

## CHAPTER I

### FROM DRAMA TO NARRATIVE

#### 1. *The Problem of a National Theatre*

In April 1864 the Capuana family learnt that Luigi's departure from Mineo had taken him not, as its members believed, to Acireale and the home of Leonardo Vigo, fellow-collector of *canti popolari*, but to Florence. 1864 was also the year when, following the September Convention, Italy transferred her capital to Florence, giving the city an unprecedented period of expansion and intellectual vitality. Luigi Capuana's subterfuge, rendered necessary by *zio* Antonio's veto on cultural visits to the 'continent', was the beginning of a prestigious literary career. During his years in Florence he was to become known as an outspoken and outstanding journalist, as drama critic first for Guido Corsini's *Rivista italica* in 1865 and then, more influentially, for *La Nazione* from 1866 to 1868.

Now that Italy formed a political unity, the task of creating a national spirit and identity fell to her politicians and intellectuals. It was natural that the theatre, a genre which could conveniently be used for propagating civil and moral values, should be at the centre of cultural debate in the sixties. It was natural too that in Florence, capital and also linguistic pivot of the nation, the debate should be at its liveliest. Testimony of the potential importance of Florence in this respect were the eight theatres she possessed in 1865 (and more were to be built or created), staging all kinds of spectacle from opera to farce. The Niccolini in particular ('il primo teatro di prosa, frequentato da un pubblico sceltissimo'<sup>1</sup>) extended a welcome to the most successful playwrights and actors of the day; it also presented a repertoire of theatrical classics and staged the newest works from France. There were incentives for writers in the form of prizes. From 1860 a prize fund set up by Bettino Ricasoli awarded L.4,000 for the best play produced in Florence during the year. The prize however failed to promote new talent: between 1861 and 1868 it was won by such established playwrights as Gherardi del Testa, Luigi Sufer, Ferdinando Martini, Achille Torelli and Paolo Ferrari. 1865 finds Capuana himself the *segretario relatore* of a commission for another drama competition, the Concorso Ristori. But the prize that year was not awarded.

Though the secretary noted with satisfaction that all about him there was 'una pressa grande di scrittori, un brulichio di commedie, di drammi e di tragedie non mai visto finora tra noi', he felt obliged to register a lack of 'studio' in relation not

only to the simple rules of theatrical composition, but also to grammar and style. His hopes for the birth of a National Theatre, anxiously awaited since the times of Alfieri and Manzoni, depended therefore mainly on the conviction that theatre was the genre 'che meglio corrisponde ai bisogni della presente civiltà'.<sup>2</sup> Some years later, in 1888, Ferdinando Martini commented ironically on the easy optimism of the sixties' *letterati*:

Fatta l'Italia e scorsi due o tre anni, i Molière vaticinati e aspettati non si facevano vivi. Si guardarono in faccia stupefatti [. . .] Come? In tempo di tirannia sorgeva un Goldoni e non ne debbono essere almeno dieci in tempi di libertà? [. . .] Paiono favole; ma se leggete i giornali di quel tempo vedrete che ragionavano così.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of the National Theatre remained a myth, as Capuana admitted in 1872, but in the meantime patriotism and the search for a national identity gave it wide currency: 'L'aver teatro', Alfieri had said, 'nelle nazioni moderne [. . .] suppone [. . .] l'esser veramente nazione, e non dieci popoletti divisi, che messi insieme non si troverebbero simili in nessuna cosa.'<sup>4</sup>

The political state of Italy in the Risorgimento period had necessarily forged links between political awareness and literature. Historical dramas and novels had covertly made their patriotic points. With Unity, however, the link broke, leaving open to discussion questions of content, of technical and linguistic requirements in the theatre, as well as the problem of its new function in the nation. In discussing these matters, Capuana's theatrical reviews of the sixties shared the prejudices of a bourgeoisie confident of its moral and political viability, and anxious to disseminate its standards through the nation. Yet, progressively, they showed a personal slant which in due course placed Capuana in the forefront of militant criticism. He began his career in 1865 mistrustful of foreign influences on a culture struggling to reflect a sense of independent nationhood, yet by 1867 held up the realism of the French theatre as an important literary model for Italy. He abandoned his role as custodian of national morality and grew to emphasize the autonomy of art, and the value of what he called, after De Sanctis, 'forma'. Inclined at first to search out in works of art immutable, classical truths, he came to view modern scientific culture as a powerful instrument for understanding the concrete reality of life, to which, he believed, contemporary literature should address itself. He relinquished his hopes for the theatre and learnt to prefer the novel (returning to the theatre, like Verga, only when his primary role as novelist and short-story writer was established, and when the particular relationship he saw between 'verismo' and drama made the reversion not a *volte-face* but a simple alternative).

Capuana's progress by 1872 to this summarily described position was not without tergiversations and hesitancy. His newspaper articles like most of their kind were sometimes incautious and mutually contradictory. But there emerges gradually from them evidence of attitudes which will condition his narrative during the seventies, in the period leading up to the publication of his first novel, *Giacinta*.

Two main demands were made of the theatre at the time when Capuana took up his post at the *Rivista italiana*. Plays were to be a force for creating those sound values in family and civic affairs which were necessary to the vitality of the new nations: they were to provide patterns of socially desirable behaviour. But as well as patterns, plays were to be mirrors, reflecting the reality of Italy's life, where her disparate subjects might recognize themselves.

There can be no doubt that Capuana subscribed to the idea of the theatre as an instrument for impressing a robust morality on a mass audience, or that this view was widespread. In 1867 Marchese Trevisani examined, under ministerial auspices, the progress of the Italian theatre in the preceding twenty years and hoped that the government

pensando seriamente ormai alla smisurata importanza del teatro nella nuova società e agli effetti, in bene o in male incalcolabili che da esso possono risultare, voglia mettere ogni suo sforzo a incoraggiarlo nella via civilizzatrice in cui solo deve mostrarsi;

he reminded the government of its duty to

dirigere questa imponente forza intellettuale verso il suo retto sentiero adoperando tutti i legittimi mezzi, perchè la civiltà, la libertà, la coscienza, la famiglia e la patria non vi ricevano la minima scossa, il bello si riannodi col vero e col buono in un amplesso finale.<sup>5</sup>

Francesco Dall'Ongaro, whom Capuana met early in his stay in Florence, expressed similar views;<sup>6</sup> and Massimo D'Azeglio, writing in 1862, informed Ferdinando Martini that Tuscany might contribute to the unity of Italy 'non solo con la lingua, ma istituendo un teatro, che [. . .] elevi i caratteri, insegni la fermezza, la generosità, il sacrificio, e tutto quanto è compreso nel bello morale'.<sup>7</sup>

As for Capuana, he is as ready to censure an 'eccesso di morale posta in bocca ai personaggi' (in Giacometti) as to deplore mere jollification (in Bersezio's *Una bolla di sapone*).<sup>8</sup> But though an enemy equally of sentimentousness and frivolity, he considers the theatre able to offer every individual 'un tesoro immenso di esperienza nei vari casi della vita che gli potranno essere guida e norma di condotta, prima che prove dure e talora senza rimedio non glielo accumulassero innanzi con poco o niun giovamento'.<sup>9</sup> For the whole of 1865 this unobtrusive moral and practical function of the theatre occupies the critic; and even later, when in 1867 Torelli's *I Mariti* gives him much else to celebrate, he still rejoices at the edifying spectacle of the admirable duchessa Matilde showing her son's impudent mistress the door, of the aristocratic Emma learning to value her self-made bourgeois husband.<sup>10</sup>

In the meantime Capuana's Giobertian aesthetic notions lead him in search of the Beautiful and the True: 'norme che costituiscono un'immutable essenza; tutte le opere della natura, e quindi i prodotti dell'intelletto, avendo regole semplici, generali, invariabili'.<sup>11</sup> Such a search tended inevitably to preclude or postpone

discussion of that other question of the relationship between a specific society and its literature, even though unification had made it an urgent one. *Italianità* in the theatre for the moment lay merely in efforts to revitalize an indigenous tradition (it was no accident that Ferrari's *Goldoni e le sue sedici commedie nuove* was for many, as for Capuana, the most significant and promising work of the period), or in avoiding the 'corruption of heart and intellect' at present stalking the boards in neighbouring France. And if Capuana was convinced that

l'artista vero non coglie, nella rappresentazione della natura, le parti esteriori e caduche, nè si arresta nella storia al lato meramente aneddotico, o descrittivo, o cronologico; ma penetra arditamente, col cuore e colla fantasia, nella parte chiusa, vitale e perpetua delle cose,<sup>12</sup>

this conviction dovetailed neatly with the idea of the theatre as a moral regenerator. The play became a conflict of 'eternal' passions from which Good emerged triumphant: morality was built into plot and characterization.

It was a conservative formula which seemed to leave aesthetic considerations at a standstill. Indeed, to state the matter simply, the difficulty for all those involved lay in reconciling aesthetic and moral values in the theatre. Though the desire for respectable literariness was strong (and Capuana himself dealt severely with offenders against literary propriety), the urge to educate was stronger. Proposing that of three annual prizes for drama one might go 'a quell'opera drammatica che meglio risponda alle ragioni della letteratura e dell'arte; gli altri a quei due lavori che offrano un più efficace e nobile insegnamento alle classi meno colte del popolo,'<sup>13</sup> Ricasoli reflected the division in its most acute form.

A further difficulty attached to the question of how literature might mirror society, especially in a country like Italy where the author who perfectly described 'l'aspetto d'una data provincia' ran the risk, according to Capuana, of being misunderstood in another.<sup>14</sup> In France Italy's intellectuals saw an enviable example of how a whole nation could identify itself with the life of a capital city. But for Capuana it was not patriotism alone that made the question vital. The survival of great quantities of literature was at stake, for the history of the *commedia* in the first half of the nineteenth century told him that its efforts to 'farsi universale' had been fatal. Willingly divesting itself of all that 'non poteva essere universalmente inteso ed apprezzato', it created an abstract reality, and became a genre which 'senza la scintilla del genio, dovea riuscire prima a convenzione, poi a freddura, a declamazione, e riuscì difatti'.<sup>15</sup> Italy however remained an amalgam of provinces, and the theatre an educator which needed to find a way to speak to all from Piedmont to Sicily. This same sense of the theatre's national mission was responsible for Capuana's impatience in this period with literature in dialect, accessible only to small groupings of the population. In the meantime those incompatible claims for *italianità* and universal moral relevance in the theatre persisted, and all Capuana could do in 1866 was to note the impasse:

Onde non restringersi in una cerchia troppo angusta, lo scrittore italiano quindi è costretto a crearsi una società ideale, o meglio, eclettica che abbia un poco della fisionomia di tutte e non rassomigli particolarmente a nessuna; è costretto a vagare nell'indeterminato, a rassegnarsi ad un colorito senza toni precisi, sacrificando insomma, per così dire, l'arte all'arte, nell'attesa di poter ritrarre una società unicamente italiana, che intanto è ancora di là da venire.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. *The 'dramma storico' and the 'commedia contemporanea': Manzoni and De Sanctis*

Six years later Capuana was boldly declaring not only the futility of any attempt at creating a National Theatre but the obsolescence of the theatrical genre itself. But the aesthetic view-points he had arrived at in the intervening years and which determined the nature of his narrative were born of close contact with the theatre. The productions he saw fell mainly into the categories of the *dramma storico* and the *commedia contemporanea*. In Sicily Capuana himself had dreamed of creating verse-drama from episodes of Italian history and of becoming 'niente meno che lo Shakespeare d'Italia'.<sup>17</sup> The continued popularity of historical plays, even after political allusiveness was no longer warranted, depended on the impulse to bond past and present, to continue a literary tradition to which writers like Alfieri, Manzoni, and Niccolini had belonged. Such plays were also able to issue invigorating reminders of Italian heroism and moral vigour. Ferrari's *Una poltrona storica*, for instance, dealt with the early life of Alfieri

perchè dal confronto tra Alfieri ignorante a 25 anni e Alfieri sommo, come tutti lo conoscono, risultasse in via di storia, quanto quel grande potesse e tenacemente volesse, e in via di morale apparisse, a conforto e documento dei giovani, l'importanza d'una tenace volontà.<sup>18</sup>

and plays like Giacometti's *Torquato Tasso*, Vitaliani's *Alfieri a Roma*, Castelvechio's *Ugo Foscolo* and Martelli's *Dante in patria* inevitably stressed the common heritage of letters as a civilizing force. In the *commedia* instead Italians were able to examine their social institutions, and to meditate on their functioning and their underlying moral assumptions. The urge towards honest and realistic self-appraisal was strong at the time. In Pasquale Villari's words 'Il primo passo [. . .] è quello di mettere, noi stessi, a nudo le nostre piaghe, di distruggere le illusioni o i pregiudizi nazionali'.<sup>19</sup>

If lessons were to be learnt from history and from contemporary society without playwrights being unaesthetically and overtly moralistic, it was necessary that the spectator should identify himself with the character in his situation. Capuana accordingly frowned on the sort of overcharged character-drawing that would hinder the spectator's declaring 'è quello il mio ritratto';<sup>20</sup> and tended to evaluate plays in terms of their ability to elicit a sympathetic emotional response. His discussions of characterization, as in the case of Eugenia from Torelli's *La missione della donna*, could become unpleasantly effusive: 'Dolce e simpatica creatura, la

mente che son pochi tratti di pennello potè dar vita alla ideale sembianza che ti investe, è mente profonda di artista! Come saremmo lieti di scontrarti un giorno sul duro cammino della realtà',<sup>21</sup> but from the point of view of his development towards realism there was a significant side to this approval of sentimental participation: if involvement were to take place, both character and action had to be life-like and convincing. 'L'intima essenza di quanto costituisce in estetica il vero dramma', he declares, is the accurate 'scultura delle passioni e dei caratteri'.<sup>22</sup> Although initially this attitude was merely the logical extension of Capuana's view that nation and historical moment are simply man's superficial trappings, and his eternal soul the proper target of literature, the stress he laid on characterization was at least as likely to point out a route away from convention to a closer examination of 'real' men as to enhance the likelihood of an emotional response in the spectator which left him passively assimilating whatever assumptions underpinned the play. At all events psychological verisimilitude soon becomes all-important for Capuana, and it will be, eventually, the very core of his realism.

His examination of historical plays caused Capuana to reflect on the psychological reasons for certain actions, of which history gives so little indication. Meditating on the relation of historical fact to poetic invention in these plays, his curiosity centres increasingly on the mental prerequisites of action, and the intrigues offered by the pages of history become the mere signposts of a more fascinating psychological reality ready for the writer to discover. Glancing sidelong at France, Capuana remarked that 'in Italia invece la questione estetica (chiamiamola così si arrestò quasi alla sola lettera di Alessandro Manzoni sull'unità di tempo e di luogo nella tragedia',<sup>23</sup> and the *Lettre* (perhaps surprisingly, and at all events unnoticed by his critics) was to be his guide in discussion of the historical genre.

His response to Manzoni the critic was, however, by no means passive. At least in theory he refused to delimit the area of poetic invention as sharply as Manzoni in the *Lettre*; nor did he finally reject the historical genre until other factors induced him to do so, though he had little liking for Alfieri or Niccolini and referred (in terms Manzoni would have approved) to the wallowing of early nineteenth-century tragedians in a 'brago di passioni colpevoli e ferocissime (per buona sorte quasi non mai passate nella realtà)'.<sup>24</sup> Manzoni's influence was nevertheless important in two main ways. His discussion of how the artist should utilize a set of pre-established facts led Capuana to ponder closely the nature of poetic truth, and prepared him by way of analogy for the polemics which would take place when not history but 'human documents' came to provide the facts in fiction. Further, in his restless worrying over potentially contradictory species of truth, Manzoni showed how much he valued a 'vero positivo' and in so doing as we shall see later gave Capuana additional support for a 'scientifically' based assessment of the age which decreed the jettisoning of historical literature.

At first Capuana's view of art as purveyor of universal truths and praiseworthy

moral values made him hesitate over historical works: the ‘dominante individualità’ of great men hindered the creation of eternal types; and the past with its ‘usi e costumi che discordano affatto dai presenti’ could place obstacles in the path of the audience’s response and thus limit the ‘efficacia morale’ of the piece.<sup>25</sup> This diffidence disposed Capuana to allow authors, at least in theory, a free rein with their historical material: no ‘malintesa scrupolosità di attenersi strettamente alla verità storica dei fatti’ was to deflect art from its course. But gradually, in practice, he limits this freedom. Only those invented characters who embody ‘intierissime le caratteristiche dell’epoca che vogliono rappresentare’ secure his approval;<sup>26</sup> and in them, at all events, invention supplements reality and does not betray it. Capuana was moreover apt to point out, not how the recalcitrant facts might have been abandoned or modified in the interests of art, but how a more thorough and imaginative understanding of them might have produced superior works. One author failed to ‘raggruppare certe fila magnifiche che la storia stessa gli porgeva’;<sup>27</sup> another provoked the comment: ‘Valeva meglio dire alla storia: dammi il segreto della tua verità, i nomi l’inventerò io, che t’orre in prestito i nomi per sfigurare la verità.’<sup>28</sup> Such remarks cannot be imputed simply to Capuana’s impatience at the muddle-headedness of authors who chose to be historical and proved so unresponsive to history. For (calling to mind what Manzoni had said of the ‘partie perdue’ of history) he stressed that poetic invention lay in an ‘ostinata ricerca dell’incognita storica di cui la storia ci ha lasciato soltanto gli inerti frantumi’.<sup>29</sup> History was no longer for Capuana simply a decorative and possibly distracting backdrop to action, but a rich source of real, psychological events which could be reconstructed. This attitude was important, for when contemporary society supplanted the historical past as the preferred subject-matter of writers, Manzoni still furnished the lesson of art’s rootedness in documented fact.

Influenced by Manzoni, Capuana felt that creativity lay in understanding the psychological and moral forces that precipitated events. Echoing Manzonian phraseology as well as Manzonian sentiments, he wrote:

Per quanto ricche sieno le particolarità che ci serba la storia, esse riguardano sempre il fatto esteriore e compiuto. Che avvenne nel cuore e nella mente di quei personaggi prima che si decidessero ad una buona azione o ad un delitto?<sup>30</sup>

‘Tout cela’, he might have added, ‘est passé sous silence par l’histoire; et tout cela est le domaine de la poésie’. To determine causality alone, however, never seemed sufficient to Capuana: poetic truth was more complex than this. Thus he could condemn a play such as Ponsard’s *Galilée* as ‘falso come storia’; and not because he explicitly revised his opinion that art has licence to manipulate historical facts, but because in this case the playwright’s modifications detracted from the density of moral implication which resided in the historical facts and which was crucial to the play’s artistic success.<sup>31</sup> In motivating Galileo’s abjuration by a regard for his daughter’s domestic happiness, Ponsard was not merely inaccurate, but he was

trivial. Among other plays Bacchini's *Giulio Orsini*, Pollani's *Aspasia*, and Morgigni's *Pier Capponi*<sup>32</sup> are guilty, according to Capuana, of frivolous inventiveness of the same kind, and his criticism of them is a practical application of the contention that

les causes historiques d'une action sont essentiellement les plus dramatiques et les plus intéressantes. Les faits par cela même qu'ils sont conformes à la vérité pour ainsi dire matérielle, ont au plus haut degré le caractère de vérité poétique que l'on cherche dans la tragédie.<sup>33</sup>

Nor was the artist's particular choice of events a matter of indifference. There lay behind certain historical happenings, Capuana felt, moral conflicts which the writer might perceive and yet which remained so subtle and spiritual as to defy dramatic representation (unless of course the playwright resorted—self-defeatingly—to the kind of expedient Manzoni had condemned in Voltaire's *Zaire* as 'ni naturel, ni instructif, ni touchant, ni même sérieux').<sup>34</sup>

From Manzoni Capuana learnt that the writer's 'vero' was concerned with human motivation which could be evinced neither arbitrarily nor slavishly but in accord with a purified and quintessential view of reality; and this view was to remain axiomatic in his critical theory. The fact that certain subjects seemed ill-suited to dramatic treatment stimulated Capuana's sense of the historical drama's limitations. And it promoted in him the opinion, which was becoming general as the seventies approached, that the *novel* was a superior form of art.

During this same period Capuana was coming to grips with plays of contemporary subject, and particularly those of France which were enormously popular in the absence of comparable Italian achievement. The *commedia contemporanea*, with its familiar points of reference, had a more direct educative potential than the historical genre. For the same reason it could also be more morally subversive. It became therefore the temporary focus of a widespread debate on morality in art which continued into the seventies and eighties by which time Zola and his disciples gave it fresh fuel. But for Capuana the sixties settled the moral issue, at least as far as his theory was concerned. And contact with these plays was also responsible for several other forms of critical emancipation or development.

While he wrote for the *Rivista italiana* Capuana still bewailed the 'festivo e spigliato genio francese costretto da mille circostanze sociali e morali a compiacersi di trascinare l'arte gentile nel brago della più fetida belletta'.<sup>35</sup> For some time subsequently he worried over plays that were socially realistic without being morally committed. Even *La Dame aux camélias* seemed an ambiguous and irresponsible work; and Marguerite Gautier had left in her wake a trail of misguidedly rehabilitated *demi-mondaines* who conspired to destroy 'i più sacri legami della società, la famiglia e l'amore'.<sup>36</sup> When authors did take what seemed to Capuana a clear stand, he was patently relieved. Even if Sardou lacked discipline and mixed farce with tragedy, he was capable of revealing with admirable courage

'il cancro più schifoso che roda il vivere sociale dei nostri tempi, il lusso e la dissoluzione della famiglia'.<sup>37</sup> Yet France's genius was 'festivo e spigliato' and Capuana was caught between admiration and dismay.

In an early article written for the *Nazione* and entitled 'Il teatro francese nel 1886' he deplored the 'baccanale del realismo' in France and the 'riguardi fallaci d'imparzialità' of even her best authors. Yet, attempting to resolve the tension within himself, he continued:

Noi non siamo campioni a tutt'oltranza dell'antico, nè quindi nemici irragionevoli d'ogni novità. Per quanto ci paia più secondo l'arte il cercare il tipo che facevano i vecchi, non ci disgustano le cure dei moderni per accostarsi sempre più al reale possibile,

and noted: 'quello che a noi sembra stranezza e oscenità è presso i nostri vicini una realtà non bella nè buona sì, ma realtà'.<sup>38</sup> These were notable though uneasy concessions. Uneasy because they invoked a more flexible attitude to the problem of morality and art, and because they seemed to advance the here and now at the expense of the timeless and universally relevant.

This latter problem need not, of course, have existed: the art of a Balzac does not lose its relevance for being rooted in a sharp observation of contemporary, historical detail. But Capuana still found it difficult to reconcile the perennial message of art with realism's commitment to what was pinned down in time and space. Nor was this a problem he was able to resolve in the near future. Intellectual fashions and particularly the 'exceptional case' of naturalism soon suggested to him that the question was simply outmoded, overtaken by events. He was content to assert repeatedly that contemporary literature had abandoned the type in favour of the individual, and it did not occur to him to investigate in depth what it was about certain characters in literature that made them unforgettable and unrepeatable and yet nationless and timeless. It is a matter of conjecture whether, had he pondered further, he would have been less inclined as a narrator to produce psychological vignettes in which the animating detail of the background shaded away into insignificance, leaving the subject sharply etched but detached and floating. On the other hand he was able eventually, with the aid of De Sanctis, to resolve the question of morality.

Since Croce's essay, De Sanctis's influence on Capuana has been widely acknowledged.<sup>39</sup> And the difference between those passionate ethical and political impulses which led De Sanctis to welcome the new realism and Capuana's more purely aesthetic approach have been rightly stressed.<sup>40</sup> But Capuana's relationship with De Sanctis in any case involved not emulation but exploitation (and Capuana even expressed reserves about De Sanctis's criticism to his friend, Mario Rapisardi).<sup>41</sup> Like Manzoni, De Sanctis provided not a total critical schema, but a series of stimuli which Capuana applied to the aesthetic problems raised in his encounters with individual plays. This explains why the *Nazione* articles are so

disconcertingly fickle in their allegiance to De Sanctis, and, more importantly, how he involuntarily fathered not only a new attitude to art's morality and the cult of 'form', but also the germs of Capuana's fabled impersonality.

Perusing those articles one can be certain that Capuana read the first collection of the *Saggi critici* in its year of publication, towards the end of 1866. In his theatrical reviews Capuana habitually commented in order and separately on plot, characterization, authorial intentions ('concezione') and expression. But as Ferrari's *Marianna* came up for comment, and with it a literary reputation Capuana had come to question, he adopted a new procedure. The article, with its telling subtitle, 'Del concetto e della forma nelle opere d'arte', refused to applaud the play for its guiding idea: 'non sapremo mai risolverci a lodare un'opera d'arte pel solo merito dell'idea che vi si vorrebbe incarnare'. By way of illustration Capuana went on to postulate a competition of statuary, and ignoring pompous tributes to Humanity and Reason in solid gold awarded his hypothetical prize to a humble clay group which showed working girls eating bread. 'Quantunque di così futile soggetto, e di materia così vile', this work seemed to him 'vital' and 'truthful'.<sup>42</sup> This was the beginning of a less rigid approach to the raw materials of the work of art, and De Sanctis's discussion on the absorption of content into a living, autonomous form had much to do with it.

Henceforward Capuana directly or indirectly assimilated a variety of DeSanctisian criteria, and used them to establish a relationship with realistic literature which neither betrayed his sense of moral responsibility nor left aesthetic discussion stranded in right-mindedness. The campaign which De Sanctis led against a rhetorical literary tradition lacking in 'quel senso del concreto e del reale, senza di cui non è vero ideale'<sup>43</sup> found Capuana prepared. The reconciliation of the ideal with the real which Capuana contemplated in the wake of De Sanctis no doubt lost some of its original ethical implications, but it was none the less the occasion for a cautious reappraisal of the past: 'Quando la *Dame aux camélias* comparve sulle scene, gli artisti e il pubblico si perdevano dietro un idealismo arido e ingannevole che isteriliva le menti e i cuori, perchè rinnegava con isdegno la natura e il vero.' To this empty idealism Marguerite was a healthy reaction; she was 'il reale che prendeva il posto del falso ideale [. . .] la carne che rivendicava i suoi diritti a gran torto obliati'. It was De Sanctis too who authorized a dialectic view of literary history, suggesting to Capuana that the excesses embodied in Marguerite were transitional ones susceptible of incorporation into a more satisfactory, balanced synthesis. That synthesis, Capuana believed, had been achieved by Dumas himself in a later play, *Les Idées de Mme Aubray*. There he found at last 'in atto l'armonica unità dello spirito e della carne, del pensiero e del senso'.<sup>44</sup> Mme Aubray, generous without being lax, reconciled to the penitent Janine. Capuana had not quite forgotten that drama should set forth models of behaviour for general imitation. *Mme Aubray* did indeed involve 'un principio ardito, non applicabile con larghezza sconfinata', but it was also aesthetically satisfying.<sup>45</sup> This approval showed how the

old moral prejudices had been scattered.

It was not only De Sanctis but also his friendship with Telemaco Signorini, the painter, which armed Capuana for battle against so much vaporous and moralistic literature which flew in the face of Nature and Truth. The painter's expression, *studio dal vero*, became a banner to be waved whenever Capuana's increasingly sensitive ear detected the stultifying cadences of literary reminiscence in contemporary works or when imagination seemed to function arbitrarily. Thus of the popular work, *Celeste*, he wrote:

Ci sembra che il Marengo non abbia studiato i suoi personaggi dal vero, ma foggiate di fantasia, forse con la vaga lusinga di renderli più artistici. Questo modo di fare però gli ha impedito di dar loro quell'aria di verità e, diciamolo anche, quella consistenza che sono le condizioni di vitalità di qualunque carattere drammatico.<sup>46</sup>

It seemed to Capuana that Italian writers lived 'troppo appartati, troppo divisi della società a cui [pretendevano] rivolgere la parola';<sup>47</sup> close observation of society was the prescribed antidote, and the guarantee of De Sanctisian 'vitality'. So it was that the issue of morality was gradually shouldered aside in a search for a more vital and less conventionalized art.

Perhaps too the young Sicilian was anxious to relax any critical attitudes that could be associated with provincial narrow-mindedness. At all events the erstwhile champion of the family confessed to a new weakness:

la donna è libera e padrona di se stessa, mescolata in guisa molto attiva a tutto il movimento della società. Quindi sulla donna d'un secolo fa ha il vantaggio di una più squisita pulitezza di maniere, d'una maggiore larghezza d'istruzione, d'una sfera più vasta entro cui esercitarsi. Così non più sdegnuzzi, non più pettegolezzi, ma qualcosa di più serio, se non di più onesto. [. . .] osiamo confessare la nostra debolezza; la donna moderna ci sembra più donna quantunque meno ingenua.<sup>48</sup>

And when he came face to face with the last of the fallen women he would meet as drama critic for the *Nazione*, he championed her. In *Paul Forestier* Augier might well pursue his 'intento di morale pratica'. But what if the rejected mistress was more moving than the insipid convent girl chosen by Augier to be Forestier's legitimate wife? The play 'rebelled' against its author and provided a lesson for those who seek out 'nella falsità dei caratteri, nell'esagerazione degli affetti, nell'impossibilità degli avvenimenti quegli effetti che l'arte può avere solamente dal vero'.<sup>49</sup> If 'il vero' was in conflict with conventional moral values, Capuana preferred the former.

Capuana had learnt to value the immediacy of a simple true-to-life subject more highly than the soulless abstraction of one that preached at him. Under the aegis of De Sanctis, he began to examine the sense of aesthetic disappointment he experienced when a work seemed to thrust its intentions upon him. He concluded that in such a case the writer remained merely a critic and a thinker: the intellectual calculations (and these included any 'intento di morale pratica') which preceded

and accompanied composition were not confined to giving the work its underlying shape and meaning, but emerged in an insistent surface patterning which all was wrenched to fit. Yet there was no turning back to times when art had seemed the product of an unthinking rapture. The practical and self-critical spirit of the new nation and the rationalistic outlook on life that followed in the wake of anti-clerical Risorgimento liberalism on the one hand and positivist science on the other posed problems for literature not so easily circumvented. It was no accident that De Sanctis wrote:

È inutile mover lamenti sullo stato dell'arte e voler questo o quello; la scienza si è infiltrata nella poesia, nè la si può discacciare, perchè ciò risponde alle presenti condizioni dello spirito umano. Noi non possiamo volger lo sguardo a nessuna cosa sì bella, che tosto fra la nostra ammirazione non s'introduca di soppiatto un:—È ragionevole?—, ed eccoci a vele gonfie in mezzo alla critica ed alla scienza.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, if De Sanctis acknowledged regret for the passing of an age when knowledge had been a passion and a spur to action ('il pensiero non è più la parola, la parola non è più l'azione. Oh! noi abbiamo bisogno di fede che tolga l'aridità al nostro cuore, il vacuo alla nostra ragione, l'ipocrisia ai nostri atti'<sup>51</sup>), Capuana did not. He belonged to a later generation with a less impetuous social mission and a respect for knowledge—particularly scientific knowledge—in its unalloyed state. He therefore welcomed the critical spirit of his age, and aimed only to see how it might emerge in the art of his contemporaries without destroying it. Here De Sanctis was instructive. For the *Saggi* criticized not only rhetorical and preceptive works of art (and here one may recall their treatment of Guerrazzi and Bresciani) but any instance of an intellectual concept, however elevated, failing to find concrete, 'vital' expression: 'non il concetto, ma la concezione, il concetto corporale visibile e accessibile ai sensi' was what De Sanctis sought.<sup>52</sup> Capuana marvelled similarly that 'si possa fare un'opera di letteratura senza fare un'opera letteraria, e ciò in grazia del'alto concetto che potrà esservi dentro'.<sup>53</sup> He concluded that 'il giorno che la riflessione si mescola al lavoro della spontaneità l'opera artistica perde metà del suo pregio. Il giorno che la riflessione vuol sostituirsi alla spontaneità l'arte è perduta e rimane il mestiero'.<sup>54</sup> Because of the nature of his age, however, the relationship between thought and spontaneous creation seemed to Capuana balanced on a veritable knife-edge; and it was in part because narrative structures afforded opportunities for analytical discussion that he eventually saw in the novel the appropriate genre for his times.

In the meantime two further facets of his criticism emerged: they too were inseparable from his evolving outlook upon morality in art, and from his opinion that contemporary intellectualism threatened art's integrity. Both were traceable in the end to his reading of De Sanctis. He began to stress the importance of 'forma'. This was no longer a neutral term designating style or expression, but a term which in itself could carry connotations of approval as in De Sanctis's aphorism: 'Il poeta

non rappresenta l'idea se non quando con amorosa intuizione la coglie in una forma'.<sup>55</sup> 'Forma' was the expressed totality of the work of art; the labours of composition and expression, the persuasions of the writer as individual, did not disappear but were transformed and fused together in a new reality. Once Capuana's moral scruples abated, his aesthetic responses were freed and the idea of 'forma' became predominant. And so, reviewing Marchese Trevisani's account of recent Italian theatre, he took the opportunity to protest at the critic's 'patria carità' in linking Italy's failures with her exploitation of the theatre as an agent of morality. Italy was ready to accept that such excuses were untenable; it was time, Capuana felt, for a more mature, exact view of art:

il concetto non costituisce per sè medesimo il punto più rilevante in un'opera d'arte, perchè rientra nel dominio della speculazione politica, filosofica, sociale, ecc., mentre invece è la forma, esclusivamente la forma, quella che ne determina sempre il carattere, e l'assicura l'esistenza. [. . .] non cesseremo di ripeterlo, il problema della forma è la questione più urgente del nostro teatro.<sup>56</sup>

It was logical that having come this far, Capuana should take a further step. 'Concepts' properly existed in art only when they were 'lost' in the concrete representations of form. The consciousness of the writer was not identical with the consciousness of his creation; and the totality of a work of art had meanings of which its constituent parts were unaware. With increasing urgency Capuana demanded that this separation be preserved, lest authors produce an 'automa che lascia intravedere il macchinismo che lo muove'.<sup>57</sup> What he urged upon playwrights was impersonality, in fact if not in name. Contemporary German theatre, he wrote,

non si trasfonde abbastanza nei suoi personaggi fino a celarsi allo sguardo degli spettatori: non oblia tanto se stesso e le sue preoccupazioni filosofiche, politiche, e religiose sino a indovinare il pensiero dei personaggi che vuol mettere in scena;<sup>58</sup>

while *I Mariti* gained praise for Torelli on this count too:

Quelle figure hanno un'espressione così profonda di verità; quegli avvenimenti scorrono e s'intrecciano con tanta naturalezza e con semplicità sì stupenda, che tu sperimenti subito *il più grande effetto dell'arte, quello di dimenticare perfettamente l'artista*.<sup>59</sup>

Thus in Capuana's thinking impersonality or objectivity was not dependent, as may be supposed, on the 'scientific' impassivity of naturalism (though it could and did gain additional impetus from it), but devolved naturally from a De Sanctisian conception of form.

### 3. *Hegelianism and Positivism: the Discovery of the Novel*

'Stanco per gli assidui studi e per la lunga assenza dal paese natìo',<sup>60</sup> Capuana returned to Mineo in June 1868, and there he remained almost without interruption until 1877, following his father's death as head of a large family, and

as mayor and school inspector. Colleagues and friends (including Verga and Angelo Camillo De Meis who soon exerted pressures of a different order) unavailingly deplored his isolation. But it was not a period of stagnation, for the aspiring dramatist was transformed during it into a narrator. The process was not casual or sudden but had been quietly initiated in Florence.

One phenomenon which Capuana had noted in contemporary works was 'l'*umanizzarsi dell'arte*'.<sup>61</sup> The literature of his day had become more human and precise, more firmly anchored in prosaic reality. Capuana had noticed too, with some regret, that the modern formula for art was 'l'*individualità*'.<sup>62</sup> Patently these tendencies were difficult to reconcile with the idea of a national theatre as it had been conceived—the nation's unifier and propagator of solid, middle-class values. Furthermore, while Capuana held fast to his own more finely shaded versions of this conception (art was to mirror contemporary society and at the same time delve into complex psychological states), he was still unable to see them in any unified perspective. Thus the formula of approval he applied to the great theatrical success of those years, *I Mariti*, ('ha letto nel gran libro della società; ha scrutato le pieghe nascoste del cuore')<sup>63</sup> separated the two issues.

The novel, however, increasingly seemed to writers an instrument of infinite flexibility in which all otherwise irreconcilable desiderata could be accommodated. The capitulation in its favour which began in the sixties accelerated. The theatre at the time when Capuana wrote still gave pride of place to the drawing-rooms of the privileged classes and did not despise dramatized proverbs in the manner of Musset: the sort of reality it purveyed was circumscribed by the need to be generally representative and ideologically sound. In contrast the novel was a long *tête à tête* with the reader. It could venture into territories both geographical and psychological which were uncharted in the theatre (thus completing the partial portrait of society provided by playwrights) precisely because in the novelist the reader had a guide ready if necessary to calm his fears and explain the unfamiliar. In comparison with France and England, Italian narrative had a tenuous tradition, and its form and function consequently invited free experimentation. There was at the time a general feeling that Italy was passing through a politically prosaic period determined by the need to know and unify her separate regions. The novel now seemed the genre most suited for the work of unification and investigation: functioning on a relatively modest technical level it was accessible to the anonymous mass of middle-brow readers who lived outside the great centres of culture and beyond the reach of the theatre; and it could move freely between social reportage—Renato Fucini's *Napoli a occhio nudo*—and the psychological study with a regional setting—Giovanni Verga's *Storia di una capinera*. Rovani had seen it as a 'democratic' genre and one of limitless malleability:

Tutte le verità e della religione e della filosofia e della storia, se hanno voluto uscire dall'angusta oligarchia dei savi, per travasarsi al popolo, hanno dovuto attraversare

la forma del romanzo che tutto assume: la prosa, la poesia, le infinite gradazioni dello stile; ei si innalza, in un bisogno, nelle più alte regioni dell'idea, s'abbassa tra le realtà del mondo pratico; è elegia, è lirica, è epica, è commedia, è critica, è satira, è discussione, al pari dell'iride ha tutti i colori, ed è per questo che si diffonde nel popolo.<sup>64</sup>

The next generation did not subordinate the pleasing variousness of the novel to its capacity to propagate the wisdom of the 'savi', but took note of it and concurred particularly with Rovani in associating the genre with 'critica' and 'discussione'. For theirs was an age of positivism. Easily assimilated in its essentials by non-scientists, positivism had engaged support for its patient objective researches outside the university as well as within that bastion of tradition; and its methods seemed extensible to all branches of knowledge. To Italy's intellectuals the whole world seemed ready to be rediscovered and discussed in this new practical spirit. While positivism reimmersed men in nature, it gave them confidence in their ability to understand all aspects of their existence. The *mediocritas* of the novel corresponded to this moderate optimism and to the desire to describe, and take cognizance of, the multiform aspects of the nation. In 1872 the young Fogazzaro referred to the 'passione di ritrarsi e di vedersi ritratto' of that time, and saw the novel as 'l'espressione prevalente del sentimento poetico del nostro tempo', a uniquely modern genre where 'l'epica, la lirica, la satira si trovano intrecciate'.<sup>65</sup>

Some evidence of Capuana's own attitudes to the novel can be gleaned from the pages of the *Nazione*. It was for him initially a convenient yardstick against which to measure dramatic achievement. It was, he felt, an analytical genre, capturing the unusual, the complex and the fleeting in everyday existence; as such its nature was alien to that of the theatre with its exemplary reality and timeless truths. Yet, even as he condemned any confusion of the two, he indicated what for him were the inviting possibilities of the novelistic genre. He criticized one French play, *Le Maître de la maison*, for failing to investigate the psychological basis of an improvable adulterous relationship:

In questo lavoro ogni autori (colpa del metodo abbracciato) hanno voluto improvvidamente trasportare sul teatro le avviluppate e molteplici peripezie del romanzo contemporaneo, disprezzando tutte le leggi che presiedono alla creazione de' due generi, leggi di proporzione, di spazio, di ottica, di convenzione ecc. di molte delle quali il romanzo o non ha bisogno o si difà con poco danno.

A novel, he continued, might have put the reader in the confidence of the adultress, allowing him to follow and understand the 'tanti piccoli *nulla*' that abutted on her 'fatale passione'.<sup>66</sup> For some time in Florence Capuana regretted the demise of that 'semplicità primitiva d'azione' which belonged to plays cast in a classical mould. But his own fascination for the *inediti* and the nuances of the psyche, which contemporary research in the moral sciences intensified, and his belief that art should examine human motivation prepared him to acquiesce in the general opinion that the novel was the genre appropriate to the age. What he had said of *Le Maître*

*de la maison* hinted that he would eventually consider the theatre conventional and hidebound—limited by formal and social considerations—and thus incapable of conducting any truly incisive and unbiased examination of society. A decade later Zola contrasted the two genres:

le lecteur isolé tolère tout, va où l'on veut le mener, même lorsqu'il se fâche, tandis que les spectateurs pris en masse ont des pudeurs, des effacements, des sensibilités dont il faut tenir compte, sous peine de chute certaine. Tout cela est vrai, c'est précisément pour cela que le théâtre est la dernière citadelle de la convention.<sup>67</sup>

Capuana was seldom so openly provocative, but he was soon expressing his sense of the arbitrariness of failures that depended on mass 'pudeur' or on local reaction. It came to seem that it was a more serious business to address the educable 'lecteur isolé'.

Other cultural factors helped to determine a new artistic orientation in Capuana. Towards the end of his stay in Florence a generic Hegelianism had begun to infiltrate his criticism, suggesting that literature was one among many forms of thought which was governed by a law of perfectibility. He spoke of his belief that

cotesto modo d'essere dell'Idea [l'arte] avesse subito e subisse ancora un continuo svolgimento; e che ora per ispirazioni spontanee, ora per mezzi riflessi, tendesse sempre a dilatarsi, a perfezionarsi, a correggersi con costante e non interrotta assiduità.<sup>68</sup>

This Hegelianism involved a view of literature which so far from being at war with the then forceful influences of positivist criticism stressing connexions between historical periods and their intellectual products, seemed rather to reinforce them. This new approach, combining with Capuana's opinion that substantial intellectual and scientific advances were currently being made, made the epic genre, for instance, seem outmoded, and primitive. It no longer corresponded to the disingenuous, reflective nature of the times. The spontaneous, collective imagination which once furnished the legend essential to the epic was impotent in an age whose self-critical nature and whose universally available culture was symbolized by the newspaper: 'il giornale', he wrote, 'ha già reso inetta la tradizione'.<sup>69</sup> Such was the persuasiveness of this view of modern society which both Hegelianism and positivism appeared to substantiate that Capuana saw fit to draw Manzoni into the debate on genres. In May 1867 at the end of a review of a historical drama Capuana quoted in translation Manzoni's comment that 'le goût toujours croissant des études historiques finira par modifier aussi les idées des spectateurs, et par rendre rares et difficiles les succès de théâtre qui ne sont fondés que sur l'ignorance du parterre.'<sup>70</sup> Limited in its implications as this comment was in context, to Capuana it appeared prophetic: Manzoni too had seen that the existence of an informed and critical audience affected the nature of art. Capuana himself took particular note of the 'progresso meraviglioso delle ricerche storiche',<sup>71</sup> and was soon paraphrasing the same Manzonian passage in

condemnation of the whole historical genre,<sup>72</sup> and declaring: 'la letteratura storica deve svanire e trasformarsi in critica ed in istoria, cioè in esposizioni e commentarii dei documenti.'<sup>73</sup> It seemed clear to him that the nineteenth century had no more use for primitive amalgamations of fact and fancy. That particular combination which was the epic he relegated to the remote past (employing a parallel with extinct animal species which speaks clearly of the current application of evolutionary theories to man's spiritual pursuits). He concluded: 'noi possediamo al giorno d'oggi un'opera d'arte non meno difficile dell'epopea e popolare quant'essa al suo tempo, ma più seria, più variata, più efficace, diremmo quasi più eccellente, e giusta è il romanzo'. It was naturally not the historical novel ('parto ibrido e falso') that Capuana had in mind, but the novel which dealt with contemporary 'costumi e caratteri'.<sup>74</sup> Nor was his definition of the novel as 'difficult' and 'serious' a defence of the genre that had been so lately despised. It was an invitation to see in the novel an ideal repository of that critical self-consciousness that characterized the age.

Capuana's conclusions in favour of the novel were soon buttressed by Angelo Camillo De Meis's recent philosophical novel, *Dopo la laurea*. The volume was sent to him in Mineo not later than June 1869 by Cesira Pozzolini (a Florentine acquaintance) and her husband Professor Pietro Siciliani who taught at the University of Bologna where De Meis since 1863 had held a chair in the History of Medicine. Since Capuana was never more than an amateur in philosophical matters, the objective strength of his buttress is not in question: certainly as far as he was concerned it produced nothing less than total intellectual renewal.

*Dopo la laurea* consists of an exchange of letters between Giorgio, a newly qualified doctor in medicine, and his older, wiser friend, Filalete, interspersed with 'intermezzi' by the 'editor'. The letters purport to trace a philosophical debate which culminates in Giorgio's conversion to the Hegelian truths expounded by Filalete. But in reality both Giorgio (who plays the token sceptic and positivist) and Filalete are a single personality—the Hegelian enthusiast who is their creator. At most they portray successive stages in De Meis's intellectual autobiography. The book is repetitive, and fulsome in expression. Croce justifiably cited it as an example of how at the hands of certain of Spaventa's disciples Italian Hegelianism 'si solidificò in domma, incapace di autocritica, sterile di svolgimenti'.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless it was calculated in those years to provoke interest, for it subjected the question of the historical development of religion and the arts to a philosophical scrutiny which De Meis's status as a scientist rendered the more worthy of credence.

The main burden of *Dopo la laurea* is that the various manifestations of the Human Spirit, artistic, religious and scientific, tend inexorably in the course of time towards absorption into pure Thought. The Spirit reveals itself ever more directly, casting gradually aside the 'primitive' images which veil and embody it, and finally thinks itself without mediation. Religion, for instance, abandons its primal anthropomorphism and the ritual and symbolism which are the images of its underlying

truth and becomes an act of pure meditation. Literature, in approximating ever more closely to the Idea, is less and less able to achieve a perfect balance of concept and image:

É invece una serie di forme estetiche l'una men perfetta dell'altra, come quelle che sempre meno adempiono alle assolute condizioni dell'arte; e sono sempre meno naturali e spontanee, meno epiche e fantastiche, sempre più spirituali, liriche, filosofiche, e vie più reali; e sì l'intenzione dell'arte è sempre men lieta e bella, e vie più trasparente ed immediata all'ideale.

Thus, unlike religion which becomes purified and more true *qua* religion as it approaches philosophical status, art becomes less and less true as art but more and more perfect as philosophy: each genre or 'forma estetica' assumed by the artistic spirit comes to perfection before it perishes, but each form is less perfect in terms of art than its predecessor because more thoughtful and philosophical and less imaginative. The epic therefore, in presenting knowledge in a form which is 'principalmente intuitiva e fantastica', precedes drama which 'apre l'adito alla riflessione'; just as drama precedes the modern lyric which is thoughtful and 'scava più addentro nell'anima umana'.<sup>76</sup>

This schema provided an appealingly non-rhetorical, 'scientific' theory of genres. It confirmed Capuana's view of the epic, and it also gave striking corroboration for that widespread approval of the novel, even extending a welcome to its 'realism'. For De Meis the only possible form of literature in a modern scientific age was the novel:

è il romanzo, ed è la vera epica, la sola possibile epopea del tempo moderno, una epopea tutta naturale e umana, senza soprannaturale, e tutta infiltrata, ma non compenetrata di realtà e di riflessione. [. . .]

Il romanzo corrisponde perfettamente, ed esattamente rappresenta e riproduce lo stato dello spirito diviso fra l'arte e la scienza, fra la poesia e la prosa, e che non potendo ancora creare una scienza poetica, crea per ora una poesia prosaica.<sup>77</sup>

Capuana spoke of having tackled Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* in about 1870. But as he disarmingly confessed 'ci voleva ben altro che i [suoi] denti!'.<sup>78</sup> *Dopo la laurea*, despite or because of its simplifications, was the real means through which Capuana experienced at first-hand and clearly a 'scientific' approach to the history of literature. Moreover De Meis, unlike his German master, was in a position to confront a problem that pressed for attention at that time—the relationship between positivistic thinking and the Hegelian system.

As far as De Meis was concerned the empirical discovery of an 'infinità di ammiccoli e d'accidenti' merely led up the blind alley of interminable classification. The significance of such scientific findings needed to be understood in the context of the progressive self-explication of Spirit. In this process empirical science represented a median stage, neither encumbered by superstition nor yet aspiring to 'la grande ragione intuitiva' or Philosophy,<sup>79</sup> but rational, orderly,

detail-obsessed. Scornful as the terminology he habitually applied to positivism was, De Meis none the less integrated it into his system: it was if nothing else an indispensable rung in the ladder that mounted to Philosophy. As such Capuana interpreted it as he threw a bridge between materialism and metaphysics:

lo studio della filosofia egheliana ha avuto ed ha una grandissima importanza nella mia evoluzione critica e artistica. Il concetto delle forme artistiche e del loro svolgimento nella storia, è tutto egheliano, di quell'eghelianismo ritemperato con gli studi delle scienze naturali moderne. Questo concetto mi ha fatto studiare in modo proficuo la storia dell'arte, dandomi la convinzione che le forme artistiche sono quasi identiche alle forme naturali, e non capricciose, accidentali, ma svolgonsi con un logico processo, arrivano alla loro perfetta applicazione, decadono e muoiono. Una delle vere gioie della mia vita è stata il trovare questo concetto con una potenza straordinaria in un libro del De Meis che ritengo dovrebbe essere il vademecum di tutti quelli che si occupano d'arte e di critica.<sup>80</sup>

Positivist literary criticism showed that art assumes changing forms adapted to the prevailing social, cultural and political conditions, like a plant in given conditions of soil and climate. This variability seemed merely to confirm the Hegelian succession of genres. Experience too suggested that certain forms of literature once they were incarnated in masterpieces survived thereafter in pallid imitations. It seemed to Capuana, for instance, that tragedy had reached its culmination with Shakespeare and after him merely clung to life: 'dopo Shakespeare delle vere tragedie non se ne sono viste quantunque ne siano state scritte delle belle migliaia.'<sup>81</sup> This was perhaps not a fastidious judgement as to its detail, but it was not easily controverted in substance (pending, at all events, the advent of a second Shakespeare). Thus it had all the appearance of a literary *fact* which confirmed the Hegelian theory of the mortality of genres. In this way Capuana placed a foot in both camps. He failed to perceive that they housed natural enemies, the positivist approach being applied disinterestedly to a series of events (or intellectual notions or forms of literature) which itself formed the subject of the research, while Hegelian idealism, acknowledging an optimising tendency in the historical series, saw behind an observed succession of changes the workings of some basic substance (the Spirit), this substance being the subject of the historical enquiry.

The misunderstanding might be dismissed with the airiness Capuana revealed when, explaining away the 'strano connubio', he described himself as 'un curioso e nient'altro, un dilettante e nient'altro',<sup>82</sup> were it not for the fact that (despite the 'scientific' course of his immediate career), Capuana's 'connubio' presaged the reappearance of spiritual values in his narrative towards the end of the century when a quantitative and morally indifferent appraisal of human affairs no longer seemed adequate. The shift from positivism to 'spiritualism' and idealism which affected in various ways writers like Matilde Serao and D'Annunzio as well as Capuana can be said to depend on the compromised beginnings of positivism itself Marina Musitelli Paladini has shown recently how Bertrando Spaventa extended a

welcome to positivism, seeing in it an impulse to concrete analysis strictly compatible with his own historicism;<sup>83</sup> and Eugenio Garin writes significantly of Pasquale Villari: 'Ancora nel '54 esalta Hegel, pur riconoscendo i nessi fra filosofia della storia e scienze positive'.<sup>84</sup> Indeed Villari's case is instructive. His essay, 'La filosofia positiva ed il metodo storico', published by the Milanese *Politecnico* in 1866, asserts that positivism provides a new method, not a new philosophical system: 'si riduce all'applicazione del metodo storico alle scienze morali, dando ad esso l'importanza medesima, che ha il metodo sperimentale nelle scienze naturali'. As far as Villari was concerned the new method divided questions into those that could and could not hope to be answered definitively, confining itself to the former 'senza però negare l'esistenza di ciò che ignora'.<sup>85</sup> In this way positivism was made to occupy a neutral territory, no more concerned with materialism than with any metaphysical system. Pietro Siciliani himself provides a final illustration of the confluence of the two schools of thought. 'A chi ben consideri', he wrote in *Sul rinnovamento della filosofia positiva in Italia*,

*l'Idea degli hegeliani è il Fatto stesso dei positivisti; ma il Fatto guardato in sè, il fatto considerato fuori le condizioni del tempo e dello spazio, cioè come legge. Al contrario, il Fatto de' positivisti è l'Idea hegeliana, ma l'Idea considerata fuori di sè, l'Idea come tempo e come spazio, come natura e come storia, come fenomeno. [. . .] La formula del Positivismo (fatto e legge del fatto) [. . .] non è se non l'Idea guardata nella sua superficie sensata.*<sup>86</sup>

Such equations must have struck the non-specialist as comfortably non-controversial. And if Capuana saw Hegelianism beginning where positivism left off, this was hardly surprising. Confiding his impressions of Siciliani's work with due diffidence to its author, he associated himself with its message of conciliation: 'il fatto senza l'idea è nulla'; approved Siciliani's position, equidistant from positivists 'che negano recisamente la scienza' and from Hegelians 'i quali considerano che la scienza è bella e fatta'; and suggested in addition that since man by nature strove towards all-knowledge it was inevitable that he should seek to illumine the 'sacra, infinita ombra del di là'.<sup>87</sup>

Capuana's was a positivism with metaphysical appendages, a *juste milieu* stance with room for manoeuvre. One may wonder at the ideological flexibility of Capuana and some of his contemporaries. Carlo Madrignani explains it in terms of cultural politics: 'quello che interessava alla classe dominante del secondo Ottocento era 'nobilitare' la propria funzione storica ed economica coll'aiuto di una 'scienza' o di una 'filosofia' che presentasse i crismi dell' 'eternità' e dell' 'universalità'.' Following the critic's lead, it is perhaps legitimate to see what he calls 'la precoce commistione di elementi filosofici idealistici e materialistici'<sup>88</sup> as calculated to deprive both systems of any power they might have had separately to offer a radical reinterpretation of reality. Certainly in Capuana the 'connubio' has a conservative air, as of one unwilling to discard any available options. And this conservatism has its relevance to his narrative, where, as we shall see, it constantly

undermines his impact.

De Meis's influence on Capuana was on the whole spasmodic and superficial, though Capuana continued throughout his life to consider him one of the great shaping intellects of the period. He certainly served to align Capuana with the nascent idealism of the nineties. The idea of the mortality of genres (and even of art itself) made an occasional, conjectural appearance in Capuana's criticism; and the De Meisan system lent tacit support from time to time for his highly speculative intellectual sorties on the subject of the future of religion or the arts. But in the early seventies De Meis was undeniably persuasive and important. He crystallized all of the drama critic's dissatisfactions into a conclusion which was both positive and, given all the other pointers in its direction, apparently irrefutable: narrative must succeed to drama.

The preface to *Il Teatro italiano contemporaneo*, balanced between De Sanctisian aesthetics and De Meis's theory of genres, takes its leave of the theatre. It pronounces a death sentence over the historical genre in the name of 'una legge necessaria, ineluttabile che trovasi racchiusa nell'intima essenza del pensiero umano agente come Arte'; and finds that in France the *commedia contemporanea* has already reached such a pitch of critical self-consciousness that it cannot survive without resolving into pure thought. Returning to *Les Idées de Mme Aubray*, Capuana comments:

sono l'arte che si piace di camminare sul filo d'un rasoio, benchè senta di già montarsi la vertigine alla testa. Ci manca poco perchè qui il personaggio, la creatura, abbia tutta la coscienza di se stessa quanto il poeta, suo creatore, ed è l'inizio dell'ultima fase in cui l'arte si risolve nel suo puro principio, il pensiero.<sup>89</sup>

(And here, in this preoccupation with the balance of thinker and creator in the work of art, lies what Capuana saw as the common ground that united De Sanctis and De Meis.) There is no mention of the novel, but the preface is as much a welcome to the 'scientific', reflective novel as a farewell to the theatre.

Even if scientific research had been more specialised and inaccessible than it was, the 'positive', rationalistic character of the times would have served to awaken widespread interest in its achievements. The sixties saw the publication or translation of work—from Darwin's *Origin of Species* to Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*—whose influence would rapidly spill over into disciplines that were traditionally non-scientific. This spillage was a characterizing feature of the age. Biological evolutionism affected the way man's spiritual development was considered. What had been mere analogy became identity: man in all his dimensions was now viewed as subject to a single evolutionary process. The monism of the positivistic creed fused physiological and moral man, and Comte's disciple, Hippolyte Taine, could write the notorious words:

Que les faits soient physiques ou moraux, il n'importe, ils ont toujours des causes; il

y en a pour l'ambition, pour le courage, pour la véracité, comme pour la digestion, pour le mouvement musculaire, pour la chaleur animale. Le vice et la vertu sont des produits comme le vitriol et le sucre, et toute donnée complexe, naît par la rencontre d'autres données plus simples dont elle dépend.<sup>90</sup>

The positivist method was to extend from science and philosophy to other fields, from psychology, anthropology to literary historiography, everywhere suggesting that behind each observed phenomenon lay a material causality. In such a climate Cesare Lombroso, founder of criminology, worked out his theories on the hereditary nature of criminality, and produced a series of studies on artistic genius, seeing in it an excessive sensitivity of the nervous system. And Paolo Mantegazza's numerous works on sexual love, though ultimately concerned to offer practical advice of a totally conventional kind, were not afraid to see love as a basic self-reproductive instinct or romantic feelings as nerve impulses.

Lombroso and Mantegazza were working on the fringes of areas occupied by creative artists, and writers including Capuana gradually took stock of the closing gap between science and art—of a new, scientific interpretation of moral man.

In his early days Capuana considered that science ('il reale') had temporarily contaminated the pure sphere of art ('l'ideale'). At a time when the word 'realism' as applied to literature still denoted vulgarity and immorality, he indeed attributed its spread to scientific values. But it is difficult to resist the impression that in those same days the young critic felt himself on trial and responded by displaying an ultra-conservative façade (and a stately prose-style) to suit the occasion. At all events by 1867 the scientist was Capuana's ideal man. In October of that year he published a short story entitled 'Dr Cymbalus', the only imaginative work of the Florentine period to reach an audience, and the beginning of a life-long interest in science fiction.<sup>91</sup>

At first sight 'Dr Cymbalus' seems to pass negative judgement on science: William Usinger, crossed in love and determined on suicide, is persuaded by his philosopher-friend, Strauss, to undergo an irreversible surgical operation (a sort of leucotomy which will numb his emotions) at the hands of Dr Cymbalus; the operation is successful but eventually the patient, despairing of his insensibility, resorts to shooting himself. The end is a piece of deliberate irony and no blame attaches to Cymbalus. The story indeed is not an indictment of meddling, over-confident science, but a demonstration that true science knows the hazards of interfering with nature. It is not Strauss, author of a *Nuovo sistema della Natura*, who holds this 'philosophic' view, but the reluctant surgeon himself, Dr Cymbalus. On him Capuana expends all the modest care for characterization contained in the story. Cymbalus represents the ideal type of the modern scientist, deeply respectful of Nature's laws, yet awesomely powerful in his understanding of them; modest, compassionate and human (Capuana cannot resist showing him as he unaffectedly plays with two small children) yet fiercely dedicated to his work. His 'vegli sostenute in pro della scienza e della umanità' contrast eloquently with the

somnolence a 'problema di alta metafisica' provokes in Strauss. The potential which Capuana attributed to modern science is summed up in the following lines of dialogue between Strauss and Usinger:

'Il dottor Cymbalus ti salverà.'  
 È dunque un dio cotest'uomo?'  
 'Uno scenziato; val quasi lo stesso.'<sup>92</sup>

One critic has seen in Capuana 'non la convinzione del valore della scienza, ma proprio all'incontrario, la fede che la scienza non potrà mai cogliere il segreto processo della vita',<sup>93</sup> a tempting conclusion in view of Cymbalus's modesty and the consequences of the operation; but nevertheless a mistaken one, for Capuana always saw open-mindedness and self-doubt as the hallmark of the truly scientific mentality; and through Cymbalus he apologised only for the 'misera attuale' of science,<sup>94</sup> believing that in time it would overcome every obstacle.

A final article written for the *Nazione*, and published when he was already in Mineo, shows that science was impinging on Capuana's critical values. The work under examination is Prati's *Armando*, and the significant portion of Capuana's article concerns the vision experienced by Armando in a state of hallucination. Capuana criticizes it for being so carefully structured as to betray the author's guiding hand. Such a criticism comes within the ambit of Capuana's realism: he looks for verisimilitude through objectivity. But there is more and it is startling. The newspaper version of the article contains a passage (excised in the later version for the book, and thus unnoticed by Capuana's critics) which displays what must be called a proto-naturalism; and does so at a time when little more than the preface of 1868 to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin* was available to establish the scientific character of the new realism. But to Capuana, regretting that the conduct of the hallucination episode was *scientifically* unsound, the transition from the mere 'studio del vero' of realism to the scientific fidelity of naturalism clearly seems logical, and could be achieved independently. We may easily reconstruct his thinking. Capuana expresses the opinion that the 'creazioni ideali' of art must retain intact 'i caratteri più strettamente essenziali delle cose reali a cui corrispondono': a 'verità reale' is rarely a 'verità artistica', for art is essential reality, a reality purified of all that does not illuminate its fundamental nature. But what is the scientific method if not the most sophisticated observing of reality? It takes account of the variables that may affect its observations, and distills from them an exemplary pattern of events, a quintessential truth. This is the reasoning behind the following comments on Prati:

Noi non abbiamo avuto affatto l'intenzione di domandargli: dov'è la diagnosi del tuo ammalato? Dov'è l'etiologia del suo male? [. . .] Abbiamo notato invece, che due o tre punti presentati dall'osservazione scientifica sarebbero stati di gran lunga più poetici della sua creazione, nè solamente perchè più veri, ma perchè rivestiti d'un carattere speciale che li rende naturalmente artistici in sommo grado. È innegabile che quello stato della natura da noi chiamato morboso presenta

spessissimo gli elementi della più elevata idealità.<sup>95</sup>

In the light of what follows the opening words of the passage are somewhat rhetorical: clearly Capuana views the 'stato morboso' as artistically significant: it intensifies normal reality—reveals it, as it were, in paroxysm—and thus endows it with the 'idealità' which art seeks after. It is clear too that Capuana is already disposed to welcome the 'caso patologico' of naturalism, though it seems unlikely that he was aware of the full implications of what he had written. In what frame of mind he removed from his later version of the article all suggestion that he was laying down artistic procedures that applied to more than *Armando* it is hard to say. But there is an enthusiasm for science in what he says which would in itself engender certain expectations of his narrative. The scientists he names (with evident relish and no real necessity) are Esquirol, Leuret, Mitivié, and Georget: all Frenchmen who had worked, chiefly between 1820 and 1840, on aspects of mental disease, heredity or the nervous system, in fields, that is, which were calculated to attract the literary naturalist at a period when moral action and human psychology seemed susceptible of physiological explanation.

#### 4. *The Psychological Analysis of 'Profili di donne'*

While deploring the difficulties that experimental physiology had encountered before being recognized and financed, Paolo Mantegazza also regrets that 'troppo fitta è l'ignoranza degli studi fisiologici in quelle classi che sogliamo chiamare colte'. If only, he continues, writers were also physiologists, 'quante immagini svariate, ricche di colorito e di forza; quanti contrasti di luce potrebbe trovare il poeta nella storia della vita! Come lo scrittore approfondirebbe sicuro lo scalpello nel cuore umano, s'egli fosse fisiologo!'<sup>96</sup> His enthusiasm was the enthusiasm of an age, and the stories of *Profili di donne*, written in the seventies,<sup>97</sup> were conceived in part as the anatomy of the 'cuore umano' Mantegazza envisages. Their attempt to register subtleties of thought and emotion with unprecedented accuracy was their claim to modernity. Since he viewed literature as a progression, this modernity was vital to Capuana. De Meis had given him the confidence that he knew the course literature was currently steering and could intercept it on its path. As he confided to Cesareo: 'La mia intenzione, naturalmente, è stata quella di far progredire lo sviluppo della forma da me presa, [. . .] assimilandomi tutti i risultati degli sforzi altrui.'<sup>98</sup> But it was the assimilation of those 'sforzi altrui' that gave *Profili di donne* an old-fashioned air. The plays and short stories of *Dumas fils* are Capuana's chief inspiration. He greatly admired Dumas's handling of female psychology, his acumen as an 'anatomista dell'amore'. The words, 'Che meraviglioso problema è la donna! Ieri femmina perduta, oggi vergine pura!'<sup>99</sup> which Capuana quoted appreciatively from *Ce qu'on ne sait pas* 'potrebbero sintetizzare l'ispirazione di queste novelle', as a critic remarks.<sup>100</sup> Constant's *Adolphe* too was not far from Capuana's mind. In 1872 when he reviewed Verga's *Storia di una capinera*, insisting significantly on the

author's capacity for psychological analysis, he saw in *Adolphe* 'una crudele e straordinaria potenza d'analisi che ricerca i più oscuri, i più impenetrabili, i più ignorati angoli del cuore': an archetypal *roman d'analyse* ('sarà ripetuto all'infinito').<sup>101</sup> It is as though Capuana intended to modernize an amatory material borrowed from France by investigating it with the precision that contemporary thinking demanded of science.

Admiring as he was of modern, emancipated woman, Capuana believed no doubt that he treated his six heroines with sympathy. But it was impossible to anticipate true feminist feeling by fifty years, and *Profili di donne* is informed throughout by Capuana's protective gallantry. It is an attitude that belongs to Dumas (always ready to 'rehabilitate' his women, but never to challenge the society that makes them what they are) as well as to Capuana. And science itself merely analysed the current mythology of womanhood, but did not question it. Thus the anthropologist, Mantegazza himself, congratulated men on the improved education of women:

fatela sapiente, e la sapienza trasformerà in carezza; fatela forte, e della forza userà per farvi ricco; fatela grande, ed essa deporrà ai vostri piedi la sua grandezza in cambio di un bacio.<sup>102</sup>

Or, less lyrically, he drew 'scientific' distinctions:

La donna può godere più dell'uomo delle delizie sensitive, ma essa rimane assai al disotto dell'uomo nel godimento dei tesori intellettuali.<sup>103</sup>

It is not surprising therefore that the 'modernity' of Capuana's woman is confined to her capriciousness, her nervousness, her emotional volatility: the narrator of the story entitled 'Fasma' declares that his sympathetic curiosity is engaged not by a healthy, peasant 'massaia'—'la donna all'antica'—but by the 'nervosa', the 'agitata', the 'tormentatissima' Fasma.<sup>104</sup> The elegance of her dress, the refined simplicity of her *salotto*, the lingering melancholy of a failed love-affair, her unprotected, solitary existence—such are the spiritual and physical accessories of the heroine which in *Profili di donne* entice the sophisticated contemplator. This sadistic connoisseurship would be less intrusive were it not for Capuana's constant use of the first person—'quel petulantissimo fra i pronomi' as an exasperated reviewer noted: whether the character-narrator calls himself Carlo or Oreste or Eugenio he is always the same 'amante fortunatissimo', the 'sultano di un harèm'.<sup>105</sup>

Capuana however had reasons for his choice. Realism, as he conceived it, eliminated the author, tried to give the reader 'un'impressione non di seconda mano, ma immediata' (p.v.). This office the first person had long fulfilled. It facilitated too the reader's emotional identification with the material; and Capuana's realism, despite all that has been written of the detachment of realism's adherents, aspired to communicate an emotional experience through verisimilitude itself. If four or five readers, Capuana wrote, felt 'la metà delle emozioni' he had

experienced in writing, 'il suo amor proprio di autore' would be well satisfied (p. vii). And it is worth remembering at this point the terms in which the 'impersonal' Verga expressed his disapproval of *Mme Bovary* and Flaubert: 'non ti fa affezionare ai personaggi del dramma [. . .] il libro è scritto da scettico, anche riguardo alle passioni che descrive.'<sup>106</sup>

Capuana agreed: he persisted in seeing Flaubert as 'indifferente, freddo o ironico e canzonatore [. . .] innanzi al soggetto del suo studio'.<sup>107</sup>

The first person set in motion the fiction of the literal veracity of the stories. Even the preface insists that these are 'sincere confidenze', 'sensazioni vere' written only for the author's satisfaction (pp. vii, v). Apostrophes to a hypothetical listener ('sii giudice tu stesso' (p. 60), 'Figurati!' (p. 78), 'Avevsi tu visto che incanto!' (p. 81), 'Tu sai bene' (p. 167) etc.) which are somewhat clumsy in context are clearly intended to foster the impression that the stories are 'overheard' by the reader or confided to him. Both Capuana and Verga (in *Eva*, for example, or in the epistolary outpourings of *Storia di una capinera*) re-utilize the traditional device of the first-person confession; but they do so in deference to a literal-minded age and the 'studio dal vero'.

*Profili di donne* is disdainful of plot. Its six stories, each bearing the name of a woman for title, relate a fleeting encounter between narrator and heroine. There is Delfina who confesses her long-concealed passion on the eve of her departure to Constantinople; Giulia whose disarming honesty dissuades the hero from pressing home the advantages he has gained by rescuing her from a situation compromising to her reputation; there is the mysterious Fasma, reluctantly enamoured, who deserts the narrator as unexpectedly as she struck up acquaintance with him; there is the fickle Ebe redeemed at last by a literally mortal passion; Emilia (in 'Iela') who briefly attracts Carlo through her resemblance to a platonic love of his adolescence; and Cecilia who with unerring intuition senses the coolness of her lover before he himself is aware of it. Some of the amorous situations contained in the book are sheer unlikelihood and wishful thinking. What for instance can possess Emilia's lover to leave her so conveniently and for days on end alone with Carlo, or Fasma to take up residence in the house of a man met casually on a train? But this wishful thinking itself emphasizes that Capuana is concerned not with what happens but with how it happens. *Profili di donne* uses event merely as a springboard for analysis, and in this way precociously foreshadows the tendency of Capuana's mature realism to devalue plot and to concentrate on interpretation and explanation.

Capuana's narrator is fascinated by thought-processes and feelings normally half-noted but instantly recognizable when pinned down and held in words: the bulk of the narrative wrestles with psychological idiosyncrasies and tabulates them. The resurgence of the date of unconscious memory forms a strong opening motif in 'Delfina' where meetings with the heroine, long-forgotten by the hero, are gradually restored to conscious recollection—a 'fenomeno', comments the narrator, 'molto

fuor del comune' (p. 5). In 'Iela' there is another instance of retarded recognition: the narrator realizes only after the concentrated effort of several days that his sense of familiarity with a stranger depends on her resemblance to a figure from his past. Not infrequently, scrutinizing these mechanisms of mind and heart, Capuana becomes abruptly scientific: the strange affinity sometimes felt by strangers 'vuol dire (è la fisiologia che l'attesta) che tra i due organismi vi sian rapporti di più intima natura, rapporti d'identità' (p. 63). Or the scientific and the sentimental mingle (in a manner generally characteristic of the work)<sup>108</sup> as Capuana wonders why 'l'amore si compiaccia volentieri di ombre e di mistero', and explains: 'La luce irrita, mette in attività, distrae le cento forze dell'organismo, e l'amore, questo terribile autocrate, non può tollerare che una menoma parte dell'attività vitale sia impiegata altrimenti' (pp. 103-4).

In *Profili di donne* physiology positivistically determines morality. Capuana presents personality in terms of the functioning of the 'organismo'; feelings in terms of the nervous system. Hence the expressions 'sentimento fisiologico' (p. 69), 'commozione nervosa' (p. 68), 'ginnastica morale' (p. 219) and the speculation as to whether 'un malessere fisico ne produca [. . .] uno morale, o se un patema d'animo agisca sui centri nervosi, li contragga e li faccia soffrire' (pp. 159-60). Hence too the narrator's declaration in 'Cecilia' that he is 'un po' materialista':

Credo vi abbia una profonda ragione fisica in questi turbamenti che l'influenza di un organismo fa risentire ad un altro [. . .] Senza credere a delle segrete ed intime affinità, non si arriva a spiegar nulla; affinità della materia, che si risolvono nelle affinità dello spirito. (p. 217).

But these same scientific attitudes and vocabulary stand shoulder to shoulder with Capuana's condescending chivalry and the ripe idiom of the *roman rose*—with phrases like 'sensazione ineffabile' (p. 13), 'ebbrezza voluttuosa' (p. 38), 'languore delizioso' (p. 43), 'tremenda voluttà' (p. 181) and 'terribile fascino' (p. 192). The volume constantly reflects a taste uncomfortably divided between the promptings of the contemporary scientific world and memories of a literature which brought the piquancy of vicarious emotion to bourgeois drawing-rooms.

The Sicilian's sense of linguistic inferiority (which he shares with the Verga of this period) betrays him into a conscious, mannered 'Florentinism'. There are endless diminutives ('vocina', 'figurina', 'lezioncina', 'donnina', 'manina', 'personcina', 'testina', 'piedino' etc.) and colloquialisms designed presumably to give an authentic Tuscan flavour: 'grullo', 'dare la berta', 'zinzino', 'la si sentiva', 'la mi perdoni'; and Capuana persistently uses the definite article before Christian names. His narrator proves particularly susceptible to a 'vocina dolce, insinuante, come se ne odono soltanto in Toscana' (p. 32). This linguistic self-consciousness together with the knots of scientific or passionate phraseology makes for an uneven stylistic texture; for a language which, though it is relaxed in general tenor, relies heavily on dialogue, and strives after the simplicity of the 'spontaneous', is

constantly calling attention to itself.

Where Capuana is moderately successful is not in the creation of a modern narrative style agile enough to grasp the nuances of the complex female psyche—his womenfolk are too apt to define themselves in Mantegazzian manner, beginning sentences with the tell-tale words, 'Noi donne . . .'—but in the introspective analysis of the hero himself. The hero of 'Cecilia' refers to a 'sdoppiamento dello spirito', to the contemporaneous existence, that is, of two selves, one subject to the 'incanti della passione', the other observant and detached, a 'spettatrice tranquilla' (p. 229). It is a duality characteristic of all Capuana's narrators, undifferentiated as they are from story to story. The act of narration itself, with its double dimension of reportage and commentary, aids the exposure of the conflicting impulses within the self. In 'Giulia', for instance, the narrator's determination to act out the role of seducer conflicts with the compassion aroused in him by Giulia's tale, and he confesses: 'Mi era uopo di credere ch'ella avesse fatto a quel caso un pochino di frangia' (p. 51). In 'Ebe' it is the wounded vanity of the discarded lover which makes him deaf to the 'intima voce del cuore' assuring him that the fickle Ebe is genuinely repentant (p. 126). The most suggestive psychological commentary turns on the distorted motivation of the calculating narrator, and his capacity to will his own self-delusion. Capuana tends to give this commentary aphoristic form, as though fleeting observations were now encapsulated as laws of human behaviour. Some of his aphorisms are far from banal, as when the narrator generalizes on bad faith: 'L'uomo è così: quando non può trovare scusa nella realtà delle cose, fa di tutto per persuadersi che le cose stiano precise come giovano a lui' (p. 51). The analytical inspiration which provokes such a comment, and the spirit of the comment (if not its penetration and elegance), bear comparison with *Adolphe*, where Constant remarks for instance: 'Presque toujours, pour vivre en repos avec nous-mêmes, nous travestissons en calculs et en systèmes nos impuissances ou nos faiblesses: cela satisfait cette portion de nous qui est, pour ainsi dire, spectatrice de l'autre.'<sup>109</sup>

*Adolphe* makes skilful use of the dual plane of the narration—the events of the story as they happened and their reflection in the recollecting mind—to suggest the deceptiveness of immediate experience ('je me sentais, de la meilleure foi du monde, véritablement amoureux'; 'l'amour [, . .] je crus tout à coup l'éprouver avec fureur'; '*Pendant que je lui parlais, je n'envisageais rien au delà de ce but et j'étais sincère dans mes promesses*' etc.).<sup>110</sup> This technique Capuana uses often exposing particularly the intrusion of volition into spontaneous thought or emotion ('Mi era uopo di credere', 'avevo bisogno di persuadermi' (p. 51); 'Forse vi era un che di artificiale in tutto cotesto rimescolarsi di sentimenti' (p. 229); 'capivo forse', 'm'illudevo volentieri', 'mi ostinavo a credere' (p. 247) etc.). Its most concentrated use is in 'Cecilia', a story which is indeed thematically close to *Adolphe* (and has the same title as Constant's unfinished novel, *Cécile*). Though Capuana's hero, unlike Constant's, is not faced with the painful consequences of his inability to

terminate a relationship which has grown burdensome (for Cecilia obligingly deserts him) his story revolves about the same central irony as *Adolphe*: the ceaselessly analytical hero proves less lucid than the emotional woman.

An 'anatomist' of passion sometimes stands alongside the introspective hero, hypothesizing about personality on the basis of gesture or external appearance. The process is significantly termed 'un lavoro di ricostruzione simile a quello dei naturalisti' (p. 154). And when the 'anatomist' gives way to an 'artista' the tone is unchanged, for this is an 'artista' of the seventies who stands back to contemplate his subject with rational detachment. Whenever he appears (to describe the elegance of a drawing-room as the work of an 'abile artista' (p. 120), for instance, or to meditatively assess the liaison he is contemplating 'come poesia, come arte in azione' (p. 219)) it is to suggest that the real world is unfelt until permeated through the images of literature or art. The 'scientist' and the 'artist' resemble each other in their detachment, and their oneness is of course symptomatic of the times: the resolute, 'scientific', non-involvement of large sections of *Profili di donne* is an attempt to adjust the introspective analysis learnt from Constant to a modern context.

It was perhaps the spirit of those times too which allowed the stories relative freedom with the theme of sexual passion. Rapisardi referred jocularly to their 'onesta scollacciatura',<sup>111</sup> and indeed Capuana's heroines are not always above taking the initiative or displaying their sensuality. But as is so often the case with *Profili di donne* each advance is accompanied by a retreat. The narrator, for all his positivistic turn of mind, still thinks in terms dictated by conventional morality. Can Fasma, he wonders, so swift in deciding to rent part of his villa, be an 'avventuriera' (p. 70)? Could Cecilia be 'una delle solite *femmes de proie*' expert in simulating 'le più squisite, le più pudiche ritrosie della virtù' (p. 228)? As long as such questions seem relevant to the narrator, all his approval of spirited independence in a woman can seem only egotistical and vulgar. Capuana's stories often end with a sharp, clinching comment no doubt designed to be elegant and pithily memorable. Thus after Ebe's death, we read:

E già parlo tranquillamente, e già sorrido pensando che obliare è una profonda, una divina necessità della vita; (p. 142)

after Cecilia has left:

Povera Cecilia! Tu non avresti mai creduto che perfino il mio rimpianto di amore sarebbe un giorno sfumato perdendosi fra le nebbie di un problema di metafisica!; (p. 265)

and when the narrator has abandoned his assault on Giulia:

abbottonai con grande soddisfazione il mio soprabito; poi mi posi a camminare colla testa alta e col cuore in festa, come chi ha fatto il suo dovere. (p. 55)

There is an unpleasant touch of self-congratulation or vanity in each of these endings. But, more than this, there is the ironic distance of the classic moral conclusion. Capuana's realism is as yet not mature enough to allow his message to emerge spontaneously, and in this respect the critic has stolen a march on the writer.

In the course of *Profili di donne* Capuana had plenty of opportunity to examine the position of woman in society even if the scope of the work confined him to her sexual relationships. Giulia, after all, has been abandoned by a lover and now struggles to preserve her self-respect and her reputation. Delfina and Cecilia are the victims of arranged marriages, and Emilia absconds from home to join her lover. There was material enough for the author who had professed a warm interest in 'la donna moderna', 'libera e padrona di se stessa, mescolata in guisa molto attiva a tutto il movimento della società'. When he reviewed *Storia di una capinera*, Capuana had been sensitive to its specific 'Sicilianness' and the presence of a social system ready to swallow up defenceless Marias. Unlike other critics at the time, he refused to see the work as a new version of Diderot's *La religieuse* or as a 'diatriba contro le monache e i conventi': it was, he said, the story of 'la ragazza della borghesia siciliana della prima metà di questo secolo'.<sup>112</sup> And yet, in *Profili di donne*, he shows no interest in the way his women mesh into the general fabric of society, and little interest in the specific localities they inhabit. The misfortunes past and present of his women merely create in them an emotional tension on which his own narrator thrives, and it scarcely matters that the stories' settings vary from Milan and Florence to Sicily.

Exceptions to the rule are only apparent. In 'Iela' Capuana may hazard a precise evocation of Sicily, its country lanes coming alive in early morning with carts bound for market, drivers sprawled across their load, listlessly smoking, the view of Spaccaforno from 'l'isoletta de Porri', and the sand dunes of Marza; equally he may include an italicized '*Bedda matri*' or '*Voscenza*' (p. 158). But these details, though refreshing after the anonymous, tasteful drawing-rooms and public parks of preceding stories, remain mere scenic backdrop and shed no light on the thoughts or actions of the characters. In the same story Capuana's description of the oppressive mid-day heat, the isolation of a cove, and the murmuring swell of the sea creates a languid atmosphere which hastens the moment of Emilia's sexual capitulation—a single instance in *Profili di donne* of a *milieu* precipitating events. But in its isolation it is more the illustration of a psychological *aperçu*—behaviour is conditioned by time and opportunity—than a promise of real interest in the way individuals may function in a given environment. The same is true of 'Cecilia' in which a Milanese park where the lovers habitually meet becomes an enchanted garden and an integral part of their relationship. When the relationship is transplanted and perishes, the park, to which Maurizio returns in search of the past, seems charmless too. The park, the background, merely provides an opportunity to stress the psychological insight that perception is subjective. *Profili di donne* is a

catalogue of psychological observations abstracted from the conditions which generate them in life; the volume seems light-weight not only because of its sentimentality, its male condescension and its stylistic defects, but because its psychological realism is partial and rootless.

It is as though his scientific reading had made Capuana feel that his characters could best be studied in the aseptic conditions of a laboratory, their psychological functioning better evinced without the intrusion of a chaotic, too-specific reality. Just as his criticism moved by choice within the ambit of purely aesthetic values and ignored literature's political or social implications whenever it could, so his narrative, even when naturalism had taught him the importance of environment, tended to skip the social dimension in which his characters moved. The old preference for the literary 'type' perhaps lingered on, suggesting that the more contingent detail he included, the more limited the general value of his work.

This consideration was particularly relevant at the time of *Profili di donne*. Capuana's experience as a critic of French literature and his recently acquired view of literature as a series of evolving forms convinced him that, if Italy was to find a place within the mainstream of European literature, he must strive on her behalf to shape any work of art according to art's 'ultima forma'; and he looked to France, which by common consent bore the palm of modernity, for his inspiration, and wrote a work which aimed deliberately at general accessibility in the belief that the viability of Italian literature lay not in its regions but in areas where its spiritual proximity to the rest of Europe was most palpable. It was for this reason that *Profili di donne* sought a text-book reality as 'true' in Milan and Catania as in Paris, and was oblivious of those regional demarcations that had seemed responsible in part for the failure of the national theatre. Capuana's narrator in *Profili di donne* was moreover a man anxious to prove his sophistication. And if Capuana had anything in common with his narrator, how intolerable it would have seemed to him to 'return' to the provinces he had struggled to leave behind: *verismo's* regionalism was still unthinkable, and *Nedda* merely a taste for the exotic.