

## INTRODUCTION

This volume reproduces the text of a doctoral thesis on 'The Nature and Limitations of Realism in the Criticism and Narrative of Luigi Capuana' submitted in the University of Cambridge. The Bibliography has been abbreviated, while the Introduction has been slightly enlarged. The additions, which consist of some general information on the political and cultural conformation of Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century—and on Capuana's position in that context—may perhaps help to orientate the reader who is unfamiliar with the detail of this particular period in Italy's history.

Luigi Capuana was born in 1839, and his birth-place was Mineo, a small town, still not easily accessible, in the province of Catania. It may seem unlikely that a figure truly representative of Italian culture in the second half of the last century should have sprung from such remote and rural origins. Yet Capuana probably has a better claim to that status than any of his contemporaries; and his Sicilian birth, paradoxically, by no means impeded his rise to this eminence.

Throughout his life Capuana proved exceptionally alert to the events of the moment. As a young man he was able to observe at close hand the exploits of Garibaldi in Sicily, and he made his debut in print the following year (1861) with a maladroit, heroic verse composition entitled *Garibaldi: leggenda drammatica*. In it the leader of the glorious Thousand became nothing less than a demi-god, the product of the love of an angel and a mortal woman. This metamorphosis was a fair illustration of popular feeling in Sicily at the time.

But gradually, after 1860, the South as a whole grew to resent its coerced administrative alignment with Piedmont; and Northerners meanwhile remained in continuing ignorance about the real conditions of life in the South. Communications were poor in this elongated and mountainous new nation. Italy's network of railways was still restricted (2,000 km as compared with England's 17,000 in the same period); and, as historians are fond of telling us, Prime Minister Cavour never even reached Rome on his travels, though naturally he knew London and Paris (and like all educated Piedmontese was more at home speaking French than Italian). So the backward South lay unvisited and abandoned; and in the North the illusion of a Southern agricultural paradise persisted. This paradise, in fact, had quickly become the scene of bloody warfare between Southern bands of brigands and the Italian army: a disturbing phenomenon which, at that critical time, patriots and men of government could not afford to talk about openly, let alone analyse. The vast

disparities of administrative and economic tradition, language and culture, between Italy's component regions inevitably gave a sharp impulse to the myth already taking shape of a glorious, nationwide Risorgimento.

A Sicilian was clearly better placed than a Piedmontese to measure the gap between myth and reality. Yet for Capuana and for Giovanni Verga, Italy's greatest novelist of the period, as well as for many other Sicilian intellectuals who belonged to the early generations of united Italy, patriotism—the myth—came first. Some years later their unswerving support for the monarchy and the forces of government would identify them—as men, if more seldom and less distinctly as writers—with the forces of reaction, especially (and ironically) under the premiership of the Sicilian Francesco Crispi in the nineties. But in the first instance support for the new government was the equivalent of support for progressionism, modernity, nationhood. It involved 'local' self-denial in the interests of a greater political design. So when, over the years, these particular Sicilians reacted negatively to stirrings of discontent among their own impoverished agricultural classes, it was first and foremost because they were patriots: because they had lived, in their youth, side by side with Sicilian separatists; and because they had sensed the perilous appeal to the Sicilian masses of the democratic, anti-monarchical Garibaldi. Thus, at least for an elite, the drama and the urgency of an achieved sense of nationhood increased in proportion to one's spiritual and geographical remoteness from Turin. Precisely the Sicilian origins of a man like Capuana place him at the centre of strictly Italian concerns.

Sicilian education and culture were, however, distinctly old-fashioned, so that an indispensable pre-condition of this central role was acclimatization to modern thinking: in short, the journey North. For generations, Sicilian intellectuals, including Capuana and Verga and Luigi Pirandello, flocked to the great cities of the mainland. If Capuana had deliberately set out to synchronize his passage from city to city with the movements of cultural fashion, he could not have succeeded better. His first destination was Florence, a choice independently corroborated both by Verga and by a third important Sicilian exponent of realism or *verismo*, Federico De Roberto. For several years, between 1864 and 1870, Florence was capital of Italy, 'davvero il centro della vita politica e intellettuale d'Italia', as Verga wrote home in the course of his second visit in 1869, adding 'è indispensabile cominciare da qui la sua strada'.<sup>1</sup> And there was the pressing question, too, of language. If the great Lombard, Alessandro Manzoni, had seen fit to remove himself to Florence in order to refine and at the same time bring alive the language of *I promessi sposi*, it was not surprising that Sicilians, brought up on outmoded Italian texts and all too familiar with dialect, should follow his example.

Capuana's stay in Florence coincided broadly with its years as capital. After the capture of Rome in 1870 Florence lost its capital city status and some of its vitality. Milan, which was not only Italy's richest and most industrialized city, but had also been the most active literary centre for generations before the Unification,

now became the goal of many semi-itinerant Southern intellectuals. Once again Capuana kept abreast of events. He joined Verga in Milan in 1877, and there wrote literary reviews for *Il Corriere della sera*. In the early eighties the cultural focus of the country was to shift once again, this time to the capital, where the publications of that commercially astute editor, Sommaruga, flourished and created a fertile climate for other literary enterprises. (It was not by accident that *Il Fanfulla della domenica* chose this moment to transfer from Florence to the capital where it was edited for some two years by Capuana.) It was here in Rome that he met and wrote of the flamboyant exponent of Decadentism, Gabriele D'Annunzio, a figure who was to dominate Italian letters for some decades, one of the few Italians of this period famous in his life-time throughout Europe.

Though Capuana's sojourns on the 'continent' were interrupted by long withdrawals to Sicily, his life-long activity as critic and journalist, and his strategic changes of domicile on the mainland, put him in contact with an unending range of *litterati*. Some are forgotten; but many, like Matilde Serao, D'Annunzio, Neera, Antonio Fogazzaro, Grazia Deledda, have lived on; others, like Verga and Pirandello—never more highly regarded than to-day—owed Capuana their earliest recognition (as well as much personal encouragement). Furthermore, Capuana was among the first of Italy's intellectuals to realize that the obsessional pursuit of a specifically Italian literature could only lead to stagnation. Immediately after the events of 1860 preoccupation with a *national* literature bordered on cultural xenophobia; and if, for the time being, French culture was held up as the epitome of what Italian literature aimed *not* to be, this was no doubt due to a natural desire to shrug off the traditional hegemony of France over Italy in cultural matters. And that desire itself probably owed something to ambiguous political feelings about the nation that had signed the Peace of Villafranca without the benefit of consultation with Italians, and which, until the Franco-Prussian war, kept a garrison in Rome to protect the Pope from incursions by the new state.

After a brief period of self-defensive introspection, Italy opened out once again to European influences, and it was through men like Capuana that she did so. That these influences were chiefly French is hardly surprising. Close political and cultural contacts between the neighbouring countries had long existed, a fact which not even the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire and the Restoration of 1815 in Italy had done anything to change. On the French side one calls to mind the Italy of Stendhal and Mme de Staël: and in Italy the explosion of the Romantic debate in response to Mme de Staël's *Sulla maniera e l'utilità delle traduzioni*, published in 1816; Balzac's visit of 1837; the fact that Manzoni addressed some of his most important theoretical writing to a Frenchman, and, like the great Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi, wrote fluent French. The reciprocity of interests represented by such prominent writers filtered down to lower cultural ranks; and all educated Italians read French (if not vice versa).

In the second half of the century the significant importation from France was

the doctrine of positivism, deriving originally from the work of Auguste Comte. As it applied to the sciences in Italy positivism stressed the importance of diligent observation and experimentation. In philosophy it was wary of metaphysical theorizing and tended towards materialism. Despite this apparently rather practical and anti-speculative character, positivism was based not only on a faith in the powers of human reason, but on the belief that the whole universe was governed by deep-hidden but ordered laws which reason might little by little uncover. Nineteenth-century Europe subscribed to the myth of progress; and the prevailing atmosphere was one of scientific optimism. Such practical and modestly hopeful attitudes were particularly congenial in Italy, where the idealistic spirit that fired the Risorgimento had given way to somewhat more prosaic considerations now that Unity was achieved. In France Hippolyte Taine had already transplanted the doctrines of positivism into the field of literary criticism, and the novels of Emile Zola, in particular, would embody some of the cardinal discoveries and theories of positivistic science. These two writers were among the chief exponents of literary positivism (or Naturalism) who caught Capuana's attention in the seventies. In Italy the literary movement originally inspired by French Naturalism (but soon acquiring its own independent characteristics) was called *verismo*. Capuana quickly became known as its leader, although his own best novel in the *verista* vein, *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*, was many years in incubation and did not appear in print until 1901. This late novel none the less shares a family likeness with earlier creative texts where Capuana revealed what was probably his most personal and original contribution to the narrative of the period: a profound psychological realism, an urge to come to terms with the intricate and often unlovely reality of the human psyche.

Realism is a term which can be applied, more or less appropriately, to the novel in all its nineteenth-century manifestations, from Dickens to Dostoyevsky: Naturalism and *verismo* were literary movements that essentially gave sharper definition to the all-encompassing concept of Realism. Adherents propounded the view that narrative should derive from close, even 'scientific', observation of the real world, abhorring facile stimulants of the reader's curiosity. The practical application of the new doctrines, as may be expected, proved extremely diverse both in France and Italy. But one important general result of the stress which fell on the notion of a carefully and objectively scrutinized reality was that Italy's regional life, the life of her lower classes in particular, made a sudden entry into the purview of her writers (and has stayed there ever since). Capuana would have strenuously denied that this deflection of transalpine influences into native provincial channels had any remotely political significance. Yet, when one recalls the problems of new Italy, and the unprecedented prominence of her Southern writers in this period, one seems to hear, behind the official pronouncements of *verismo*, the dissenting voice of Italy's ill-assimilated and underprivileged meridional regions.

Capuana's position as a Sicilian in regard to such protest was, as we said, bound to be deeply contradictory. If this had not been so, he would no doubt have been a less representative figure. For, intellectually versatile and energetic as he was, and explicitly aligned with the ruling classes of the new nation, his impulse was always to move forward, and he regarded *verismo's* concentration on the impoverished classes as a strictly temporary matter: certainly not as a disguised message of protest. While Verga—author of two outstanding novels on Sicilian working people—fell silent, Capuana grew restive, and smarted under the *verista* label which contemporaries had attached to him. He maintained his critical and creative output right up to his death in 1915; and even when he found himself out of step and sympathy with the literary movements that dominated the *fin de siècle* period—Decadentism, Spiritualism, French Symbolism, the turbid Catholicism of Fogazzaro—his theoretical and narrative work continued to mirror new orientations in literature, albeit sometimes in a negative or semi-parodistic vein.

Capuana's half century of literary activity is proof of a remarkable capacity for cultural survival. Some have seen him as the link which knits together into one tradition the criticism of Francesco De Sanctis, that brilliant and impassioned Neapolitan of the Risorgimento generation, and Benedetto Croce, the great philosopher-critic of this century. Certainly Capuana's criticism shows a conscientious pursuit of aesthetic coherence, unusual in work appearing primarily in journalistic contexts. His cultural longevity does not of course mean that his role either as a critic or a narrator was always crucial and central in Italian literary debate. But as Giovanni Gentile, the Sicilian-born philosopher, remarked, 'nessun italiano, uscito fuori dalla propria regione, è stato dopo il 1860 meno regionalista del Siciliano';<sup>2</sup> and Capuana was always a vigilant observer and recorder of contemporary events, detached and humorous enough in his writing to be almost always illuminating about the period in which he lived.

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The critic of Capuana's work is presented not only with the question of the theoretical contradictions which conditioned his intellectual activity, but, as A. Navarra complained long ago, with the 'vastità stessa dell'opera',<sup>3</sup> to which must be added its daunting multiformity. Ranging from science fiction, stories for children and poetry to drama, narrative, criticism, and 'non-fiction' works on such subjects as spiritualism and Sicilian customs, Capuana's volumes furthermore betray different levels and kinds of commitment, some being produced to meet urgent financial needs, others, like the parodies on the bard of Catania, Mario Rapisardi, starting life as exercises in literary humour, still others being written for polemical or at any rate extra-literary reasons, and yet shedding light on the *letterato*.

Without ignoring these secondary areas, this study sets out to examine the central issue of Capuana's realism as critic and narrator, and to account for its moments of

apparent inconsistency, its limitations and strengths in the course of a long career which until recently has tended to be treated in piecemeal fashion. In so doing it proceeds chronologically, relating Capuana's aims and achievements to the changing cultural context which conditioned them, and relying extensively on articles which have remained buried in the newspapers and journals of both Sicily and the Italian mainland to explore uninvestigated aspects of his critical meditation or to illuminate the areas of obscurity in his development both as critic and narrator. A close analysis of narrative texts has been a main instrument of enquiry in this work: though it aims primarily at an evaluation of Capuana, it also hopes to contribute to the understanding of the period in which he lived.

Since the rationale of my work is to be explained in part by what seemed the shortcomings and the lacunae of earlier critical studies, the main lines of their approach to Capuana may usefully be outlined.

The history of Capuana's critical fortunes provides a startling proof of the persistence of Croce's influence in some sectors of Italian literary criticism. His essay of 1904 was the first attempt at a total vision of the author, and the views expressed there when adopted with little of their original flexibility by subsequent critics became, in my opinion, a major obstacle to a satisfactory reading of Capuana. Croce gave prominence to two problems. He pointed out the contradictory nature of Capuana's allegiances to De Sanctis and to the Hegelian De Meis, to autonomous and heteronomous views of art (and the question was duly re-examined by Vetro, Zangara, Ceriello, and others);<sup>4</sup> and in addition he felt the chill wind of critical detachment blowing through Capuana's imaginative writing: 'troppo vi si sente', he wrote, 'il curioso di psicologia e di scienze naturali', 'il critico che si vale della riflessione'.<sup>5</sup> The theme of critic versus creative writer thereafter became a compelling focus of attention even when Croce's conclusions were reversed;<sup>6</sup> and it invited a compartmentalized treatment of Capuana. As far as A. Navarria, for example, is concerned, the period from 1895 to 1905, when Capuana 'potè essere libero veramente dai suoi concetti estetici e dalle sue passioni letterarie', produced the best of his narrative;<sup>7</sup> while the identical period seems to Ermanno Scuderi particularly rewarding in the field of Capuana's criticism, making his 'un'esperienza paradigmatica di tutte quelle che si sono succedute, prima, in ordine di tempo e di valore, quella di Croce'.<sup>8</sup> In 1967 Palmiro M. Pinagli produced another substantially Crocean reading of Capuana's criticism.<sup>9</sup> A year later Carmelo Musumarra, insisting that Capuana's narrative be regarded as a 'chiara esemplificazione' of his criticism and that both be examined against the background of the 'complesso e tormentato mondo letterario di fine Ottocento', seemed to perceive how the lack of a historical perspective and the perennial, Crocean impulse to separate intuition and reason, art and criticism had created an arbitrary and elusive Capuana; but even he ended by concurring in the view that Capuana's theoretical acumen functioned to the detriment of his creative work.<sup>10</sup>

It seemed essential that such approaches should be abandoned, and indeed the

best documented and most stimulating work on Capuana to date was produced in 1970 by Carlo A. Madrignani, a member of the so-called younger generation of Marxist critics. Madrignani's book shifted interest from the later to the earlier half of Capuana's career, and tended to superimpose the analyst of 'complex' psychological states and the critic of the two series of *Studi sulla letteratura contemporanea* on the more standard image of the regional *verista* and the author of *Gli 'ismi' contemporanei*. Madrignani's passing judgement on several traditionally respected volumes (notably *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* and *Gli 'ismi' contemporanei*) which fell outside the immediate scope of his work was harsh. His strongly politicized approach caused him to abandon Capuana once his materialism, which in Madrignani's view was the true force for renewal in his work, showed signs of waning, and the last part of Capuana's career was dismissed with the words:

Negli anni successivi al '90 Capuana porta avanti la sua opera di artista e di critico nella direzione di un sempre più deciso distacco dalla base positivista perdendo così i suoi caratteri peculiari, la sua funzione, mentre i tentativi di adeguarsi ai nuovi tempi non riusciranno più a dargli la precedente compattezza di pensiero e di gusto.<sup>11</sup>

In this way, a large and important portion of Capuana's work remained unexamined; moreover, Madrignani advanced a thesis on the development of Capuana's 'ideology' which, in my opinion, was not entirely acceptable. He was the first exponent of what may be called after Walter Mauro and Giorgio Luti (who soften his severer judgements, while accepting his main argument) the 'involutional' thesis, whereby after his 'scientific', materialistic phase Capuana regresses towards a form of cautious and relatively 'reactionary' idealism.<sup>12</sup> In my view Capuana was involved not so much in an ideological *volte-face*, as, right from the beginning, in a compromise—the compromise of his 'hegelsmo scientifico' which remained constant throughout his career, though the changing climate of the times served to emphasize its different components in succession. This explains why the division of Capuana's career into two more or less distinct portions seems unacceptable and why my treatment of Capuana extends to the whole of his later work.

The aims and scope of its different chapters may now be outlined. On the basis of a complete examination of contemporary articles, both those reproduced in *Il teatro italiano contemporaneo* and those never reprinted, Chapter I traces the process of Capuana's adjustment to a modern cultural environment, that of Florence in the sixties, and his conversion to realism and to narrative. In so doing it explores the contribution to Capuana's work of some unexpected sources and discusses the genesis of his 'philosophy', poised between positivism and Hegelianism. It closes with an examination of *Profili di donne*, the point of confluence of Capuana's dawning scientific realism and his sentimental, 'literary' interest in female psychology. Chapter II, which covers Capuana's naturalist phase, shows how brief was the period when scientific materialism seemed to offer him a total approach to reality. An examination of *Giacinta* discusses his debt to French

naturalism, showing the limited use he made of those keys to interpreting human behaviour provided by the naturalists, and how the most original parts of the work centred on psychological intuitions which, though they were not incompatible with a materialistic outlook, tended to provide what may be termed a rationale of the irrational. The second half of this chapter deals with Capuana's 'discovery' of Verga, the modifications to his artistic theory which such a discovery brought, and with his own regional tales. The period from about 1883 to 1890 which is the subject of the third chapter produces problematic and disparate material. The chapter argues for the fundamental continuity of Capuana's artistic theory and practice, not for the beginning of a clear 'involution' therefore, but for deliberate and superficial concessions to a climate of feeling that was growing increasingly hostile to positivism and to its attendant literary realism. It demonstrates that these concessions are belied by his best artistic performance and his sharpest critical responses which remain anchored to the artistic ideal of realism. Chapter IV investigates work now clearly written under the impact of the new 'correnti spiritualistiche e idealistiche'. Acknowledging their considerable influence on the matter of Capuana's creative work, the chapter shows that the realist techniques of Capuana's narrative remain substantially unchanged, and that the criticism of the late nineties rather than diminishing its calls for the impersonality which had long been the core of Capuana's realism makes them with renewed energy. The final chapter examines *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* in its cultural setting and argues through a close analysis of the text that it was the most extreme explication of Capuana's realist techniques. The Conclusion indicates some developments in Capuana's narrative after the turn of the century and briefly recapitulates the main findings of this work.

A final word remains to be said on the terminology used in the text, and on the criteria which governed my selection of works for close analysis. It may perhaps be argued that naturalism is a term which properly belonged to France alone, and defined works informed by scientific materialism, whereas *verismo* was an exclusively Italian (and regional) phenomenon virtually independent of a scientific substructure; and that naturalism and *verismo* may be regarded as parallel species of the same genus, which is realism (it is indeed for this reason that 'realism' was preferred to other terms for the title of this work). I have none the less made no attempt to distinguish rigorously between these terms in the text, for the period which found a need for them gave them overlapping meanings, and Capuana himself tended to use them interchangeably or at all events with considerable flexibility. The purposes of clear exposition would not have been served by using the terms rigidly, as excogitated by hindsight and the literary historian, for the usage of the text would have been at variance with that occurring in passages of citation. Moreover, the interchangeability of the terms corresponded to a *real* overlapping of aims. Without becoming meaningless, any more than it did at the time, the terminology employed is pliant in its connotations to the concrete situation.

My decision to concentrate on Capuana's novels, with the use of short stories confined to supplying missing links in the argument or to completing the literary picture, was determined by considerations of different orders. It seemed reasonable to suppose that lengthier compositions might have been less susceptible than short stories of exploitation for those pressing financial needs which often goaded Capuana into a weary over-production. There was also the consideration that three of Capuana's five novels (if we include *La Sfinge* which Capuana alternately referred to as a novel and a *racconto*), among them *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*, had received, in my view, entirely inadequate and impressionistic attention. In practice my selection of material for detailed study was not of course an *a priori* operation, but was conditioned in the act of reading. No doubt it cannot be entirely immune from charges of arbitrariness, but it may be pointed out that close examination of other works would not have altered but rather supported the conclusions reached, to which indeed they tacitly contribute.

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