The Intradiegetic Narrator in the Italian Historical Novel

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Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.

-Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

What most critics concerned with historical discourse—including Hayden White, Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon—agree upon is that history (or the “real,” or historical events, or truth) is “…not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but…it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and…our approach to it…necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization.”1 Jameson’s study, largely influenced by the Lacanian notion that desire arises from lack, works to unmask the underlying political or social problem (the real) in certain genres of narrative. He claims that the real is “that which resists desire,” even though it is only through desire itself that we can detect the manifest effects of the latent real.2 On a related note, White asserts that the real is made desirable when a formal coherency of a story is imposed on its events. “The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand,” he suggests, “for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama.”3 In other words, historical narrative, as opposed to annals or chronicle, requires a moralizing closure to the events recounted according to the authority represented by the social systems at play in the narrated story. White and Jameson provide excellent tools for analyzing nineteenth-century historical novels and twentieth-century historical novels that adopt their predecessors’ narrative style and moral framework.

Hutcheon, building on White’s theory of an imposed formal coherency, is ultimately less concerned with representations of the real than she is with the way “facts” and “fiction” are intertwined in what she calls “historiographic metafiction.”4 Whereas historical novels, in Georg Lukács’ opinion, succeed in representing history through generic character types and assimilation of the “historical record,” Hutcheon claims that historiographic metafiction

…incorporates, but rarely assimilates such data. More often, the process of attempting to assimilate is what is foregrounded: we watch the narrators of [historiographic metafiction] trying to make sense of the historical facts they have collected. As readers, we see both the collection and the attempts to make narrative order. Historiographic metafiction
acknowledges the paradox of the reality of the past but its textualized accessibility to us today.  

Elements of the “historical record” are presented, then questioned and even undermined by the introduction of fictive elements, which are presented or integrated into the story in the same way as the “facts” are. The combination of fact and fiction in this type of contemporary historical novel ultimately contests the order that the narrative has imposed on “real events,” leaving no moralizing conclusion, “…no reconciliation, no dialectic… just unresolved contradiction.”

Although Hutcheon’s theoretical work is grounded in previous studies on representations of the real in historical narrative, her own theoretical elaborations concern contemporary fiction. Contemporary historical narrative is generally more interested in ambiguities of fact and fiction, and relies less on conventional historical narratives that attempt verisimilitude and delivery of moral content. In fact, what many examples of historiographic metafiction profess in presenting both fact and fiction in the same way is the impossibility of a single, universal truth: these novels, Hutcheon claims, “…openly assert that there are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just others’ truths.” The multiplicity of truths represented in historiographic metafiction makes the presentation of these (competing) truths more complicated than that of a single truth as is usually found in conventional historical narratives. While truth or moral content in conventional narratives is usually conveyed by an omniscient narrator, multiple or competing truths in historiographic metafiction are accordingly presented by multiple or unreliable narrators. Narrative authority, which in conventional narratives is demonstrated through the narrator’s omniscience, personal testimony or claims of fact-checking and research, becomes ambiguous in historiographic metafiction. The very presence of multiple truths and narrators introduces the theme of problematic subjectivity, an argument dear to proponents of feminism and gender studies. Hutcheon’s analysis thus can also be utilized in approaching contemporary problems of gender and ideology in historical fiction, problems that are not directly addressed by Jameson or White.

The mid-to late-twentieth century historical novels that Hutcheon analyzes are stylistically quite different from the realist novels that Jameson investigates and more conventional early nineteenth-century historical novels that easily fall into White’s parameters of historical narrative, but the manner in which their respective narratives mask the real remains the same. White suggests that “…we can comprehend the appeal of historical discourse by recognizing the extent to which it makes the real desirable, makes the real into an object of desire, and does so by its imposition, upon events that are represented as real, of the formal coherency that stories possess.” Here I argue that the most evident way in which the Italian historical novel—from its emergence with Alessandro Manzoni’s I promessi sposi (1827/1840) to the contemporary novel—imitates and incorporates the characteristics of historical discourse is through the literary figure of the intradiegetic narrator (who addresses the reader in some way while attending to the narrated story). This figure’s function is to organize and prioritize events in a coherent fashion, revealing “facts” and character traits at opportune and auspicious moments, while hiding the plot with these diversions in order to make the story seem real. I restrict my argument to three categories of historical novel. The first type of narrative claims to
be a re-presentation of a found manuscript or story; the second inserts its narrator as a character into historical events that serve as a backdrop to the novel’s fictive events; and the third presumes, to a certain extent, its real author to be its narrator. The examples I have chosen for this article cover a period of almost two centuries, beginning with the early nineteenth century, when the historical novel first appeared on the Italian literary scene, and ending in the 1990s.

Although a period of roughly 150 years separates the publication dates of *I promessi sposi* from Umberto Eco’s *Il nome della rosa* (1980), both novels employ the narrative device of the found manuscript and the voice of the narrator who is temporally removed from the events depicted. The prototype of this kind of narrator—not to mention the genre of the historical novel itself—first emerged in Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819). Scott's narrator Laurence Templeton introduces many themes that will become integral elements of the genre in its future incarnations: he accuses historians and history books of being difficult to access, too “antiquarian;” he calls attention to his own abilities as a writer, which hinge on his interpretation of the found manuscript; and he admits to the probable historical inaccuracies in his own text. He also anticipates a critical debate that will haunt the genre and some of its authors: “Still, the severer antiquary may think that, by thus intermingling fiction with truth, I am polluting the well of history with modern inventions, and impressing upon the rising generation false ideas of the age which I describe.”10 This brief sentence seems to anticipate Manzoni’s 1850 critical essay “Del romanzo storico,” which condemns the mixture of fact and fiction in literature, particularly in the historical novel. However, with the publication of his own historical novel *I promessi sposi* just a few years earlier, Manzoni implicitly substantiated such a mixture. The reasoning that Scott’s narrator offers to defend his narrative against this type of criticism also foreshadows Manzoni’s narrator’s explanation of his narrative decisions:

> It is true, that I neither can nor do pretend to the observation of complete accuracy, even in matters of outward costume, much less in the more important points of language and manners. But the same motive which prevents my writing the dialogue of the piece in Anglo-Saxon or in Norman-French…prevents my attempting to confine myself within the limits of the period in which my story is laid. It is necessary, for exciting interest of any kind, that the subject assumed should be, as it were, translated into the manners, as well as the language, of the age we live in.11

With the intent that the story itself be appealing to and understood by a general public, the narrator justifies any historical inaccuracies that may have occurred with the insertion of contemporary language and mannerisms. The elaborate explanation of the “modernization” of the found story is a trait that will be adopted by Manzoni’s narrator. Although the device of the overtly humorous introduction will also resonate in Manzoni's derivation of the genre, the named and clearly identified narrator does not.12

That Manzoni's two narrators (the sixteenth-century narrator and his early nineteenth-century counterpart who translates the former's manuscript) are both nameless at first appears to further distance the author's responsibility regarding the veracity of the
events related. Indeed, the contemporary narrator refers to his predecessor as "l'Anonimo" (Anonymous), officializing his forerunner's ambiguous identity while legitimizing his own anonymity as a continuation of the previous mode of the story's presentation. It is the inherent appeal of the story itself that initially inspires the latter narrator to re-present the manuscript in readable form:

mi sapeva male che una storia così bella dovesse rimanersi tuttavia sconosciuta, perché, in quanto storia…a me era parsa bella, come dico; molto bella. –Perché non si potrebbe, pensai, prender la serie de’ fatti da questo manoscritto, e rifarne la dicitura?  

However, the narrator's confirmation through research of the manuscript's historical accuracy not only accentuates his need to place the story's events in a secure historical past that can be referenced; it also gives rise to his avowedly continual citation of the results of his research in his own manuscript: “citeremo alcuna di quelle testimonianze, per procacciar fede alle cose, alle quali, per la loro stranezza, il lettore sarebbe più tentato di negarla.” The appeal of the extraordinary re-presented story is such that the reader takes it to be a work of fiction; Manzoni’s narrator must aver its basis in real events. By frequently citing Giuseppe Ripamonti, a real historian of the sixteenth century, the narrator regularly underscores his own namelessness throughout the novel.

In Il nome della rosa, Umberto Eco's narrator also highlights his own anonymity when he complicates the source identity of his story. The narrator works with so many different sources that it is impossible to designate a single one as primary. Even the original manuscript, he claims, is tainted by the culture and ideology surrounding its production. “In conclusione,” he says, “sono pieno di dubbi. Proprio non so perché mi sia deciso a…presentare come se fosse autentico il manoscritto di Adso da Melk.” Indeed, by noting the subjunctive mood of the previous contrary-to-fact sentence, the reader assumes that the manuscript is not authentic at all. When the narrator begins to find his various sources in ever increasing exotic and random places all over the globe, the reader’s desire to accept the events related as truth may begin to diminish along with his or her credulity. However, the narrator re-presents his found story out of “semplice gusto fabulatorio,” not out of any desire to relate “historical” events found in a verifiable and documented source, as Manzoni’s narrator does. Eco’s narrator admits to not being concerned with the veracity of the events he relates, and he presents to his reader an amalgam of various “truths” gathered from different sources. The impossibility of determining a single, verifiable source of the events related points to what Hutcheon suggests is the possibility of multiple truths in historiographic metafiction.

Manzoni and Eco's narrators purport to have no “authority” in their respective stories because the stories were already complete in finished form when the narrators “found” them. Yet, the narrators’ imprints are necessarily left when they re-present and “translate” the manuscripts. Throughout Manzoni's novel, the narrator imparts his ideas and opinions in interjections that pass judgment on characters, events, and the language in which the manuscript was originally written. The concluding words of the novel intentionally lay bare the narrator’s organizing apparatus and present a final appeal to the reader’s expectations:
Questa conclusione, benchè trovata da povera gente, c'è parsa così giusta, che abbiam pensato di metterla qui, come il sugo di tutta la storia. 
La quale, se non v'è dispiaciuta affatto, vogliatene bene a chi l’ha scritta, e anche un pochino a chi l'ha raccomodata. Ma se in vece fossimo riusciti ad annoiarvi, credete che non s'è fatto apposta.

The narrator refers to certain elements and requirements of the story (conclusion, author [“chi l’ha scritta”], moral [“il sugo di tutta la storia”]) and even explains the narrative’s conclusion, in effect demonstrating White’s theory of the demand for closure and its inherent moral authority in historical narratives. If these concluding remarks are taken at face value, then the task of eliciting a moral meaning from the story is already done. If we take into account Jameson’s theory of the latent real, however, another conclusion must be made. The moral referred to at the conclusion of the story is found by the “povera gente” of the story itself, and not necessarily that gleaned by its reader or that intended by its author. The conclusion of Manzoni’s novel reveals to the reader an ideological end of the story, but the real ideological (or political or social) message of divine Providence remains implicit in the text, referred to periodically by the narrator.

Although Il nome della rosa was written more than 150 years after I promessi sposi, Eco’s use of the found manuscript paired with the narrator who presents the new version of the story mirrors and complicates Manzoni’s use of the same elements. The apparent lack of a moralizing conclusion in Il nome della rosa initially differentiates its ideological end from that of I promessi sposi, and leaves its reader, along with its narrator Adso, at a loss for meaning. Hutcheon suggests that “…nineteenth-century structures of narrative closure (death, marriage; neat conclusions) are undermined by those postmodern epilogues that foreground how, as writers and readers, we make closure.” Rather than finding the apparent “neat conclusion” of the nineteenth-century historical novel, or the intentionally open-ended conclusion of the modern novel, contemporary readers must find meaning for themselves from the “unresolved contradiction” presented at the conclusion of this postmodern historical novel. Protagonist and narrator Adso relates his concluding thoughts:

Più rileggo questo elenco più mi convinco che esso è effetto del caso e non contiene alcun messaggio….che tu ora leggerai, ignoto lettore…Non mi rimane che tacere …Lascio questa scrittura, non so per chi, non so più intorno a che cosa: stat rosa pristine nomine, nomina nuda tenemus.

The narrative within the narrative—that of Adso—suggests that the book the reader is holding is an empty container, devoid of meaning, but again, this is the manifest message spelled out by one of the novel’s protagonists, and we must look to the unnamed narrator who re-presents Adso’s story to find its latent truth. In fact, the original Latin manuscript that Adso supposedly wrote is not extant. The story that the unnamed narrator presents to us has gone through so many fragmentations, translations and re-textualizations that any remaining “truth” left in the story—manifest or latent—is questionable, a fact to which the narrator himself attests. The absence of the manuscript itself—the closest that the narrator can(not) get to the truth of the events narrated—allows the narrator to adapt the story to his own truth.
The object(s) of desire of both Adso and the unnamed narrator in Eco’s novel is utterly unattainable, but the object of desire of the framing narrative becomes that of the story retold. The unnamed narrator’s introductory story of his own search for Adso’s story reads like a map of Adso’s narrative of lost and desired objects. The unnamed narrator and Adso both briefly have a love interest who is subsequently lost, but the more significant lost or absent objects of both narratives—the narrator’s framing story and Adso’s story—and narrators are books. The unnamed narrator never finds Adso’s Latin manuscript, and he loses the French translation of it, much as William of Baskerville (protagonist of Adso’s story) loses Aristotle’s treatise on comedy just moments after it has finally come into his possession. The contemporary narrator claims to re-present Adso’s story out of “sheer narrative pleasure,” but he is really cathartically recounting his own narrative of lost and desired objects.

Despite the historical distance between the appearances of Manzoni’s and Eco’s novels, both narratives present an obvious conclusion (whether it be overflowing with morality, or devoid of all meaning) that must be rethought through the figure of the representing narrator who brings to the forefront questions of the latent desire for the real. In embedding one narrative within another, Eco is able to combine in one novel two modes of narration—that of the narrator who happens upon an interesting story (the obvious precursor is Manzoni), and that of the confessional memoir written by the protagonist-narrator years after the events recounted. This second mode of narration, in which the narrator attempts to draw a moral conclusion from his/her life by recounting its events, is also evident in Ippolito Nievo’s Le confessioni di un italiano (1858).

The confessional memoir narrative as presented by Nievo and Eco claims testimonial narrative authority by placing the narrator directly into the story as a protagonist. Rather than giving the manifest moral of the story at the conclusion of the novel as do Manzoni and Eco, Nievo gives it to us on the first page as an explanation of the events he will recount:

Io naqui veneziano…e morrò per la grazia di Dio italiano quando lo vorrà quella Provvidenza che governa misteriosamente il mondo.

Ecco la morale della mia vita. E siccome questa morale non fui io ma i tempi che l’hanno fatta, così mi venne in mente che descrivere ingenuamente quest’azione dei tempi sopra la vita d’un uomo potesse recare qualche utilità…

That narrator Carlino was born Venetian but will die Italian masks the real historical events that led to the unification of Italy, and serves as a reader’s guide as to how to interpret this latent ideological meaning. To make sure that the reader follows this guide, Carlino directly addresses him/her throughout the novel, and goes so far as to tell the reader what reactions s/he should have had to certain parts of the narration: “Il maggior effetto prodotto nei lettori del capitolo primo sarà stata la curiosità di saper finalmente, chi fosse questo Carlino.” Nievo’s narrator Carlino recalls Manzoni’s narrator in that he repeatedly reminds the reader that s/he is, in fact, reading a story composed of separate elements that are woven together. More specifically, the reader knows that s/he is reading a novel: “…le memorie del giorno prima mi passarono innanzi chiare ordinate e vivaci come i capitoli d’un bel romanzo.” After a particularly suspenseful and abrupt chapter
ending, the narrator “explains” the structure and content of each chapter: “...io ho preso l’usanza di scrivere ogni giorno un capitolo terminandolo appunto quando il sonno mi fa cascare la penna.”31 Carlino denies any pretense of purposefully building up narrative tension by explaining that his writing habits are restricted by his bodily needs. Here Nievo disguises a real element of the novel form—narrative suspense—with the daily habits of his narrator, thus claiming as accidental any occurrence of tension or curiosity that attempts to keep the reader’s attention. Like Manzoni’s narrator, Carlino names the necessary elements of the form of the novel (reader, main protagonist, chapter), but also the expected effects of such a narrative upon consumption by a reading public (effect produced in the reader) and precisely how his chapters are composed (whatever he can write in one day). Again, White’s ordering structure—and its inherent pleasurable effect on its reader—of the historical narrative is laid bare by its very narrator, while its narrative devices are accordingly hidden by its author.

The fact that Carlino displays his moralizing framework at the beginning of the narrative rather than at its termination leads to further rearrangement of the story’s elements. Nievo pays homage to Manzoni in the novel’s first lines (“morrò per la grazia di Dio italiano quando lo vorrà quella Provvidenza che governa misteriosamente il mondo”), acknowledging him as a narrative and ideological predecessor, which allows Nievo to leave the conventional paradigm behind and incorporate different techniques, including first-person testimonial narrative.32 The organizational dilemma brought on by the problem of memory—Carlino is in his eighties when he begins to narrate his life story—is resolved when Carlino directly addresses the novel’s reader: the inherent nature of the “confessions” to which the reader is now obligated to listen suggests an intimacy between the “confessor” and his listener. The orality and spontaneous essence of the confession, as opposed to the well-ordered and researched events of Manzoni’s novel, compels the listener/reader to forgive any mistakes or lapses in memory, and to trust that Carlino’s testimonial authority will suffice.

Adding to Carlino’s narratorial authority is the fact that he adopts the role of two narrators: one who claims testimonial authority (the narrated “I”) and the other who is more or less omniscient (the eighty-year-old narrating “I”). The doubling of the narrator is a common element of historical fiction that occurs in Manzoni and Eco (and less blatantly in Scott), but it is usually represented by two characters, separated chronologically by several centuries; in Nievo the same doubled narrator is consolidated into one character. Carlino has the privilege of being able to recount the events of his own life from its near end, but he is not always able to keep the two narrating roles separate, as Ugo Olivieri writes: “Il presente dell’ottuagenario non è esente da una complicità con il passato narrato e in un’alternanza tra la forma del narratore onnisciente e il filtro dell’autobiografia, la sua voce s’inserisce in una congerie di materiali accumulati e riletti nel détour del commento.”33 For example, when recounting childhood experiences, Carlino is apt to insert knowledge of events that he could not possibly have witnessed at the time, but only learned in the future. It is impossible for the narrator/protagonist, knowing how the “plot” is resolved, not to incorporate information generating from the narrating “I” when the narrated “I” is speaking, which creates a temporal dislocation. Whereas the temporal rift caused by the doubled narrator in Manzoni and Eco remains a static part throughout their respective novels, in Nievo it will eventually disintegrate as the narrated “I” catches up to the narrating “I” and they become
one character near the conclusion of the novel. Indeed, the last chapter of the novel assumes a different narrative style than the rest of the novel: it is simply the presentation of letters sent to Carlino by his son in South America.

The reorganization of conventional narrative devices in Carlino’s story highlights Nievo’s distinction from previous historical novelists who adhere to a proven formula (story re-presented by narrator + concluding moral at the end). Nievo’s inclusion of a female character who is not typified or exemplified is another characteristic that sets his narrative apart from Manzoni and Eco’s novels. While Manzoni relies on stock female characters and Eco mostly avoids them by placing his narrative events in a monastery, Nievo gives his reader Pisana, a complex character who continues to develop throughout the novel rather than representing static extremes of a Manichean binary. In Pisana, the reader of the historical novel finds a precedent for the subjects of many historical narratives by and about women that do not follow a rigid narrative order and present alternative narrative techniques.

Many historical novels written in the second half of the twentieth century utilize these new narrative techniques that Hutcheon attributes, in part, to problematic subjectivity: “The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to [be] a coherent, meaning-generating entity. Narrators in fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate or resolutely provisional and limited—often undermining their own omniscience.” This is particularly evident in historical narratives with female authors, narrators and subjects who must differentiate themselves from male accounts of history, in which women are often marginalized or nonexistent. In fact, new paradigms must be invented, or the old ones altered, to accommodate the large number of such narratives that do not fit into older paradigms.

Whereas Hutcheon’s deviations from the Lukácsian paradigm of the historical novel stem from his analysis of Manzoni’s I promessi sposi in particular, Maria Ornella Marotti instead begins with Lukács’ genealogy of the nineteenth-century historical novel in general. According to Marotti, Lukács finds the roots of the European historical novel in the Enlightenment novel and the romantic novel: the former recounts historical events leading up to the French Revolution through the eyes of the “common people” and the latter touts major historical figures as protagonists of a subjective and nostalgic interpretation of “the past as a time of irretrievable harmony.” Although historical novels with major female historical figures do exist, they “do not express nostalgia for an irretrievable past, because there is no golden age for women’s history.” In fact, the majority of historical novels specifically about women adopt ordinary women as protagonists. Whether the events narrated be ordinary (see Elsa Morante’s La storia [1974]) or extraordinary (see Maria Rosa Cutrufelli’s La briganta [1990]), “[t]he goal of...these [feminist] texts,” claims Carol Lazzaro-Weis, “is precisely to describe the formation of a new subjectivity.” Many forms of women’s writing will thematize subjectivity as a key organizing narrative factor after World War II.

In the postwar period, fictional narrative by Italian male authors mostly concentrated on contemporary events, which began to address ideological issues in a collective, neo-realist mode. While their male counterparts searched for solidarity in narrating experiences common to many, post-World War II narrative by women tended toward what had become labeled more “personal” genres of the historical novel and autobiography/biography. Anna Banti’s Artemisia (1947) embodies all three of these
genres: the novel presents the historical “facts” of the documented life of painter Artemisia Gentileschi (biography), re-constructs and reconfigures the artist’s personal experiences using both documented fact and fictive imagination (historiographic metafiction), and portrays Banti’s own personal experiences (autobiography). Artemisia is representative not only of the major trends in Italian women’s writing of the twentieth century, but also of the continuation of the intradiegetic narrator in the historical novel.

In a direct address to the novel’s reader, the author of Artemisia, also assumed to be its narrator, relates the objectives of her first manuscript, destroyed in World War II. However, the narrative that follows this introduction is the second manuscript re-written from memory of the first, destroyed, absent narrative. Working from the memory of her lost manuscript, Banti’s narrator re-constructs her first narrative, but then incorporates her own experiences into the second narrative, much as Eco’s narrator works from memory of his lost manuscript and incorporates his personal experiences into the novel’s framing narrative. The goals of the re-presented narrative—whether they are manifest or latent—are not proffered by Artemisia’s narrator, as is the case for Manzoni, Eco and Nievo. The object of desire (the real), which is masked in male accounts of historical narrative, lies even farther beneath the surface in Artemisia, since its narrator does not even offer a veiled moralizing conclusion to decipher. The ideological goal of this type of narrative is not to narrativize “true” historical events, but to fill in the gaps left by male accounts of history by presenting alternative histories.

Accordingly, the narrative devices used to attain this goal often differ from those found in conventional examples of the historical novel. For example, establishing narrative authority by claiming the story’s factual basis, while integral to many conventional historical novels, is precisely what several women authors of twentieth-century historical narrative are trying to avoid. The logically impossible collaboration between the historical figure of Artemisia and the narrator of the novel Artemisia denies any conventional notion of narrational authority, since it is an obvious fictional scenario. The distance that usually separates intradiegetic narrators (if the narrator is not also the protagonist) from the stories that they recount is eclipsed in Banti’s novel. The author/narrator Banti expresses an emotional involvement with and personal attachment to her subject that continues to characterize more contemporary historical narrative, in fiction written by both men and women.

The inclusion of the author/narrator’s personal experiences in relation to the narrative’s subject matter and characters is also a driving force of Luisa Muraro’s Guglielma e Maifreda (1985), which presents the results of Muraro’s extensive archival research on the eponymous historical figures. Although Muraro’s book is not a historical novel in the conventional sense of the genre, it does fall within the parameters of Hutcheon’s definition of “…historical fiction as that which is modeled on historiography to the extent that it is motivated and made operative by a notion of history as a shaping force (in the narrative and in human destiny).” In fact, Guglielma e Maifreda appears to contain all three kinds of historical representation—annals, chronicle and narrative—that White discusses. After the narrative itself concludes, Muraro includes a synchronic table of historical events (annals) and a chronology (chronicle) of the Inquisition’s trial of Guglielma Boema and her followers. Despite having the appearance of a historical narrative, the main body of Guglielma e Maifreda does not adhere to an ordered timeline, nor does it attempt an overt moralizing conclusion, much
like Banti’s narrative. Within the narrative itself Muraro presents facts found in court
documents and rumors and legends that shaped Guglielma’s image in the popular
imagination after her death. All aspects of the author’s research are combined and
presented in the same fashion, regardless of any concept of authority or legitimacy that
one may have over the other.45 In this respect, her narrative corresponds to
historiographic metafiction. However, Muraro as a narrator makes no attempt to
naturalize what little “plot” she is able to reconstruct, in effect making her narrative less
engaging or desirable for the reader by White’s standards of the genre.46 Her stated
objective in the book’s preface is less an attempt to convey a moral conclusion than it is
simply to read the signs left by her subject’s “human, feminine power”:

Lo scopo del mio lavoro ne dice i limiti. Ho voluto conoscere e fàr
conoscere i fatti e le idee che ebbero al loro centro Guglielma…
La figura di Guglielma sfugge a una compiuta rappresentazione storica,
in parte per la scarsità delle notizie e in parte per quel di piú inafferrabile
che forma il segreto delle grandi personalità umane. Non avendo io alcuna
disposizione artistica per supplire con l’immaginazione a ciò che sfugge,
per conoscere Guglielma mi sono rivolta ai suoi effetti. Attraverso gli
effetti di un processo penale, non abbiamo altro punto di partenza, ho
cercato di ricostruire quello che Guglielma era e voleva dire. In coloro che
l’avvicinarono, come nei fatti e idee associati al suo nome, è possibile
scorgere il segno lasciato dalla sua potenza umana femminile. Tentare di
leggere quei segni era la cosa piú accessibile a me ed è insieme la cosa che
considero piú importante per il mio sesso: significarsi.
Il mio lavoro, naturalmente, ha parecchi altri limiti, quelli dovuti alla mia
personale limitatezza e dei quali non è dato a me di guidicare. Ne
giudicherà chi legge, come di tutto il resto.47

Much as Nievo gives his reader a guide for interpreting the real historical events that he
will recount in his opening lines, here Muraro signals to the reader her—the
author/narrator’s—feminist ideology, which gives form to the events recounted. Not only
does she overtly refer to mechanic components of a narrative (“punto di partenza”) as
Nievo’s narrator does, she also openly refers to limitations and factors that will shape her
narrative (“lo scopo del mio lavoro,” “i limiti”). Muraro’s strong base in feminist theory
allows her to approach her subject as such, and as a narrator she “translates” her findings
accordingly.

The author/narrator of Guglielma e Maifreda does not attempt to hide the
inadequacies that the historical record presents, and admits that supplementing narrative
with imagination is a normal route to follow when the object of desire—in Muraro’s case,
Guglielma’s story—is ultimately unreachable. To reiterate Jameson: “…this Real—this
absent cause, which is fundamentally unrepresentable and non-narrative, and detectable
only in its effects—can be disclosed only by Desire itself, whose wish-fulfilling
mechanisms are the instruments through which this resistant surface must be scanned.”48

As Muraro herself relates, she must reconstruct (“ricostruire”) Guglielma’s story through
the effects left by her trial and the people with whom she came into contact. Yet the last
sentence of her preface, reminiscent of Manzoni’s preface and concluding remarks,
acknowledges the fact that the reader will attempt to judge ("guidicare"), or moralize, the events and people recounted as well as her own limits, an attempt that she renounces. In fact, the concluding remarks of the narrative are evocative of those with which Adso of Melk terminates his narrative: “E consegnandosi [Guglielma] pronunciò le parole che dicono la sua trovata coincidenza fra destino e scelta: sit de me quicquid esse potest.” Although Adso’s last words relate an apparent sense of non-meaning and existential despair, Guglielma’s last words convey that Muraro has achieved her goal: she has let Guglielma speak, and in doing so, reconstructed at least one woman’s story that had previously been untold.

Although the paradigm of the historical novel has been altered significantly over the years, Manzoni’s prototype remains a massive presence that readers and critics find difficult to see past. I do not deny Manzoni’s influence and magnitude within the genre of the historical novel; however, if authors and critics continue to assert his dominance without allowing room for new ideas, they risk limiting their own vision. One way to open out analysis of the historical narrative is by examining the various incarnations of the intradiegetic narrator. In this article I have concentrated on that very intradiegetic narrator, one of the most effective ways in which the historical novel incorporates characteristics of historical discourse. I have restricted my argument to three types of historical novel: the first is a “rewriting” of a found manuscript, the second’s protagonist is also its narrator, and the third’s narrator appears to be its real author. Each type posits a different kind of intradiegetic narrator, and each alters the status of the real (the object of desire) to accommodate its ideological ends. While many of the early characteristics of the historical novel have either disappeared or evolved into something entirely different, the intradiegetic narrator has remained a fixed code in a changing genre. In the novels I have analyzed here, narrative authority is established in conventional historical narratives through testimony and claims of truth-value, but for feminist or postmodern historical novels the same task is achieved through a mixture of truth and fiction, through meticulous archival or historical research and artistic invention. White and Jameson’s studies provide a strong foundation for analyzing early historical novels that strive to present a moral meaning construed from the real (truth/history), but prove to be inadequate in examining more contemporary novels that question and ultimately undermine the real. Hutcheon offers an excellent introduction to the analysis of contemporary historical fiction that incorporates then alters conventional paradigms. I suggest that critics who insist on an unchanged, fossilized Manzonian-Lukácsian paradigm follow Nievo’s lead, acknowledging Manzoni and his achievements in the first lines of their work, and moving on to create new paradigms.

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.

-Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

ENDNOTES

1 Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 35; see also pp. 82, 184. On related ideas, see also Hayden

2 Jameson 184.
3 White 21.
4 Hutcheon 116.
5 Hutcheon 114. Emphasis in original.
6 Hutcheon 106.
7 Hutcheon 109. See also pages 13 and 21.
8 “Narrators in [postmodern historical] fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate (…) or resolutely provisional and limited—often undermining their own seeming omniscience.” Hutcheon 11.
9 White 21.
11 Scott xix.
12 However, the humorous narratorial introduction as found in Manzoni seems to disappear in twentieth century Italian historical fiction.
13 Manzoni will also promote this type of ambiguity in the narrated story by calling one of his protagonists “L’Innominato” (The Unnamed).
15 Manzoni 16-17.
16 Ippolito Nievo also makes extensive use of real historians’ texts, although he does not explicitly refer to them. Instead, he inserts them in slightly modified form, assimilating them into his own text. Identifiable tracts from Carlo Botta’s *La Storia d’Italia dal 1789 al 1814* (1854) and G. Cappelletti’s *Storia della repubblica di Venezia* (1850-55) are found in passages of Nievo’s *Le confessioni d’un italiano* (1858) that describe real historical events. Ugo M. Olivieri, *Narrare avanti il reale: “Le confessioni d’un italiano” e la forma-romanzo nell’Ottocento* (Milan: Franco Angeli Libri, 1990), 75-80.
17 Eco’s narrator works with his own translation of a nineteenth-century French translation of a fourteenth-century Latin manuscript until the French translation goes missing; he then fills in the narrative gaps with excerpts from an Italian translation of a Castilian translation of a Georgian text on a subject entirely foreign to the original manuscript in order to compile a late twentieth-century Italian version of his found (and lost) story. The narrator also alludes to questions of subjectivity when he disguises the gender of his own lover.
19 Manzoni’s narrator translates his found story from seventeenth-century Spanish-inflected Italian to nineteenth-century bourgeois Italian. I have already mentioned the complicated nature of Eco’s narrator’s task of reconstructing his story.
20 Manzoni 914.
Interestingly, the events of *Il nome della rosa* are set in 1327, exactly 500 years before the first appearance of *I promessi sposi*. Although I have been unable to find commentary on this fact by the novel’s critics or author, I do not believe that it is a coincidence, given Eco’s attention to historical detail.

In order to avoid any confusion regarding the much-debated term “postmodern,” I will use it in this paper to refer to the contemporary period rather than an identifying set of aesthetic qualities.

The Latin phrase that concludes the previous passage translates as “yesterday’s rose endures in its name, we hold empty names.” Translation from Latin by Adele J. Haft, Jane G. White, and Robert J. White, *The Key to The Name of the Rose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999) 175.

If we go one step further and search for the author's intended meaning through his literary, historical and philosophical sources, we get an even more complicated and contradictory message, as the extensive research in *The Key to The Name of the Rose* suggests.


Nievo 48.

Nievo 123.

Nievo 556.

Nievo’s novel has been described as an amalgam of different novel genres, including historical, picaresque and epistolary novels, as well as the Bildungsroman. I believe that this homage that begins the narrative is another of the author’s hints as to how to read the novel.


*Hutcheon* 11.


Marotti 17. Examples of this type of historical novel include Maria Bellonci’s *Lucrezia Borgia* (1939) and *Soccorso a Dorotea* (1972).


Caesar 205. See also Carol Lazzaro-Weis, “Stranger Than Life? Autobiography and Historical Fiction,” *Gendering Italian Fiction*, 44.

On the topic of women writers’ narrative genres of the twentieth century, see Marotti, Caesar and Lazzaro-Weis, “Stranger Than Life?”

42 Luisa Muraro, Guglielma e Maifreda, storia di un’eresia femminista (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1985). The Guglielmiti were put on trial by the Inquisition in 1300. The religious sect believed that their spiritual leader Guglielma was the reincarnation of God, and thus were convicted as heretics. Guglielma’s body (she died in 1281) and some of her followers were burned at the stake at the conclusion of the trial.

43 Hutcheon 113.
44 White 4.
45 Muraro dedicates an entire chapter to presentation of material based on rumor in “Le due leggende,” but she also describes actual historical events in great detail; for example, see the chapter entitled “Il processo.”
46 “[T]he plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as ‘found’ in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques.” White 21.
47 Muraro 9.
48 Jameson 184.
49 Muraro 167.
50 I have purposefully avoided historical narratives that have little or no specific reference to a narrator, such as those written by Laura Mancinelli (her medieval trilogy consists of I dodici abati di Challant [1981], Il miracolo di Santa Odilia [1989] and Gli occhi dell’imperatore [1993]) and Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (Il gattopardo [1957]). Concentrating on this type of narrative that ‘speaks itself’ without the assistance of a foregrouded literary narrator would prove to be an interesting counter-prospective to the argument at hand.

WORKS CITED


