao 1890, 12; "non [ha] fantasia"; Serao 2010, 29). The difference between the two friends, one of whom is "romantic" and "fantastic" (Serao 1890, 201), while the other is unimaginative and domestic, is replicated in their attitude towards reading: the first is a voracious reader of religious writings (*Life of Saints*, the Bible) as well as of Romantic works (Balzac, but among her favourites is also the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi), the second is bored by reading – "reading bores me; there's nothing but rubbish in books" (Serao 1890, 82)[10] – and reads only letters.

What girls could read was of course a much-debated issue, and this is thematized in *Fantasia*. Because of their realistic and indecent content Zola's works were banned for young and female readers (in nineteenth-century novels a penchant for Zola served to classify the woman reader character as uninhibited and morally corrupted). And yet here in the opening of the novel the boarding school girls discuss not whether it is moral or immoral to read Zola but rather whether it is not more astute to keep their reading quiet so as not to incur disapproval. Flaubert is instead openly quoted as the inspiration of the novel when Lucia is flirting with Caterina's husband and tells him that "their position is to be found in *Madame Bovary*"

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8 "romanzo contemporaneo psicologico"; "l'esame profondo di se stesso e dell'oscuro dramma che le passioni e i casi svolgono nel mistero di ogni anima".

9 "nascosto agitarsi delle passioni.".

10 "il leggere mi secca: non vi sono che corbellerie nei libri" (Serao 2010, 94).

(Serao 1890, 229).[11] By mirroring herself and her lover in Flaubert's novel, Lucia states that they are "performers in a bourgeois drama, or in a provincial one" (Serao 1890, 229; "dramma borghese o dramma provinciale"; Serao 2010, 233). As Ursula Fanning has aptly observed, "Lucia's knowing mockery of *Madame Bovary* casts light on Serao's use of the text: she uses it in order to re-write it" (Fanning 2020, xx). This Neapolitan Madame Bovary has a different ending: not only does the adulterous Lucia live, but she gets what she wanted, that is her friend's husband. Hence, Fanning rightly argues that *Fantasia* is not a morality tale but a cautionary tale: "a consideration of the power of the imagination and, I propose, of the importance of being a skilled and analytical reader, alert to generic conventions and to the power of fiction" (xx). Because Caterina is not good at reading books, she is also not good at reading life (or keeping her husband), therefore she is the one that succumbs and kills herself.

Fantasia, a sentimental novel, a provincial melodrama, was the work that established Matilde Serao (1856-1927) as a novelist. She was then 27 years old, already a journalist and with a successful career ahead of her, both as a writer, a journalist and the director of a newspaper. But *Fantasia* is also an intriguing reflection on the novel and on the power of fiction. Serao, the woman writer, herself is the one with "too much imagination" (she was accused of an "excess of imagination" by one of her first critics; Perozzo 2013a, 169). With *Fantasia* the novelist exorcised her own ambivalence towards the novel as a "make believe" genre. She ponders the morality of an art which contributed, deliberately or not, to the creation of an illusory, fictitious world in which the reader, unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy, could lose herself: "the reader goes over the novel in the imagination", Serao wrote one year later in 1884, "as if it was her own adventure, and a transfusion happens, a communion is created, and the critic vanishes into the dreamer" (Serao 1884).[12] Lucia, the reader and daydreamer is, technically speaking, an immoral character, but she is a winner. This puzzled some readers; a correspondent of Fogazzaro wrote that "Serao's *Fantasia* disgusted her" (Chemello 2017, 189). Victoria Tomasulo (2016, 9) interestingly notes that the ending of *Fantasia* "met with so much opprobrium in England that it had to be rewritten to satisfy conventional moral expectation".

The reflection on morality and the novel is particularly thorny for the woman writers, who in that period were "living their Rinascimento" (Frau and Gragnani 2011, xxiv). The entrance into the literary limelight of the women writers is the key phenomenon of the nineteenth

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11 "la [loro] posizione si trova nella *Madame Bovary*" (Serao 2010, 232).

12 "il lettore rumina con l'immaginazione il romanzo come fosse un'avventura sua propria, e una trasfusione accade, una comunione si fa, il critico svanisce nel sognatore".

century in Europe and in Italy. Interestingly, in Italy "women published in that period more than a quarter of the novels" (Perozzo 2014, 364), which means that in spite of delay and underdevelopment, the emergence of women writers Italy was in line with what was happening in the rest of Europe: for England Richard Altick (1962, 392) states 21% women writers, whereas Nigel Cross (1985, 167) estimates 20% to 30%. However, their field seems to be restricted to pedagogical and educational literature, and most importantly women "could practice writing only with the right precautions and without distorting their female character" (Perozzo 2014, 376). Thus for women writers the moral issue was even more compelling than for male writers. Going back to Serao, it is now possible to understand her ambivalence towards the novel: first because of the racy reputation of the genre; secondly, because she was entering a field, the literary field, that until then was exclusively male. As Lucienne Kroha (2000, 165) observed, "Women writers [...] were self-conscious about their 'transgressions' often going to great lengths to reassure themselves – and everyone else – that they were not forfeiting their femininity by writing". *Fantasia* was a way to explore the issue of morality and fiction, and at the same time her identity as a novelist.

2.3. Against Romanticism*: "L'illusione" (1891) by Federico De Roberto*

In *L'Illusione*, written by Sicilian writer Federico De Roberto (1861-1927), the third and younger figure of Italian *Verismo* (his mentor and lifelong friend was Giovanni Verga), the mechanisms of fictional identification are exposed, starting from the idea that books replace life:

> The novels were her advisers whom she asked for suggestions. Now she knew life! And what an intense life she lived, with her books. Enthusiastic impulses and unlimited suffering, dread and shivers, smiles and tears, they gave her everything. Sometimes, after long hours of reading, she arose with a physical heaviness, a disgust, a nausea for everything, for the vulgarities of existence to which she had to submit and which made her equal to the abhorred and brutish crowd. She refused food, wanted to be able to live on air, she induced finally one of her neurotic fits. More than the heroes, she loved the heroines; in the women she saw as many sisters. And those long descriptions, full of monotonous narration annoyed her: she skipped many to get to the love dialogues, the sweet or terrible scenes, the sudden catastrophes, which left her shocked and feverish. How many tears those books cost her. (De Roberto 1984, 79)[13]

[13] "I romanzi erano sempre i consiglieri ai quali chiedeva suggerimenti. Adesso conosceva la vita! Ed una vita intensa ella viveva, con i suoi libri. Slanci d'entusiasmo e dolori sconfinati, raccapricci e fremiti, sorrisi e lacrime, essi le davano tutto. Alle volte, dopo lunghe ore di lettura, si alzava con un'oppressione fisica, un disgusto, una nausea per tutte le cose, per le volgarità dell'esistenza alle quali doveva sottostare e che

De Roberto describes in detail the physical reactions produced by reading novels: tears, shivers, hysterical fits, and lack of appetite; disgust about reality described in terms of 'nausea'; confusion between fiction and reality and identification of the character with the heroines of her books; finally, the tendency towards an empathic modality of reading which privileged emotional involvement (through gripping love scenes or sensational developments). In short, all the key features of the cliché are represented and Teresa is portrayed as a worthy sister of Emma Bovary, albeit a more Mediterranean and melodramatic one (the name of Emma is explicitly invoked a few lines later as one of the heroines loved by Teresa). However, Teresa does not die as does Emma: she evolves from the naïve and Romantic reader who she was into someone who "had read too deeply in the book of life" and contemplates "with a dry and fixed eye" (De Roberto 1984, 357 and 409) the condition of solitude and disillusionment; in this sense, argues Margherita Ganeri (2005, 32), *L'illusione* marks "the end of bovarysm". And indeed by dwelling upon and comparing the illusion of novelistic fictionality with the illusion of love (the "illusion" of the novel's title), De Roberto intended to criticize bovarysm as a Romantic illusion which makes readers lose the perception of reality. However, he ends up using and transforming the cliché of the female reader into an investigation of the fictional status of the novelistic genre. The novelty of *L'illusione* is the space given to the act of reading, the reflection on the ambiguous function of the novel as a genre (books are dangerous but also a means of emancipation), and the meta-reflection on literature and writing (Santovetti 2011). In particular, De Roberto brings to the fore the function that writing plays in mediating, codifying and falsifying the feeling and discourse of love (in this he follows closely Verga's dismantling of the idea of romantic love).

In this investigation Flaubert is omnipresent. "The example of the great Flaubert!" – as he confessed enthusiastically to a friend in the same year he wrote *L'illusione* – "There is no one else, there is no one else!" (De Roberto 1984, 1728).[14] What I find particularly intriguing is that the polemic against romanticism, which permeates De Roberto's novel, takes the same approach as his engagement with Flaubert. The point is that, among the Italian nineteenth-century critics and writers, De Roberto is the one who first grasped and thoroughly embraced Flaubert's realist poetics, even in his meddling with the Romantic illusion that they both

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l'agguagliavano alla folla bruta e aborrita. Rifiutava i cibi, voleva potersi nutrir d'aria, si procurava finalmente qualcuno dei suoi attacchi nervosi. Più degli eroi di quei libri ella amava le eroine; vedeva nelle donne altrettante sorelle. E le lunghe descrizioni, le pagine piene di narrazione monotona l'infastidivano; ne saltava molte, per arrivare ai colloqui d'amore, alle scene dolci o tremende, alle catastrofi improvvise, che la lascivano sbalordita e febbricitante. Che lacrime le costavano quei libri!"

14 "L'esempio dell'immenso Flaubert (non c'è che lui, non c'è che lui!)."

ended up criticizing. What Mario Vargas Llosa concluded in relation to *Madame Bovary* could be applied to De Roberto and *L'illusione*:

> One of the most oft-repeated commonplaces concerning *Madame Bovary* is the statement that this novel did away with romanticism with one stroke and inaugurated the realist movement. It would be closer to the truth to speak of a romanticism brought to completion rather than a romanticism denied. (Vargas Llosa 1986, 147)

This point is important and needs to be expanded. De Roberto published three literary articles on Flaubert. In "Leopardi e Flaubert" (1886) he looked at romanticism not as a literary school but as a psychological situation, as such he defined it as "a sort of hypertrophy of the imagination which pleases itself in the creation of amazing and unreachable mirages, which is always waiting for extraordinary events and superhuman feelings, in comparison with which every reality becomes dowdy and miserable" (De Roberto 1984, 1590).[15] In this psychological sense, Leopardi and Flaubert can be said to be Romantic: they possessed an "equal exuberance of imagination", "their sentimental education is made by books" (1590) and finally to their "disillusionments, to the persuasion that everything is evil and sorrow in the world, is added their personal experience of sorrow" (1591).[16] In fact, it is "because imagination has been deceptive" – De Roberto observed in an another long article from 1890 – that "[Flaubert] will stick to cold analysis. […] He will lean so much on the abyss of his own conscience as to fall into vertigo. He does not live life, he looks at himself living" (1624).[17]

Flaubert's principle of *impassibilité* comes from this, explains De Roberto in the third long article dedicated to the French writer: "the novelist who despises human beings too much to do them good, the one who does not believe in the distinction between good and evil, will limit himself to the complete representation of what happens under his senses, refraining from any comment"; this is what makes his books so "true" [veri] and his characters "endowed with vital energy": "because they look like real people, whom we can judge as we would judge people in flesh and blood" (De Roberto 1984, 1615 and 1616).[18] The influence of

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15 "una sorta di ipertrofia dell'imaginazione che si compiace nel creare miraggi magnifici e inafferabili, che è sempre in attesa di avvenimenti straordinari e di sentimenti sovraumani, al confronto del quale ogni realtà diventa sciatta e meschina."

16 "uguale esuberanza dell'immaginazione"; "la loro educazione si fa sui libri"; "alle disillusioni, alla persuasione che tutto è reale e dolore nel mondo, sta la personale esperienza del dolore".

17 "egli si atterrà alla fredda analisi. […] egli si chinerà tanto sull'abisso della propria coscienza, da cader preso dalla vertigine. Non si lascia vivere, si guarda vivere."

18 "Il romanziere che disprezza troppo gli uomini per far loro del bene, anzi che non crede alla distinzione del bene e del male, si atterrà alla integrale rappresentazione di ciò che che cade sotto i suoi sensi, attenendosi da qualunque commento;" and "[personaggi] dotati di una vitalità rigogliosa [...] perché sembrano persone vive possiamo giudicare come giudicheremmo delle creature di carne e ossa."

Flaubert was crucial in the development of De Roberto's own theory of impersonality (akin to Flaubert's *impassibilité*) as well as in his conception of art as "supreme deception" (1728). This was put in practice for the first time in *L'illusione* ("a long monologue of 450 pages"; 1733) with the adoption of modern free indirect speech, considered by the critics to be the great novelty of *L'Illusione* (Madrignani 1971; Pellegrino 1984; Ganeri 2005; Bocca 2006). Thematizing the Romantic woman reader, the reader intoxicated by literature, could be seen as the embodiment, but also the exploration, of a conception of art as illusion, "supreme deception and ultimate superfluity" (De Roberto 1984, 1728).[19] It also squares things up with romanticism, a movement which De Roberto, like Flaubert, wanted to criticize but which still fascinated him.

2.4. The end of the didactic function of literature: "La biondina" (1893) by Marco Praga

Neutrality, impersonality and a committed naturalist poetics are the key ingredients of my fourth example, which is *La biondina* by Marco Praga (1862-1929). Marco Praga was a playwright and critic with a Realist agenda: "I want art that is art for its own sake. Enough with the Truth which is carefully selected. […] After having observed the truth I put it on the stage, the audience will deduce their idea, but they must find it by themselves; it is not my duty to point it out" (Praga interviewed by Ugo Ojetti in Ojetti 1987, 77-88). *La biondina* is Praga's only novel and belongs to the context of Zola's naturalism: "between Madame Bovary and Thérèse Raquin, it portrays a bourgeois woman in her existential experience, and results in the exasperated secular confession of an inexorable descent into the hell of perdition" (Finzi 1982, 8). Adelina, the woman reader character of this novel, is a bourgeois wife turned into a part-time high-class prostitute. *La biondina* addresses the issue of morality (or immorality) at the heart of the debate about the novel openly and provocatively.

Praga's novel is studded with comments about reading, but one passage in particular, which occurs in the middle of the text and occupies two pages, is a manifesto of realist poetics. In this passage Adelina speaks of what she likes to read and why. Skimming through the long list of books and authors, one thing is certain: Adelina is a true reader. She "reads a lot: [she has] read everything that is readable and, perhaps, also the unreadable" and she knows where she stands, that is "for the new naturalistic school" (Praga 1982, 147). Then follows a long list of names and literary movements:

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[19] "supremo inganno e ultima superfetazione".

> After Zola — Bonnetain, Rosny, Guiches, Descaves, Métenier, etc. […] I love a little less the impressionists, apart from the De Goncourts whom I adore because they are aristocrats, I detest the symbolists: I don't get Huysmans for example: he does not look to me like a man of this world. The philosophers, including Bourget, Rod, Houssaye, Véron, Karr, I find they understand nothing, particularly when they speak of women and want to portray women: they say things which are completely wrong. Once in a while, for fun, as if to lift the spirit, I like some frivolous stuff: and I get hold of Droz, Gyp and Halévy. The Romantics, I have never paid them the honor to welcome them into my house. Finally, I banned the Erckmann-Chatrians, Andrea Theuriets, and all of those syrupy writers of novels for serial publication which enter the family home. Of the old stuff little or nothing: a little of Balzac and a little of Flaubert, because it is old stuff that is always new. And that's all! (Praga 1982, 147-48)[20]

We should note not only the quantity of Adelina's readings but the ease and competence with which she classifies authors and literary trends, arranging them according to a hierarchy that seems to take into account the complex structure which Bourdieu sees developing in the *fin de siècle* period, with the two inverted scales, one which aimed at commercial success and the other at literary prestige. (Of course it is Praga the writer giving Adelina her voice: but why else does he do it?) With Balzac, and particularly with Flaubert, the novel acquired prestige, but it was still associated with consumerist literature. Then there is the case of Zola, which was at the top of both scales. The mention of Zola is important also on another front. As we have seen before, Zola is banned because his realist novels deal with rough and racy subjects which are not appropriate for woman readers; and in fact a predilection for Zola normally implies that the woman reader is too bold and morally corrupted – which Adelina in some ways is, considering that she prostitutes herself. However, in this case her predilection for Zola implies also that she is a skilled reader, someone who reflects on what she reads (and not one who devours novels for immediate gratification only as in the bovarystic cliché): not without reason, Adelina "prides herself of being a connoisseur and a gourmet" ("si picca di essere una conoscitrice e una buongustaia"; Praga 1982, 147) in the matter of books. This becomes particularly evident when she tells us what books mean for her: "the book, like the play, cannot have either a didactic or immoralizing influence on people" (Praga 1982, 148).[21]

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[20] "Dopo Zola — Bonnetain, Rosny, Guiches, Descaves, Métenier, ecc. Certamente tu conosci tutti questi autori, tu che vivi nel gran cervello letterario del mondo. Amo un po' meno gli impressionisti, se ne togli i De Goncourt che adoro perchè sono degli aristocratici. Abborro i simbolisti: Huysman [sic] per esempio non lo capisco: mi pare un uomo non di questo mondo. I filosofi, come Bourget, Rod, Houssaye, Véron, Karr, trovo che non ne capiscono nulla di nulla, specialmente quando parlano della donna e vogliono dipingere la donna: dicono delle cose sbagliatissime. Ogni tanto, per passatempo, come a sollievo dello spirito, mi piace un po' di roba mondana: e mi attacco a Droz; a Gyp a Halévy. Ai romantici poi, non ò mai fatto l'onore di riceverli in casa mia. E, infine, ò messo al bando gli Erckmann-Chatrian, gli Andrea Theuriet, e tutti codesti melensi scrittori di romanzi per le appendici dei giornali che entrano nelle famiglie. Della roba vecchia poco o nulla: un po' di Balzac e un po' di Flaubert, perchè è roba vecchia che è sempre nuova. E basta!"

[21] "il libro, come la commedia, non può avere influenza nè educatrice, nè demoralizzatrice sulla folla".

There are no lessons to impart, no models to follow: Adelina, the modern reader, reads novels "to find something of herself" ("per trovare qualcosa di se stessa"; Praga 1982, 148).

Conclusion

The last three decades of the nineteenth century constitute the golden age of the Italian novel (both in terms of the novel creating its own tradition and in being instrumental to Italian nation-building). However, paradoxically, these decades also are the period in which the Italian novelists became painfully aware of the importance of Franco-Italian cultural transfer. This is particularly evident if one retraces the history of the novel and the rise of Italian Realism. In the first half of the nineteenth century Alessandro Manzoni had already advocated for and experimented with a realist poetics. And yet, amidst the Romantic climate, the Realist mode was suffocated by the pedagogical issue which tended to subordinate the artistic endeavor to moral and educative aims. This was no longer possible after Flaubert's Realism and Zola's naturalism inflamed the literary debate. Not only Italian critics and writers openly questioned the relationship between morality and art, but the Italian novel of the period showed itself – in its multifarious strands – as the realist genre par excellence. (So much so that even an anti-Realist as Fogazzaro could be seen, with his psychological novel, as coming to terms with the Realist model.)

Through these four case studies we have seen not only the influence of *Madame Bovary* on Italian writers (which is more complex than the story of Flaubert's translation and critical appreciation) but also that the novels with woman reader characters have a specific function in the age of realism, which is that of transferring the contemporary debate on the novel into the narrative. By demonising "French novels", the power of imagination, the romance or "Romantic" drive inside the novel, these novels are testing the ground for the Realist project. By pondering the effects of novel reading and the dynamic of identification, by addressing and thematizing the receivers of their message, these novels reflect on the status and function of art which was under attack in the positivist and capitalist society of the *fin de siècle*. Underlying this self-reflexivity, I suggest, is the shift in the conception of art from a pedagogic and moralistic function to *l'art pour l'art*, which asserted the autonomy of the artistic sphere (art as the creation of an independent reality). By introducing a new mode of reading based on identification, the novel set itself in ambiguous terrain (hence the trope of the novel as a deceptive and wicked genre). The intense identification triggered by the novel

resets and neutralizes moral judgment. The work of art no longer provides examples of virtue, nor simply mirrors of reality but stands on its own feet and obeys its own internal logic. With *Madame Bovary* and her many fictional sisters, literature was coming to terms with – and enacting – what Franco Moretti calls the "slow process that has detached European literature from its didactic functions" (Moretti 2006, 398).

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