

## CHAPTER III

### A PERIOD OF PERPLEXITIES (1882-1892)

#### 1. *Beyond the Ideology of Naturalism*

Most of Capuana's critics agree that after the second series of *Studi sulla letteratura contemporanea*, his criticism shows increasing detachment, in Carlo Madrignani's words, 'dalle teorie positivistiche e dal suo zolismo anche teorico'.<sup>1</sup> He is, by common consent, now upon the road to idealism; and undoubtedly the attitudes of this period, after the Zolian, scientific parenthesis evoke memories of the old 'connubio' of Hegelianism and positivism. To Walter Mauro 'il triennio '81-'84' (which produced articles for a collection of criticism entitled *Per l'arte*, published in 1885) seems 'estremamente importante per il processo involutivo dell'ideologia e della metodologia critica del Capuana'.<sup>2</sup> But Capuana's position is not a simple one. Questions which science seemed to have answered or which had become irrelevant in the context of a triumphal positivism now reappear, and yet are not in themselves proof of an 'idealist' Capuana, for he approaches his renewed 'metaphysical' interests in what to him, as we shall see, was still an unequivocally positivist spirit. We shall see too that despite his ability to respond sensitively to new departures in literature, he continues to prefer works which give pride of place to 'il vero' and to objectivity. The period is marked not by a radical revision of views but by an uneasy blending of old and new. It is the beginning of a long conflict between the Capuana whose aesthetic attitudes remain anchored to realism, and the Capuana striving to come to terms with new artistic ideals because he senses that the realism of the Goncourts or Zola is fast slipping into the past. *Per l'arte* is a curiously ambiguous volume in which Capuana jettisons certain aspects of realism (and emphasizes others), but only in order to save it from perishing entirely. His attack is a form of defence, but also a sign of waning self-confidence.

In 1882 Capuana replaced Ferdinando Martini as editor of the *Fanfulla della domenica*. In Sommaruga's Rome, where the *Fanfulla* was only one of several flourishing literary enterprises, Capuana witnessed the birth of a new, more 'spiritual' literature. 1881 saw the publication of *Malombra* as well as of *I Malavoglia*, and in Rome the early ferments of a decadent sensibility were epitomised in the presence of the youthful D'Annunzio. 'Nell'inverno e nella primavera dell'82', wrote Scarfoglio of the *Cronaca bizantina*, 'Gabriele fu per tutti noi argomento d'una predilezione e quasi di un culto non credibile'.<sup>3</sup> It was not

surprising therefore that Capuana, now approaching middle-age, should feel that 'his' art and the art of Verga were under threat. He was always sensitive to the winds of change, and some aspects of *Per l'arte* and other works written in the eighties suggest that he was blown along in its course.

'Per l'arte', which gives its name to the volume, was written in 1885, and incorporates an article of 1884 which in the *Fanfulla* bore the significant title of 'Fantasia e immaginazione'.<sup>4</sup> In essence 'Per l'arte' is a rebuttal of the most banal criticism levelled at the naturalist (or *verista*, or realist, for Capuana still uses the terms interchangeably), the charge that it was vulgarly photographic, and lacking in imagination since it relied on the 'human document'. Capuana is manifestly still convinced of the seriousness of the modern novel and of its superiority over its romantic counterparts ('Dal latte e miele del Carcano al *pane nero* del Verga la distanza è incredibile' (p. xxvi)), and a trifle scornful of those 'persone colte' who 'rimpiangono il nodo, l'imbroglione, la favola, la *machine* [. . .] dei romanzi di trenta anni fa' (p. xl). And if the novelist, he says, 'ruba il mestiere al psicologo, al fisiologo, al professore di scienze sociali' (p. xliii), this is the inevitable result of the 'smania di positivismo, di studi, di osservazioni, di collezioni di fatti' (p. xliv). But then, in an effort to disarm his critics, Capuana presents the familiar parallel between the novelist and the scientist in a new guise, now emphasizing not the 'scientific' qualities of the writer, but the imaginative powers of the scientist:

Questo è poeta, è creatore, è romanziere anche lui. La natura gli porge dei fatti; ma egli non saprebbe ché farsene se non sapesse anche di poter arrivare a cavarle di mano la cosa più importante, il vivo processo di quei fatti. Allora lo scienziato cerca, tenta di compenetrarsi con quei fatti, si sforza, sto per dire, di diventare natura; e a furia di immaginazione—domandatelo ai grandi fisiologi—combina, rifà un processo che la natura, gelosa dei suoi segreti, vorrebbe tenergli nascosto, e quando riesce—non vi paia una bestemmia—si mette quasi pari con Dio. (pp. xlvii-xlviii)

If this passage does not argue for disenchantment with science, it certainly underlines the decisive role of imagination (or the '*spiraculum vitae*'), and has thus invited the view that Capuana is in the process of invalidating his earlier campaign for an art based firmly in the observation of real life. 'Se a far l'arte era proprio lui, lo *spiraculum vitae*', writes Gaetano Trombatore, 'che bisogno c'era più del documento umano e di tutto il resto? Se quel che contava era solo il punto d'arrivo, l'opera d'arte in senso assoluto, in tal caso tutte le provenienze, tutte le vie, diventavano indifferentemente buone.'<sup>5</sup> He is correct in seeing Capuana ready to welcome art from 'tutte le provenienze'—Capuana reiterates in this same article the idea that *verismo* turned its attention to the 'strati più bassi della società', only 'per ripiego', 'per far [si] la mano' (p. x). But if in Capuana's view the writer, like the scientist, must try to 'compenetrarsi' with the object of his observation, then 'tutte le vie' cannot be called 'buone'. Capuana still opines for a work that seems '*fatta da sé*', for an artistic collaboration with nature and the willing eclipse of the author in

his work. He may stress imagination now under pressure of attack, but then he had always taken it for granted. 'Che miseria critica!', he wrote in irritation to Verga when certain Italian critics, among them De Amicis and Torelli, inferred 'da certe parole del Zola [. . .] che egli *manchi di fantasia e d'immaginazione*'.<sup>6</sup> If anything it must have seemed to him that naturalism schooled and dignified imagination. None the less his new emphasis on it at this point looked like an attempt to vindicate his own artistic ideals in the terms dictated by a new literary climate which was beginning to show itself weary of 'scientific' detachment and eager for more subjective and 'spiritual' experiences. And there are other facets of 'Per l'arte' which invite the views expressed by his recent critics. Much as in the 1889 preface to *Giacinta*, Capuana describes the difficulties he and his fellow-writers had had to overcome in the absence of an Italian narrative tradition, and their need of 'una prosa viva, efficace, adatta a rendere tutte le quasi impercettibili sfumature del pensiero moderno' (p. vi). Acknowledging the inadequacies of the language 'imbastita' to meet these requirements—'mezza francese, mezza regionale, mezza confusionale'—he none the less asserts: 'gli scrittori che verranno dietro a noi ci accenderanno qualche cero, se non per altro, per l'esempio di *aver parlato scrivendo*' (p. vii). The 'grande insegnamento' of realism will have been 'l'amore, il rispetto, il culto disinteressato dell'arte' (p. iv). What is striking about these claims is the fact that they are made in the name of an essential, non-partisan art, and that Capuana's perspective is already historical.

An article on *I Promessi Sposi* is possibly even more startlingly detached and carefully non-controversial. Excluding only 'una meravigliosa esecuzione delle parti secondarie', Capuana had recently abandoned Manzoni to the past and to the company of an antiquated Walter Scott.<sup>7</sup> It is surprising therefore to find him asking himself: 'Perchè questo libro, invece di invecchiare, ringiovanisce?' (p. 2). An imaginary interlocutor reminds him that '*I Promessi Sposi* è il libro della reazione religiosa' and Capuana retorts that the only pertinent question to ask of a work of art is whether 'quel contenuto, qualunque esso sia, è riuscito a organizzarsi, a prender forma, a diventare qualcosa d'indipendente, di vivo nelle creature che l'artista vi ha posto sotto gli occhi' (pp. 3-4). We are confronted in the whole of this article with a Capuana anxious to dissociate himself from any line of aesthetic argument which seems to carry with it a particular ideology and a preference for a particular content. He pointedly invokes the name of De Sanctis and the 'libera personalità' of the work of art, and as though to clinch the matter of his unexceptionable aesthetic stance sets Zola alongside Manzoni, treating the two with rigorous impartiality. It is a juxtaposition that would have been unthinkable at the time of the *Studi* and is still astonishing in the present context. Again the interlocutor speaks: 'I Rougon-Macquart sono il manuale del materialismo, del pessimismo contemporaneo.' And the new Capuana replies: 'Ma è l'identica cosa! Il contenuto, le intenzioni o le pretese scientifiche (dite come vi pare) dello Zola sono diventate carne ed ossa, organismi viventi in Silverio, in Renata, in Massimo, in

Gervasia, in Coupeau, in Nanà, in Mouret? Sì o no; la risposta dovrebbe essere questa' (p. 4).

Another curious feature of the article is the link that Capuana establishes between Verga, the author whom he unfailingly cites when he wishes to prove Italy's achievement in modern narrative, and the author of *I Promessi Sposi*. This link he sees operating not only on the level of Verga's development of aspects of Manzoni's 'forma' (and here the revised conclusion that 'fra Walter Scott e il Manzoni c'è di mezzo un abisso' (p. 10) is significant), but more superficially on the level of a shared compassion for the humble and the impotent. Thus *I Malavoglia*, 'scientemente o inconsciamente', owes as much to Manzoni as to 'Zola e i suoi grandi predecessori' (p. 13). Even as he increases the distance between himself and Zola, Capuana conjures up a semi-autonomous Italian tradition. It is a retrospective manoeuvre designed to rescue what Capuana views as Italy's original contribution to modern narrative from the tendentiousness of the battle that surrounded naturalism.

These re-evaluations were undoubtedly critically sound, but they were motivated by a self-defensiveness that elsewhere in *Per l'arte* modulates into self-doubt. In an imaginary conversation with the playwright whose repeated triumphs had left Capuana, in his reviews for the *Nazione*, half-admiring and half-suspicious, Capuana mercilessly exposes Sardou's '*ricetta*' for theatrical success. Capuana's 'Sardou' is the antagonist of the naturalist theatre as expressed by Zola in *Nos auteurs dramatiques*, a wily manipulator of his public, ready to exploit its transient passions, its thirst for scandal, to lull its critical faculties with strong emotion. 'Tiens! Tiens! Voilà mon affaire!' is the repeated exclamation of this Sardou, perpetually sniffing the wind to discover sensational 'attualità' which will fill the stalls (pp. 181-89). Capuana himself was to revert to his old theatrical ambitions in this decade; and when he did so with a version of *Giacinta* (first performed with considerable success on 16 May 1888 in Naples) it was with a seriousness of intent and a desire to renew the antiquated conventions of the theatre that was, if not Zolian, at least far removed from the opportunistic handling of the genre which belonged to his Sardou. *Giacinta* was not a play, according to Capuana, which made concessions. It offered the spectator none of the usual titillations of emotion by proxy, no *colpi di scena*, nor did it prudently calculate the depth and the time-span of his concentration:

Io ero convinto di metterlo a dura prova col contenuto e con la forma del mio lavoro, dove nessuno dei personaggi riesce simpatico [. . .], dove l'azione si svolge rapida, di scorcio in molti punti, in accenni qua e là che richiedono uno sforzo d'attenzione poco ordinario in teatro: dove il dialogo è spoglio di quelle fioriture, di quelle brillanti tirate, atte anche a svagare e a far riposare la mente; dove non sospensioni, non artifici di sorpresa per ottenere il volgare interesse del 'come finirà?'<sup>8</sup>

What then is the reader to make of the shoulder-shrugging conclusion to the article

on Sardou where a Roman audience, spell-bound by his *Fedora*, induces Capuana to concede that perhaps Sardou's calculations are not, after all, entirely misguided: 'fino a un certo punto io non credo che abbia torto' (p. 189)?

The reader may recall that Capuana had in any case long considered the theatre a moribund genre. He indeed republished the iconoclastic preface to *Il Teatro italiano contemporaneo* in *Libri e teatro* (the critical volume which follows *Per l'arte*), asserting his belief that it had not entirely lost 'il pregio dell'opportunità' for all that it dated from 1872.<sup>9</sup> But one may conjecture that (like so many short stories republished, retouched and rebaptized) this preface served chiefly to plump out a volume which could provide Capuana with his ever more urgently needed author's advance. At all events, in contrast to the second series of the *Studi*, *Per l'arte* is silent on the luminous prospects disclosed to the intellect by the universal law of evolution, silent on the power of 'la critica moderna' to account scientifically for the successive forms of art. Capuana's evolutionism has become shy and retiring. In the second series of *Studi*, the article on Betteloni and Cannizzaro, 'Elzeviri e non elzeviri', had urbane proclaimed, via that image of the Poetic Muse turned coquette of uncertain age, Capuana's view that lyrical versification was not at all the robust, male activity required of a realistic, scientific age. But he had now to face the fact that Carducci's achievement in the *Odi barbare* had been followed by *Primo vere* and *Canto novo*. Poetry, which Capuana had condemned to impotence, refused to languish and showed instead a certain vigour. He acknowledged D'Annunzio's outstanding poetic gifts, and called *Canto novo* a 'foga sinfonica, tormentata alla Wagner, dove i rossi e i gialli mandan fuori rantoli profondi ed urla da ottoni, dove il verde e l'azzurro cantano' (p. 28); but at the same time he was reluctant to consider that the pronounced visual sense, the attentiveness to verbal sonority, the 'mescolanza di arti diverse' (p. 29), displayed by D'Annunzio might genuinely be a sign of new life in Italy's poetry. He preferred to suggest that *Canto novo*, for all the originality he recognized in it, marked a decline in the realist tradition. He believed that man's psycho-physiological make-up had grown in the course of time 'molto più sensibile e più vibrante che non fosse una volta' (p. 31). It followed that D'Annunzio, like other modern writers, was drawn to 'cose troppo elaborate, raffinate; cioè sensazioni aggruppate, fantasmi che si aggrovigliano e si divincolano agitati da nevrosi', and to an artistic form correspondingly 'analitica, eccessivamente cesellata, spesso contorta' (p. 32). He was torn between admiration for D'Annunzio and the old prejudice against poetry in general. Thus the article concluded on a bizarre note, with an admonition to D'Annunzio to realize that 'il far dei versi, anche stupendi, non sia il meglio che egli possa fare!' (p. 39).

In this period his attitude to poetry is consistently ambiguous. In 1882 the *Fanfulla* published his parody article 'Un poeta danese' in which Capuana's fictitious Wil'hem Getziier was equipped with a biography, scholarly commentators, and poems 'translated' by 'G.B.'.<sup>10</sup> As he reveals with obvious relish, in a note

appended to the article when it was republished in *Per l'arte*, the *Fanfulla's* readers were deceived into sending 'G.B.' letters of encouragement. Capuana's critics have been in the habit of celebrating his literary deceptions, from the faked *canti popolari* to the Rapisardian parodies, merely for their exceptional powers of mimicry, occasionally for their mordant humour. 'Chi vuol riconoscere il Rapisardi vero', wrote Giulio Salvadori, 'lo deve cercare in queste falsificazioni del suo compaesano';<sup>11</sup> recently Giuseppe Marchese has expressed the view that they show an 'aspetto notevole dell'intima natura del Capuana, un ironia sottile [. . .] un'originale *vis comica*'.<sup>12</sup> Rapisardi had responded to Capuana's criticism of his epic poem, *Lucifero*,<sup>13</sup> with haughty irritation (his verse epistle, 'Perchè non rispondo ai miei critici', contained an unflattering reference to the 'Zolian' Capuana: 'Ghigna beato, e col ditin paffuto/m'indica, in carità, la via più corta/del lupanar, tempio dell'Arte'),<sup>14</sup> and no doubt Capuana's main aim was to chastise by laughter, as in this passage where the *vate* of his own infernal court prepares to unleash his song:

[. . .] Tormentosa  
 Correa la destra intanto all'arcuato  
 Onor del labbro e le affilate punte  
 N'attorcigliava con solenne gesto.  
 Poi, come al varco delle labbra imposti  
 Furon gli estremi delle dita e il breve  
 Triplice scoppio di sua tosse uscì,  
 Dal picciol petto ch'il febeo consunse  
 Terribil foco gorgogliante l'onda  
 Dell'epico suo carne si devolve.<sup>15</sup>

Recently, however, Enrico Ghidetti has argued that behind the apparent playfulness of Capuana's literary vendettas and his poetic counterfeiting lies a serious critical purpose. The free-verse poems published under the title of *Semiritmi* in 1888, and which include the seven 'translated' in the Getziier article, are 'la rivelazione, in chiave ludica, del meccanismo di questo fare poesie per dimostrarne, una volta accertata la sua riproducibilità all'infinito, l'assoluta inutilità'.<sup>16</sup> There is certainly more profundity in this opinion of Ghidetti's than in that of critics disposed to see *Semiritmi* merely as an exercise in humour. Supporting Ghidetti's interpretation are both the close to the final poem, *Finis*:

Quello che più mi tormenta,  
 o Muse, è il profondo terrore  
 di far produrre altre serque  
 di semiritmi.  
 Perchè gli scimmiottini dell'arte  
 non san distinguere il ben dal male  
 e vorran, forse, ora svagolarsi  
 semiritmicamente!<sup>17</sup>

and the warning note attached to 'Un poeta danese' in *Per l'arte*: 'Se qualcuno dei tanti nostri traduttori di poeti stranieri ha già, per caso, versificata la mia prosa, ora è pietosamente avvertito' (p. 167). In both cases Capuana envisages a nightmarish and meaningless proliferation of verse. If, however, *Semiritmi* simply made the point that to write poetry was by now a futile, rhetorical activity, it did so in an uncharacteristically laboured and oblique manner. This may have been part of the volume's message, but Capuana's experiments in free verse were also vehicles of the self-doubt, the new questioning that characterizes this period. The attentive reading of poets from Gautier and Verlaine to Carducci and D'Annunzio may not in itself signify a capitulation in favour of poetry, but certainly Capuana's verses allow him to explore themes and ideas which positivism had decreed irrelevant. Precisely because they were undertaken in a mood of less than high seriousness, they left Capuana free to toy with prohibited notions. In *Intus*, for instance, he describes the re-emergence of a religious sensibility:

Assorgo ai patenti cieli sgombri d'orrore,  
e canto nel tempio della liberata Natura  
l'inno della Legge, e respiro il vivente  
aere delle forme via via tramutantisi.

Ma, tosto celebrato gl'infranti lacci,  
la mia ragione non rivacilla com'ebbra?  
È? Non è? La spaura il profondo mistero  
delle cose, l'Iside che non vuole svelarsi.<sup>18</sup>

While few would argue for a return to orthodoxy on Capuana's part,<sup>19</sup> by the time *Alla ricerca dei letterati*, Ugo Ojetti's Italian equivalent of Huret's *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*, appeared in 1895, Capuana was professing himself 'credente'.<sup>20</sup> And *Profumo*, the novel which closes this decade, is anti-determinist, while its Doctor Mola, the equivalent of *Giacinta's* Follini, is a pious man. Another 'semiritmo', *Poesia musicale*, contains an undoubtedly ambivalent tribute to D'Annunzio and other decadent poets. It is poised, much like the article on *Canto novo*, between admiration and the suspicion that the poet sets out deliberately to mystify:

Suona nei tuoi versi, o biondo poeta,  
una musica troppo nuova pei duri orecchi  
del nostro volgo [. . .]

Parole, parole! . . . Oh sì! Ma dietro l'ondeggiante  
parvenza, che il ritmo persegue ansioso,  
più largamente rivela l'Infinito.

La sillaba dalla sillaba riceve dilucidazione;  
così delle tue canzoni che più sembra nulla dicano  
vena sgorga, o poeta, d'ineffabile poesia.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike the critic who wrote 'Elzeviri e non elzeviri', and for all his sly ambiguity,

the present Capuana seems willing to live in a world which still includes poetry. He is as sympathetic to the symbolist-decadent ideals as the vestiges of his belief in the evolution of literature towards the extinction of poetry allow. In *Libri e teatro* he states:

Al pari dei decadenti, io penso che spesse volte la sola musicalità del verso, il solo splendore di un'immagine, fino l'eccesso d'una metafora e d'un aggettivo, potendo produrre effetti nuovi potenti in correlazione con la facile eccitabilità dei nostri nervi e con la rapida comprensibilità delle nostre intelligenze, siano preferibili alla esattezza e alla limpidezza che, precisando il concetto, suggestionano niente.

E' una corruzione! esclamano.

Che importa, se naturale svolgimento di un fatto, logica necessità?<sup>22</sup>

Thus a question mark hangs suspended over Capuana's attitudes to poetry, to drama and to certain existential problems. The realist formula and the rigid materialism of positivist science seem no longer to provide full answers, and Capuana's 'scientific' polemicism has faded. But it is noteworthy that he is as yet prepared to make tentative sorties into the hinterland of positivism only when dealing with the genres that least involve him personally. It seems reasonable to assume that he was passing through no radical spiritual or intellectual crisis, but that the atmosphere of the times induced him to suspend his disbelief on a number of questions which had once appeared unanswerable, and therefore futile, or else satisfactorily resolved.

One poem from *Semiritmi* entitled simply ?, wryly expresses Capuana's doubts about the spiritual understanding of the table-tapping defunct who have passed over to the 'other side':

Nulla disimparato, nulla voi avete  
dunque appreso costì, se è mistero  
l'essenza delle cose sempre, o Spiriti, per voi?<sup>23</sup>

The 'spirits' leave him sceptical, and it is in his volume, *Spiritismo?* of 1884, with its emblematically interrogative title, which shows that while Capuana still associated himself with the ideology of positivism, he feared that the scientific philosophy that derived from it was becoming dogmatic. The volume retails his own spiritualistic experiences, from the alarming encounters he engineered between the Florentine Beppa Poggi and a peculiarly irascible 'Foscolo' in the summer of 1864 (until Beppa's nerves and state of mind forced him to desist) to his more recent and less sensational impression of writing the children's *fiabe* of *C'era una volta* 'quasi sotto dettatura'. Capuana is interested in a possible relationship between ultra-physical perception and what he terms 'l'allucinazione artistica', the 'punto, nell'atto della produzione, in cui la facoltà artistica agisce con completa incoscienza'.<sup>24</sup> *Spiritismo?*, written by an enthusiastic amateur, walks a tightrope between 'scienza' and 'fantasia', but before concluding, as Walter Mauro seems to do, that Capuana has abandoned his positivism and is invincibly drawn to 'tutto

quanto di subconscienziale, magico, ignoto esiste nell'io',<sup>25</sup> we should examine the way in which Capuana envisages an investigation of extrasensory phenomena. He rejects on the one hand 'la cocciutaggine della scienza nel negare fatti evidentissimi che saltano agli occhi da ogni parte', on the other any persistence in attributing 'tali fatti a cause soprannaturali, come se fossero già stati esauriti tutti i possibili mezzi di esame per annodarli alla gran catena dei fenomeni del mondo inorganico e dell'organico, dato che siano due mondi e non uno solo, solissimo.'<sup>26</sup> In this idea of an uninterrupted chain of being the monism of the positivist creed emerges, and Capuana indeed proclaims himself in agreement with Claude Bernard in seeing extraordinary events as mere exaggerations of the normal. He recommends the approach of Adolphe D'Assier in *Essai sur l'Humanité posthume et le spiritisme*. D'Assier's work, published in 1883, seeks to attribute 'post-sepulchral manifestations' to a 'fluidic' posthumous being whose 'constituent molecules' are of 'extreme tenuity' and represent the 'last term of organic matter'. Fantastical as this theory sounds, it was undeniably materialistic and D'Assier was a trained scientist and an avowed positivist whose aim was to 'bring within the compass of the laws of time and space the phenomena of the posthumous order, hitherto denied by science because it was unable to explain them, and to rescue the people of our epoch from the enervating hallucinations of spiritism'.<sup>27</sup> Capuana, then, rejects a positivist science grown pedestrian and unimaginative, but hopes that life's mysteries may eventually succumb to scientific research undertaken without dogmatism and in a spirit of adventure. He criticizes positivist science for its now settled and unquestioning ways (and reminds the reader that Lavoisier once refused to believe in the existence of meteorites), but not the methodology or the essential spirit of positivism itself.

This suspension of disbelief runs throughout the range of Capuana's intellectual activities. In the field of his literary criticism, as we have seen, he reaches out to understand new departures, and yet clings to an artistic methodology worked out in the period of the *Studi*, and which (for all the present rejection of the tendentious ideology of naturalism) is inseparable from a vision of life as decipherable by observation of cause and effect. Capuana resisted the tendency of art's focus to shift from the outside, observable world to the inscrutable self, exclaiming in connexion with the D'Annunzio of *Canto novo*, 'Ah! se la realtà per poco l'afferra' (p. 39), and continuing his campaign for a realist, impersonal art in the margins of *Libri e teatro*.

Though this volume, like the earlier *Per l'arte*, represents an effort to be scrupulously non-controversial, Capuana's abiding artistic preferences emerge clearly enough. He is anxious not to be accused of *contenutismo* because of his past literary affiliations: 'materialisti, scettici, spiritualisti; intuitivi possiamo egualmente riuscire con la nostra particolar materia d'arte a creare una bell'opera d'arte, se la nostra intenzione sarà di fare, prima di tutto, un'opera d'arte e nient'altro'.<sup>28</sup> But at the same time we find him pointing out that naturalism has been judged mainly by

its aberrations and excesses, by its inevitable propensity to reflect the current materialist philosophy. The implication is that once writers have seen fit to discard the 'brutalità di certi particolari', 'descrizioni ridotte a uno sfoggio di abilità tecnica', and the 'troppa loro cura di aggruppare figure malvage' (p. 124) (for all of which a materialistic doctrine was responsible), a form of naturalism or realism may survive. The nature of this 'neo-naturalism', purified of partisan ideologies and its obsession with animality, becomes clearer in a review of *Il Piacere*.

As with *Canto novo*, Capuana finds D'Annunzio's novel a remarkable but flawed work, its author too lyrical and 'troppo invadente' (p. 43), too much given to 'descrizione eccessiva e inutile' (p. 21), yet an 'apparizione veramente eccezionale nella nostra odierna produzione letteraria' (p. 7). In *Per l'arte* the improved control of narrative structure and style in *Numa Roumestan* by Daudet (whose language in the past was so often 'troppo straluccicante, troppo impennacchiata') seemed to Capuana the presage of a 'bella evoluzione artistica';<sup>29</sup> similarly with *Il Piacere* we find him tensely scrutinizing D'Annunzio's pages for signs—destined for disappointment—of a future artistic development along the lines of his own preferences: 'È ben chiaro che il mondo esteriore comincia ad attirarlo non unicamente come colore, come linea, e neppure come sola sensualità' (p. 18). And then again: 'Sembra che, più di tutto, lo attiri un vivo desiderio di accostarsi alla realtà e di renderla, come oggi si dice, oggettivamente' (p. 19). As far as Capuana is concerned the novel is still founded in the observation of reality, and produces a quintessential version of it. Impersonality remains axiomatic not arbitrarily, nor as the inert legacy of a scientific age, but because it is able to ward off the subjectivism which prevents art from becoming an autonomous 'organism'. Capuana is aware of course that this 'organism' is an invention but it does not occur to him that in the last analysis it is quite as much an invention as the work where, in Binni's words, 'il centro è dovunque, è in ogni punto della periferia',<sup>30</sup> and where that centre is the undisguised and unashamed consciousness of the author. The culture which shaped his view of the novel taught him that it was possible and desirable to understand the world beyond the self; it did not equip him to reflect that other forms of cognition were feasible and equally legitimate. Thus he might reject the naturalist label as applied to himself, defining it for these purposes in terms of a scientific ideology which had little to do with the fundamental nature of art, but he remained wedded to a form of naturalism which seemed to him timeless and free of prejudices, a question merely of approach or method.

Yet certain prejudices remained, for from his ideal work of art he debarred the 'literary' self-indulgences of subjectivism and lyricism, and the only novel he could envisage dealt with personalities and passions. Thus he was disappointed with the psychological handling of the central character, Sperelli, and with the tendency of D'Annunzio's language not merely to mediate passively between the object and its perception, but to clamour for attention on its own behalf: what he allowed the poet in terms of formal experimentation, he apparently could not bring himself to

allow the novelist. 'Il prosatore', he writes of D'Annunzio 'nel nuovo libro, è tuttavia sopraffatto dal poeta: l'osservatore vi si lascia prender la mano dal colorista e dallo stilista' (p. 4). Proof of his abidingly and exclusively realist outlook in relation to narrative is an aside on the modern novel, which, he says, 'bisogna tuttavia chiamare *naturalista*, finchè non ci saremo accordati a dirlo semplicemente romanzo' (p. 121).

Despite his habitually shifting terminology, it may be surprising to find him using the word 'naturalista', which he himself has made pregnant with ideological connotations. But it is an act of calculated provocation, ready as he is to counter with the remainder that *his* naturalism (or *verismo*) is not an ideology, has no preferences for content, but is a universal method. *Libri e teatro* in effect uses the term in two distinct ways: negatively, to designate a body of ideas unrelated to the essential nature of the work of art, but inevitably reflected by it in the period of their philosophical ascendancy; positively, as an artistic method particularly conducive to the creating of the autonomous 'organism' which in his view uniquely constitutes aesthetic activity.

This dual definition allows Capuana to preserve an appearance of critical consistency over the years; and with more justification than many critics have allowed, if we remember the stricture of the second series of *Studi* that the scientific character of the age affects only the 'forma' of literature. None the less there are small, revealing shifts of emphasis. If the touchstone of aesthetic excellence, the 'organismo', and the methods Capuana prescribes, observation of reality and impersonality, themselves imply a specific philosophy of life, a number of marginal concessions to the new 'spirituality' are perceptible. It is true that Capuana's theoretical *verismo* was not indissolubly linked to the regional, agricultural classes, but his present view of them as constituting 'un filone di metallo prezioso ma molto povero e già quasi esaurito' (p. xxviii) was perhaps conditioned by his first-hand experience of a new avant-garde indifferent to such material and concerned instead with scrutinizing its own internal, spiritual dilemmas. Having pared away the transient, ideological *parti pris* of naturalism, he felt free to write that the 'alta genialità d'un artista consiste appunto nel fare un'equa parte all'osservazione interna e alla esterna' (p. 123). But was this not to extend his 'neutral' method in the direction which writers like Fogazzaro and D'Annunzio were making fashionable? How far this method could be divorced from attitudes which had matured during the hey-day of positivism, and to what extent Capuana's new, carefully undoctrinaire stance produced a genuine artistic inspiration, it will be our task to examine in *Profumo*.

## 2. 'Profumo': On the Brink of Idealism?

In the essay 'Per l'arte' Capuana deprecated the intricacies of plot and the sensational vicissitudes which had accounted for the popular success of novels belonging to an earlier generation. The realist writers of France, whatever their

practice (and one thinks of the momentous, symbolic animation of Zola's industrial machinery, or of the zestful, larger-than-life parody of the *petite bourgeoisie* in Flaubert's *Homais*), reacted against sentimental, noble, and adventurous subjects and deliberately sought out anti-heroic material and the textures of everyday life. Flaubert's contemplation of a novel which was to tell the story of 'une jeune fille qui meurt vierge et mystique, entre son père et sa mère, dans une petite ville de province, au fond d'un jardin planté de choux et quenouilles' was an extreme manifestation of this reaction;<sup>31</sup> and in 1887 we find Capuana too, seduced by the idea of writing 'tre atti *con nulla*'.<sup>32</sup> In *Giacinta* the story-line had already been slender, an undeviating impulse which propelled the heroine through a series of psychological 'phases' to a 'logical' catastrophe. But on closer inspection the sham marriage, the tribulations of adultery, the suicide, had revealed their fair share of melodramatic extravagance. *Profumo*, by contrast, seems deliberately to erode the role of plot into insignificance, and it perturbed Capuana's colleague, De Roberto, in the process. 'È una cosa *voluta*', Capuana reassured him.<sup>33</sup> But it was 'voluta' not perhaps so much in order to explore the extreme possibilities of plotless realism, as to tone down the darker, more dramatic conduct of Capuana's earlier naturalist works, from *Giacinta* itself to stories like 'Povero dottore!' and 'Mostruosità' (from *Homo!*), in which pathological characters moved convulsively towards death or the silence of desperation. Carlo Madrignani comments on the significance of *Profumo* having been first published in such a respectable journal as the *Nuovo Antologia*.<sup>34</sup> It was not simply that in the course of time naturalism had lost its power to shock. *Profumo* is the product of Capuana's new naturalism as he defined it in *Libri e teatro*. Neither obtrusively materialistic or scientific, it sets matter alongside spirit, balances 'internal' and 'external' observation, and shows in short—as Capuana himself said—that 'si può essere naturalisti, senza dover mostrarsi ineducati'.<sup>35</sup>

Looking back on *Profumo* in a preface to its fourth edition of 1900, Capuana notes with satisfaction: 'Immaginario paladino a ogni costo delle teoriche naturaliste o veriste, io smentivo col fatto la leggenda creata attorno al mio nome, trattando un soggetto che un critico autorevole ebbe a chiamare *puro come un'ostia*'.<sup>36</sup> He was understandably anxious to seize on any available means of wriggling free of his naturalist or *verista* label. During the nineties, as naturalism faded definitively into the past, critics drew up their literary balance sheets, and Capuana, who would continue to write prolifically until his death in 1915, resisted their impulse to consign him along with naturalism to the pages of history. In the same preface he claims that *Profumo* 'accennava a un'evoluzione dell'arte contemporanea, manifestatasi apertamente alcuni anni dopo' (p. vii). Writing to Cesareo in 1914 he was more specific: 'con *Profumo*, io preannunciai l'evoluzione del romanzo moderno verso quell'Arte spirituale che ha sostituito il così detto naturalismo'.<sup>37</sup> It is noticeable, as in *Libri e teatro*, that Capuana facilitates his renunciation of naturalism by choosing to see in it simply a tendentious preference

for 'brutal' subject-matter. A subject that was 'puro come un'ostia', according to this simplistic definition (one which ironically places Capuana in the same position as the moralists whom he deplored), could never be considered the product of naturalism. The defence of *Profumo* however is retrospective; and Capuana's interpretation of it is clearly permeated through more recent experiences, and specifically the writing of *Rassegnazione* (which, though it did not appear finally until 1907, was conceived and partly published, in serial form, by 1900). Thus *Profumo* in Capuana's eyes assumed the melancholy philosophy of life and the consoling moralism of the later novel:

Senza intenderlo nell'atto della creazione e dell'esecuzione, io venivo imbastendo un simbolo di me stesso e di parecchi altri che, al pari di me, hanno sbagliato la loro via, chiedendo alla vita più che essa non sia in grado di dare; non comprendendo, smarriti dietro un falso ideale, che il vero ideale è la realtà che si attua e si trasforma; la quale non è poi tanto disprezzabile, come io e parecchi altri abbiamo ingenuamente creduto. (p. viii)

While all this fits *Rassegnazione* better than *Profumo*, in anticipating a future development in Capuana's narrative it usefully alerts the reader to the traces of moralism undoubtedly present in *Profumo*, and also to Capuana's desire to create a novel of half-tones and graded subtleties, a novel of 'polite' naturalism.

That naturalism or *verismo* of method, which, as we saw in *Libri e teatro*, Capuana believed was ideologically neutral, he did not however relinquish even in 1900. 'Non intendevo affatto rinnegare', he wrote, 'quei principi che vogliono per fondamento della creazione l'osservazione della vita reale.' He intended indeed to show that they could 'benissimo applicarsi a soggetti di qualunque natura, perchè nel mondo, per fortuna, accanto al male c'è il bene, accanto al senso il sentimento, accanto all'istinto la elevazione spirituale dell'umana coscienza' (p. vii).

For all the purity discovered by the 'autorevole critico', Capuana is concerned in *Profumo*, as so often, with the psychology of sex. The perfume of the title refers to the scent of orange-blossom which Capuana's heroine emits during attacks of nervous hysteria, so that the title itself loudly advertises the book in terms, as it were, of boudoir medicine. None the less the psychological conduct and the insights of the work are subtle and even strikingly original. This time the novel depends much less on an inert, preliminary premiss, like the antagonism between the pathological character and a 'guilty' society of *Giacinta*: it distributes psychological abnormality among three related individuals able to condition each other's outlook, and thus to invest the psychological dimension of the novel with a complexity and an autonomous dynamism absent in the earlier novel. There is no decisive trauma which subsequently determines the whole movement of the story, but rather three sets of attitudes, variously motivated, which harden in contact with each other. And the context of Capuana's 'problem' is not the adulterous triangle so favoured by nineteenth-century writers as a representation in miniature of society's moral structure, but a marriage which must meet the threat of a jealous mother.

Eugenia's hysteria is, in fact, not the centre of the novel at all, but rather a peripheral symptom of the graver neurosis of her husband. The nature of his abnormality begins to emerge as the book opens. The newly-married couple, accompanied by Patrizio's mother, Geltrude, is discovered travelling by carriage to the Sicilian town of Marzallo (modelled on Spaccaforno, the modern Ispica), where Patrizio is to take up his duties as an inspector of taxes. The travellers are disgruntled and silent, Patrizio in particular full of vague foreboding. Turning first (and the order of his priorities is important) to his mother to ask how she is, he receives in reply 'un breve cenno degli occhi socchiusi' which hardens 'la espressione di quella ruga della fronte che la inesplicabile diffidenza di lei verso la nuora pareva segnasse, da qualche settimana, con maggiore energia' (p. 2); only secondly he addresses his wife; and a little later, tempted to kiss her, he none the less refrains: 'Il pudore della sua casta giovinezza e il pensiero che gli occhi severamente socchiusi della madre stessero lì a sorvegliarlo con la gelosa diffidenza contro la nuora, lo avevano trattenuto' (p. 4). It is the shadow of his possessive, censorious mother which darkens Patrizio's horizon. And he, passive, immature, excessively dutiful to the widow who has lived a joyless, penniless, solitary existence seemingly for his sole benefit, cannot cope with the aura of aggrieved resentment which surrounds her. The result is an inhibited sexual response to Eugenia, even a fear of her physical demonstrativeness which may lead him into further 'betrayals' of his mother. Though for a long time he rationalizes her unreasonable behaviour (reflecting that he is after all the only son of a woman who has been perpetually afflicted in life), and remains for ever too loyal to condemn it explicitly, he comes at last to realize that the estrangement between him and his wife depends largely on his own subjugation to the strong-willed Geltrude. But in the meantime the frustrated Eugenia, piqued by her mother-in-law's ill-concealed animosity and importunate omnipresence, has succumbed to bouts of hysteria, accompanied by the strange symptom of the orange-blossom perfume. She begins to doubt Patrizio's feelings for her, and then, when the acute phase of her illness passes, sinks into an apathetic disillusion with marriage and an indifference to Patrizio which finally borders on contempt. Even Geltrude's death before half the novel is over does not halt the gathering momentum of the couple's estrangement, for her emotional blackmailing ('Io non conto più niente per te! [. . .] Dovrete sopportarmi ancora un po'. Poi sarete liberi; sarete pur liberati di questa incresciosa!' (pp. 44,45)) survives the tomb, and sends her 'guilty' son on his ritual, daily visit to the cemetery or propels him into the jealously preserved sanctuary that was her room, where he plunges into remorseful, morbid meditation. The 'problem' seems insoluble, and indeed Eugenia's interest is turning elsewhere, towards Ruggiero, the son of Marzallo's mayor. Just in time, however; and with the help of a local doctor, Patrizio's inhibitions fall away. Against the background of rolling thunder (which elicits from Patrizio a 'male' protectiveness towards his nervous wife) and rainclouds shrouding the room in intimate obscurity, comes the long confession

which miraculously resolves all misunderstandings. The storm ends, the sun reappears, and Patrizio and Eugenia are left framed in the window, gazing out onto a garden newly washed by the rain: 'E guardavano, guardavano, e si stringevano amorosamente le mani' (p. 252).

The optimism of this ending is obviously significant, and we shall see in due course how much of Capuana's narrative strategy is geared towards it. At the same time it is the least convincing element in the book. In the preparation for this denouement, Doctor Mola has had too great a hand, and thus Patrizio's effusive directness in the final chapter seems something of a feverish masquerade constantly on the point of revealing the same passive character only momentarily galvanized into action by a stronger personality, Mola's. Nor is the reader given the benefit of his full confession (for over most of it Capuana draws a veil, presumably of modesty), and Patrizio's reconquest of Eugenia therefore seems too precipitate. Yet consultation of the *Nuova Antologia* version of the novel reveals that Capuana was aware of these deficiencies. In the volume of 1892 he made strenuous efforts to improve on his original version of the denouement. In the *Nuova Antologia* an impossibly dense, short chapter includes Ruggiero's declaration of love and Eugenia's far from convinced rejection of his advances, her reconciliation with Patrizio, and finally even (by way of a brisk 'coda') the report that Ruggiero is already contemplating a return to the arms of a local belle—an inappropriate piece of 'realist' cynicism.<sup>38</sup> In the volume this one chapter expands into four. The graveyard conversation with Mola, improbably decisive for Patrizio in the original version, is followed by a second, longer discussion, and Patrizio is accorded space in which to meditate on the damage done him by an over-protected childhood. In addition Capuana strengthens the once barely perceptible motif of Patrizio's jealousy. Though the allusions to marital infidelity which crystallize his vague suspicions are hopelessly misallocated, being placed in the mouth of the simple sacristan known as Padreterno, a humble, slightly comical figure who in the rest of the novel is concerned with nothing more emotionally charged than the care of the convent garden and the vestments belonging to its chapel, they are witnesses of Capuana's attempt to motivate Patrizio more persuasively. From the episodes concerning Ruggiero Capuana removes all the abruptness and vulgarity, accommodating them better to the prevailing tone of the novel. And yet the novel's solution remains its least satisfactory aspect, seeming to indicate that while Capuana was determined to have his happy (non-naturalist) ending, it scarcely engaged his imagination.

As in *Giacinta* his strengths emerge where he ties the psychological knots eventually to be unravelled. The sense of guilt which he attributed to Giacinta in her relations with her mother now moves from its peripheral position in that early novel to constitute the central psychological focus of *Profumo*; and ten years before Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* touched incidentally on the Oedipus theory, Capuana seems to have intuited something of the hostile, erotic response of

child to parent. *Giacinta* had shown that Capuana was sensitive to the importance of childhood experience in shaping adult personality, and aware in particular of what is now known as infantile sexuality. This subject he had treated in a short story called 'Precocità' (published in *La Tribuna* in 1885), which deals with a child's passion for her 'uncle' Carlo;<sup>39</sup> and the first chapter of his own 'Ricordi d'infanzia' describing his childhood to the age of seven years focuses particularly (though presumably this time 'unconsciously') on experiences of an erotic nature, from the nightly dream visitation of 'Facciabella' ('mi prese ignudo su le braccia e mi portò via, con sè, facendomi passare a traverso l'uscio chiuso, come era passata lei') to the 'primo amore' for a pretty, painted Madonna which hung over his bed.<sup>40</sup> This particular area of Capuana's sensitivity is now ably exploited for the benefit of Patrizio.

Patrizio himself is half-aware of the sources of his sexual inhibitions. In Chapter II, amid recollections of his mother, grief-stricken and condemned to poverty by his father's death, comes the evocation (retailed to Eugenia) of his friendship with a child named Giulietta, a friendship with erotic connotations disapproved of by Signora Geltrude, who stumbles upon the two children affectionately embraced:

La mamma, trovatici così, domandò brusca: 'Che fate?'

Ci sciogliemmo dall'abbraccio, quasi vergognosi di esserci lasciati sorprendere in un atto che avevamo dovuto fare di nascosto [. . .]

Ci nascondevamo, per baciarci e abbracciarci senza che la mamma potesse coglierci all'improvviso e domandarci: 'Che fate?' Io mi sentivo scotere tutto, quando Giulietta mi abbracciava. (p. 24)

The future pattern of Patrizio's emotional life is already determined, from his passivity (Giulietta takes the initiative, as Eugenia will) to the guilt he associates with emotional ties bonding him to persons other than his mother. Signora Geltrude is already the stern, jealous, inhibiting figure who greets the news that Giulietta has fallen from a window and is dying with the words: 'Hai sentito? . . . Quando si è scapati! . . .' (p. 26), in the same way as she responds to Eugenia's first attack of nerves: 'Lo vedi? E' un'isterica! E non volevi credermi!' (p. 38). Capuana is not afraid of exposing the morbid quality of her possessiveness. In an ugly and irrational outburst on the subject of Eugenia, she sees herself not only as Patrizio's guardian but as a 'rival' for his affections:

Tu non ti guardi allo specchio, o ti guardi così di sfuggita da non poterti accorgere quanto sei mutato e invecchiato da sei mesi! Non ti potresti riconoscere. Lei se lo beve il tuo sangue! [. . .] Io sono impotente a lottare con lei! E' giovane, è bella, è amata. Ti ha stregato! Che posso più fare io? Ti avvertii in tempo; ti ho avvertito dopo; ti ho sempre ripetuto: 'Bada! Bada!'. (p. 45)

As his 'first love', invested with the privileges of that position, Patrizio too sees his mother. Thus Eugenia, who has instinctively understood the implications for herself in Patrizio's account of Giulietta ('"Basta, non ti commovere troppo", disse

Eugenia con durezza gelosa nella voce, levandosi da sedere' (p. 27)), is justified in feeling less than satisfied when Patrizio tells her: 'Nel mio cuore non c'è lievito di altri amori . . . Tu sei stata l'unica donna, *dopo mia madre*, che n'abbia preso possesso e per sempre' (p. 153). (Italics mine). At times Capuana is tempted to categorize Patrizio as he did Andrea Gerace, to see in him the end product of a total of quantifiable experiences. The outcome of a lonely childhood, passed in the dreary atmosphere of his mother's self-martyring poverty, burdened with her adult sorrows, and isolated from other children, is Patrizio's vague pessimism and timidity. But it is always around the motif of his inhibited sexuality that Capuana groups his lightest and most penetrating psychological touches. Thus, for instance, Patrizio persuades himself that sexual abstention is vital to the recovery of Eugenia's nerves (and indeed hints at his own 'altruism' to her); makes her feel faintly immodest with the enigmatic phrase, 'Se tu comprendessi, non lo diresti' (p. 150), when she openly begs for a more normal relationship; or, on the road to recovery, watching village boys scrapping as they search for birds' eggs, intuites the contribution of his repressed childhood to his inadequate, 'infantile' manhood: 'Ah, se da ragazzo si fosse azzuffato anche lui, come quelli là! Se avesse dato anche lui pugni e schiaffi [. . .]. Tutti costoro imparavano così a vivere nella società, provando la loro forza, esercitando le proprie passioni, uomini in miniatura sin da ora' (pp. 210-11).

Capuana was clearly fascinated by the psychological enormities which quite ordinary existence disclosed to him. Earlier he might have treated Patrizio's 'monstrous' feelings as he treated the perverted passions of the short story 'Mostruosità' in which an abject husband, subjugated by his beautiful, meretricious wife comes to loathe her only when she has learnt to respect *him* and renounced her lovers.<sup>41</sup> This was a story which allowed a zestful play on dramatic, ironic symmetries. But in *Profumo* Capuana eschews the violent contrasts, strong colours, and stress on the instinctive basis of behaviour which he now chose to associate with naturalism. Heredity plays no part in *Profumo*. The kind of positivistic thinking which produced Lombroso's 'born' criminal and the innate bestiality of a Beppe may at times still hint that Eugenia is predisposed to nervous disorders, but the impossible conditions of her life are sufficient to warrant her reactions. And the 'pathology' of the couple, their moments of melancholy introspection, and intermittent, inconclusive confrontations are only half the novel. The 'medical' framework is interspersed with documentation on the everyday course of Sicilian life, with its customs, superstitions, small-town gossip and characteristic personalities.

Capuana is no longer chary of giving his fiction a precise setting: the cheerily eccentric or characteristic world of his regional stories now erupts into the closed abode of bourgeois suffering, counterpoising and diluting its torments with common sense. There is the mayor of Marzallo, a bustling, verbose man unperturbed by local political wrangles and those unpaid taxes which Capuana

himself had confronted; his three daughters, the eldest burdened with the responsibility of quelling her irrepressible sister, Giulia, and the middle daughter, Benedetta, already destined to be the family's prim *zitellona*; their student brother, Ruggiero, to whom Capuana attributes the youthful intolerance for Sicily's backwardness of his own *Nazione* articles on the religious practices of the island. There is the comical servant of the mayor's family, and their comical aunt; and there is Padreterno, raiser of goldfinches (a 'Sicilian' pastime of Capuana's soon to be recorded in a book for children, *Il Drago*),<sup>42</sup> and nostalgic custodian of the lugubrious masks once used for the festivities of Holy Week. These are the figures who regularly distract Patrizio and Eugenia from their problems with social calls, attendances at picturesque religious ceremonies, and excursions into the countryside. They are still conspicuously 'characteristic', but because portraiture is not their author's sole aim, they are less heavily burdened with his 'ex'-Sicilian condescension and remorseless quest for the quaintly humorous. In the total plan of the novel they may occasionally serve the purpose of comic relief, or momentarily relax its central, psychological tensions; but, in a more fundamental way, they are indices of a new outlook in Capuana.

The narrative space devoted to Eugenia's and Patrizio's aberrations is carefully dosed, alternating regularly with the normality represented by Capuana's provincial figures. No longer, as happened with *Giacinta*, does abnormality stand out in relief against a one-dimensional social background. Capuana advances a little further towards creating a continuum between the normal and the abnormal, between the world of Marzallo and the tortured emotions of the convent's inhabitants. Thus the increasingly frequent excursions made by Eugenia with the mayor's family seem to Patrizio to 'come between' him and his wife; and Ruggiero, in particular, steps into the foreground to woo Eugenia and to inspire erotic fantasies in which Patrizio has no place. Waking her from a dream of 'stretti, lunghissimi corridoi dove Ruggiero la inseguiva', shattering her private world of self-compensation, Patrizio sees in her eyes the 'corruccio di essere stata svegliata in quel momento da lui' (p. 217). Though it is not in any way the cause of the couple's difficulties (and here again is evidence of a limited response to the naturalists' notion of *milieu*), the outside world nevertheless becomes involved in them, just as Eugenia and Patrizio become involved in the episode of Giulia's elopement. Even in this partial interchange abnormality becomes simply a moment in the functioning of life as a whole. Moments of tension are balanced by moments of repose, and the potential drama of *Profumo* is softened and neutralized.

It is noticeable that Capuana, so prone, from the time of *Profili di donne* onwards, to plunging his reader *in medias res* and presenting him with arresting conclusions, adopts a different technique here. The novel begins with a long meditative sentence on Patrizio's present happiness and fears for its duration; it closes, as we saw, on the tranquil prospect of the couple's new-found harmony which seems to stretch away into the distant future. In between, Capuana maintains

the calm tenor of his prose, only rarely interrupting it with Eugenia's staccato bursts of misery or with a scene of confrontation, destined anyway to peter out in reticence and resigned perplexity, refusing to pause overlong in the passages of free indirect speech which chart the desolate thoughts of his characters, and keeping them as near to the lightness and liveliness of direct speech as possible:

Perchè dunque si sentiva preso da malessere, osservando che, col decrescere della malattia di Eugenia, il carattere di lei veniva appunto conformandosi all'idea che egli s'era fatta di un'inalterabile felicità domestica, di un'esistenza isolata e quasi fuori del mondo?

'È cambiata? Che accade nel suo cuore?'

Non aveva proprio desiderato questo, no, mai! (p. 90)

Capuana mistrusted descriptive writing, seeing in it the most insidiously convenient receptacle of 'subjective' phrase-making. Yet in *Profumo*, descriptions of nature abound. Many of them are 'literary'—correlatives of states of mind, or reposeful word pictures offering relief from the novel's main subject. But they are also the means by which this subject is set in proper perspective. Their conspicuous place in Capuana's narrative economy balances psychological tensions, and absorbs them into a total reality which is, on the whole, benevolent. Though Capuana may entrust his description with dismal intimations on the couple's future, his Nature is not fearful or sinister. The precipitous slope below the convent terrace, in Chapter I, is only mysterious, palpitating with unseen life, and a trifle melancholy:

Attorno, vicino, lontano, gran silenzio, interrotto soltanto dal malinconico stornello di un contadino dalla melodia monotona e strascicante. Sotto il parapetto della terrazza, l'abisso nero gorgogliava di sordi rumori: stormio di fronde, scroscio di acque scorrenti, stridi di uccelli notturni. A intervalli, calma profonda. (p. 13)

Even in the would-be desolation of a neglected cemetery, Nature seems animated, the trees protective and the gravestones bright among the foliage:

In quel lato le croci erano più fitte; rozze pietre, meschini tumoletti di sassi e gessi biancheggiavano tra il verde, sgretolati, immiseriti, sormontati da croci di ferro munite di cartellini col nome della persona sepolta. Un ulivo dai larghi rami proteggeva una tomba; brevi siepi di alloro si allargavano di qua e di là tra i mandorli e i fichi dalle braccia contorte e biancastre. (p. 202)

It was no doubt in part the realist's passion for naming the objects he observed which made nature seem so healthily industrious; but it is clear that a landscape which had no darker tones than these, and contained reassuring figures like the gardener, Padreterno, and nothing more destructive than small boys in search of birds' eggs, was intended to preserve the atmosphere of calm moderation which prevails in the rest of *Profumo*.

The narrative texture of the novel, the constant shifting of its focus from a troubled inner world to a serene, sometimes comic, outer one, its modest dramas which turn out well (Eugenia able to resist Ruggiero, Giulia married to the man of

her choice in a general atmosphere of reconciliation), converge at last on the optimistic ending. This ending is the major pointer to Capuana's break with the ideologies of scientific naturalism. The inspiration of *Giacinta* was optimistic only in as far as it bespoke the confidence of positivist science to understand the causes and the ways of abnormality; in its rigid determinism it offered the afflicted no escape—Follini foresaw disaster but was powerless to prevent it. In *Profumo* Patrizio realizes that his task is to over-ride the psycho-physiological determinants of his nature, to 'ritessere tutta la tela della sua vita, tentare l'impossibile' (p. 207), and he succeeds: *Giacinta* had deliberately set out to prove the impossibility of such an undertaking. While the earlier novel had shown that beneath a surface abnormality there lay a special, deviant normality (*Giacinta*'s adulterous 'marriage' with Andrea for example) discernible to the all-comprehending eye of positivist science, *Profumo* shows that an apparently blameless normality may conceal grave psychological aberrations. This was potentially the more radical notion, and yet *Profumo* turns out a work of rather consoling, facile optimism. The vigour and the originality of the book lay in Capuana's straining, without either moral scruples or sensationalism, after insights into the psyche. But as an effort of cognition, its impact is deadened when Capuana clumsily and casually reinstates 'metaphysical' man; the traces of idealism which he had seen fit never to eliminate thoroughly from his world-view now re-emerge to emasculate his realism.

He did not appear to jib at De Roberto's comment (which he quoted back at him) that with Eugenia he had intended to show 'la lotta della sensazione con la volontà e il trionfo di questa aiutata dal sentimento morale del proprio dovere'.<sup>43</sup> The instinctive life of the creatures of naturalism was now integrated with long-neglected moral absolutes, with 'volontà', and 'dovere'; as the preface said in 1900: 'accanto al male c'è il bene, accanto al senso il sentimento, accanto all'istinto la elevazione spirituale dell'umana coscienza.' And there was nothing to object to in Capuana's thus dissociating himself from the 'pessimism' of naturalism's philosophy, or in his evident responsiveness to the new, spiritual values of the age. But in the act of creation what seemed to catch his imagination was precisely the 'medical', pathological aspect of his characters, not the acts of volition, for instance, through which they secured their own recovery. For Eugenia in the moment of her triumph over Ruggiero and desire, Capuana can find only a stream of commonplaces: 'Sia bono! Gli voglio bene, ma non come crede lei. A che scopo? Non me ne riparli più. Sono d'altri. Sarei imperdonabile. [. . .] Se mi vuol bene, mi lasci in pace, si scordi di me. Non posso amarlo. Non devo amarlo' (pp. 228-9). And if it be objected, as perhaps it may, that this is precisely the hypocritical, trite language that best conveys a fundamental lack of conviction, the mindless babbling of clichés that reveals Eugenia's real desire, then one may remember at least that all the re-writing of the last section of the novel could not make Patrizio's change of heart convincing.

It is significant that there Capuana leant heavily on Doctor Mola, for once again

it is the figure of a doctor who is invested with the authority to make explicit something of the author's current views on life.

That Mola should be capable of influencing the action of the novel is, of course, a pointer to the new conception of *Profumo*, to its polemical, anti-naturalist optimism. Mola, the country practitioner, has lost something of the laboratory perfection of a Follini. In him there is none of the aristocratic intellectualism of the infallible positivist scientist, but a lively sense of his practical mission among men, and a modest scepticism about the scientific trustworthiness of his calling. Where medical science gives no answers he is content to allay his patient's fears with a 'pietosa bugia' (p. 231), even if this strategy, as when he leads Eugenia to believe she is pregnant, may prove less than useful in the long run. Yet Mola contemplates the strange phenomenon of the orange-blossom perfume with all the detached intellectual appetite of accredited positivism: 'Fenomeno raro. Sono contento di poterlo osservare', and pronouncing it an 'indizio di grande delicatezza dell'apparecchio nervoso' (p. 63) he speaks the accepted language of positivist physiology, while his scientific reading is up-to-date; Doctors Hammond and Ochorowicz have already prepared him to meet such a case as Eugenia's.<sup>44</sup> It is precisely because his scientific credentials are in order, that Capuana may venture to make him the vehicle of attitudes which, in his view, have overtaken the rigorous materialism of the seventies' positivism. Mola's outlook, like Capuana's in this period, is carefully undogmatic. While we have no reason to believe that Capuana is to be identified with Mola on the question of religious faith, it is noteworthy that Mola's belief is in any case that of a man convinced that science is unable to explain all life's strange occurrences, or rather, too much in its infancy to provide full explanations of them; in the meantime, until science can account for phenomena (whose existence it at least no longer denies), he might just as well call them 'miracles' as the Church does (p. 64). We may conjecture that the spirit of Mola's attitudes struck Capuana as more 'scientific', because less dogmatic and more open to correction, than that of the blinkered positivists criticized in *Spiritismo?*.

Mola is the partisan of the *juste milieu*. Not unlike his distant antecedent, Cymbalus, he believes that all aspects of existence contribute to a total beneficent pattern. Between spirit and flesh, as he tells the too 'idealistic' Patrizio, there is a balance which, if respected, renders life 'molto più facile che non paia' (p. 235). On one occasion however the latent connotations of extreme conservatism emerge from behind the cheerful façade of Mola's easy-going tolerance. His reactions to the Good Friday 'flagellanti' procession explicitly offer a challenge to the 'doctinaire', progressionist views of Ruggiero (whom Mola himself defines 'di scuola moderna', 'libero pensatore' (pp. 106, 107)). 'Lasciateli fare!', the doctor tells the outraged young man:

Qualcuno ne muore, parecchi si ammalano, tutti rimangono spossati per parecchie settimane . . . È un guadagno. Si pongono in circostanze di non poter commettere,

per un certo tempo, nessuna cattiva azione . . . Te ne persuadi? La religione, anche quando diventa un po' superstiziosa, dà sempre buoni frutti. Sono poveri ignoranti; bisogna compatirli! (p. 107)

When put to the test, Mola's equanimity is transformed into an irritating paternalism. The well-read doctor who criticizes the 'paroloni di moda' (p. 39) employed by his scientific colleagues is, in fact, a moralist. His paternalistic attitudes are, moreover, echoed by the mayor, who thus described the functioning of municipal affairs and his unsought role in them: 'Cento teste, cento pareri. Il Parlamento mi par tal quale il nostro Consiglio comunale, dove si chiacchiera, si chiacchiera, ci si appiglia per gare di partito, e non si conchiude niente di buono . . . Io mi ci trovo in mezzo per caso, perchè hanno voluto così' (pp.29-30); or accounts for his taking part in the barbaric 'flagellanti' procession to Geltrude: 'Sono di servizio, come vede. Festa popolare. Il sindaco deve suonare la traccolla, per dirigere la processione. Usi di paesetti, signora mia; bisogna uniformarvisi, per politica' (p. 104). The narrative structure and the style of *Profumo* must have seemed to Capuana inadequate to body forth his new hopefulness; Mola and the mayor together carry an explicit message of consolation, the message that life is good and that happiness consists in cheerfully adapting to it. It is no accident that Mola's whimsical humour provides a foretaste of Capuana's Doctor Maggioli, narrator of the fantastical, ironic tales of *Il Decameroncino* (1901) and *Voluttà di creare* (1911), in which science, now definitively dethroned, generates grotesque machines, abortive experiments, and bizarre situations, and serves only to set Maggioli's comic verve in motion. And it is no accident that Mola and the mayor find counterparts in the comforting figures of a country priest and a country doctor in *Rassegnazione*, the most exhortative of Capuana's narrative works.

Thus *Profumo* revives the moral world which had slumbered during the hey-day of positivism. But Capuana engineers this rebirth in a superficial, almost sentimental way, with none of the original thinking that went into the measured deciphering of the novel's psychological problems, or the sober respect for truth which attached to them, making his scabrous subject seem 'puro come un'ostia'. And the ambiguities and the metaphysical doubts of the eighties persisted. In *Mondo occulto* of 1896, which Capuana saw as an appendix to *Spiritismo?*, we find him still conceiving of intellectual advance only in terms of the positivist method, with its constant willingness to adapt and modify existing scientific laws, and conjecturing that it may eventually explain extrasensory phenomena, causing the natural and the supernatural worlds to 'confondersi insieme', to form 'una cosa sola, il mondo della realtà'.<sup>45</sup> And yet he clings, contradictorily and with unashamed superficiality, to the concept of the supernatural, as is shown in a passage of imagined dialogue in which he wonders whether unexplained psychic phenomena 'non possono esser effetto di una legge semplicissima, fenomeno tanto naturale quanto l'emissione della voce', and continues:

**'Allora lo spiritismo va per aria! Il soprannaturale fa un tonfo!'**

**'E chi parla di soprannaturale? Dove finisce il naturale e dove comincia quell'altro? Chi ne ha segnato il confine?''<sup>46</sup>**

The truly negative effects of this intellectual floundering are to be felt only in the experimental narrative and the criticism of the nineties. For the present *Profumo* stands on the edge of Capuana's ideological uncertainties and survives, one of his best works of psychological realism despite the superficial consolation of local colour and moralizing optimism.