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Putting the self into perspective.

Fiction and moral imagination in Giovanni Verga

Diceste soltanto ingenuamente: «Non capisco come si possa vivere qui tutta la vita».

Eppure, vedete, la cosa è più facile che non sembri: basta non possedere centomila lire di entrata, prima di tutto; e in compenso patire un po' di tutti gli stenti fra quegli scogli giganteschi, incastonati nell'azzurro, che vi facevano batter le mani per l'ammirazione. Così poco basta perché quei poveri diavoli che ci aspettavano sonnecchiando nella barca, trovino fra quelle loro casipole sgangherate e pittoresche, che viste da lontano vi sembravano avessero il mal di mare anch'esse, tutto ciò che vi affannate a cercare a Parigi, a Nizza ed a Napoli.

È una cosa singolare; ma forse non è un male che sia così – per voi, e per tutti gli altri come voi. Quel mucchio di casipole è abitato da pescatori; «gente di mare», dicono essi, come altri direbbe «gente di toga», i quali hanno la pelle più dura del pane che mangiano, quando ne mangiano, giacché il mare non è sempre gentile, come allora che baciava i vostri guanti... Nelle sue giornate nere, in cui brontola e sbuffa, bisogna contentarsi di stare a guardarlo dalla riva, colle mani in mano, o sdraiati bocconi, il che è meglio per chi non ha desinato; in quei giorni, c'è una folla sull'uscio dell'osteria, ma suonano pochi soldoni sulla latta del banco, e i monelli che pullulano nel paese, come se la miseria fosse un buon ingrasso, strillano e si graffiano quasi abbiano il diavolo in corpo.

Di tanto in tanto il tifo, il colera, la malannata, la burrasca, vengono a dare una buona spazzata a quel brulicame, il quale si crederebbe che non dovesse desiderar meglio che esser spazzato, e scomparire; eppure ripullula sempre nello stesso luogo; non so dirvi come, nè perchè.

Vi siete mai trovata, dopo una pioggia di autunno, a sbaragliare un esercito di formiche tracciando sbadatamente il nome del vostro ultimo ballerino sulla sabbia del viale? Qualcuna di quelle povere bestioline sarà rimasta attaccata alla ghiera del vostro ombrellino, torcendosi di spasimo; ma tutte le altre, dopo cinque minuti di viavai, saranno tornate ad aggrapparsi disperatamente al loro monticello bruno. Voi non ci tornereste davvero, e nemmeno io; ma per poter comprendere siffatta caparbia, che è per certi aspetti eroica, bisogna farci piccini anche noi, chiudere tutto l'orizzonte fra due zolle, e guardare col microscopio le piccole cause che fanno battere i piccoli cuori. Volete metterci un occhio anche voi, a cotesta lente, voi che guardate la vita dall'altro lato del cannocchiale? Lo spettacolo vi parrà strano, e perciò forse vi diventerà.¹

This extract is taken from the first pages of *Fantasticheria*, one of the best known and yet least studied texts by Giovanni Verga. Published for the first time on the 24 August 1879 in *Il Fanfulla della Domenica*, *Fantasticheria* was later included in the collection of short stories *Vita dei campi* (1880), as its opening piece. *Vita dei campi* was the first book to embody Verga's Verism. It might seem counterintuitive to look at

¹ Giovanni Verga, *Fantasticheria*, in *Tutte le novelle*, ed. by Carla Riccardi (Milan: Mondadori: 1979), pp. 129-136 (pp. 130-31).

Fantasticheria in order to find aspects of self-reflexivity, intended either as a form of self-writing, or as a textual commentary on the fictional or narrative dimension of the text.² For one thing, Verga's Verism rests on a poetics of impersonality and effacement of the authorial self that seems to be incompatible with any form of autobiographical writing or self-examination. Moreover, according to a well-entrenched view, Verist narratives would aim at mirroring reality in a transparent and purely objective way, like the back-and-white photographs with still subjects facing the camera that Verga took in order to document contemporary life.³ Many literary critics and historians have insisted that this is precisely the kind of objectivist representation of reality that Verga had in mind, when he proposed his Verist poetics.⁴ One should thus not be expected to find in Verga's Verist works any meta-fictional and metanarrative comments, which are intended to make readers aware of the perspectival nature, hence the mediacy and opaqueness of narrative.

In this paper, I will counter both assumptions, by showing that *Fantasticheria* functions as a self-reflexive narrative device in a twofold sense. I will argue that this text is both a form of self-writing, whereby Verga stages himself as a modernist writer, and a metanarrative and meta-fictional commentary, which elaborates on a theory of literary fiction. I also aim to demonstrate that *Fantasticheria* is the key text for understanding both Verga's career as a writer, and his novel *I Malavoglia* (1881). In order to prove my point, I will offer what I would call a 'thick reading' of *Fantasticheria*, whereby I mean a form of reading which is internal to the text – as opposed to an external reading –, but which avoids the pitfalls of close reading. In contrast to close reading, thick reading combines a contextual and a theoretical

² In this paper, I use the term "self-reflexivity" in its full polysemy. By "self-reflexivity", I mean metanarrative comments, metafiction, autofiction, and any reference to the self. For the definition of the narratological terms, see the relevant entries in David Herman, Manfred Jahn, Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge 2005). By "self", I mean one's own sense of identity as a web of strong identifications that give meaning to one's own life, and depend on habits, emotions, choices, beliefs, commitments, obligations, group memberships, customs, and so on. I will call such web of strong identifications "morality", adopting a broad definition of morality, which I do not see restricted to what a person ought to do, i.e., to moral obligations. For the definition of "self" and "morality", I am borrowing from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the self: the making of the modern identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 3-107. Sometimes, I will prefer to use "sense of oneself" instead of "self"; by doing so, I want to suggest that the self is not a stable entity, for is never well defined and is open to radical change. On this point, see Peter Goldie, 'The narrative sense of self', *The mess inside: narrative, emotions, and the mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); for an overview of the current debate on the "self", see: Shaun Gallagher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³ See Giovanni Garra Agosta (ed.), *Verga fotografo* (Catania: Giuseppe Maiomone Editore, 1991). I have discussed elsewhere why I think this analogy is misleading: Alessio Baldini, *Dipingere coi colori adatti. 'I Malavoglia' come romanzo moderno* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2012), pp. 31-43.

⁴ Renato Barilli, *La barriera del naturalismo: studi sulla narrativa italiana contemporanea* (Milan: Mursia, 1980 [1964]).

reading of the text. I will read *Fantasticheria* against the backdrop of the cultural and social context to which it responded, and in the light of a broad theoretical question, namely the relationship between morality and literature.⁵ The extract quoted above will serve as a ‘point of departure’ (*Ansatzpunkt*), i.e., it will always be implied, when not explicitly commented on.⁶ In fact, I must start by taking a step back. In the first part of the paper, I will trace the emergence of the publishing industry and the literary field in Italy. This will provide the context for understanding Verga’s career as a writer, which I will sketch briefly. In the second part of the paper, I will turn to issues posed by the interpretation of Verga, and I will finally comment on the text.

The emergence of the publishing industry and the literary field in an agrarian society

Well after its unification in 1861, Italy remained a predominantly agrarian society.⁷ Contrary to what naïve forms of economic determinism might suggest, the conditions for the emergence of the publishing industry and the literary field did not require a fully developed industrial society. The literary field relies on the publishing industry and the market for books and periodicals, and these had already emerged in Italy during the 1880s, before industrialization was in full swing.⁸ The expansion of the

⁵ For the definition of “morality”, see note 2. “Thick reading” can be traced back to Szondi; see Peter Szondi, ‘On Textual Understanding’, in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 3-22. For recent discussions on modes of reading, see: Peter Brooks, Hilary Jewett (eds.), *The Humanities and Public Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Joseph North, ‘What’s “New Critical” about “Close Reading”? I. A. Richards and His New Critical Reception’, *New Literary History*, 44.1 (Winter 2013), pp. 141-15; Franco Moretti, *Franco, Distant reading* (London: Verso, 2013); Marielle Macé, Marlon Jones, ‘Ways of Reading, Modes of Being’, *New Literary History*, 44. 2 (2013), pp. 213-229; Paul A. Armstrong, ‘In Defense of Reading: Or, Why Reading Still Matters in a Contextualist Age’ *New Literary History*, 42.1 (Winter 2011), pp. 87-113.

⁶ For the definition of *Ansatzpunkt*, see Erich Auerbach, ‘Philologie der Weltliteratur’, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie*, (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1967), pp. 301-310. Auerbach’s method exemplifies what I mean by ‘thick reading’; see, Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: the representation of reality in Western literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask; 50th anniversary ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁷ Valerio Castronovo, ‘Alla periferia dell’Europa’, in *Storia economica d’Italia. Dall’Ottocento ai giorni nostri* (Turin: Einaudi, 2013), pp. 3-74; Gino Luzzatto, *L’economia itaiiana dal 1861 al 1894* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991).

⁸ On the emergence of the publishing industry in Italy, see: David Forgacs, *Italian culture in the industrial era (1880-1980): cultural industries, politics and the public* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 4. Erminia Irace, ‘L’editoria ottocentesca’, in Sergio Luzzatto, Gabriele Pedullà (eds.), *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, vol. 3, Domenico Scarpa (ed.), *Dal Romanticismo a oggi*, (Turin, Einaudi, 2012), pp. 202-212 (p. 202); Ermanno Paccagnini, ‘Il giornalismo dal 1860 al 1960’, in Giuseppe Farinelli, Ermanno Paccagnini, Giovanni Santambrogio, Angela Ida Villa, *Storia del giornalismo italiano. Dalle origini a oggi*, (Turin: UTET, 2004), pp. 161-310 (p. 165). For an overview of the cultural revolution brought about by the cultural industries in Europe, see: Donald Sassoon, ‘1880-1920: The Revolution’, in *The culture of the Europeans: from 1800 to the present*

print market was correlated with educational reforms, and political change. In 1877, the Coppino law made primary education compulsory from the age of six to nine; and this increased the number of students, and contributed to the spread of literacy.⁹ In 1876, a government was formed out of the parliamentary opposition, for the first time in the history of unified Italy; in 1882, the electoral reform raised the number of voters from half a million to two million.¹⁰ Political change and the widening of political participation increased the demand for magazines, newspapers, and books.

Already an important publishing centre before unification, Milan came to dominate the Italian publishing industry by the 1880s.¹¹ In 1873, 137 periodicals were published in Milan, making the capital of Lombardy the first city by number of periodicals published.¹² In 1891, 40% of the publications and 22% of the new titles were published in Lombardy.¹³ The largest Milanese publishers were profit-seeking companies run according to managerial principles. The same publisher would own newspapers and magazines, and produce books, operating within an integrated system. Sonzogno and Treves, the two biggest Italian publishers, were leading the way.¹⁴

By the 1880s, the expanding education system and the publishing industry led to the emergence of the Italian intellectual and the literary fields as we know them today.¹⁵ Universities, schools, and publishing houses opened markets, and offered jobs to aspiring intellectuals and writers. It is true that a negligible number of

(London: HarperCollins, 2006). The industrialization of Italy was kick-started at the beginning of the twentieth century; see: Valerio Castronovo, 'Il decollo industriale', *Storia economica d'Italia*, pp. 75-142.

⁹ Absolute values of literacy rates are not reliable for the nineteenth century; however, they capture variation relative to space and time. To take two examples that are relevant here: in Lombardy, the illiteracy rate dropped from 54% in 1861, to 32% in 1881, and to 13% in 1911; whereas in Sicily, it dropped from 89% in 1861, to 81% in 1881, and to 58% in 1911. The trend is clear. In the 1880s, literacy was spreading, but the divergence between North and South was widening.

¹⁰ Denis Mack-Smith, *Modern Italy: a political history* (New Haven, CT.; London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 123.

¹¹ Marino Berengo, *Intellettuuali e librai nella Milan della restaurazione* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980); Giovanni Ragone. *Un secolo di libri: storia dell'editoria in Italia dall'Unità al post-moderno* (Turin: Einaudi 1999), pp.xi-xii.

¹² Valerio Castronovo, Luciana Giacheri Fossati, Nicola Tranfaglia, *La stampa italiana nell'età liberale* (Bari: Laterza, 1979), p. 67.

¹³ Ragone, p. 726.

¹⁴ Sonzogno owned the most important Italian newspaper, *Il Secolo*. Treves specialized in the publication of weekly periodicals, including the hugely successful *L'Illustrazione italiana*. See Ragone, pp. 724-25; Paolo Murandi, *Storia del giornalismo italiano. Dalle gazzette a internet*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), pp. 66-73; Ermanno Paccagnini, 'Il giornalismo dal 1860 al 1960', in Giuseppe Farinelli, Ermanno Paccagnini, Giovanni Santambrogio, Angela Ida Villa, *Storia del giornalismo italiano. Dalle origini a oggi* (Turin: UTET, 2004), pp. 161-310 (p. 175).

¹⁵ Christophe Charle, *Les intellectuels en Europe au XIX^e siècle. Essai d'histoire comparée* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), pp. 165-168.

intellectuals made a living from their work as writers; the vast majority taught at schools and universities, others combined journalism and another profession, others were rentiers.¹⁶ However, the literary field was already functioning at the end of the 1870s, when Verism occupied its centre.¹⁷

The literary field functions along to two axes.¹⁸ The first axis delineates the tension between autonomy and heteronomy, displaying the positions of agents either striving for independence or leaning in direction of markets. This tension is both constitutive and internal to the literary field, which relies on the print market to differentiate itself from the other fields; without the print market, the domain of literature would be absorbed into other domains, such as morality, politics, religion. The second axis describes the conflict between entrant and established groups. These need not to be formally organized. Internal splitting is how the field functions and reproduces itself; the grouping happens when agents enter the field.

The evidence for the emergence of the literary field in Italy by the 1880s is provided by the first sociological enquiry about Italian literature, namely the interviews conducted and edited by Ugo Ojetti.¹⁹ Of course, these interviews were not conducted according to the standards of the social sciences. Ojetti neither applied any theory, nor had any methodology; and he explicitly expressed his bias for the rising star of Italian letters, Gabriele D'Annunzio. And yet, Ojetti was well-informed, and had interiorized the field dynamic. In his 'Prolegomeni', he lists the shortcomings of his enquiry:

per quanto mi ci sia sforzato io non sono sempre riuscito a mantenere l'oggettività di puro relatore; [...] io ho in grande disdegno tutta l'arte puramente naturalista – sia fisiologica che psicologica – la quale ha confuso il mezzo con lo scopo e ha fatto romanzi con quella materia grezza ed informe donde l'artefice idealista estrarrà per sua maestria l'opera vera [...]; infine io giovane conosco molti giovani pronti e validi che, come me, queste cose belle credono e intendono di apertamente affermare in odio ai vecchi disdegnosi di noi. Potevo io, per quanta fosse la mia volontà, dimenticare, anzi scordare queste ambizioni dei compagni miei e di me stesso, e adagiarmi continuamente in una oggettività pacificata?²⁰

¹⁶ Antonia Acciani, 'Dalla rendita al lavoro', in Alberto Asor Rosa (ed.), *Letteratura italiana*, vol. 2, *Produzione e consumo*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), pp. 412-448 (p. 429).

¹⁷ On Italian literature in the post-unification period and the rise of Verism, see : Roberto Bigazzi, *I colori del vero: vent'anni di narrativa (1860-1880)* (Pisa : Nistri-Lischi, 1969).

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil 1998 [1992]).

¹⁹ Ugo Ojetti, *Alla scoperta dei letterati* (Milan: Bocca, 1899 [1895]).

²⁰ Ojetti, pp. ix-x.

Ojetti perfectly describes the group dynamic within the field. He sees the split along two fault lines. He sets the younger generation against the older one, and an idealist poetics against a naturalist one. The interviews confirm his perception, with writers more aligned with these groups engaging in a covert polemic.²¹ The enquiry conducted by Ojetti proves that Verism constituted the first established group within the Italian literary field. Ojetti's interviews also trace the second field dynamic, namely the constitutive tension between autonomy and heteronomy, of which Verga gives the most lucid account:

– Le dico ciò guardando la letteratura dall'alto, fuori delle scuole e delle chiesuole. Da moltissimi anni la letteratura nostra non ha avuto una tale espansione oltre l'Alpi, non solo in Francia ma, prima e meglio, in Germania, in Austria, in Russia. E questo è un sintomo di vitalità potentissimo. E noti che ciò avviene quando nessun letterato in Italia vive col reddito puro della letteratura, o almeno... col reddito della letteratura pura. Date queste orrende condizioni economiche, quel che si fa è moltissimo; e pochi paesi, se quelle condizioni fossero migliori, potrebbero resistere al confronto.²²

After more than 30 years as a professional writer, Verga knew first-hand how the difficult balance between markets and pure literature worked. He had always wanted to become a writer, and make a living out of literature. At the beginning of his career, he took a hazardous move; he gave away the money that his father had set aside for his education. Verga would never graduate in law, preferring to use the money to publish a historical novel.²³ His ambition led him to move to Florence in 1869, when the city was still the capital of Italy, and then in 1872 to Milan, which was becoming the hub of the national print industry.²⁴ He was so obsessed with the idea of gaining enough money to support himself with his work as a writer, that he would write countless letters to his family drafting unrealistic and yet detailed projections of future incomes from his publications,²⁵ which were discussed in detail with his publishers.²⁶

²¹ See the interviews with Verga and D'Annunzio: Ojetti, pp. 59-71; pp. 297-331. Verga and D'Annunzio belonged to two different generations: Verga was born in 1840, and D'Annunzio in 1863.

²² Ojetti, pp. 63-64.

²³ Giovanni Verga, *I Carbonari della montagna – Sulle lagune*, edizione critica ed. Rita Verdirame, (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1988). *I Carbonari della montagna*, which marked the Verga's debut as a writer, was published in 1861-1862.

²⁴ On Verga's experience in Milan, see Daniela Brogi, 'Il "fiasco" dei Malavoglia', in *Annali della facoltà di lettere e filosofia*, XVII (1996), pp. 165-205.

²⁵ Giuseppe Savoca, *Dalla cronaca familiare alla storia dei 'Malavoglia'*, in Giovanni Verga, *Lettere alla famiglia* (1851-1880), ed. by Giuseppe Savoca e Antonio Di Silvestro (Acireale – Rome: Bonanno, 2011), pp. 15-42 (p. 26). For a sample, see the letters that Verga wrote to his mother from Milan in 1874: Giovanni Verga,

His desire to live the life of a professional writer also motivated him to write a hundred short stories, a dozen novels, and scripts for theatre and cinema.²⁷ He also sued the producer and the composer of the successful melodrama *Cavalleria Rusticana*, based on one of his short stories, in order to change the copyright agreement. Later, he would be sued in turn, for copyright infringement in relation to the same work.²⁸

A functioning print industry and market were the conditions for the emergence of an autonomous literary field; it is not surprising that this social fact was reflected into agents' dispositions. In effect, Verga's obsession with gaining economic independence as a writer was one with his vindication of the autonomy of literature. He worked relentlessly on texts he thought were pure literature, preparing various drafts and polishing proofs. In his correspondence, he would strenuously go over his conception of the autonomous literary work. According to him, a literary work had to be a self-sufficient organism, and the literary value had to be considered independently of any moral value.²⁹ *Fantasticheria* was the first published text where Verga proposed his radical autonomist programme, sketching the principles of Verism as a modernist poetics. In order to explore this point, I will move on to the second section of the paper.

A Caterina di Mauro, Milan, 20 gennaio 1874; 24 gennaio 1874; 30 marzo 1874; 23 aprile 1874; 11 agosto 1874; 14 agosto 1874 (Savoca, p. 196-418 passim);

²⁶ See the correspondance between Verga and Treves: Gino Raya (ed.), *Verga e i Treves* (Rome: Herder, 1986).

²⁷ For the screenplays, see: Giovanni Verga, *Due sceneggiature inedite*, ed. Carla Riccardi (Milan: Bompiani, 1995).

²⁸ Gino Raya, *Verga e gli avvocati* (Rome: Herder Editore, 1988); Gino Raya, *Carteggio Verga-Monleone*, (Rome: Herder, 1987).

²⁹ For example, see the following letters: Giovanni Verga, *Verga a Capuana*, Milan, 19 febbraio 1881, in Gino Raya (ed.), *Carteggio Verga-Capuana*, (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1987), pp. 158-159; Giovanni Verga, *A Carlo Del Balzo*, Milan, 28 aprile 1881, *Lettere sparse*, ed. Giovanna Finocchiaro Chimirri (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979), p. 110; Giovanni Verga, *A Francesco Torraca*, Milan, 12 maggio 1881, *Lettere Sparse*, p. 250; Giovanni Verga, *A Filippo Filippi*, Cadenabbia, 11 ottobre 1880, in Pietro Trifone, 'La coscienza linguistica del Verga. Con due lettere inedite su Rosso Malpelo e *Cavalleria Rusticana*', *Quaderni di filologia e letteratura siciliana*, 4 (1977), pp. 5-29 (p. 19).

A portrait of Verga as a modernist writer

Today, Verga is remembered as the author of *I Malavoglia*, and a few collections of short stories set in rural Sicily. *I Malavoglia* tells the story of a family of fishermen, who live in a small village on the Sicilian eastern coast. The story is set just after the unification of Italy and spans over two decades, from 1863 to the late 1870s. Our understanding of the novel, and of Verga as a writer, can still be traced back to his first interpreter, Luigi Russo, who published the first edition of his influential monograph in 1920.³⁰ Scholars of different orientations have subscribed to Russo's influential interpretation. It is true that the cultural and social turmoil of the late 1960s coincided with a change in the critical view on Verga, an author who had always been put to question when issues of realism, and of the relationship between literature and society had become more pressing.³¹ In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of literary critics contested Russo's interpretation of *I Malavoglia*. Whereas Russo thought that this novel was imbued with nostalgia for the lost little world of a tightly-knit community, the protagonists of the so-called «caso Verga» insisted that, on the contrary, the pessimistic outlook and the bleak tone of the narrative conveyed a sense of inevitable loss, which Verga expressed in a detached way.³² Nostalgia was to be ruled out, since Verga understood that even the isolated communities in the South had already been deeply affected by modernity. However, it should be also clear why, in spite of their disagreement, both Russo and his critics shared two important points in their interpretation of *I Malavoglia*. First, they all thought that this novel was an ethical protest against the failure of the Risorgimento in Southern Italy. More precisely, according to them, Verga had shown that the shortcomings of the Risorgimento were not just the result of historical circumstances. Modernity as such was to be held responsible, for modernization led to a disenchanting world dominated by self-interest, and was eroding the locally

³⁰ Luigi Russo, *Giovanni Verga* (Naples: Ricciardi 1920). Numerous editions have been published since; for the most recent one, see: Luigi Russo, *Giovanni Verga* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1995).

³¹ See, for example: Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, *Tempo di edificare*, ed. Massimo Rizzante (Trento: Dipartimento di studi letterari, linguistici e filologici 2008 [1923]). Among the most influential readings of *I Malavoglia*, one must count Visconti's filmic adaptation: *La terra trema*. Dir. Luchino Visconti. Universalis. 1948. For issues raised by this filmic adaptation, see: Millicent Marcus, 'Visconti's *La Terra Trema*, the Typology of Adaption' in *Filmmaking by the Book: Italian Cinema and Literary Adaption* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) pp. 25-45.

³² Vitilio Masiello, *Verga tra ideologia e realtà* (Bari: De Donato, 1970); Romeno Luperini, *Pessimismo e verismo in Giovanni Verga* (Turin: UTET, 2009 [1968]); Asor Rosa (ed.), *Il caso Verga* (Palermo: Palumbo, 1972).

rooted traditions that preserved authentic values. Both Russo and his critics made central to their reading of *I Malavoglia* an idealized picture of the close community as the bulwark against a heartless and alienated society – they just disagreed about whether this ideal was still to be found as a relic of a fading past. And this point was tied up with another view shared by Russo and his critics. They were all moralists, i.e. they thought that the artistic value of literature resided in promoting morality. The literary value of *I Malavoglia* consisted either in the expression of a nostalgia for the good life within a traditional community, or in the defiant attitude towards a nihilist modernity.³³

With few notable exceptions,³⁴ Russo's views have long dominated our understanding of *I Malavoglia*, and are still commonly held.³⁵ The canonization of *I Malavoglia* has also contributed to this moralizing interpretation. If Alessandro Manzoni, the only other nineteenth-century novelist to be widely taught in schools, is still mainly considered as one of the fathers of national identity, Verga represents its critical conscience.³⁶ In the remainder of this paper, I will challenge Russo's enduring views. My main point will be that Verga was not a moralist, but a modernist writer. In order to do so, I will turn to *Fantasticheria*, which I claim provides readers with the best introduction to *I Malavoglia*. In my argument, the self-reflexivity of *Fantasticheria* will play a crucial role.

Verga neither put together a literary theory, nor devised a method for storytelling; he left a few theoretical considerations, scattered throughout his correspondence and

³³ For a brief and clear discussion of moralism, see: Berys Gaut, 'Morality and art', in Stephen Davis, et al. (eds.), *A Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 428-431. For some recent and quite different examples of moralism, see: Martha Nussbaum, *Love's knowledge: essays on philosophy and literature* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing human rights: a history* (New York; London: Norton, 2007); Steven Pinker, *The better angels of our nature: a history of violence and humanity* (London: Penguin, 2012).

³⁴ Daniele Giglioli, 'I Malavoglia.', in Federico Bertoni, Daniele Giglioli (eds.), *Quindici episodi del romanzo italiano* (Bologna: Pendragon, 1999), 15-43; Giuseppe Lo Castro, *Giovanni Verga: una lettura critica*, (Catanzaro: Rubettino, 2001); Pierluigi Pellini, *In una casa di vetro. Generi e temi del naturalism europeo* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2004); Paolo Giovannetti, "'...and you could hear the whole village chattering" I Malavoglia as a figuralized novel', *Enthymema*, 9 (2013), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.13130/2037-2426/3599>> [accessed 20 January 2015], pp. 163-200.

³⁵ See, for example: Giuseppe Savoca, Antonio di Silvestro (eds.), *Prospettive sui Malavoglia: atti dell'incontro di studio della Società per lo studio della modernità letteraria*, Catania, 17-18 Febbraio 2006, (Firenze: Olschki, 2007); Francesca Pilato, Luisella Mesiano, Verga (Rome: Carocci, 2011).

³⁶ On Manzoni's reception, see: Daniela Brogi, *Il genere proscritto. Manzoni e la scelta del romanzo* (Pisa: Giardini, 2005). Along with Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, Verga's *I Malavoglia* is one of the most frequently commented novels. Commented editions are often intended for secondary schools; for a few examples, see: Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia*, ed. Giulio Carnazzi (Milan: BUR, 2007); Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia*, testo critico e commento di Ferruccio Cecco (Turin: Einaudi, 1995); Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1990); Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia*, ed. Salvatore Guglielmino (Milan: Principato, 1985).

a handful of his published works. He wrote most of these remarks from 1878 to 1881, when working on *Vita dei campi* and *I Malavoglia*. Since Verga's sporadic engagement with theory contrasts with his dedication to writing, some critics concluded that he was a naïve writer who followed his unconscious drives;³⁷ those who disagreed objected that Verga was, on the contrary, a literary theorist and intended storytelling as the application of a method.³⁸ None of these opposing views capture how Verga actually worked; he was neither a naïve writer, nor a literary theorist. Verga possessed instead the ability of imagining stories and fictional worlds, and pursued relentlessly an exercise in self-examination.³⁹ *Fantasticheria* perfectly exemplifies how Verga blended together his narrative craft with a form of self-reflexivity. More importantly, the writing of this text coincided with a radical change in Verga's conception of literary fiction, and marked a turning point in his career. In early 1878, while working on *Fantasticheria*, Verga decided to get rid of a first version of *I Malavoglia*, a short story entitled *Padron 'Ntoni* still conceived as a moralizing narrative about the lower classes from the South,⁴⁰ and embarked in a new project.⁴¹ *Padron 'Ntoni*, soon to be called *I Malavoglia*, became the first novel of a five-volume cycle provisionally entitled *La Marea*, and later *I Vinti*.⁴² *Fantasticheria* is a window opened into Verga's literary workshop, and provides readers with the best introduction to *I Malavoglia*.⁴³

Fantasticheria opens *Vita dei campi*, and this liminal position already sets this text apart from the others. As I will show, *Fantasticheria* has in effect very little in common with the short stories, for it is a self-reflexive text in its fullest sense. The short stories collected in *Vita dei campi* are typically cast in the third person, and the narrator does

³⁷ Luigi Russo, Giovanni Verga; Giacomo Debenedetti, *Verga e il naturalismo* (Milan: Garzanti, 1976).

³⁸ Giovanni Pirodda, *L'eclissi dell'autore. Tecnica ed esperimenti verghiani*, (Cagliari: Editrice Democratica Sarda, 1976); Guido Baldi, *L'artificio della regression. Tecnica narrativa ed ideologia nel Verga verista* (Naples: Liguori, 1980).

³⁹ Gino Tellini, *Il romanzo italiano dell'Ottocento e del Novecento* (Milan : Bruno Mondadori, 1998), p. 180.

⁴⁰ On this point, see Pierluigi Pellini, *Verga* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), pp. 33-36.

⁴¹ For Verga's work on *Fantasticheria*, see: Carla Riccardi, 'Vita dei campi: storia della raccolta', in Giovanni Verga, *Vita dei campi*, edizione critica ed. Carla Riccardi (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1987), pp. ix-lxxxix (p. xxiv). For the famous 'sacrificio incruento' of the first draft of *Padron 'Ntoni*, see: Giovanni Verga, A Capuana, Milan, 17 maggio 1878, in Gino Raya (ed.), *Carteggio Verga-Capuana*, p. 61.

⁴² Verga announced his new project to his friend and lawyer Salvatore Paola Verdura: Giovanni Verga, A Salvatore Paola Verdura, 21 Aprile 1878, in *Lettere sparse*, pp. 79-80. For a long time, Verga hesitated between *Padron 'Ntoni* and *I Malavoglia* as titles for his first novel. In August 1880, he announced his final decision to his publisher: Giovanni Verga, A Emilio Treves, Varese, Albergo Riposo, 9 agosto 1880, in Gino Raya, *Verga e i Treves* (Rome: Herder, 1986), pp. 51-52.

⁴³ In the remainder of this paper, I will support the view that Verga intended *Fantasticheria* as the introduction to *I Malavoglia*. Instead, the often quoted preface to *I Malavoglia* should be read as the introduction to the whole five-volume cycle; for this text, see Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia*, ed. by Ferruccio Cecco, pp. 3-7.

not intrude into the fictional world. The conception of the literary work as an autonomous organism meant that Verga abstained from interfering with fictional make-belief. In two instances, he employs the first person, but he confines its use to a metanarrative commentary that is kept separate from the narrative. In *L'amante di Gramigna*, the shift from the first person to the third person marks the transition from the preface to the narrative; in *Pentolaccia*, the first person is restricted to some opening remarks.⁴⁴ Also, in these and the other short stories, narrator and narratee never appear as characters.

Instead, *Fantasticheria* is entirely cast in the first person, and both the narrator and his narratee, a unnamed woman who was once his lover, feature as characters. The narrator who speaks in the first person is easily identifiable with the writer. When he tells the story of the novel he is planning to write, readers recognize the plot of *Malavoglia*, and identify the narrator of *Fantasticheria* with Verga.⁴⁵ Presented as an autobiographical narrative in a collection of short stories, *Fantasticheria* has an ambiguous fictional status, which is typical of autofiction. This ambiguity is reinforced by the title, which warns the readers. Etymologically linked to the verb “fantasticare”, “fantasticheria” means either the habit of imaging something in a confused way, or its product; it means “phantasy”.⁴⁶ In effect, halfway through the text, while addressing the woman, the narrator refers to his memories as ‘ricordi [...] vaghi, confusi, disparati, raccolti qua e là, non so più dove; forse alcuni son ricordi di sogni fatti ad occhi aperti’.⁴⁷ I will come back to autofiction later, for I want first to focus on the other aspects of self-reflexivity.

The remark about daydreaming also points to another self-reflexive aspect of *Fantasticheria*. The story has two distinct and yet permeable narrative levels. *Fantasticheria* begins with the narrator recalling three days that he spent together with the woman in Aci Trezza. Some time has passed, and he now imagines himself going back to the fishermen’s village. When he sees an old woman again, to whom his lover used to give some money, the narrator starts wondering about his novel; and the people that he and his lover had met in the village become the characters of

⁴⁴ Verga, ‘L’amante di Gramigna’, ‘Pentolaccia’, in *Tutte le novelle*, pp. 202-210 (pp. 202-203), 221-226 (pp. 221-222).

⁴⁵ Of course, Verga’s readers would not know anything about the forthcoming novel, before the publication of *Malavoglia* in 1881; it would only then that they could fully make sense of *Fantasticheria* – which confirms that Verga thought this text as closely related to the novel.

⁴⁶ Nicolò Tommaseo, Bernardo Bellini, *Dizionario della lingua italiana*, vol. 2 (Turin, Naples: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1869), pp. 648-49.

⁴⁷ *Giovani Verga, Fantasticheria*, p. 132.

another story. In this *mise en abyme*, the framed narrative functions as a metafiction. Not only readers suddenly plunge into a parallel fictional world, to which *I Malavoglia* will give shape,⁴⁸ the blurring and interlocking of the two narrative levels further emphasise the metafictional and metanarrative aspects of *Fantasticheria*. The text is not a short story, but an extended commentary on writing *I Malavoglia* as an act of telling and word-fiction making.

However, *Fantasticheria* should not be read just as a metaliterary text, uniquely concerned with the status of fictional storytelling. In fact, with this *mise en abyme*, Verga suggests that life enters the remotest recesses of literary imagination, even when someone imagines a fiction that is twice removed from life; and he does so with his use of autofiction.⁴⁹ In *Fantasticheria*, Verga does not only reflect on his narrative craft, but also on his sense of himself as a writer, as well as on his readers' sense of themselves. *Fantasticheria* makes it clear that Verga intended fictional storytelling, at least the kind he and his readers would practice in *I Malavoglia*, as an exercise in moral imagination and self-reflection. In order to clarify this point, I must now turn on the extract quoted above. First, I will briefly contextualize the passage in *Fantasticheria* as a whole; I will then conclude this paper by commenting on it.

This passage is the keystone of the whole narrative and conceptual architecture of *Fantasticheria*. The text hangs together thanks to the interlocking narrative levels, which alternate throughout; and this passage connects the lovers' story with the villagers' stories, bridging between the framing and the framed narrative. At the end of their three-day sojourn spent in Aci Trezza, the woman addresses the narrator, expressing her doubts about the meaning of a life spent entirely in the village. As I have shown, *Fantasticheria* is clearly presented as an autofiction; in effect, the autobiographical memory is probably false. Even if the unnamed woman could be identified with the Countess Paolina Greppi, who was one of Verga's lovers, it is

⁴⁸ In order, the writer's lover, and the reader, learn about : the 'povera donna cui solevate fare l'elemosina', 'il vecchietto che stava al timone della barca', 'la ragazza [...] che faceva capolino dietro i vasi del basilico', 'quello che sembrava un David di rame', 'quello che [...] non osava toccarvi il piedi', 'quel poveretto che è rimasto a Pantelleria', 'la sorella', 'il ragazzo dell'ostessa', 'quei monellucci che vi scortavano come sciacalli'. There is no exact correspondence between these characters and those who feature in *I Malavoglia*. In fact, the novel is just a draft at this stage, and the characters' stories and roles are not yet clearly defined. However, the reader can recognize events and roles that Verga would later associate with the members of the Malavoglia family. For a list of notes on characters from *I Malavoglia* to be compared with *Fantasticheria*, see: Giovanni Verga, 'I Malavoglia. Personaggi, carattere, fisico, e principali azioni', in Verga, *I Malavoglia* (Einaudi), pp. 386-91.

⁴⁹ For the discussion on the uses of autofiction, I am drawing on Raffaele Donnarumma. *Ipermodernità: dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2014).

unlikely that they had been together to Aci Trezza, and that this dialogue had ever occurred. Moreover, Verga's letters to Greppi contrast sharply in tone with the one he uses here. In *Fantasticheria*, when discussing the woman's doubts, the narrator replies with a patronizing tone, lecturing her on the living conditions in the village and, in his turn, harshly questions her without waiting for any answer.⁵⁰ Here, Verga is not sharing his personal life with his readers, which would also contradict his autonomist conception of the literary work; this passage is a grinding and compulsive monologue, in which he scrapes up his thoughts about fictional storytelling.

So, the woman is just a character; and she is not even a fully fledged, round character. She bears no name, and can be barely said to have a story; she is a passing flattened figure of the imagination.⁵¹ And the same can be said of the villagers. All these flat characters do not give any depth to the fictional world; they function as placeholders of moralities that implicitly articulate modes of life. Through these characters, readers can capture a glimpse of these moral landscapes, imaginatively transgressing their borders; and it is on these characters that I will now focus.

In this passage, the woman is characterized by her wealth. Implicitly, she is assigned a rent of one thousand lire per year, which means that she can profit from a considerable fortune of around two million lire. If one compares this figure with the value of a house, the most important asset possessed by a family of fishermen, one can get a sense of the gap in terms of wealth. In *I Malavoglia*, the protagonist family would eventually sell their house for a little more than five hundred lire.⁵² In comparison with the woman, the villagers own almost nothing. Whatever might be the likelihood of her possessing such a fortune, this figure captures the widening inequality in wealth and income between the poor and the rich in Italy at that time.⁵³

⁵⁰ It was Gino Raya to suggest the identification of this character with the countess Paolina Greppi; see: Gino Raya, 'Eros verghiano', in Giovanni Verga, *Lettere a Paolina*, ed. by Gino Raya, (Rome: Fermenti, 1980), pp. 3-29 (p. 18). The surviving correspondence, which starts in May 1880, supports the view that Verga and Greppi had met some time before, since the tone of the first letter presupposes familiarity. However, the correspondence does not bear any evidence that Verga and Greppi had ever been together in Sicily. Also, Verga says in a letter to Capuana, he says that he will spend some time in Aci Trezza only after *I Malavoglia* will be finished. See Giovanni Verga, *A Capuana*, Milano, 17 maggio 1878, in Gino Raya, *Carteggio Verga-Capuana* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1984), p. 61.

⁵¹ For the distinction between flat and round characters, see E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the novel* (London, New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 73-80.

⁵² The family will sell the house in order to extinguish a debt of five hundred lire; I take this value, which does not account for interests, as roughly indicative of the value of the house. See Verga, *I Malavoglia* (Einaudi), pp. 64-65.

⁵³ As Piketty has shown, inequality of wealth and income was rising steeply all over Europe, at the end of the

The woman leads the comfortable and protected life of a late nineteenth-century rentier; she is well travelled, enjoys her pleasures, and is also in control of her circumstances. The contrast drawn between her life and those of the families of fishermen is stark. They are stuck in their village, because of their poverty; their lives are difficult, precarious, and exposed to extreme luck. They have no control over their natural and social environment, and their mortality rate is very high, because of the hazards of their work, and poor sanitation.

Fantasticheria clearly resonates with the contemporary debate on the economic and social divergence between North and South. It is beyond doubt that *Vita dei campi* and *I Malavoglia* expressed Verga's, as well as a whole generation's disillusionment with the aftermath of the Risorgimento. By setting his Verist novels and short stories in his native Sicily, Verga was implicitly taking a stance.⁵⁴ However, it is important to note that the narrative does not draw the North-South divide as one between the traditions and modernity, past and present. The split of the fictional world does not concern historical time, but social space. The contrast is one between affluent classes and those who live in poverty. Verga wanted to focus on the invisible stories and the social world of those who lived in Italy's Southern margins.⁵⁵

Fantasticheria presents readers with the fractured moral horizon of modernity, where a plurality of moral landscapes collide and diverge.⁵⁶ The fishermen have a strong sense of identity as 'gente di mare'; they get pride in their hard work, feel a strong sense of belonging to families, and attachment to the objects, and the stretch of land and sea on which their survival depends.⁵⁷ And clearly, they do not understand the behaviour of the outsiders who have come to their village. They show

nineteenth century; and this was reflected in the coeval literature: Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the twenty-first century* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 113-163.

⁵⁴ The debate on the Southern Question came to the fore with the publication of two sociological enquiries: Leopoldo Franchetti, *Sidney Sonnino, Inchiesta in Sicilia*, 2 voll., (Florence: Vallecchi, 1974 [1876]); Pasquale Villari, *Le lettere meridionali ed altri scritti sulla questione sociale in Italia*, (Turin: Fretelli Bocca, 1885 [1878]). Verga was well acquainted with those sources; on this point, see Romano Luperini, 'Simbolo e "ricostruzione intellettuale" nei Malavoglia', in *Verga moderno* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005), pp. 105-144.

⁵⁵ For a spatial reading of the Southern Question as a tension between the centre and its peripheries, see: David Forgacs, *Italy's margins: social exclusion and nation formation since 1861* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press 2014), pp. 139-196.

⁵⁶ For this description of modern morality, see: Charles Larmore, *Patterns of moral complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987)

⁵⁷ In the final section, the whole idea is encapsulated in metaphor of the oyster: ' – Insomma; l'ideale dell'ostrica! direte voi – Proprio l'ideale dell'ostrica, e noi non abbiamo altro diritto di trovarlo ridicolo che quello di non essere nati ostriche anche noi. Per altro il tenace attaccamento di quella povera gente allo scoglio sul quale la fortuna li ha lasciati cadere mentre seminava principi di qua e di là, questa rassegnazione coraggiosa ad una vita di stenti, questa religione della famiglia, che si riverbera sul mestiere, sulla casa, e sui sassi che la circondano mi sembrano – forse pel quarto d'ora – cose serissime e rispettabilissime anch'esse.' (Verga, *Fantasticheria*, pp. 135-36).

rather their silent disapproval, when they carry the writer and the woman on their boat.⁵⁸ Conversely, the woman is unable to see what lies beyond her moral horizon. After having planned to stay in a remote Southern village for a month, she leaves after just a two-day sojourn, because she realizes that there is not very much to do there.⁵⁹ Looking at the dawn from the sea is a strange spectacle to her, and she is fully aware that her presence on a boat stands out as odd. Before she sets off to some other destination, she declares herself bemused by the thought that someone could spend her or his whole life there.

One should not forget that the woman is not just the writer's lover, she is also his reader. Drawing on the traditional image of the female reader, as well as on the Baudelairean address to the *hypocrite lecteur*, Verga confronts his readership.⁶⁰ By demeaning the woman's mode of life, he refuses to give any moral backing to the morality of the affluent classes. However, Verga is not posing as a moralizer here, since he does not offer any clear alternative; in fact, he refuses to align literature with any morality. When the narrator remarks that the woman would never go back to Aci Trezza, he immediately adds that he would not either; and towards the end of *Fantasticheria*, when he ponders over the fishermen's locally rooted and industrious lives, he declares himself unable to take seriously and show respect for the fishermen's attachments and sense of identity, for longer than a fleeting moment.⁶¹ The readers of *Fantasticheria* are left with a deep and troubling sense of moral confusion. Verga was a modernist writer, and saw literature as incapable of promoting any morality, of directing or redressing anyone's sense of what makes life worth living.⁶²

⁵⁸ 'passammo sul mare una notte romanticissima, gettando le reti tanto per far qualche cosa che a' barcaiuoli potesse parer meritevole di cercare i reumatismi' (Verga, *Fantasticheria*, p. 129).

⁵⁹ 'Una volta, mentre il treno passava vicino ad Aci Trezza, voi, affacciandovi allo sportello del vagone, esclamaste: "Vorrei starci un mese laggiù!". Noi vi tornammo e vi passammo non un mese, ma quarantott'ore; [...] In quelle quarantott'ore facemmo tutto ciò che si può fare ad Aci Trezza', Giovanni Verga, *Fantasticheria*, p. 129.

⁶⁰ This choice also reflects a sociological fact; see: Ann Hallamore Caesar 'About town: The city and the female reader, 1860-1900', *Modern Italy*, 7.2 (2002), 129-141. Verga's readership excluded the very protagonists of Verga's literary fiction, for they were illiterate; see note 9.

⁶¹ See the note above (57). Verga was nor a romantic neither a traditionalist. This is confirmed by a careful reading of the preface to *I Vinti*. Here, Verga does not object to the modernization process, which he considers positively. His argument is a moral one. He argues that the maximization of social utility brought about by the 'progresso' should not override considerations for individual lives. *I Vinti* are individuals who are left behind and fail. This argument against utilitarianism is not typical of conservatism, but rather of liberalism. See Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia*, pp. 5-6. For a brief and clear introduction to utilitarianism, see: Michael Sandel, *Justice. What's the right thing to do?* (London, New York, Penguin: 2009), pp. 31-57

⁶² Taylor has described modernism as characterized by the breaking of the bond between art and morality, which characterized Romanticism. Whereas Romantics believed that the pursuit of art was one with the quest for

Rather, Verga thought of writing and reading fiction as an exercise in moral imagination. In the passage, the narrator eventually avows that he too does not understand how and why the villagers go on with their lives. Then, he invites the woman to perform a mind experiment, and look through some magnifying lenses, but from the other side. The woman is asked to abandon her point of view, stepping outside of her sense of herself. However, she must not look down to life from above, from an absolute standpoint that could not be located anywhere.⁶³ The flip side of these lenses reveals life as seen from the point of view of the fishermen, from their sense of themselves. From there life will look strange, perhaps amusing. Here, Verga consigns the poetics of impersonality and effacement of the authorial self to his readers. By reading literary fiction, they will imagine life from the others' point of view, and will so put their sense of themselves into perspective.

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morality, modernists saw art as autonomous, hence amoral. Taylor traces modernism back to the mid-nineteenth century, and more precisely to the influence of Baudelaire and Schopenhauer. See Taylor, pp. 434-498. Verga came to see art as separated from morality by reading Flaubert; see Pierluigi Pellini, 'Verga e i "cavoli" di Flaubert', in *Una casa di vetro*, pp. 15-34.

⁶³ Thomas Nagel, *The view from nowhere* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).