Francesca Duranti and Metafiction

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Metafiction as a term seems to have been first used by Lionel Abel (1963) in a discussion of the play-within-a-play. Clearly, however, it has been a part of literary critical discussions for a much longer time. Widely considered in its various configurations by literary critics, metafiction takes diversified forms and titles, including introversion, anti-novel and surfiction.¹ All of these rubrics have in common the general formulation of a fiction that self-consciously reflects upon its own structure as language.

The terms of a metafictional text have changes over time. In the modernist context the concern was largely consciousness. The first-person telling of a story by a character informs us, the readers, of his/her development to a point which has enabled him/her to compose the novel we are about to read. From the outset the ability to recreate reality, as was presupposed by the nineteenth-century realist tradition, was put on alert. Only fiction could be created. In the epistemological sense reality floated away on the winds of individual existence. The idealist Hegelian formula and a quantifiable artistic aesthetic were abandoned in favor of Heidegger and discussion of what it feels like to be alive. Existence became the primary focus. True history became humankind's ability to face the *Angst* of being and a sense of nothingness in preparation for death.

In the postmodern development of metafiction the concern is first and foremost with fictionality, that is, with the construction and destruction of illusion. The traditional figure of the author as a transcendental imagination, as the god who through an ultimately monologic discourse weaves a tale on a plot, is once again *démodé*. Now the presence of the author is made to resonate for the reader at a relatively high number of decibels. The postmodern metafictional narrator's presence is claimed and foregrounded, and the reader is made aware of it in more or less subtle ways depending on the type and degree of metafiction. This narrator establishes a rapport and collaborative discourse with the reader, while at the same time setting up another dialogic with an embedded text. The metafictional narrator alternately sends the ball to the left or right side of the court, once to the reader and once to the embedded text.

Duranti in the four novels mentioned here, the last of of which are discussed at length, adds a new spin to the literary-critical historical line of events.

Within each text she moves through metafictional modes of discourse that include a recovery of modernist consciousness and lead to another stage which may be defined as postmodern existential metafiction. In Duranti's new dimension the existence of the text and disappearance of the author are foregrounded. The text conflates into the life of the author but the author ultimately disappears. The final essence of the text is intertextuality. It is the ultimate existence. In *La casa sul lago della luna* (1984) Fabrizio, the author "in" and "of" the text, is consumed by the fiction. His text has taken on a life of its own; Maria Lettner exists and continues to exist, but the author disappears. In *Effetti personali* (1988) Valentina searches for an author, Milos Jarco, and finds that he does not exist, except as a collective identity. The act of writing (by the collective and Valentina) and the text are what is left. *Ultima stesura* (1991) similarly shows the disappearance of the author, who on the final pages romantically fantasizes or actually does throw herself off the balcony in a liberating cartwheel. And the text remains. In *Progetto Burlamacchi* (1994) all of the rewriters of history – Michel, Ms. Patanè, Ruggero, his mother, Furlanetto – fade into multi-medial oblivion but their *istorie* (interwoven with European *histoire*) and the discourse of the text remain, open to whatever amorally manipulated interpretation is running at the time.

Duranti's move from undiluted postmodern metafiction through a recovered modernist consciousness and then into existential intertextuality is particularly evident in *Ultima stesura* after story six ("Il rosso e il bianco"). Consciousness is resolved in a postmodern vein. Life and the writer disappear. The act of writing and its refracted interpretations, i.e., intertextuality, remain. A closer look at it and *Progetto Burlamacchi* will help to demonstrate this new positioning of Duranti in relation to her craft. The move is from the ontology of the writer to the ontology of writing and intertextuality.

Ultima stesura begins by setting up the frame. If there is a classical metafictional form, then this novel has it. It is a series of stories embedded in the overriding story line. The fundamental discourse from beginning to end of both levels is the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday 'reality' and its slipperiness in fulfilling this role. There is a moveable quality to 'meaning'. Language does not reflect a coherent, meaningful and 'objective' world. For example, in the first part of the text the tangible facts of the author's² life and her description of herself do not quite coincide. This gap between theory (self-definition) and practice (daily existence) is illustrated by the embedded texts which hammer home the problematic relationship between the arbitrary linguistic system and the phenomenal world. They are the metaphors or the tools which permit the exploration of the metonymic or frame world – in this case the female author's identity as a writer and as a person (Lodge, "The Metaphoric" 79). This is true until Story Six: at this point in the novel the two lines will conflate into a modernist consciousness. Subsequently

the theoretical configuration of the final part changes because the metonymic author also disappears.

The separation of metonymic and metaphoric discourse occurs even graphically (since italics are used for the embedded texts). Graphic intervention, however, is delayed until the first story. The initial pages are an introduction about the author. They are entitled "Il mio nome" (not as easy to define as one might think, but with approximately 70% chance of accuracy her name is Teodora Francia) and "Il mio mestiere" ("l'autista, il facchino, la maestra, la giornalista, la cuoca, la politica, la traduttrice, la conferenziera, l'elettricista, la puttana, il contabile"[10]).

In these brief descriptions we find the basic thesis of the text as a whole. Identity through words is slippery but the author needs to use this system (i.e., writing) in order to exist; at the same time, existence (i.e., living) is inextricably intertwined with writing (where would Scheherazade have been without Sinbad?). But we will see in both levels of the text that authors, like texts, have a particular destiny.

The frame story sets up the locus just before the first story. The author is living in the countryside with her second husband, Marco, and her second child, Eloisa. The first story, "La porta di mezzo," is said to be a true one. It tells about Bedini and Buti, two lawyers, and an orthographic error that radically changes the lives of all the characters in the story.

When Bedini and Buti go to the telephone company to contract service for their newly opened law office, Buti is distracted from close-reading of the projected phonebook text. The two have been friends forever, paired together since school and Fascist Cub Scout days by the inevitability of alphabetical order. Their personalities, however, are completely different. Bedini's family is less wealthy; he is more studious, less social, and finishes law school first but waits for Buti, who by then is already happily married with a delightful wife and children. They decide to open a law office together. At the window of the telephone company Buti, the more socially adept one, dictates to the clerk the words [signs] to be listed in the directory. Here the author exploits the comic potential for systematic misunderstanding possible in an empiricist's model of language. The listing appears not as "Bedini-Buti" in unequivocal, non-suggestive alphabetical order but rather as "Bedini, Righetta, Buti." Righetta subsequently takes on a life of its/his own. 'His' name is put on the broom closet ("la porta di mezzo"), and word order marches forward to destroy Buti. The semiotic of the phonebook listing leads perspective clients to believe that Bedini is the successful and therefore expensive partner, Righetta his capable second man, and Buti – inexplicably out of alphabetical order – at best the newest, but certainly the least effectual member of the equip. Buti's bourgeois individualism is gradually removed from him in a series of mishaps. Eventually his wife and children leave him; she marries Bedini, who changes appear-

ance from dreary bespectacled lawyer to slim sun-tanned successful professional. The ambiguity and contradiction of the sign have changed the course of the story. The author, Buti, has disappeared only to melt intertextually into Bedini. Within the metaphorical world of the embedded text, one character has become another. The rest is intertextuality. In relation to the metonymic world of Teodora's life we see the problem of identity reflected through words.

Before beginning the second story the framework narrator tells the readers about her many professions. She makes tons of jam, teaches her three-year-old to read using a system that she herself has invented, and explores many other more or less successful but interesting projects started and not always finished. During her craft-cottage industry pause, she carefully understates the issue she is willfully avoiding: the one thing that she knows she can do well, not just passably well, is write. The problem of facing her creations will be illustrated in the metaphoric text.

"La Milanese" is the second story. As the reader is drawn into the text, which unfolds before our senses in a tactile auditory dimension of fabrics, jangling jewelry, rustling nylon stockings and "lo snackherare" of high heels on parquet floors, Teodora re-enters the picture, interrupting its development because she has to make supper. Her avoidance is literally textualized. She is followed into the kitchen by her daughter Eloisa, and there she weaves a few more threads into the frame story. She is pleased with her ability to use a male first-person narrative voice and to depict a woman who is immediately and unconditionally loved, a woman completely unlike herself. The reader learns that Teodora has always been a willful individualist whose first words were neither "Mamma" nor "Papà" but "da sola". Peering through the framework text the reader is made to see the real Teodora Francia, a very different person from the one cooking dinner, the one waiting for the sound of her husband's car and tucking away the manuscripts so that he will not seem them.

Back into the embedded text the reader finds a young woman who, like Woody Allen's Zelig, takes on the identity of the people near her. The male narrator realizes her mimetic nature only toward the end of the story. He thinks he wants to marry her until he realizes that the person she recalls in her slightest gestures and even in her laugh is himself. She has molded her being on him, just as she had done previously on her husband and before that on her mother. Identity is only parasitically derived. He, the author, disappears, fleeing to a post in Africa. She, "la milanese," does not exist. She is a text without an essence, only an intertextuality with the person next to her. She is metaphoric representation for Teodora who in this part of the frame is trying to fool herself into acting the mimetic role of the dutiful and totally devoted wife who can only be fulfilled by her loving husband.

There are seven short stories (+one) in *Ultima stesura*. In virtually all of them the first-person (usually male) narrator/author describes and defines a person who is ultimately only an image, a type, or a form. He or she exists in

the frame/gaze of the observer, but the observer does not launch him/her into cathartic verification of self and emotions, nor does the observer destroy him/her. The observer recedes into nothingness, disappears. The doctor in "La Milanese" goes to Africa, Buti in "La porta di mezzo" becomes a shell of a person, the Genoese businessman in "Campane nuziali" becomes a nostalgic old man, the husband in "Carezze di Dio" is not himself but a third person in the story, the author in "L'episodio del Berretto Sportivo" is crushed under a Swedish bookcase, and the waiter/author in "Rosso e bianco" is only half there because he denies the carnal dimension of his existence. Teodora Francia herself disappears in the metonymic story line at the end.

The authors of the texts disappear and, in a way, so do the characters they describe. They have meaning only as types and take on existence only through the embedded author's frame, which can readily be moved. Eleuteria, the Greek actress in "Campane nuziali," leaves her fiery acting career and becomes a stout bourgeois Genoese wife; Nina, in "Carezze di Dio," commits suicide in order to end what a trusted witness has described as a symbiotic relationship (i.e. intertextuality) with her husband. Maria Besana, in "La Milanese," only reflects the text around her. She is the quintessential reification of intertextuality, but so is Buti. Both of them exist only as intertextuality.

As previously mentioned, the seventh story in *Ultima stesura* marks a turning point in the narrative structure of the novel. It fits into the text's metafictional pattern in a way that recalls Filippo Balducci's tale in the *Decameron*.³ Written to sound as if it has been added *a posteriori*, it is the additional story that breaks the progression. Authorial voice intervenes explicitly in the metaphoric dimension in a declaration to the readers of intentionality and definition of purpose. Teodora Francia states in italics: *Il settimo racconto é autobiografico. Potrebbe essere scritto in corsivo* (133). But it is not, and the metonymic and metaphoric become one in the dimension of consciousness. In this story the author goes through a process of soul searching about her relationships with men and finally decides to share her living space with a female friend, not as an erotic partner, but as a "wife". Mina, a friend from university and law school days, has been evicted from her apartment. She was essential to Teodora's sanity when the latter's marriage dissolved (due to her choice to write), and she subsequently chose to move to Milan. Teodora camped out on Mina's sofa for months and came to reconfirm her admiration for this slightly older woman's ability to organize daily existence and create a reassuring atmosphere around food and home. When Mina is evicted from her apartment, Teodora takes the opportunity to invite her to share her own living space. But she has no illusions concerning the selfish purpose of the invitation. She realizes that indeed it will be a help to Mina at such a critical time; yet she really sees this move as relocating the nurturing caretaker into a familiar territory. Mina could help organize Teodora's daily existence: she could do the curtains, cooking, cleaning, and reinforce her ego and sense of insecurity about her work with an

adequate dose of "bravas." Mina, of course, as soon as she moves in, loses that earlier maternal-wifely identity and becomes useless, dependent, and passive-aggressive. She must be nurtured by Teodora. The object framed by the author's earlier text dissolves as the frame is moved, this time directly into the author's life. The intertextuality of Mina is further complicated by her own text. She is the vehicle that further conflates the story lines (now both metonymic and metaphoric) into the reader's immediate temporality. Mina criticizes what we are reading and challenges Teodora's ability to write. According to her this latest metafictional form of short stories embedded in a diaristic story line is a feeble follow-up to the real creative vein confirmed by prizes and critical acclaim in the earlier successful novel (understood by the reader as *Lago della luna*). She tells Teodora that people will say she has run out of gas. Teodora is thus sent into an existential tale-spin of self-doubt: *Ci ho pensato tutta la notte. Io lo so, di non aver finito la benzina. Lo so? Mah, sì. Ho sempre meno tempo per scrivere ma idee me ne vengono a decine* (144). Duranti has inserted the modernist consciousness dimension into the text as she conflates the two metafictional levels. It is Teodora's voice which underscores this textual moment by emphasizing it as a turning point in her life and activity. It will enable her to compose the rest of the novel. Addressing herself, but also the reader, she describes the psychological need to add the eighth story. She will demonstrate that she can still write.

The night watchman in "Tantalus" is by the author's admission really Attilio Rade, a successful writer of sentimental tomes and for a short time Teodora's sexual partner. This final story the older male writer's inability to recognize his diseased psyche. He acts out but has no rational-logical consciousness of a fairly straightforward sexual attraction for his sister, who lives with him. Her husband died perhaps with the help, however unwittingly, of Rade himself, and Rade has adopted her son. In the text the nightwatchman, also a writer of sentimental stories, similarly has no clue of a need to retrace in his psyche the disturbing behaviour he enacts. The authors in this final story, Rade and the nightwatchman, do not disappear. The frame moves to the author of the metafiction. Teodora, who has now become a part of the text, disappears and the intertextuality between her story and the text's story remain. In the italics part of this last story she continues her stream of consciousness search and ultimately disappears in a cartwheel off of the balcony.

The structure of *Progetto Burlamacchi* (1994) is very different from that of *Ultima stesura*. At first glance it appears to be a derivative of the adventurous chivalric romance with Ser Ciappellettoesque false miracles and lengthy titles. For example, the introductory chapter heading is: "Dove si legge come ebbe origine tutta la vicende, una sera di settecentoventi anni fa nella torre di Sella (Lucca)." If we had thought to look at the table of contents, we would have noticed that the first chapter must be a flashback which presumably will be reintegrated into the thread of the story later on. The second chapter is clearly

ultra-contemporary and high-tech: "Dove si racconta come il professor Antonio Micheli, insegnante di informatica all'Isituto Tecnico Commerciale di Lucca, concepì il Progetto Burlamacchi." The reader is flashed up to the 20th century to find the real beginning of the discourse which will weave its threads back and forth to form the story. The chapters, entitled in proto-romance style, are interspersed with first-person reports ("Relazione di...") written by Alvise Furlanetto, the contemporary anti-hero or Don Quixote of the tale. In the second half of the novel, he will declare war on impurity, paradoxically using false miracles as weapons, but will be consumed by a temporal reality (setting: Italy, 1994), which knows not the meaning of this claim (unacceptable both in 17th-century Spain and in late 20th-century Italy).

How does the metafiction of this text evolve? Duranti uses the roving frame to move the reader/viewer's eye from one setting to another and from one perspective to another. Employing the technique of cinematic (or television) sequence, she darts around from one narrator to another creating a series of metaphoric contemporary human tales on the story line of Italian history. Her angling and framing of contemporary character types (frames) inevitably foreground their predictability. They are only cogs in the metafictional discourse of history (itself an orchestrated text). Duranti then subdivides her metaphoric discourse into two initially morally and ethically conflicting lines. The first is the temporal/historic dimension defined by the Progetto Burlamacchi. Micheli, the computer technology teacher, is concerned with the decline of human standards and morals in general. In daily life he is faced with a computer lab full of passive, indifferent teenagers. He thinks the answer to this 1990s dilemma can be found at an earlier time in history. His "Progetto" purports returning to the 16th-century to the precise moment of an attempted rebellion by proto-reformist Burlamacchi in order to posit, with the help of his powerful computer, Bonzo, and the assistance of his students (who incidentally find new meaning and a sense of commitment in this research), what would have been different had Burlamacchi been successful. Was Burlamacchi the "branch in the stream" which allowed the course of events to continue down the murky waters of political and moral corruption? How would Burlamacchi, a sort of lay Savonarola, and the events surrounding his political heresy, have changed history had he not been burned at the stake?

Micheli's teleologically structured quest is a deconstruction of the narrative of the past performed with the help of his students and the mega-binomial cybernaut, Bonzo (readers may add Buddhist priestly aura around his circuits). The Tuscan high school teacher presumes the veracity of historical accounts and their accuracy in relation to events recounted. Curiously, however, he is not driven by a neo-Platonic faith in the absolute centrality and influence of humankind and the cosmos. They are going to find and remove the branch from the stream of history and empirically demonstrate an alternative interpretation to the events. Duranti calculates and at length works this paradox into the

moveable and moving frames of the text. The less than substantial characters she describes are not freely choosing their destiny, but ectoplasmatically incorporating and shedding one intertextual frame for another, like the authors and characters in *Ultima stesura*. The empirical reconstruction of history can be compared to the empirical interpretation of language seen in the "Bedini, Righetta, Buti" episode discussed above. It falsely attributes a fixed meaning to the signs. We, the readers, understand that the participants in the Project, who rediscover their youthful idealism and are driven by the mystery and sense of purpose surrounding the collective event, will be disillusioned. As "pure" knights they are the carriers of the new frame which will reinterpret and disembroil the muddle of history and humankind. But the reader, bearer of tangentopolian and Berlusconian wisdom, is led by Duranti through the didactic, exemplary purpose of the task toward its inevitable failure.⁴ The participants will be enveloped by intertextuality.

Duranti's first metaphoric story line strung in the metonymic frame of "Italian History" is Micheli's Project. Her second is the domain of virtual reality presented by the electronic miracle of television. First Micheli, the user of a high tech mode of image production, puts his students into a time machine on the back of Bonzo. Their virtual domain in cyberspace is the context of chivalric romance populated by youthful 1990's Italians. Like an American football team that returns to the time of King Arthur on a Saturday morning cartoon, the young people begin their framing quest. Alvis Furlanetto is the second user of a virtual domain. While Micheli's students are joyously floating around in cyberspace with only their ideas for cloaks, Professor Furlanetto, the jaded intellectual who has found success in the manipulative amoral electronically modulated space of television, appears in a corner of our textual screen. He is the caricature of the intellectual, similar to the narrator/"falsario" in *Lieto fine* (1987). His fame and fortune are derived from corroboration of journalistic nonsense that the viewing public craves on prime time television. His frame is the television screen, although Duranti allows us – through Furlanetto's own reports – to witness his behind-the-scenes calculations.

The two metaphoric spaces (television and cyberspace), of the same kind but inhabited by different morals, conflate halfway through the novel at the cathartic moment of sexual fulfillment. At the crucial moment, precluding consumption of his libidinous drive, Furlanetto swoons and is reborn. His epiphany is dripping with purity. In the luxuriously frescoed conical tower bedroom of Giulia Seberg,⁵ his aristocratic but monogamous and morally pure conquest, Furlanetto, the amoral aesthete, sees a ghost. At first he seems to have slipped into intertextuality with Van Der Lippe, the eighteenth-century *bon viveur* and earlier inhabitant of this tower room. However, another possibility on the other side of the moral highway pops into mind. He thinks it is Jacopo Neri, the man who in the twelfth century had tried to maneuver a mira-

cle by stealing the Christ statue from the cathedral and hiding it in this same tower. The image seen by Furlanetto appears in the frescoed scenes on the walls of the tower room. It seems to run into the forest and hide with Psyche the mythical figure of the soul or spirit separated from the body and Eros.

After this scene fraught with psychoanalytic material, the ghost is subsequently more adeptly interpreted by the post-Freudian quixotic hero, as well as by his friends, as his own image reflected on the wall. (The reader/critic sees the character slipping, first from intertextuality with Van Der Lippe – debauchee left-over from the French revolution –, and then back in time to Jacopo Neri). It is the Lacanian mirroring and recognition which moves Furlanetto out of the pre-Oedipal stage (amoral profiteering of images) and into language. He now possesses the *verbum* and becomes driven to bring humanity back onto the straight and narrow. He will not be dissuaded even by cruel Providence, which, he has determined, really does not want humankind to succeed in being too happy on earth and often steps in, *deus ex macchina*, to thwart kindly attempts at progress.

Furlanetto, with the help of his friends, now all on the same moral side of the high-tech metaphor, constructs a false miracle (like the original Jacopo) and attempts to propagate it through television. The framing does not have the desired effect. From the moral point of view, Duranti shows us that manipulation is useless and that humankind is and always has been feckless. From the linguistic point of view she shows that meaning and the *histoire* are going to change according to the frame. Furlanetto is not struck down by lightening. He is simply relegated to late night television on obscure networks. Micheli dissolves into the oblivion of daily existence with his new partner, Adriana Patanè. Both authors (Furlanetto and Micheli in this story) fade away and only the moveable frame exists in the metafictional intertextual world of slippery images.

Textuality is shown to have an existence which the authors do not. The essence of the text, however, is not as solid as the word “frame” would suggest. It has a woven quality about it, like Maria Besana’s sonorous silks and nylons. The essence of the text is its existence. The author leaves signs and the signs take on a life of their own. In *Ultima stesura* Teodora, the author, but ultimately the protagonist of the conflated text, sums up the issue. She repeatedly underscores the necessity to remove her living self from her writing self so that she can live.

Io, signori, continuo a portarmi a sperdere, altro che andare in cerca di me. [...] Quando ho scritto il mio primo racconto, quello dell’avvocato Righetta, rimasto inedito per quasi trent’anni, ho compiuto...la prima dolorosa e indispensabile operazione. Sono andata in cerca del poeta che era dentro di me, l’ho indotto a mostrarsi e zac! L’ho steso secco. (123-24)

Life is removed from the author and only the moveable frame remains. She cannot live without writing nor can she write without living; nor can she write and live at the same time. The text is intertextual with her living, but the text remains as an existential intertextuality and the author does not.

Like earlier modernist writers of consciousness metafiction, she must kill the author in order to live. What is left is not the "real" existence of the person who writes. Duranti's postmodern position posits the text, but more precisely, intertextuality, as a web-like substance. The essence of that text is its existence. Its essence is determined by a mixture of frames and gazes that reveal, not a chunk of reality from the point of view of an omniscient author, but an intertextuality of signs interpreted by a chorus of observers.

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NOTES

- 1 Texts explicitly dealing with metafiction are by: Gass; Alter; Scholes; Christensen; Federman; and Waugh. More recent critical texts reelaborate in similar vein the same earlier works, such as Borges and Barthes. See, for example, McHale; and Lodge, *After Bakhtin*.
- 2 "Author" refers to the author/narrator 'in' the metonymic frame, i.e., Teodora Francia. Although Duranti in this novel makes repeated reference to the issue of autobiographic overlapping, in this discussion I have chosen to work with the text as artifact and artifice.
- 3 Introduction to the Fourth Day of the Decameron considered by some Tale number 101.
- 4 Duranti, a self-declared non-Catholic, uses spirits and spirituality like Fellini. In *Effetti personali* Valentina and her ex-husband are authors of hagiographic texts. Each chapter of Valentina's story begins with a quote from one of the Fathers of the Church, setting the tone for an exemplum to follow.
- 5 Duranti plays on intertextuality among her own novels. The tower and a similar bedroom are found in *Lieto fine* and Burlamacchi is one of the houses in the park surrounding the villa in *La bambina* (1976). In *Ultima stesura* the narrator-author Teodora Francia was born Teodora Garrone, who recalls going to the beach with her brother. Fabrizio, the author in *La casa sul lago della luna*, is also Garrone. Teodora is the well-known author of a novel thinly disguised as *The Germanist*. Attilio Rade (*Ultima stesura*), if only in name, recalls Ante Radek in *Effetti personali*. The mirroring and moving of frames and images is more than a series of autobiographical topoi woven into every text. Each time the function and meaning changes radically. Only the casing remains the same.

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