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Historiographic Metafiction: P.M. Pasinetti’s *Melodramma*

In “Postille a *Il nome della rosa,*” Umberto Eco argues that postmodern authors, unlike their modernist predecessors, cannot entirely escape the past. “Il passato ci condiziona, ci sta addosso, ci ricatta” (528). Since the past cannot be destroyed, it must be revisited in an ironic, non-innocent manner (Cf. Eco, 528). The postmodern novel challenges the formalist closure of the modernist text by explicitly addressing the problems of reference and representation. Postmodern historical fiction, in particular, overtly meditates upon the ways in which the historical past is emplotted, experiments with narrative forms textualizing the world, and highlights the ideological as well as formal significance of such textualizations. Therefore, it self-consciously addresses the implications of present ideologies in the shaping of past realities, the epistemological values of both fictional and factual “truths,” and the role of subjectivity and identity in the reconstruction of the past. As Linda Hutcheon observes, “What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past” (89). By stressing their shaping, organizing and selecting processes and by blurring the edges between fiction and history, postmodern historical novels raise questions about the cognitive status of both fictional and historical knowledge. These novels are, in Hutcheon’s definition, examples of “historiographic metafictions”:

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical facts and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. (93)

At the same time, historiographic metafiction challenges the humanist notion of art’s autonomy by referring to recognizable historical contexts that existed prior to their fictional and historical encodation. The extratextual past inhabits the historical novel in a paradoxical way: while firmly grounded in a historical reality, this fiction also emphasizes the discursive derivation of all historical knowledge. What we ‘have’ are not the raw facts, but their documentary traces. The postmodern historical novel does not question the ontology of the historical referent but
confronts the narrative strategies, the linguistic structures and ideological filters that preside over its textualization. The process through which the past, accessible to us by means of documents, eye-witness reports, fictional and historical works and other artistic representations, is retextualized is the object of historiographic metafiction.

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P.M. Pasinetti’s 1993 historical novel *Melodramma* combines fictional inventions with historical occurrences, literary borrowings with archival documents, and metanarrative allusions to the act of historical reconfiguration with references to other artistic expressions such as theatre, music, photography, cinematography and painting. A complex illustration of private and public events occurring after the fall of Manin’s Republic in Venice, *Melodramma* challenges the totalizing and monological orders of traditional historical representations. A fluctuating and multivocal orality problematizes the single authoritative voice of the centered omniscient narrator and the third person ‘voice of objectivity’ of historical writing. A polyphonic *mise-en-scène* of the past in the provisionality and presentness of its being textualized from multiple chronological angles and shifting points of view also replaces the teleological historical discourse. The historian’s infatuation with the authority of ‘real’ events and their documentary evidence is implicitly complicated by the ironic juxtaposition of multiple texts, each of them capturing and translating reality and fiction in different styles and varying perspectives. The various narrative voices participating in the textual production emphasize their enunciative circumstances, thus revealing the ideological foundations of their historical reconfiguration.

*Melodramma* also tests the ability of narrative to convincingly emplot the historical world. By using the structure of a three-act drama, Pasinetti illustrates both the resilience and the limits of this specifically ‘closed’ narrative form as a way to cognitively and imaginatively order the world. In Pasinetti’s ironic meta-discourse, both fictional and historical figures become characters in search of a stage, ready to perform and also discuss the play of their truthfully invented relationships: “Le parentele vere sono le parentele inventate” (Pasinetti 251).

I. The Past Recaptured: The Dialogue of Proximity and Distance

Throughout its narrative space *Melodramma* stages an ironic, self-conscious and playful exchange between the binary opposite dimensions of past and present in a narrative strategy that Lucia Re, in another context, identifies with the Bakhtinian model of the dialogic (cf. 47). This constant exchange permeates the novel and revises any stable, definitive and unidirectional confrontation between opposite fronts and unreconcilable polarities. According to Michel de Certeau, the begin-
ning of modern Western historiography is based on the establishment of two antithetical spaces, separated by an unsurmountable gap:

[Western historiography] assumes a gap to exist between the silent opacity of the "reality" that it seeks to express and the place where it produces its own speech, protected by the distance established between itself and its object. The violence of the body reaches the written page only through absence, through the intermediary of documents that the historian has been able to see on the sands from which a presence has since been washed away. (5)

Historical characters, de Certeau continues, "find a haven in the text [. . . ] find access through writing on the condition that they remain forever silent" (2). It is exactly this silence, or this absence, that Pasinetti both affirms and questions. The "past real" is absent from historical discourse, and the figures of the past are not evoked through the authoritative voice of a single controlling narrator, but rather through the relativizing kaleidoscope of multiple discourses. Melodramma exploits two temporal dimensions: that of the twentieth-century characters, Giorgio Partibon, Bianca Angelone and Gregorio Passina, and that of their nineteenth-century ancestors. In both cases, however, direct speech is the prevailing discursive form. In the fictional framework of the novel, then, the language of the past is no longer inaccessible nor are its voices historiography's absent figures. The combination of history and fiction in Melodramma achieves an act of resuscitation.

To resuscitate does not mean to assimilate. Melodramma establishes a constant dialogue between separate and yet combined temporal frames by constantly shifting roles and narrative positions. The past remains other, different and separated from us, yet the novel discloses the strategies through which a silent past can be given a voice, and the ways in which present readers may come to terms with the historical world. It is paradoxically the past's uncanny proximity and its fascinating distance that intrigue us in the present. Melodramma neither utterly exorcises the past's otherness, nor only evokes antiquarian distance. If intelligibility is established through a relationship with the other, it is the nature of this relation that Melodramma sets out to examine. The novel emphasizes the ideal bond that is established between the tellers and their subject, a bond that avoids falling prey to either the present violence of representation or the discourses in bad faith of past objectivity.¹ In Dominick La-Capra's interpretation

the past is not an 'it' in the sense of an objectified entity that may either be neutrally represented in and for itself or projectively reprocessed in terms of our narrowly 'presentist' interests. (10)

In Melodramma, the present discursive time of Bianca, Giorgio and Amedeo is, at times, paradoxically combined with the past discursive dimension of nineteenth-century figures like Maffeo Partibon and Gregorio Passina. The level of
the present discourse that occurs three generations after that of the narrated story spans the temporal barrier so that both the "historians" and their characters inhabit the same chronological space. This fleeting erasure of all distance between past and present conjures up an ontological space where past and present are allowed to exist together and at once: "e perché allora . . . ci domandiamo, all’unisono per così dire, il mio bisavolo e io" (49), intervenes Giorgio in a crucial moment of the story, and elsewhere he asserts the necessity of verisimilitude against Bajamonte’s unrealistic statement that the nineteen-year-old Maffeo had spent some time in Paris:

Qui il mio futuro bisavolo tende l’orecchio e io con lui. E Bianca, e Amedeo. In coro escludiamo signor Bajamonte, che Maffeo diciannovenne si trovasse a Parigi. (147)

By overcoming the gap that de Certeau sees at the roots of Western historiography, Pasinetti demonstrates that to rewrite the past in fiction and in history "is [...] to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon 110) — to start a dialogue, so to speak, that involves both temporal parties equally. This relationship stresses the mutual interdependence between past and present, and challenges one of the most resilient conceptual presuppositions of Western historiography, namely that otherness in time should be understood and exorcised by establishing a progressive and causal pattern that unites in a linear manner the extreme points of the past and the present. Pasinetti’s multivocal historical reconfiguration shatters the exclusively linear conceptualization of time, and reveals that both past and present are multiple, interrelated dimensions coexisting at once in the characters’ consciousness. Gilberto Rossi, the protagonist of Pasinetti’s Il Ponte dell’Accademia best exemplifies this concept, as he tries to fix in the linear dimension of syntax the memory of an encounter during a train trip:

Sto cercando di dire che un fatto, un avvenimento umano non è mai afferrato inte-
ro, mai del tutto capito, e ciò semplicemente perché continua ad accadere. Anche quella notte in treno mi diventa significativa, la memoria di quelle ore mi si slarga
da tutte le parti. Nella memoria i fatti continuano sempre a svilupparsi. (114)

The self is constantly changing; the past exists in the present, which, in turn, includes in its space all that happened before. Yet, if present and past coexist in memory as fluid entities involved in a dynamic process of constant change and perennial becoming, their rationalization involves the establishment of a vantage point in the present from which to organize and make sense of the past. In other words, a gap must be set in the chronological continuum in order to separate two abstractions: the fixed points of ‘then’ and ‘now.’ Melodramma both exploits and demystifies this conceptualization of time. The novel establishes its chronological framework around two temporal extremes: the narrated past of Manin’s Republic — the level corresponding to Emile Benveniste’s definition of histoire — and the narrative present of Giorgio, Bianca and Amedeo — the level
of 

of *discours*. The novel sets the two extremes in motion, and involves them in a dialogical confrontation by combining, separating and exchanging their positions. The two narrative levels, past *histoire* and present *discours* are not two opposite entities separated by a chronological line. Rather, they are conceptual principles involved in a dynamic process of both sympathetic appropriation and critical distancing. In this way, *Melodramma* captures the mechanism of historical becoming together with the hermeneutical tools that make historical understanding possible. Significantly, it was a younger Giorgio Partibon who declared, in *Rosso veneziano*:

non è che ci sia il passato o il presente, non è che il tempo vada avanti o indietro, è che il tempo ci circonda da tutte le parti, ogni persona che osservi è come sempre pronta a sprofondarsi in tutte le direzioni in questa cosa che porta con sé, il tempo, che te la allarga, te la complica. (212)

*Melodramma* does not acquiesce to existential chaos; nor does it translate time and history as all inclusive and unformed entities defeating all attempts at rational reappropriation. The novel testifies to Paul Ricoeur’s humanistic belief that “order is our homeland despite everything” (72) and at the same time it relativizes this concept by refusing to “naturalize” or universalize the epistemological processes that allow for historical representation. *Melodramma* demonstrates that these processes are by no means neutral and absolute, but rather originate in subjective interpretative codes, echo ideologically-framed narrative voices, and raise provisionary formal constructs always liable to be revised, reassessed and eventually discarded.

II. Dialogizing Ideology: *Melodramma* and the Play of Its Narrative Voices.

The epiphanic moments of oneness between different time frames and the novel’s multiple dialogical exchanges do not erase the voices of the present producers of the text: Bianca, Amedeo and Giorgio. The present discursive dimension, therefore, is not erased as in traditional historical narration or realist fiction. Pasinetti systematically emphasizes what Kaja Silverman defines “the apparatuses of enunciation” (215). The text’s “cultural inscriptions” (Silverman 246) testify to the fact that we cannot ignore the cultural and historical circumstances of their own utterance. In other words, *Melodramma* restores “to discourse its character as an event” (Foucault 229). Present discourse marks the dimension that cognitively and ideologically presides over the reconstruction of the past. While traditional historical fiction presents its order as “given,” the narrators of *Melodramma* grapple with their subject, trying to make sense of the historical facts they have collected, so that “as readers we see both the collecting and the attempts to make narrative order” (Hutcheon 114). As Giorgio says of Maffeo:
il mio bisavolo si illudeva di poter sistemare, a modo suo, eventi e azioni umane come pezzi di un pittorico gioco d’inastro. (76)

Giorgio, Bianca and Amedeo are not impersonal objective voices nor transparent reporters. Giorgio and Bianca are historians by training if not by profession, and are personally and emotionally involved in the resuscitation of both the historical and familial past, often from openly partisan perspectives. By exploiting the discursive frame, Pasinetti consciously highlights the level of the producer’s intents and context. Giorgio is nothing like Arthur Danto’s “Ideal Chronicler” or Barthes’ “personne objective” (69). Unlike an impersonal historical narrator, Giorgio immediately reports his and his ancestors’ ideological stance: “Noi siamo sempre stati dalla parte della rivoluzione e della repubblica” (9). Amedeo in turn “da quarant’anni si considerava comunista militante ma oggi è pieno di dubbi e frustrazioni” (29). The stress on the locus of the historical reconfiguration is functional to the present relevance of the past. It stages the strategies that present historians adopt, and the difficulties they encounter, in their effort to narratively cope with the past. Everywhere, Melodramma points out that the representation of the past is a process involving mnemonic and imaginative recreation and intellectual systematizing. Even omissions and silences reveal their foundation in the characters’ ideological choices. When Giorgio and Bianca appeal to the law of factual truth to avoid fantasizing over a hypothetical undocumented sex scene between Ifigenia and Maffeo, they reveal that their omission is based on ideological motivations as well. Their narrative choice does not depend on the documentary as much as on the aesthetic and the political:

Sarebbe facile immaginare che Maffeo l’abbia non soltanto contemplata ma stretta a sé, e forse sarebbe ancor più facile raffigurargli elaboratamente in estatiche congiunzioni, ma non lo si aspetti da noi; ancora una volta, non sappiamo; e poi — di quelle scene là —, osserva Bianca, — ce n’è anche troppo fra i libri e il cine e la tivù anche, per non parlare dei tronfi racconti che usano — o usavano — fare i supercampioni dell’amplesso, gli autodecorati al valore amatorio; scene e racconti che sempre rischiano di implicare l’estibizionismo da una parte e il voyeurismo dall’altra: i due cardini dell’erotismo fascista. (286-87, emphasis added)

Although Giorgio does not disappear as the first person narrative voice, he ‘situates’ himself in a multiple, dialogical and creative historical landscape paradoxically affirming and at the same time subverting the transcendent subject “addressed by an autonomous and authoritative author” (Belsey 55). He periodically obliterates himself by allowing other characters to narrate their stories. They become, like him, provisional reporters sharing in the multiple discursive reconfiguration of the past. Interestingly, Maffeo reconstructs a Daniele Manin caught half way between Goldoni’s Sor Lunardo and Manzoni’s Don Abbondio in his walking “bel bello,” a kind of Pied Piper of Hamlin gathering up the Civil Guard as he proceeds towards the Arsenale. Bianca, less matter-of-fact than usual, sees Manin as a combination of Cavour and Goldoni. Giorgio’s portrait of Radetzky’s
landing in Piazzetta San Marco is juxtaposed to Bianca’s didactic report of Venice’s surrender to the Austrian empire. Marinovich’s assassination is staged in different ways as PASINETTI contrasts the “chroniclers’ reports” to Orseolo’s letter that provides an operatic rendition of the whole episode. If to many people the significant dates of the story of the Venetian Republic are just names of streets and calli, to the three friends Bianca, Giorgio and Amedeo the facts of the Republic are stored away in public and private archives, literary texts and historical documents, conscious and unconscious memories and imaginations as:

parole, pezzi di frasi, schegge di immagini, come frammenti di storie a fumetti, o come appunti presi in qualche lontana aula scolastica fra distrazioni e ironie, ma anche come cenni di melodie, di arie d’opera. (10)

In this way PASINETTI problematizes what Foucault calls the “synthetic activity of the subject” (14) and the novel is no longer the coherent inscription of a single unified subjectivity. The interplay of voices and the pluralizing multivalence of points of view, the shift of focalizers in the Jamesian sense, make of each character a partial and provisionalary participant in the construction of meaning.

Melodramma therefore reveals, and at the same time relativizes, the ideological frames presiding over its narrative construction, because this construction is a communal project in which the narrative voices responsible for the textual reconstruction equally belong to both present and past dimensions. The vast interdialogism of the novel radically decenters the notion of the humanist subject as well as the belief in historiography as the verbal translation of history’s non-contradictory continuity. Giorgio’s historical method, the ways in which he selects, examines and reports the records of the past, is made explicit in its multi-faceted and often tentative ways. It involves parentheses and pauses — it is a work in progress the provisionalary nature of which is emphasized rather than obliterated: “Interrompo la citazione,” Giorgio affirms, “forse la continuero un’altra volta” (180).

The multitvocal, contradictory and often partial accounts of public history and private stories offer a rendition of what Foucault calls the “true historical sense,” the sense that resists the establishment of a fixed point of reference and affirms instead both personal and historical knowledge as “perspective.” The value of perspective, the ability to be at once an outsider and an insider to the historical scene and entertain both critical distance and sympathetic participation are all evident not only in the dialogue of proximity and distance between past and present, but in a spatial framework as well. The juxtaposition of the Venetian events of 1849 to the American gold miners that in the same year died in Death Valley seeking a shortcut to the Pacific puts both occurrences in perspective, estranges them from usual cognitive codes and offers “colori e sensi del tutto diversi alla comune cifra che li data” (13). By juxtaposing the Venetian siege to the report of the acts of the U.S. Congress, two absolutely different realities united by the same dates, Maffeo is exhilarated to find out that “il mondo torna a offrire possibilità e sorprese, smisuratamente” (62). Like Giorgio, Maffeo takes a non-op-
positional stance of proximity and also of distance, an intellectual perspective based on “a logic of analogy and non-exclusive opposition opposed to monological levels of causality and identifying determination” (Kristeva 42). The cognitive value of this analogical perspective resides in the imaginative ability to “trace likes in unlikes” (Miller 13) and to creatively infer meaning “generated by the echoing of two dissimilar things” (Miller 9). Perspective is, then, an ability to decenter oneself, to speak different voices and inhabit different spaces in a non-definitive, non-conclusory manner. As Giorgio points out:

Noi non siamo Dio, che ha saputo e visto tutto e, altrettanto certamente, quella mattina del 22 marzo 1848, non eravamo in alcun modo ‘là’. Ma appunto per questo ci par di sapere e vedere le cose, come si dice, in prospettiva. Questa però è tutt’altro dalla prospettiva che poteva avere il mio bisnonno Maffeo, per non parla-re della sconfinata divina prospettiva. (30)

In a different context, though, Bianca replies to this statement: “Non si può essere sempre dappertutto ma si può lavorare d’immaginazione” (62).

III. The Historical Imagination and the Definition of Truth.

Once he has established the story’s time frame and its scenario, Giorgio partially and temporarily obliterates himself, letting the story’s characters, particularly Maffeo and Gregorio, directly present their attempts at historical reconstruction. The dialogic exchanges between these characters accentuate their enunciative strategies — the ways in which they come to terms with public and private events. Maffeo is an outsider to the historical facts of the Venetian Republic, whereas Gregorio is a potential eye-witness, a “Capitano della Guardia Civica.” While Maffeo requires an insider’s report, “Sai tutto, sono sicuro hai visto tutto,” (22) Gregorio casts doubt on the possibility of ever reaching satisfying conclusions: “Cosa si potrà mai riuscire a dire, a spiegare? Anche di quelle cose che uno ha fatto, ha veduto” (20). Maffeo demands an ordered and structured report of facts starting from the beginning. March 22, 1848: “Cosa facevi? Che aria c’era? Cosa c’è stato che tu devi aver visto?” Gregorio questions the value of both origins and experiential participation as acceptable ways to shape the historical past, as he does not realize that for Maffeo the documentary traces and the eye-witness reports are starting points, anchors against which to ground his own creative re-shaping of the events: “Maffeo vede in Venezia rivoluzionaria, non vasti moti macabri di masse in rivolta . . . c’era stato l’assassinio singolo, isolabile, sceneg-giabile” (30). History is depicted, then, as a mise en scène, a theatrical representation, a drama. Maffeo himself is presented in various parts of the text as a “uomo teatrale” naturally prone to lying, “congenitamente portato alla falsificazione” (127) “con il suo amore per la parola recitata o cantata sulle tavole del palcoscenico” (23). He is the quintessential actor, creating multiple images of himself, especially “quella del mimo, del commediante, del suonatore di chitarra,
prestigiatore, saltimbanco" (160) but, most of all, of the creator "della grand'opera lirica" (160). Maffeo "sees" the past as a theatrical piece, a representation that questions the notion of factual, documentable truth, but defends the creative, shaping force of memory and the constructive truth of the imagination. As Giorgio, the unorthodox historian, points out:

Tutti gli eventi, pubblici e familiari, come al solito si presentano a Maffeo in disparate evocazioni, in pezzi slegati; non può, non possiamo, far altro che tentare di combinarli un po' con la forza dell'immaginazione più vera del vero. (120)

As he asserts the value of creative imagination in the shaping of the past, Giorgio also establishes a dialogue with the rights of history and defends referential accuracy against exclusively aesthetic demands. Describing the return of Gregorio and Maffeo to Venice from Milan, Giorgio comments "Bello sarebbe poter immaginare che vi entrassero . . . per il ponte ferroviario ma riteniamo non fossero ancora riparati gli archi distrutto dagli assediati" (123). And reconstructing the scene of Clorinda and Maffeo 'kidnapping' Gioachino from the Merozzi, Giorgio states, "Bello sarebbe vedere tutti e tre in qualche modo stretti sul cavallo di Maffeo ma è più probabile che lui si fosse provveduto d'un bioroccino" (257). Other times, Giorgio seems to opt for a kind of creative verisimilitude that respects both the rights of factual and imaginative truths. In this vein he recreates the hypothetical meeting between Maffeo Partibon and Gregorio Passina in a café in Milan: "L'ora? Direi sulle cinque del pomeriggio" and:

Questo caffè io lo vedo situato al pianterreno del Grand Hôtel de Milan o poco lontano da quel celebre edificio in una stanza del quale un coetaneo di Maffeo, e da lui probabilmente considerato l'uomo più importante dell'epoca, Giuseppe Verdi, mezzo secolo dopo sarebbe morto. (19)

Although Melodramma is built around a theatrical metaphor and life is conjugated in terms of a play8 the fact that it is also a historical novel problematizes the question of referentiality and representation:

historiographic metafiction both underlines its existence as discourse and yet still posits a relation of reference (however problematic) to the historical world, both through its assertion of the social and institutional nature of all enunciative positions and through its grounding in the representational. (Hutcheon 141)

Clearly, the question Melodramma asks is not "Did the past exist? Did Manin, and Verdi, and Tommaseo and Radetzky exist?" but rather what do we know of them and how? By blurring the edges between what we commonly perceive as a historical account and a fictional one, Melodramma emphasizes the "problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge for us in the present" (Hutcheon 92).

Nowhere is the constructive and creative side of the text more self-consciously staged than in the character of Ifigenia. Like Marco Partibon in Rosso veneziano, Ifigenia is a presence constructed upon an ontological absence: "Chi non ama Ifi-
genia?” Maffeo rhetorically inquires. Ifigenia is, this time in Amedeo’s blurred speech, a dream and a desire, “la perfezione irragiungibile, l’assoluto sfuggente, la suprema rivelazione che non viene mai. Come a teatro” (161). Ifigenia’s Greekness provokes associations with Pallade, Venere and all of the Muses (cf. 83). For Gregorio, Ifigenia is “quella raffigurazione, come dire, celestiale ultraterrena” (181), heaven on Earth (202); she is Orazio’s star, his compass, the idealized object around which he revolves (224). In one of the extraordinary compressions of time in the novel, Ifigenia is presented as the potential ideal object of today’s “sponsori zatori della culturindustria” (225), a fantastic combination of a “donna angelicata” and a modern commercial star,9 a dweller of the collective unconscious of the characters that have created her. Ifigenia is, also, an “être de papier” a literary construction based on texts: Euripides’ dramas and the operas by Gluck and Monteverdi (91). Thus idealized, she inhabits the space common to present and past generations:

Improvvisa e già subito in primo piano, Ifigenia Spatis, sul proscenio della memoria e dell’immaginazione, loro e nostra, di Gregorio e di Maffeo, e di Bianca e mia. (81)

Ifigenia exists as the object of other peoples’ representations of her. Physically absent for most of the novel, she is literally produced through other characters’ discourses, filtered through their memories and desires. As Bianca puts it: “Che peccato non avere dei nastri, dei video” (91), as something that would, paradoxically, make her more real if not less framed by other peoples’ interpretations. Ifigenia appears ‘in person’ for the first time in the novel at La Fenice in Venice during the opening night of Rigoletto. The recognition scene between Ifigenia and Maffeo ironically blurs the distinction between art and life. “Forse questo sarà il melodramma che alla fine non lascerà Maffeo con un senso di rivelazione mancata” argues the narrator (240). Like the allegorical Beatrice in Dante’s Vita nuova, Ifigenia appears to Maffeo clad in red, and her eyes “in uno stesso attimo lo folgorano e lo rassicurano” (240). This coup-de-théâtre is, at the same time, a triumph of intertextuality.

IV. Intertextuality as Dialogue between Closed and Open Forms.

Edward Said argues that in postmodern fiction “the image of writing has changed from one of unique inscribing to one of parallel script” (139). Discussing intertextuality, Gerard Genette defines “hypotext” an anterior work upon which a following text grounds itself (12). Homer’s Odyssey is, for example, the “hypotext” for Joyce’s Ulysses. Loosely borrowing Genette’s definition, drama may be considered then the “hypogenre” upon which Pasinetti’s historical novel is grounded. The exploitation of these two genres — drama and historical fiction — works on both formal and thematic levels, and their combination once again complicates the issue of representation and referentiality in the novel. Formally,
the use of the structure of a drama would establish the novel as a ‘closed’ text. Henry James saw in drama “a masterly structure”:

The fine thing in a real drama, generally speaking, is that, more than any other work of literary art, it needs a masterly structure. It needs to be shaped, and fashioned and laid together, and this process makes a demand upon the artist’s rarest gifts. He must combine and arrange, interpolate and eliminate, play the joiner with the most attentive skill . . . . The five-act drama . . . is like a box of fixed dimensions and inelastic material, into which a mass of precious things are to be packed away. It is a problem of ingenuity and a problem of the most interesting kind. (98)

Melodramma embraces the “masterly structure” of a three-act drama with an ironic twist. By stressing its discursive dimension, Melodramma undertakes a self-analysis, and addresses the provisionality and difficulties involved in the structuring act. By testing its epistemological value and revealing its ideologic foundations, the novel demonstrates that narrative cannot be presented as given, natural and unproblematic. Melodramma shows that language and the truth it conveys as well as the forms in which it is encased are always mediated, constructed from within the context of “specific politico-discursive conditions” (cf. Eagleton 168).

Melodramma also claims that the narrative framing the novel in all its constructive self-consciousness is still one of the most effective ways of making sense of reality and the past. Is this a way to universalize it? Roland Barthes argued that narrative “is simply there like life itself . . . international, transhistorical, transcultural” (79). Hayden White in turn writes that narratives are “panglobal facts of culture” (1), they are meta-codes, human universals “on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted” (1). It would be easy to read both Barthes’ and White’s statements as affirmation of the “liberal humanist suppression of the historical, political material and social in the definition of art’s formal unity as universal and eternal.” Melodramma defends the value of narrativity as a transtextual organizing strategy, while problematizing it by revealing its values and its limits, its provisional nature and utilitarian value. The implicit similarities between the ways in which present and past characters respectively refer to remote and near history emphasize the transtemporal methods of emplotting reality. Maffeo’s imaginative approach anticipates Giorgio’s and repeats Orseolo’s. The ‘dramatic’ metaphor that defines the novel reveals this resilience. Yet, the closed dramatic structure also implodes from within, as the novel often questions the possibility of organizing the flux of history and effectively or univocally coming to terms with the real. The master narrative of the three-act drama is evaluated in terms of its transhistorical persistence and as “a paradigm among others” with no claim to universality and no ambition to fully and finally exhaust the dynamics of narrative (cf. Ricoeur I, 73). The formal organization of the novel becomes an anchor, a ground-
ing device, a tool that is used to put to the test its own foundational certainties. Like the Apocalyptic model of Umberto Eco’s *Il nome della rosa*, the dramatic structure adopted by Pasinetti tells us that structural models are not to be absolutely dismissed, but can and actually must be recognized for their practical, contingent yet resistant value as tools, and not essences, to be critically and self-consciously used and exploited. *Melodramma* tells us that any way of narrativizing the past is already a way to impose closure on a story that originally had no such closure. By choosing the narrative order of a three-act drama, Pasinetti claims that there is no given, transparent and ideologically-free mode of textual emplotment (cf. White 34), and that the formal artifices and the textual strategies with which we emplot reality are of epistemological value as long as we are willing to accept that they are representations of the world and inevitably bear the inscription of their producers’ ideologies.

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Intertextuality works also on the content level of the novel. In this sense, it marks the co-presence within the master text of a number of other texts, under the form of direct citations, parody or allusion. The intertexts of *Melodramma* open up the novel to other narrative genres and artistic forms. Interspersed through the book are poems, newspaper articles, legal documents and official dispatches, quotations from librettos and fictive epistolary fragments. The story of Manin’s republic and of the years immediately after its fall is rewritten and reinvented through the discourses of fiction, history, drama, the visual arts, and photography. It is writing working within other writing, an “intersection of textual surfaces” (Kristeva 37). The often ironical juxtaposition of different texts and the play with the varying voices and styles of the intertexts create an effect of “interdiscursivity” among the various works, presenting a multiple and often contradictory past, ready to be staged and interpreted again and again. In Kristeva’s definition, intertextuality is “a permutation of texts” as in the space “of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (36). In Pasinetti’s case intertextuality is another expression of the vast dialogue between past and present, where texts do not neutralize one another but often polemically juxtapose contradictory views about the same past events. In this way, the novel is a “productivity,” the place, that is, where multiple meanings are constructed: “the novel, seen as a text, is a semiotic practice in which the synthesized patterns of several utterances can be read” (Kristeva 37).

In the context of historical fiction, the function of intertextuality — of a text seen as a mosaic of citations (Kristeva 37) — is to challenge the traditional and institutionalized separation of the fictional and the historical. They both depend on verisimilitude rather than objective truth and are both identified as linguistic constructs, equally intertextual in nature:
The issue is no longer "to what empirically real object in the past does the language of history refer?" and is more "to which discursive context would this language belong? To which prior textualizations must we refer?" (Hutcheon 119)

By multiplying its voices and constructing itself as a verbal exchange among several writings, historiographic metafiction challenges the monological discourse of orthodox historical works through what Bakhtin names "dialogue and ambivalence." Yet, intertextuality poses a potential threat to the historical referent. Does this multiple framing of different discourses on the real create a double removal from the real? Intertextuality demonstrates that the referent is always and already inscribed in the discourses of a specific culture. It makes us aware of the discursive grids that precondition our apprehension and knowledge of the past. In this way, the citation "of the intertexts of both the 'world' and art . . . contests the boundaries that many would unquestionably use to separate the two" (Hutcheon 127). As we have seen, the fictional and the historical are no longer opposites, as they both derive their force from verisimilitude rather than objective truth, and are both identified as linguistic constructs. They both appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own multiple textuality. The use of drama as the structural framework for the historical novel complicates, on the level of form, the issue of representation and referentiality. While historical fiction evokes the factual world by means of the traces that history has left, drama dramatizes the real and frames it in the fictional setting of a stage. It thus challenges our "suspension of disbelief" and implicitly questions the "as if" assertion that forms the basis for realist fiction.

On the other hand, intertextuality can indirectly reinstate the referent by stressing the relationship of a specific text to the reality of its time. The references to Verdi's Rigoletto, in fact, address the problem of representation from a political perspective. They raise the issue of censorship by Austria's military government. "Few composers," writes David R.B. Kimbell, "have suffered more from theatrical censorship than Verdi, and few combated its absurd manifestations more stoutly" (23). Censorship was mostly concerned with issues of political, religious and moral offense (cf. Kimbell 23). Authors of librettos for operas had to request approval for their subjects before they started writing them. It was on political issues that censors were strictest: "subjects, situations, or phrases that implied disrespect toward sovereigns or established governments, expressions of patriotism or libertarianism, mention of conspiracy or assassination, were all alike regarded with distrust" (Kimbell 25). Authorities were hostile to Verdi's proposal to write an opera based on Victor Hugo's romantic play Le Roi s'amuse. After the librettista Francesco Maria Piave composed the text, the Imperial Central Directorate for Public Order demanded to examine it, and found it unacceptable on the grounds of obscenity and triviality (cf. Kimbell 24 and 267). Victor Hugo's original play had suffered a similar fate, and was banned after the first performance on the grounds that it offended public morals, but Hugo argued that
there were political reasons for the prohibitions and protested against what he considered an attack on liberty.

After two months of negotiations Verdi’s opera was accepted under the title La maledizione and with a change of the place and time of the action so that they would be removed from the sixteenth-century French court of Francis I “to one of the independent Duchies of Burgundy, or Normandy, or one of the petty absolute princes of the Italian states, probably the court of Pier Luigi Farnese” (Kimbell 272).10 On 11 March 1851 the première of what was finally entitled Ricoletto, was performed at the Fenice theatre in Venice, and immediately became one of Verdi’s most brilliant popular successes (cf. Kimbell 279).

Verdi represents the quintessential incarnation of the interaction of art and politics. Verdi’s Israelite chorus in Nabucco singing their longing for a homeland was greeted as a song of desire to be free of Austro-Hungarian domination.11 Ricoletto as one of the intertextual presences of Melodramma does not define intertextuality as “a doubly introverted form of aestheticism” (Hutcheon 128). On the contrary, it reveals art’s implications in the political, and thus counteracts Orseolo’s humanist rejection of the historical and social foundations of art in name of its eternal and universal values: “il melodramma è cosa senza tempo, slancio di sentimenti, libero dalla storia . . .” (216).

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Melodramma initiates a dialogue between fiction and reality, a non-conclusive, contradictory discussion that does not furnish final answers but problematizes our relation to the world and the forms in which we inscribe it. By embracing the framework of a historical novel, Melodramma explores the values and the limits of our narrative understanding of the past. The novel exploits the fixed form of a three-act drama and yet questions its epistemological value both on thematic and formal grounds. Melodramma defends its literariness and the values of creative imagination together with its ties to the real. The complexity and the final significance of Melodramma emerge from the problematic engagement between its structural frameworks and its thematic content. The novel displays how a perfectly shaped aesthetic form may indeed maintain the dialogue between formalism and ideology. In this way the cognitive grids and systematizing structures share in both the realm of transhistorical constructions and in the empirical spaces of specific historical and cultural occurrences. The founding tenets of identity, referentiality and the narrative order — the tenets of the discourse of history — are tested not so much against as within the dialogical, citational and polyphonic structure of drama. The novel’s discursive openness is set against, and indeed triggered by, the pictorial motionlessness of Gregorio’s formal portrait at the beginning of the novel. In a mirror-like fashion, the novel closes, so to speak, on another visual intertext, the giant daguerreotype of all the novel’s characters:
Erano pose lunghe, per così dire inchiodanti; questo non c’impedisce di figurarsi, sotto a quella fissità, il grado di piacere o di noia, di disinvolta e di disagio con cui ciascuno si sottoponeva alla relativamente nuova esperienza fotografica. (340)

Against the daguerreotype’s structural changelessness, the novel’s will to narrate reopens the boundaries of the text in a new impetus to create, interpret and finally invent.

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NOTES

1 In *The Idea of History* R.G. Collingwood makes a similar point. The historian’s activity is a three-step process involving documentary research, interpretative imagination in the re-shaping of the documentary evidence, and finally the “re-enactment” of the past. Re-enacting becomes a rethinking of the past that is set in between the respect for documentary evidence and present interpretation of the past “through the historian’s own mind” (Collingwood 215).

2 Bianca, in particular, stresses the present temporality of the enunciatrice act by recurring to a modern jargon: “Tutti dissociati, come adesso” she exclaims about the nineteenth-century characters as she turns off the television, and about Gregorio “Continui alti e bassi . . . era un ciclofotico” (318, 315). Commenting on Eleonora’s desire to participate in patriotic clandestine activities, Bianca exclaims: “È il radical-chic di quel tempo” (258).

3 Similarly, the novel provides different hypotheses on Ifigenia’s disappearance. Calisto Alzetta reports “La versione dei fatti secondo il conte Gregorio” (173) and immediately Maffeo demands Calisto’s own version: “e dammi la versione tua, allora” (173).


5 Or, later on in the novel, “Ma prima di procedere, spostiamoci a un paio di ore prima” (304).

6 “Non mi potrai più dire che non eri là, presente ai fatti, che non hai preso parte” (29).

7 In *Dorsoduro* Giorgio Partibon questions the authority of the “facts”: “. . . la parola stessa, fatti, non dice molto. Cosa sono e dove avvengono i fatti? Chi fa i fatti?” (19).

8 “E come la Maria,” Sara explains, “lo intendo anch’io, Maffeo, e cioè che è tutto un vivere e far scena, che bisogna far scena per comprendersi” (300).

9 In a parody of Dante’s Beatrice she is “una creatura piuvua dal cielo” (273, *emphasis added*).

10 Interestingly, Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* makes a similar point when the narrator’s three guests from Pakistan tell the story of military censors preventing a production of *Julius Caesar* because it depicted the assassination of a head of state.

11 In John Berger’s *G.*, the revolutionary crowds meet around statues of Verdi, seen, but only by some of them, as the emblem of freedom. At the end of Pasinetti’s *Dorsoduro* it is exactly the reference to “Va pensiero sull’ali dorate” that provides a link between the narration of private events and the reconstruction of historical occurrences. The reference to Verdi’s famous chorus provides a political allegorization of private sufferings, and expresses the hope for a future collective liberation from all forms of authoritarianism (*Cf. Re 93*).
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