

## CHAPTER IV

### THE NINETIES: REACTIONS TO THE CONTEMPORARY 'ISMI' IN NARRATIVE AND CRITICISM

#### 1. *The 'Idealist' Experiments of 'La Sfinge' and 'Rassegnazione'*

In 1899 E. Troilo, a positivist of Ardigò's school, looked back over the preceding decade and was forced to admit that his own philosophy struck a discordant note amid the brooding mysticism of the closing years of the century:

Sorto nell'aurora luminosa d'un grande rinnovamento umano, allorchè [...] sulle rovine salivano la scienza positiva e la libertà, il nostro secolo scende ora alla fine tutt'avvolto di nebbie cineree. E tra le nebbie delle coscienze infiacchite ed invecchiate prima che la forza rigeneratrice dei nuovi tempi le ritemprasse per l'avvenire, si affacciano i fantasmi che parevano svaniti per sempre, ritornano le vecchie credenze, si sente il soffio della fede ridestare pensieri e forze spezzati: il mondo, che appare come pentito, impaurito e deluso va brancolando dietro qualche di fantastico che non si sa definire e dietro ideali inafferrabili.<sup>1</sup>

Those 'fantasmi' and those 'ideali inafferrabili' as far as Capuana was concerned had been stirring even in the eighties. As they become more insistent it was no longer possible simply to acknowledge the fact of their existence with the circumspect question mark which had characterized that period. Capuana now felt obliged to test his artistic method, salvaged from the ruins of naturalism in *Per l'arte*, against new, more 'idealistic' contents. That aspects of his method, for example his particular kind of literary language (and here one remembers the example *verismo* gave 'di aver parlato scrivendo' and its general suspiciousness of formal virtuosity), were likely to prove inadequate instruments for rendering feelings and ideals that were 'inafferrabili', infinitely shaded and contorted, did not seem to strike him. Or if it did, the desire to be *à la page* was stronger. As we have noted before, Capuana did not seem to see that his 'metodo' could be divorced only with difficulty from specific ideological attitudes. Of the *verista* triad from Sicily it was only De Roberto who clearly perceived the necessity of this linkage. Born some twenty years after Verga and Capuana he came to maturity in a period that may be called post-Zolian (but even his early criticism, when dealing with the theoretical Capuana, minimized the importance of the Zolian first series of *Studi* in relation to the second with its substantial scepticism about the theory of the experimental novel<sup>2</sup>). The ardour of personal commitment which had informed the early debates

on naturalism (and which in part motivated Capuana's and Verga's anxious attempts to update their literary credos in accordance with a changed, anti-naturalist environment) was unknown to the younger writer. Capuana, with his De Sanctisian cult of form, should have realized that the would-be neutrality of his method was an impossibility, but it was De Roberto who wrote: 'ogni metodo d'arte porta con sè la propria filosofia [. . .] Realismo e idealismo sono al tempo stesso dottrine morali e metodi tecnici, sistemi filosofici e partiti artistici. Un romanzo idealista nell'ispirazione e naturalista nell'esecuzione—o viceversa—non è possibile.'<sup>3</sup> How far the 'idealism' of works like *La Sfinge* and *Rassegnazione* (which Capuana repeatedly adduced as proof of his independence of any literary school) was compatible with an artistic method which had evolved from naturalism itself is the problem which confronts the reader of Capuana's narrative of the nineties.

If the new cultural and spiritual needs of the period had reactivated in Capuana that propensity to suspend judgement which had been present from the first, notably in the 'connubio' of Hegelianism and positivism, they also led him to reject in part the sort of rationality which had been connected historically with a moment of confident and fervid activity in the sciences. Reason or 'scienza' (or 'la vera scienza' as he was to call it in *Gli ismi contemporanei*<sup>4</sup>) as he now saw it had lost some of its hard-headed self-assurance and had abandoned its claims to be able to solve humanity's problems immediately. In learning patience and a sense of its own limitations, it became, in Capuana's view, truer to its own essential spirit. And while Capuana was losing his scientific optimism, the powers of determinism, in *Profumo*, yielded to moral categories such as 'volontà' and 'dovere' which defied the sort of analysis naturalism had made available to its adherents.

The pattern of reversal in Patrizio hinted at a fundamental revision of attitudes in regard to the nature of human action, and in his long *racconto*, *La Sfinge*, Capuana goes much further.<sup>5</sup> The actions of its characters, as the title self-consciously suggests, are now deliberately viewed as enigmatic and indecipherable in terms of the naturalistic canon.

According to Enrico Ghidetti, in stories like 'Anime in pena' and 'Ribrezzo' (both published in *Ribrezzo* of 1885) already 'l'impalcatura scientifica di sostegno comincia a vacillare [. . .] e il quadro della malattia si restringe alla "coscienza", ma per rivelarne tutta l'insondabile profondità'.<sup>6</sup> Yet for the young Lucini, opting himself for the symbolist 'synthesis' which 'assurgendo dal singolo alla universalità, ci ridona [. . .] la fede negli uomini e la sicura nozione del mondo astante', *La Sfinge* was unquestionably a 'volume naturalistico'. He felt that its message, which emerges from an analysis of the particular, was not only non-universal, but wilfully negative as only naturalism with its pessimistic 'apriorismo scientifico' could be.<sup>7</sup> The fact is that *La Sfinge* is the confluence of two currents of thought, the meeting-point of naturalism and 'spiritualism'. Artistically unsatisfactory as the work undoubtedly is, it has attracted little critical attention and yet remains a significant pointer to the ideological volatility to which not only Capuana but his

contemporaries were subject.

As in so many stories of the past, the main impulse of *La Sfinge* is psycho-sexual and its action rigorously linear. Its subject is the love-affair of Giorgio Montani, a once successful playwright, and a young widow named Fulvia. The relationship is quickly tainted by the presence of a second suitor, an old family friend and moreover the medical attendant of Fulvia's ailing child, a man she cannot dismiss without arousing suspicion about her affair. No proof of Fulvia's 'guilt' exists, yet Dr Butironi's faintly equivocal presence is enough to turn the idyll into a joyless torment, and Montani, obsessed by jealousy, finally commits suicide. The theme of sexual jealousy, so congenial to the naturalist's 'instinctual' view of life, no longer however carries the whole burden of the tenuous action. For Giorgio is also the artist-hero who spurns an imperfect existence, and maintains a man's right to cut it off at a point of maximum fulfilment.

Certainly Capuana is sometimes to be discovered in his familiar role as the arithmetician of the psyche: Giorgio's pessimism is 'prodotto dagli studi e più, dai casi della sua famiglia, specialmente dal suicidio del fratello e dalla morte della sua amatissima mamma'. But in this case the deterministic formula is immediately superseded by an insistent, triple reference to 'la fatalità delle cose', 'la misteriosa legge dei fatti', to 'un'insidia della sorte' (p. 63), which promptly shifts attention from the conditionable nature of the self to the 'mystery' of obscure outward forces impinging upon it. And this tautological form of interpretation, with one set of motivations superimposed on the other, invests the central theme of Giorgio's jealousy. Capuana stresses that the intensity of his feelings is pathological:

cominciava a capire che dentro di lui c'era stato qualcosa di eccessivo, di morboso. Egli aveva contrariato, represso il naturale svolgimento delle sue facoltà, e l'organismo si era ribellato, tanto più violentemente quanto più tardi. Foggiatosi un ideale assurdo, campato in aria, senza nessuna base di realtà, aveva conformato ad esso ogni suo atto, col superbo concetto che il pensiero sia quel che più importa nella vita. (p. 485)

Giorgio's troubles, like Patrizio's, are attributed to the repression of instinctive material which now explodes uncontrollably in neurosis; and Capuana calls him 'mad' ('Forti ondate di pazzia gli assalivano violentemente il cervello' (p. 75); '“Ammattisco!”', aveva esclamato, rabbrivendo di orrore' (p. 76) etc.). But this naturalistic diagnosis is offered not only in a perfunctory manner, but with a deliberate disregard for the normal process of the disorder. There is no 'logic', no progressive intensification in Giorgio's morbid feelings, but an alternation of lucidity and unbalance in him which transforms his 'madness' into an enigmatic visitation from outside. Capuana's psychological naturalism begins to break down, taking on the quality of a nervous tic, a habitual and intermittent grimace devoid of meaning. The emotion of jealousy, nominally excited by Butironi (for all his physical repulsiveness) and exacerbated by Giorgio's 'idealism' is in reality treated according to the dictates of a new literary climate which no longer cherished exasperated

feelings as examples of 'interesting' abnormality, but as evidence of a superior-humanity in the sufferer. The question of suicide in particular shows Capuana alert to the stirring of decadentism. While in *Giacinta* suicide had been the extreme explication of the 'rationality' of frustrated emotions, in *La Sfinge*, it is the supreme expression of individual will. Capuana was probably conversant with Schopenhauer. In 1892 D'Annunzio wrote that 'gli spiriti più complessi e più inquieti', feeling the limitations of naturalism, 'si protesero con avidità verso le correnti spirituali che attraversavano la vita europea e la conturbavano fecondandola', and those currents were represented on the one hand by the Russian novel and on the other by 'il pessimismo occidentale, formulato da Arturo Schopenhauer con elegante rigore e quindi dai romanzieri di Francia inoculato ad altissime dosi in creature letterarie o deboli o mediocri o estremamente complicate, e sottili'.<sup>8</sup> It is probably what often was interpreted in the nineteenth century as Schopenhauer's apologia for suicide, combining with some knowledge of the fashionable Nietzsche, that provides the key to *La Sfinge's* treatment of the topic. It is at all events difficult to accept the naturalist and psychological reading offered by one of the work's few critics, Giuseppe Marchese, who considers the suicide of Giorgio's brother an indication of congenital predispositions also inherited by Giorgio. The sheer baldness of such a supposed tribute to determinism does not escape Marchese himself ('non ha certamente un adeguato approfondimento'), but he offers no alternative explanation.<sup>9</sup> The fact is that Ernesto's suicide is as inexplicable to Giorgio as it is acceptable—a sublime assertion of free will over the lowly instinct of self-preservation:

La ragione del suo suicidio era rimasta ignorata. Nessuno aveva potuto sospettare il tetro proposito. Era stato visto allegro fino a pochi minuti avanti. E non un rigo di addio alla madre e al fratello! Se n'era andato fieramente altero, senza scusarsi, senza chieder perdono neppure ai suoi cari del dolore che lor cagionava. Era un diritto! Aveva fatto bene, se la vita gli era diventata insopportabile. (p. 673)

Capuana's repudiation of the naturalist's concept of man could hardly be more decided. The real function of Ernesto's suicide is to introduce the idea—and even more the 'ideology'—of suicide which will justify the story's conclusion. But a certain perplexity remains: is *La Sfinge* concerned with pathology or with a 'glorious' excess of feeling?

The same duality of inspiration attaches to the figure of Fulvia. Is she truly the 'donna alla buona', the 'borghesuccia amante del quieto vivere' (p. 678) she claims at one point to be, or has Giorgio good reason to recollect with terror her confession that she embarked on the relationship in a spirit of curiosity, attracted by the lustre of his name (p. 281)? Certainly Fulvia seems a commonsensical, if conventional, creature, and is no more given to telling white lies than Giorgio's inordinate suspiciousness warrants. But Capuana intends that the question Giorgio asks, 'Era dunque proprio innocente o affatto impenetrabile colei?' (p. 279), should

remain unanswered. For (despite the distaste he would soon show for symbolist art, and his warning that the fictional character, if he becomes a symbol, should do so 'senza volerlo a senza saperlo'<sup>10</sup>) Fulvia is deliberately associated with the sphinx of the title. In Giorgio's study there hangs a picture of this enigmatic and unattainable creature seated on the summit of a barren mountain, indifferent to her 'victims' perishing in their ascent on the slopes below. The link with Fulvia, and with mysterious womanhood in general, is unmistakable. 'È la sfinge mitologica; sei tu, siete tutte, è la donna, l'enimma insolubile!' (p. 478), Giorgio exclaims, showing Fulvia the picture.

If *La Sfinge* had exclusively adopted the view-point of the frenzied hero (giving full value to the passing suggestion that the Fulvia Giorgio contemplates exists only in his own mind—'gli sembrava che Fulvia fosse attinta dallo stesso male di lui, la smania del nuovo, del raro' (p. 488)), the symbolic superstructure might have seemed less contrived. But the narrative belongs to Capuana as well as to Giorgio (who is indeed 'diagnosed' in a detached spirit), so that the symbol rises awkwardly from a fundamentally realist matrix, an ingenuous homage to current literary fashions. And *La Sfinge* is in general vitiated by Capuana's effort to marry his own narrative procedures, his 'spoken' prose and impersonal method, with a new sensibility and new themes.

The signs of his attempted *aggiornamento* range from his deliberate psychological inconclusiveness to certain features of content and style. It is no accident that the story unfolds in Rome, the decadent, feverish Rome of *Il Piacere*, whose 'malefico fascino' leaves Giorgio 'sfibrato' and incapable of work (p. 61), the city where Fulvia's husband became embroiled in 'ardite speculazioni' and 'arricchendosi vertiginosamente, e perdendo tutto, vertiginosamente' died of grief (p. 70). Choosing the D'Annunzian city, Capuana chose an atmosphere of sophistication and paid, as best he could, his dues to its fads and fashions. Thus Giorgio symbolically anticipates the end of his affair with a ritual broadcasting of dead rose-petals, or gazes at a photograph of Fulvia, 'strana, misteriosa' in an exotic Eastern costume (p. 663). The calculated negligence of his study with its Oriental statuettes and scattered 'ninnoli artistici' (p. 485) is a model of *fin de siècle* elegance. Fulvia in her turn provides allusions to the current, slightly *outré* vogue for bicycling—a faint, naive presage of D'Annunzio's *engouement* with the heroics of the automobile and the aeroplane after the turn of the century. Finally there is the telepathic hallucination which reveals Giorgio's suicide to Fulvia and brings the *racconto* to its melodramatic close. This ending prompted Croce to remark: 'Persuasivo com'è il Capuana che i fenomeni spiritici e telepatici appartengano al mondo della realtà e debbano formare oggetto di osservazione scientifica, non può dubitare di ammetterli nella cerchia della sua arte, che vuole per l'appunto coincidere con la cerchia delle sue convinzioni di naturalista.'<sup>11</sup> In any other work, perhaps, than *La Sfinge* it would be correct to draw Capuana's interest in extrasensory perception within the ambit of a fundamentally positivist outlook. But in *La Sfinge* there is no

real question of 'osservazione scientifica'—the work deliberately proclaims the inscrutability of the psyche. The episode is nothing more than a piece of esotericism designed to underscore the spiritual refinement of the characters.

This refinement seems to have suggested to Capuana that if Giorgio's exquisite suffering was no longer to be rooted in the humble, cause-and-effect psychology of positivism, but to move freely in a rarefied ether, it must at least be endowed with the intensity and the spirituality to keep it afloat. To this end *La Sfinge* intermittently adopts a heightened, rhetorical style, as though to create through language itself the rationale of the emotions it describes. Giorgio recollects the plenitude of his love in a passage replete with self-conscious *correspondances*: 'quelle paradisiache ore volate via senza ch'essi se n'accorgevano, quando pareva che dalle loro anime scaturisse un'onda di suoni fosforescenti, un'avvolgente nuvola di profumi, come se le parole, i sorrisi, la lietitudine spirituale del loro amore si traducessero in altrettanti simboli d'ineffabile comprensione' (p. 277). A plethora of exclamation marks and a phraseology reminiscent of *Profili di donne* appears ('terribile visione' (p. 74), 'orribile tortura' (p. 283), 'squisita ineffabile dolcezza' (p. 489), 'gioia selvaggia' (p. 673) etc.). This is not however the language of sentimental literature, but the coinage of the decadent hero with his superior capacity to feel (and his ability to restore to the most hard-worked of adjectives the full vibrancy of their meaning). It is clear that certain words and phrases used are no longer the passive signs of the reality they designate, but that they have acquired 'un valore di trasformazione, di idealizzazione', 'un valore quasi per sè stesse'—a tendency Capuana will soon condemn in D'Annunzio.<sup>12</sup> At moments in this experimental phase Capuana could hardly be further from that ideal of an anti-'literary' language after which he had so long striven, and which in his own work and Verga's so effectively contributed to releasing Italian letters from their earlier academic straitjacket.

All these aspects of content and style are tributes to a post-naturalist age when the arts seemed to merge into each other, tributes to the age of Wagnerianism, of the *poète-musicien*, of dream-like or stylised symbolism in painting, of refined subjectivism in prose and poetry. But *La Sfinge* mercilessly reveals the vanity of the exercise. Stylistically it oscillates between the studied intensity of its 'decadent' interludes and the more familiar, 'concrete' prose of Capuana's realism, exemplified in this passage of description with its vigorous urge to define and its emphasis on characterizing detail and gesture:

Il commendatore capocomico si era alzato dalla poltrona, e prima di riprendere dalla seggiola accanto il lucidissimo cappello a stajo, i guanti e la mazza sormontata da grosso e pretenzioso pomo di argento cesellato, si tirava in giù il panciotto bianco, quasi recitasse una delle sue famose parti di caratterista, così esageratamente scoteva la testa in segno di gran malcontento e torceva le labbra su la faccia rasa di fresco. (p. 60)

Conceptually *La Sfinge* is suspended between psychological realism and a vaporous

'idealism', and the ignoble passion of jealousy is at loggerheads with the 'noble' ideal of willing self-annihilation. The gratuitously neurotic Montani becomes unfit to carry the elitist message assigned him.

But for all the superficiality and above all the ingenuousness of Capuana's decadentism, it is perhaps significant that the most successful and subtle form of psychological analysis in *La Sfinge* is no longer that which excavates the inner dimension of the character, registering and accumulating modifications of feeling which will motivate some future action. Rather the character's psychology is projected onto the outer world. Objective description becomes vision, and the writing takes on a subjective, non-rational quality. In the following passage, which describes Giorgio bewilderedly walking the streets soon after conceiving his suspicions about Fulvia, the impressionistic transformation of reality is particularly effective:

In lunghe file, lungamente spaziate, brillavano ai fianchi della via i primi lampioni del gas. Una carrozza gli era passata accosto rapidamente, gettandogli addosso lo sprazzo dei suoi fanaletti: poco più in là, un uomo gli veniva incontro diffidente, e sfilava oltre squadrandolo. E la via si allungava, si allungava, con edifizii che si schiarivano un po' al suo accostarsi, e pareva s'immergessero nuovamente nel buio alle sue spalle, con chiome d'alberi che sovrastavano ai muri, ai cancelli, macchie nere nel cielo tempestato di stelle. (p. 279).

The technique is not always as suggestively handled and Capuana employs it so spasmodically as to indicate that he had not yet settled on the place such description was to have in his narrative. Even so, it implies the beginnings of a doubt as to whether the reality of consciousness could be fully encapsulated in the severely rationalistic and objective terms he had employed to this date. And it is perhaps not irrelevant to note that the cherished doctor-figure, key to the interpretation of *Giacinta* and *Profumo*, is not only removed to the periphery of the story but seen in a negative, sinister light.

Though *La Sfinge* reveals an interest in psychological awareness which owes nothing of substance to the scientific formulas of naturalism, its imperfect assimilation of alternative values is obvious. As much as ever in the past, sudden stylistic transitions betray the borrowed nature of Capuana's inspiration and his inability to abandon the habits of mind acquired in the era of positivism. *Rassegnazione*, following after *La Sfinge*, consciously takes stock of this failure and tries to make a merit of it, adopting D'Annunzian poses, for instance, only to expose from within their inhumanity and lack of a 'base di realtà'. If Capuana felt the attractions of 'spiritualism', with its critique of positivist rationality, its restoration of free will and the tragedy of the individual, it was nevertheless powerless to give a fundamentally new shape to his view of the world. He remained, as always, mistrustful of extremes and wedded to a common-sense realism which undermined the elitism of *La Sfinge* and accounted for the moralistic stance of *Rassegnazione*.

A spirit of moderation which balanced spirit and matter had emerged from *Profumo*, and *La Sfinge* implicitly subscribes to the same modest views. Giorgio's spiritual exaltation is repeatedly set at a distance by a demystifying realism which sees him as mentally unbalanced, and his mistake, echoing Patrizio's and foreshadowing Dario's in *Rassegnazione*, is to have denied his faculties their 'naturale svolgimento'. The 'natural' man whose instincts are to be respected as much as his mind is neither the 'brute' of naturalism nor the spiritual contortionist of decadentism. Capuana's deepest response to decadentism, as we shall see in connexion with his criticism, was negative; his confidence in positivism had waned. To the weary vacuum which the aestheticism of *La Sfinge* had failed to fill he brought the consoling philosophy of *Rassegnazione*.

Though *Rassegnazione* was finally published only in 1907, it belongs not solely in terms of inspiration but also to a great extent in terms of chronology to the nineties.<sup>13</sup> The manuscript of the novel bears the following note in Capuana's hand:

Cominciato a scrivere il 30 gennaio 1894. Interrotta, all'undicesimo capitolo, la pubblicazione in *Flegrea* e scritti i capitoli XII e XIII. Ripreso a scrivere il 15 aprile 1906 e terminato il 5 luglio dello stesso anno. L. Capuana.<sup>14</sup>

A letter early in 1895 to De Roberto records the completion of 'most of the first half' of the novel, and reveals that the total plan was already established:

*Rassegnazione* è la storia di un uomo ricco, colto, con un grande ideale nella mente, e che per il suo debole organismo e per la natura del suo ingegno si vede condannato all'impotenza. Dispera; ma all'ultimo, per una serie di circostanze che formano la tela del romanzo, arriva a rassegnarsi, riconoscendo che nella vita anche gli umili e i mediocri hanno il loro valore. In questo romanzo non c'è amore, e sarà, in un certo senso, la sua originalità.<sup>15</sup>

The first thirteen chapters, published in the Neapolitan journal in 1900,<sup>16</sup> appear unchanged in the volume of 1907, and the second half, written in 1906, follows the plan described to De Roberto in 1895. The novel itself bears no trace of its interrupted composition.

*Rassegnazione* coincided with a period of Capuana's life that was marked by constant nervous depression and increasing financial strain. Like *La Sfinge* it was conceived at a time when the theories and the culture which had informed the bulk of his work were disappearing into the past. It is Capuana's second and last attempt to associate himself with the new avant-garde, and it is a work which betrays the intellectual weariness and the melancholy of the period. In recent years the novel's rare critics have judged it harshly. Marchese refers to the 'indifferenza' and the 'inerzia' which must afflict 'qualsiasi lettore';<sup>17</sup> Carlo Madrignani has dismissed it as 'il più pesante e immaturo' of Capuana's works.<sup>18</sup> In 1907 it was largely ignored, perhaps for reasons of tact. Capuana himself attributes the critical silence to the 'mille commemorazioni carducciane'.<sup>19</sup> But even when, in a private letter to him,

De Amicis defined the novel 'uno degli studii d'anima più profondo e più originali che siano stati fatti in Italia', the remark sounded more reverent than convinced, and it was followed by the expression of a fear: 'saremo in pochi a gustare tutte le bellezze [. . .] profuse in *Rassegnazione*'.<sup>20</sup> Edoard Rod wrote in similar terms: 'Questo vostro romanzo di idee, nuovo, acuto, sarà compreso da pochi', and Pirandello, in an incomplete and unpublished review, responded coolly though with the same admixture of respect.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless it was reviewers and critics writing nearest the time of *Rassegnazione*'s publication who were most favourable. In 1922 Pietro Vetro pronounced it 'il migliore romanzo di Capuana e uno dei più forti e originali della letteratura contemporanea',<sup>22</sup> and seven years later a more reliable critic, Luigi Tonelli, treated it kindly.<sup>23</sup>

Reading between the lines of their comments, one senses that even the earlier critics found *Rassegnazione* indigestible, but they were clear on one matter: the novel was 'new' and corresponded to a modern climate of feeling. Many conspicuous novels in the closing years of the century, like *Rassegnazione*, showed a spiritual sickness in men. Grown over-refined and over-rational, they were incapable of spontaneity and without moral anchorage. Aspiring after some absolute of spiritual experience and attracted by high ideals, some by way of reaction became saints (like Antonio Fogazzaro's Piero Maironi from *Il piccolo mondo moderno* and *Il Santo*) or supermen (like D'Annunzio's Claudio Cantelmo from *Le vergini delle rocce*, his Stelio Effrena from *Il Fuoco*); others, more sceptical and passive, dissipated their energies and aspirations amid the triviality of provincial life, contemplated suicide and sometimes committed it. (D'Annunzio's division of 'creature letterarie' into the 'deboli e mediocri' or the 'estremamente complicate e sottili' was not without justification.) These anti-heroes, from Butti's Attilio Valda (*L'Automa*) and Svevo's Alfonso Nitti (*Una Vita*) to Oriani's Adolfo Romani (*Vortice*), Onufrio's Luciano Rambaldi (*L'ultimo borghese*), and even D'Annunzio's Giuseppe Aurispa (*Trionfo della morte*), are the *inetti*, a breed that sprung up in the vacuum left by positivist materialism and which found successors in Borgese's *Rubè* and Moravia's *Gli indifferenti*. Capuana's Dario is one of them. 'Inetto all'azione', he suffers from 'impotenza creativa' and a Svevian 'anticipata vecchiezza' (pp. 11, 26, 12).

If *Rassegnazione* seemed to make a contribution to the spiritual problems raised by the 'idealism' of the period, this was no more than Capuana intended. In a preface dated 31 December 1906 he dedicated *Rassegnazione* to the diseased and failed aspirations of the age. If a single 'illuso', he continues

ne ricevesse conforto e insegnamento a non chiedere alla vita più di quel che essa può dare e ad amarla anche pel poco che talvolta concede, sarei orgoglioso che la mia opera d'arte riuscisse qualcosa di più che lo studio coscienzioso di una crisi dello spirito di parecchi nostri contemporanei. (p. ii)

The familiar note sounded by the 'studio coscienzioso' contrasts strangely with

Capuana's determination to offer some spiritual consolation. The words are none the less an accurate representation of the text. *La Sfinge* had been an involuntary declaration that Capuana was fundamentally unable to sympathize with either the literary or ideological manifestations of the new spiritualism. In the species of debate which he had initiated between himself and the new culture of the nineties *Rassegnazione* represents a more articulate phase. Through Dario Capuana attempts to demonstrate his intimate participation in the 'spiritual crisis' and the exacerbated idealism of the period while at the same time exposing the self-absorption and egoism to which its protagonists are prone, and offering an alternative and more balanced philosophy of life.

In Dario Capuana has created a victim of exasperated idealism, a man tormented by a dream of artistic and intellectual fulfilment which his personality and his lack of true creative ability place forever beyond his reach. Studying aimlessly, Dario watches his literary abilities burn themselves out in self-criticism, and his moods alternate between self-pity and a sense of pride in his superior vision of life's goals. While the three companions of his student days embark on their careers, accept the compromises involved, and achieve recognition, he stands aloof, paralysed by his soaring ambition and half envious, half contemptuous of their easy adjustment to the mediocrity of existence. The disproportion between Dario's ideals and the 'forze fisiche e intellettuali che avrebbero dovuto metterli in atto' (p. 23) is the premiss of the work; the chief manner in which Capuana chooses to see these ideals struggling vainly towards fulfilment is undisguisedly D'Annunzian. When Dario's homely mother reminds him of the satisfactions of marriage and family, the idea of procreation assumes in Dario's mind the value he attributed to artistic creativity. Having found and married his 'collaboratrice' Dario intends to 'dare la vita a colui che avrebbe creato il capolavoro d'arte a [lui] negato di produrre, o rivelato alla società l'idea nuova e feconda che avrebbe allargato i confini dell'intelligenza, dominato le menti e creato l'avvenire' (p. 70). But he makes the bitter discovery that genetic laws are less than subservient to the power of an idea, and the male of genius whom Fausta was supposed to bear turns out to be a short-lived female. Fausta does not survive her second pregnancy. The soured idealist then leaves for Milan, there to vent his disappointments on a sophisticated city which can at least offer some absolute of willed depravity. But Dario is a bourgeois at heart. Despite the cool expertise in corruption of his mistress, her 'inconsapevolezza da bellissimo animale' (p. 187), he is on the point of falling in love when his mother calls him home to commemorate the anniversary of Fausta's death. Chance and impulse finally play their part in deflecting Dario from his intended suicide when he rescues a peasant child from the window of a burning cottage. Brought up in Dario's household, the orphaned 'contadina' becomes 'signorina' and provides at last that humble sense of purpose towards which the book has all along been straining.

In 1895, *Il Convito* had published *Le vergini delle rocce* in serial form, and the volume appeared the same year (though with the date of 1896) in time to influence

the central part of the novel which concerned Dario's selection of a wife and his plans as progenitor of a superior breed. Without Claudio Cantelmo Dario would have been unthinkable. Cantelmo wonders whether life might become 'un esercizio diverso da quello consueto delle facoltà accomodative nel variar continuo dei casi; ciò è: se la [sua] volontà potesse per via di elezioni e di esclusioni trarre una sua nuova e decorosa opera dagli elementi che la vita aveva in [sè] accumulati',<sup>24</sup> similarly Dario aspires to 'realizzare un ideale di vita con mezzi e intenti forse non mai adoperati riflessivamente fin allora' (p. 64), and his 'miracle' of creation is to result not 'dalla sospensione di certe leggi della Natura, ma dalla intelligente coordinazione di queste a uno scopo determinato' (p. 115). As Cantelmo sets about choosing one of his three princesses to 'preparare il destino di Colui che doveva venire', the King of Rome,<sup>25</sup> so Dario selects 'Coei che doveva essere la sua collaboratrice nella sovrana opera di creazione' (p. 69) of 'il Sospirato, l'Atteso', 'il principino imperiale' (pp. 164, 110). Thus the first of D'Annunzio's supermen has passed on to Dario much more than the ideal of a sublime form of existence dominated and regulated by force of will. It is true that the Cantelmo-inspired episodes of *Rassegnazione* do not exhaust all Capuana has to say on the subject of Dario's idealism, but they form a weighty, central section of the novel (Chapters IX to XX), and as borrowed material were not perhaps the most convincing proof of Capuana's independent grasp on the spirituality which had eclipsed his own naturalism. *Rassegnazione*, however, is a work of thinly veiled polemicism, a negative response to the dream-mongers of the period; it is not the D'Annunzian parody Capuana was capable of writing but an earnest attempt to combat the ethic of the superman using D'Annunzio's own weapons (including capital letters).

Giuseppe Marchese has referred to 'l'anormalità di tutta la vicenda spirituale, che rasenta l'assurdo',<sup>26</sup> a remark which remains inert until one examines the reason why *Le vergini delle rocce*, let us say, is less 'absurd' than *Rassegnazione*, though far more seriously in contravention of good sense. The polemicism of *Rassegnazione* must be blamed. The sense of a learning process equipped with a fore-ordained conclusion is constantly reinforced by the presence of secondary characters who stand in a demonstrative relationship to Dario. From his mother, deluded in her dreams of emotional fulfilment and yet resigned, to Dario's school-fellows, all aspiring in their youth to the poet's laurels and later achieving success in a more mundane fashion, these secondary characters are—without more than mechanical differentiation—examples of the adaptability which Dario so patiently lacks. The real philosophy of the novel emerges finally through two characters who are the spiritual heirs of Dr Mola and the mayor from *Profumo*. A 'medico condotto' and a country priest, the two make their appearance together, potential representatives of opposing religious and scientific view-points. But Capuana's purpose is to point out the follies of ideological dogmatism. '“Tutto è miracolo”', exclaims the priest on learning how Dario's mother has had a presentiment of danger at the moment when Dario gazed with suicidal intentions at his revolver: '“Allora! . . . tutto è naturale, è

lo stesso”’ (pp. 218-19), rejoins the doctor. Intellectual partisanship has become superfluous in the face of the humour, the active usefulness, and the sense of human limitations, which are the attributes of these two characters. The gap between the aristocratic aestheticism of Dario and the sentimental and faintly moralistic good sense of the finale is enormous; and the debate between idealism and positivism which had occupied Capuana more seriously elsewhere peters out in a vapid admission of intellectual exhaustion.

Capuana was careful not to conclude *Rassegnazione* merely with a facile affirmation of life's value. Dario, who is narrator and thus the centre of the novel's intellectual focus, achieves a resignation which is not free of residual bitterness and doubt; and the book ends with a double 'desolattissimo punto interrogativo' (p. 239) (with the emblematic question mark). He doubts his power to shape the orphan girl's personality since it is already conditioned by heredity; and he asks himself whether the refined and educated creature he has produced would not have been happier leading the semi-instinctive existence of her origins. Such thinking hardly bears scrutiny for its underlying assumptions (though it is an interesting reminder of the conservative connotations of Capuana's positivism), but it is evidence of his care to avoid too radical a change of heart in his hero. Nevertheless within *Rassegnazione* itself, as in *La Sfinge*, lie the elements which subvert its artistic success and they are no less harmful for being, this time, conscious.

For the first time since *Profili di donne* Capuana has chosen a first-person narrative. It enabled him to investigate an individual psyche in depth without betraying the doctrine of impersonality. He was, as we shall see in greater detail in connexion with *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*, worried by the tonal unevenness and the implications for impersonality created in the course of a narrative by transitions from objective description to psychological analysis, from the external to the internal planes. *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* and *Rassegnazione*, composed largely in the same period, in interwoven blocks of time, adopt apparently radically different solutions to the problem, *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* avoiding all psychological analysis which cannot be in some way 'externalized', and *Rassegnazione* being resolved entirely on the internal plane created by the first-person narration. The limited insights into other personalities which depended on Dario's being the novel's exclusive centre of consciousness did not matter as long as Dario was also the vehicle of its intentions. But though Capuana's first person seems to translate a desire to match the delicate, 'spiritual' examination of modern man now being undertaken by writers from Bourget to Fogazzaro and Matilde Serao (the Serao not of *Paese di cuccagna* but of *Cuore infermo* or *Castigo*), a closer inspection of *Rassegnazione* reveals that its narrative techniques are akin to those of *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*, and that the first person is not much more than a device which allows Capuana to weld criticism of events to their narration. Dario gives his account from the standpoint of the philosophy of resignation, and the dual time scheme produces a multiplicity of phrases of the type: 'Il mio orgoglio

divergeva per altra via, e non m'accorgevo' (p. 70), 'Lo riconosco ora, dopo molti anni. Allora però [. . .]' (p. 115), 'Inconsapevolmente proseguivo la mia idea di un tempo' (p. 183). There is enough masochism in the text (and it reaches absurdity, as when Dario enviously compares his own inertia with the liveliness of an aggressive little boy playing at soldiers and dreaming of killing 'tutti gli abissini che hanno scannato a Dogali i nostri soldati' (p. 31)) without constant reminders of the wrongmindedness of Dario's D'Annunzian ambitions; and it is this integral, critical, and polemical dimension in the narrative that accounts in great part for Marchese's impression of absurdity. The reader cannot seriously participate in Dario's idealism while it is being evaluated retrospectively in the light of common sense.

D'Annunzio's first-person narrative in *Le Vergini delle rocce* was one of the means he chose 'per comunicare la sfiducia nella realtà normale e progettare, nello stesso tempo, l'avverarsi della realtà promessa al Superuomo'.<sup>27</sup> Capuana's first person certainly emphasized the fashionably introspective movement of his novel, but it offered nothing substantially different from his 'realist' third-person narrative. The narrator superimposes a 'correct' reading of events on their narration (in what is essentially a polemical exercise), but the past seldom conditions the present, creating that sense of *durée*, of psychological complexity which might have marked a departure from the narrative schemes used hitherto by Capuana. An exception is the following brief passage: 'non posso prolungar molto questo sforzo dell'immaginazione per rivivere la mia fanciullezza e spiegarmela. Soffro ora quel che non soffrivo allora; mi sento mancar l'aria, mi sento imprigionato dentro me stesso; e mi vengono le lacrime agli occhi' (p. 12); but this fleeting sense of stifling misery never recurs, and indeed the narrator repeatedly stresses the total accuracy of his recall, an accuracy which means that the past is not relived but reproduced ('mio padre, lo rivedo come in quel giorno', 'mi par di sentirne risonare la parola' (p. 1); 'principale occupazione colà è stata sempre quella di ricostituire con tutti i particolari la mia vegetazione di allora' (p. 13); 'Ricordo benissimo; mi trovavo nel mio studio [. . .]' (p. 65); 'Mi è rimasto indelebilmente impresso nella memoria lo strano spettacolo' (p. 83); 'Ripensandoci sento di nuovo l'urlo bestiale' (p. 114); 'La ho davanti agli occhi, dopo tanti anni, fissata nella memoria' (p. 128) etc.). Despite the narrator, events exist not in the complex dimension of the recollecting mind but in the simple, historical dimension which belongs to Capuana's realist narrative.

Just as these events are retailed with all possible fidelity, the fiction of Dario's perfect recall leaving them unchanged by the passage of time, so they unfold chronologically, not recorded by a shaping consciousness, nor interrupted by the 'author' of the recollections—the Dario of the present tense (except in as far as he is constantly insinuating the wisdom of hindsight into the narrative). As in *Giacinta* and *Profumo*, the early chapters of *Rassegnazione* examine childhood, and the account then moves forward in strict sequence paying due attention to a likely distribution of events over the period of time in question. This procedure is an

indication of the degree to which the cause-and-effect psychology of positivism still coloured Capuana's perceptions. It means that Dario's sense of inferiority and uncompromising idealism required preliminary justification; and this was provided by an account of his frail health in childhood, accompanied by a sense of inadequacy in relation to his energetic father, and of his studious adolescence, shaped intellectually by the Hegelianism of a tutor.

Capuana continues to assume, in a characteristically realist manner, an identity between narration and reality, language and life. The tentative experimentation of *La Sfinge* which had fused description and analysis in a new, subjective reality is taken no further. Certainly Capuana rejected description for its own sake. 'Se non mi diffondo a descrivere il paesaggio', he wrote to Cesareo, 'faccio così perché credo che esso, per sé stesso, non abbia valore se non in quanto ha rapporto con lo stato psicologico del mio personaggio.'<sup>28</sup> The following passage indisputably translates a state of mind:

La primavera era arrivata da parecchi giorni coi suoi tepori, coi suoi profumi, col suo vasto sorriso di verde e di sole, con la lieta gazzarra degli uccelli nidificanti tra i rami degli alberi, tra le siepi, con le farfalle che ci volteggiavano su la testa, d'attorno, mentre noi procedevamo per l'ampia strada, riandando con lieta spensieratezza i bei giorni della giovanile comunanza di studi. (p. 111)

But the landscape has not entirely lost its autonomy. This vision of springtime (in its sheer banality: warmth, perfume, green foliage, twittering birds, butterflies) is as much the vision of *any* onlooker as Dario's. And the natural description in *Rassegnazione* generally is not transformed by the gaze of the beholder (becoming, as in *La Sfinge*, a sensitive register of vibrations of feeling), but is utilized simply as a convenient way of recapitulating states of mind which can moreover be directly stated: in this instance 'la lieta gazzarra degli uccelli' and the rest is a mechanical reflection of 'lieta spensieratezza'.

We shall be noticing in *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* Capuana's failure to exploit free indirect speech, that device which allows information to be filtered through the awareness of the author; he prefers to preserve what Herczeg calls 'l'autenticità dell'accaduto'.<sup>29</sup> *Rassegnazione* speaks exclusively of an inner reality (ignoring geographical location and giving no sense of the social dimension in which Dario presumably lives), yet no use is made of free indirect speech. To the end of his career his impersonality led Capuana to respect the 'objective' truth of words for which his characters took responsibility and which precluded his own action as author within the narrative (his rewriting of *Giacinta* as well as of many short stories consistently tended to abolish passages of free indirect speech and passages of connective or expository material in favour of the 'autenticità' of direct speech). Like *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*, *Rassegnazione* abounds in dialogue, even where the exceptional readiness of its characters to philosophize aloud for Dario's benefit heavily underscores Capuana's intentions and borders on improbability. And on the

whole *Rassegnazione* retains the old, 'transparent' language of Capuana's realism. Faint D'Annunzian echoes attach themselves to Dario's D'Annunzian utterances, and dialogue occasionally aspires to a form of recitation as in this exchange between Dario and his mother:

'Io attendevo da te una parola, come tuo padre e forse assai diversa da quello che attendeva tuo padre. Non me l'hai detta. Perché Dario?'

'Non so, mamma! C'è un gran buio nel mio spirito. L'orgoglio m'acceca tuttavia [. . .]. La scienza è dolore! Vorrei dimenticare, diventare tutt'a un tratto un ignorante, un povero di spirito . . . Ecco perchè non ho potuto dirti la parola da te attesa . . . C'è un gran buio nel mio spirito!'

'Io non oso suggerirti . . .'

'Parla, mamma! Le tue parole dell'altra volta mi avevano aperto uno spiraglio di luce' etc.. (pp. 48-9)

Despite the repetitions and the inversions, the level of this stylization is modest. Like aspects of the content it is much more in the nature of a deliberate 'proof' that Capuana understood and could adopt at will the stance of the decadent aesthete (from which strong position he could more convincingly express his dissent) than evidence of a real participation in the culture which had superseded his naturalism.

*Rassegnazione* makes the point that Capuana is no longer to be associated with scientific materialism: the prestige of positivist science has collapsed, and when, through the mouths of the several doctors Dario encounters, 'la povera scienza medica attuale' (p. 89) is not confessing its inability to fully understand the working of 'mysterious' Nature, it speaks the unvarnished language of physiology, distressing the fastidious Dario, but as far as Capuana is concerned betraying its inadequacy to deal with anything beyond the immediate phenomenon. The novel also rejects idealism, where idealism means foolish pride, suppression of 'natural' instincts, inability to adapt to ordinary existence. Yet Dario seems to voice a philosophy that appealed to certain facets at least of Capuana's personality when he speaks of a 'Forza Superiore, che guida e regola le nostre azioni, spingendole dove vuol essa anche quando noi crediamo di agire con la più capricciosa libertà', of a 'ragione elevata' which should make us 'meno vanitosi' when we reflect that 'lavoriamo inconsapevolmente a quel che il Montesquieu chiamava: "*Le grand œuvre*", e un nostro illustre pensatore semplicemente: "La storia"' (p. 68). The thinker is undoubtedly De Meis. In this Hegelianism *sui generis* Capuana seems at last to see that Hegelians when they spoke of Reason were not speaking of the intellectual processes characteristic of individuals, nor of their powers of reasoning, but of a world-historical process in which individual reason had little part to play, and where indeed its function might be shown to contradict wholly its conscious aims. The 'scientific', Zolian Capuana had ignored De Meis's distinction between 'piccola' and 'grande ragione' (between positivistic reason and the Reason of the spirit), assuming that the one subsumed the other. Now in a new spirit of humility

and doubt, Capuana seems to confess the inadequacy of the scientific dream and to stand reverently in the shadow of the Spirit. Yet so predominantly polemical was the inspiration of *Rassegnazione* and so short of intellectual exploration its neo-idealism (embodied by those simple, countrified characters of its last chapters) that the familiar, realist procedures of Capuana's narrative remained untouched. This contradictory situation was to be mirrored in Capuana's criticism of the nineties, and only by reference to the polemical impulse behind the novel and to its deliberate thematic experimentation can the contemporary presence of a novel like *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* be included in a unitary vision of the author.

## 2. Criticism: Beyond the 'ismi'

*Gli 'ismi' contemporanei* is Capuana's final major statement of critical attitudes. *Cronache letterarie*, published a year later in 1899, enlarges on certain themes but has nothing radically new to offer (while the reviews of *Lettere alla assente* (1904), purporting to be addressed to a literary lady friend stranded in the country with nothing better to do than read, are mostly tired self-repetition—a fact which the contrived imaginary framework merely emphasizes). Consisting of articles written between 1892 and 1897, it is not surprising that *Gli 'ismi' contemporanei* should contain traces of the anti-naturalism and even anti-materialism already evident in *La Sfinge* and *Rassegnazione* as well as a statement of artistic outlook which is particularly well articulated precisely because it was now required to stand up under pressure of new aesthetic credos. It is not surprising either that the volume in the complexity of its cultural and even psychological motivation should have provoked widely divergent evaluations and interpretations. One may even find a recent critic like Ermanno Scuderi peering at Capuana through a Crocean mist, and without reference to the precise cultural matrix which produced it, giving preferential treatment to Capuana's post-1890 criticism and tending to ignore all that preceded it.<sup>30</sup> *Gli 'ismi'* and *Cronache letterarie* undoubtedly reveal a 'pre-Crocean' Capuana, one who equates 'conception' and 'expression', flinches at biographical criticism, minimizes the role of the intellect in the production of a work of art, and comes to a negative conclusion on decadentism—Croce's 'grande industria del vuoto'.<sup>31</sup> It has, however, become still more common to contrast the period of the two series of *Studi* with that of *Gli 'ismi'*—the vanguard Capuana with the Capuana of a conservative, rearguard action, insensitive to the innovations of the period and battling for a 'ritorno ai sacri principi del "vero"'.<sup>32</sup> What has not been seen at all is the relationship of the volume with certain innovations and accentuations of past tendencies which become perceptible in *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*.

The dissonant voices of commentators responding to this period of Capuana's criticism dissonances in the criticism itself partly explain: for as in *Rassegnazione*, Capuana is anxious to demonstrate his responsiveness to new ideals and new literary procedures (and his extraneousness to the question of naturalism), but all the while

he betrays his enduring faith in a realistic method. In the next chapter we shall see one consequence of this conflict: Capuana's efforts to show that the work of certain writers whom we now know as *veristi* had amply fulfilled the requirements of the younger literary generation. In the meantime we may note that *Gli 'ismi' contemporanei* and *Cronache letterarie* give way in certain directions to the pressure exercised by that generation. On the relationship between science and religion which was then keenly debated, Capuana's tone is cautious and undoctinaire. Reviewing *Le Ascensioni umane*, he agrees with Fogazzaro in qualifying as 'spesso premature' the conclusions drawn by Darwinian science to the detriment of the doctrine of creation;<sup>33</sup> and reading Butti's profession of atheism in the dedication of *L'Automa*, he benevolently ascribes to the author's youthfulness a dogmatism in the face of the problem of immortality 'davanti al quale la vera scienza, da lui qualificata fredda e essiccatrice, conferma non aver prove egualmente solide per affermare o per negare' (p. 78). Everywhere spiritual matters are handled with tactful respect. An examination by Ermete Rossi of the disciplines of self-denial practised by saints, mystics, and visionaries finds Capuana reluctant to subscribe to the author's simplistic (and therefore 'non esattamente scientifica') conclusion that self-mortification 'è nelle sue conseguenze immorale come ogni principio anti-biologico', and on the whole preferring by reason of its more edifying content the 'nevrosi religiosa' to that described in the 'terribili libri dello Charcot e del Richet' (pp. 175, 176, 168). Capuana defends Papal Rome ('la grande mole dell'organismo cattolico') against Zola's indictment of it in the person of the Abbé Froment from *Rome*.<sup>34</sup>

It was natural in the present context that De Meis, who had offered Capuana an intellectual scheme which encompassed and went beyond positivism, should again float to the surface of his mind. 'La storia', wrote Capuana in the essay 'Idealismo e cosmopolitismo', 'è il registro immortale degli immani sforzi, dei dolorosi travagli, delle gloriose vittorie dello Spirito lungo il corso dei secoli' (p. 36); and this Hegelian allusiveness becomes increasingly frequent as though to suggest in Capuana a broad, sweeping perspective strictly compatible with the most visionary 'idealist' or 'cosmopolitan' gaze. A page of *Dopo la laurea* on the eternal creative processes at work in the universe is called upon to show Fogazzaro the sublimity of a philosophic vision which 'compie ciò che la fede e la scienza e anche la poesia, sono, tutte unite insieme, incapaci di compiere'.<sup>35</sup> It is the sheer visionary sweep of De Meis's thought that attracts Capuana, and no doubt it sensitized him to the 'spiritual' atmosphere of the times, but in the concrete critical situation De Meis's influence weighs light in the balance. Furthermore in one significant respect his teaching as Capuana understood it in the seventies has been abandoned. Capuana no longer sees in the novel De Meis's composite genre which, in balancing thought and imagination, science and art, ideally suited the reflective nineteenth century. The prognosis for art, it is true, seems far from favourable if 'la storia letteraria ci dimostra come la riflessione e la scienza vadano di mano in mano falciandosi le

forme artistiche' (p. 38), but compromises between science and creative imagination are now unthinkable, and Capuana unhesitatingly condemns 'i romanzieri mezzi artisti e mezzi scienziati, esseri neutri che non appartengono per ciò nè alla scienza nè all'arte' (p. 46). This was perhaps only to substitute one idealism by another: it was undoubtedly to renege on the persuasions of the past, continuing what had been begun in *Per l'arte*. Capuana's most immediate polemical aim, however, was to attack from an unassailable position 'la baraonda dei concetti artistici' (p. 9)—the antipathetic contemporary 'ismi'—implicating them in the crime of nurturing preconceived opinions and systems of thought which impeded the free operations of creative imagination:

c'è il chiaccherio di non so che teoriche delle quali non voglio nemmeno parlare, perchè io, in tatto d'arte, alle teoriche bado poco; chiedo lavori, iavori, lavori! Le teoriche sono buone per la discussione tra critici, o per mettere, tutt'al pi' u, un'etichetta su la produzione; inutile, se la produzione è cattiva; inutilissima, se l'etichetta vien preparata anticipatamente. (p. 6)

It was only fair that naturalism should receive the same treatment as the other 'ismi', and indeed this suited Capuana's purpose: in 1894, during a visit of self-documentation for *Rome* Zola visited Capuana's home at number 88, Via Arcione, thereby reawakening memories of how *Giacinta* had been dedicated to him and how well the first *Studi* had served his cause. Capuana soon found himself the victim of a criticism (in general, one favourable to D'Annunzio) determined to see him merely as the leader of the Italian naturalist movement. It is understandable that the author of *La Sfinge* and the children's *fiabe* should be perplexed and irritated by the label. His sense of detachment from the movement had become a profound conviction, and many pages of criticism, notably the essays 'La Chimera' and 'Domando la parola' in *Cronache letterarie*, strenuously combat the definition, while 'La crisi del romanzo' in *Gli 'ismi'* had examined the fortunes of the modern novel in a historical perspective and treated its phases, including naturalism, with the detached humour of one persuaded he is now above the fray. Comparing the novel to a hospital patient, Capuana sees its feverish delirium of Romanticism calmed at first by 'una buona dose di *naturalismo* e di *sperimentalismo*'; the cure however soon begins to produce deleterious side-effects, and the novel 'da bravo figliuolo, onesto, morigerato [. . .] che era' becomes an 'assiduo frequentatore di bettole e di donnacce' (p. 40). Whereupon it is subjected to an antidote, 'inezioni sottocutanee di *psicologismo*', which temporarily remove the '*delirium tremens*' of naturalism, but in the long run produce the unnatural swelling of excessive introspection. The ailing novel is readmitted to hospital where doctors now argue the relative efficacy of various remedies, from '*idealismo*' and '*neocattolicismo*', to '*simbolismo*' and '*lirismo*' (p. 41).

If Capuana tranquilly historicized his own past this was because all theories, philosophies, and preordained concepts seemed to him equally irrelevant to the

creating of a work of art, and naturalism now represented to him only a programme. As long as this view is accepted, there is a good deal to be said for Capuana's claim that for him naturalism was merely a 'chimera' of the past. Several integral elements of his naturalism had disappeared. In times when modern literary sensibilities were deeply influenced, as he duly noted, by the tormented spirituality of writers like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and Ibsen, it would have been insensitive to continue classifying humanity according to distinct socio-economic criteria, each category having its own level of psychological and linguistic complexity. The question of the novelist's ascent through the layers of society is broached on a single occasion in these years, and then only in the context of Capuana's calls for a more healthily concrete art (p. 111), in contrast with the vague internationality of contemporary literary movements; and in 1907 he would go so far as to state, in defiance of the preface to *I Malavoglia*, that since moments of passion and conflict, which should be the subject of art, deprive people of their powers of introspection, educated men enjoy no advantages over their brothers 'nell'espressione dei loro sentimenti'.<sup>36</sup> The pathological case of naturalism too had fallen from grace.

Capuana's early response to the enormous popularity of Russian novels was clouded by the reflection that often their protagonists were 'allucinati scossi da nevrosi', creatures perfectly at home on the wild Russian steppe but dangerous models (as he now has occasion to discover in connexion with *Giovanni Episcopo* and *L'Innocente*) in more temperate, Latin climes.<sup>37</sup> Commemorating Daudet in *Cronache letterarie*, he rejoices on detecting that the writer's latest fictional characters 'non rappresentavano più un caso eccezionale, patologico ma la natura umana schietta, con le idealità, le miserie, le falsità della passione e del vizio che rendono bella e triste la vita'.<sup>38</sup> The philosophy of moderation in *Rassegnazione*, and the mediocrity of Dario, spoke clearly enough of Capuana's rejection of naturalist 'eccezionalità'. Moreover—to anticipate discussion of *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*—it is noteworthy that when in that novel Capuana enlarges on the ancestry of his hero he is not offering information on his inherited predispositions.

Steadfastly indifferent to content as he now professes himself Capuana can serenely equate Verga and D'Annunzio on the level of concept: 'L'un concetto val l'altro. Sia la darwiniana lotta per la vita, sia la pessimistica e aristocratica filosofia del pensatore tedesco finito miseramente in un ospedale di matti' (p. 20). Though the gloss on Nietzsche is something of a *lapsus*, Capuana's attitude is carefully neutral and non-controversial, and he is as prepared to accept the current 'ricerca di un contenuto elevato per l'opera d'arte' (p. 85) as any other: 'tutto il contenuto possibile, a patto però che egli prenda forma vitale per via dell'immaginazione creatrice' (p. 18), he writes, in a recollection of De Sanctis. But the crucial factor which undermines all his impartiality and justifies in part the persistence of the naturalist label is his failure to envisage any change in the narrative procedures which were to support the new content. Here in fact there is a hardening of attitudes and an elaboration of certain points which are subsequently embodied in

*Il Marchese di Roccaverdina.*

Utilizing the distinction applied to naturalism in *Libri e teatro*, Capuana notes that naturalists themselves ‘confondevano il concetto materialista col metodo positivo’ (p. 45). But, he continues, ‘in un certo paese di questo mondo, writers talked not of naturalism and experimentalism but instead ‘inalberarono il vessillo del *verismo*, il quale accennava particolarmente più al metodo che non alla materia di cui l’arte loro si serviva’ (p. 45). The theme, once so emphasized by De Amicis, of Zola as self-publicist emerges to justify the inevitable conclusion that Zola’s true contribution to aesthetic debate was his having given writers

la coscienza più chiara, più categorica, del dovere dell’artista di dare al suo lavoro un fondamento di osservazione diretta e nel lasciare ai fatti, ai caratteri, alle passioni la loro piena libertà d’azione, senza mescolarvi i suoi particolari criteri; insomma nell’imitare proprio la natura, che mette al mondo le creature e le abbandona a sé stesse e al giudizio della società. (p. 44)

Impersonality survives once again because it alone guarantees that the intellectual content of a work should be harmoniously absorbed without residue into form; indeed, one may say that it flourished now that the thinker-artist had been finally banished, and the imagination ruled supreme. Reality itself was to speak in the work of art, and imagination meant the total availability of the writer to absorb and body forth that reality. Impersonality, we may say, was the proof contained in the work itself of the multiform, opinionless functioning of the imagination. So it was that for Capuana there was no such thing as a programmatically mystical or idealist novel, but only mystical or idealistic characters:

un romanziere ha l’obbligo di dimenticare, di obliterare se stesso, di vivere la vita dei suoi personaggi. E se tra essi c’è un mistico, il romanziere deve sentire e pensare come lui, non ironicamente, non criticamente, ma con perfetta obbiettività, lasciando responsabile il personaggio di tutto quello che sente e pensa’. (p. 49)

That Capuana views impersonality as a universal criterion of excellence is strongly suggested first by his recourse to the incontestable greatness of Shakespeare who, he avers, ‘aveva praticato quel metodo in modo supremo’ (p. 44), and secondly by his singular assertion that the ‘clamoroso successo’ of the best Russian novels is due to the way they have developed ‘il germe dell’impersonalità artistica’, following a ‘rigoroso metodo di osservazione’ (p. 48).

As the triumphs of positivistic science came to be indefinitely postponed (‘Nos petits enfants verront des belles choses’ was a phrase of Richet’s Capuana quoted appreciatively in this period<sup>39</sup>), leaving the way clear for idealism to display its seductions and to tempt a weary Capuana into confessions of nescience and semi-religiosity—but *still* he could not tell whether the Spirit was ‘umano o divino’ (p. 36)—the scientific framework of naturalism crumbled and disappeared. *Rassegnazione* had been called, as Capuana noted with satisfaction later, ‘fin troppo *idealistica*’.<sup>40</sup> But its narrative structures and procedures had been those of realism,

and Capuana had been tolerant of the label of *verismo*, where *verismo* meant simply a method which could be summed up in the word, 'impersonality'. Capuana quoted Verga's opinion that '*si possa scrivere un romanzo mistico con una forma naturalistica*', adding, in the interests of clarity, that '*invece di naturalistica avrebbe dovuto dire meglio: impersonale*' (p. 49).<sup>41</sup> But were the questions of method and subject so thoroughly divisible? Did the method not tend to have repercussions on the conception and the treatment of the subject (if not on the choice of subject itself) as well as on Capuana's responses as a critic?

We may begin to answer these questions by noting that in this period Capuana approaches the subject of expression with redoubled concern. This was a direct consequence of his 'indifference' to content, but it also stemmed from the need to confront the linguistic experimentation of contemporaries. Whether he is minutely singling out instances of careless composition in Butti, Neera, and Gualdo, or observing that where a noun is to be qualified it is easier to muster five or six adjectives than to discover '*il solo, l'unico che dovrebbe sinceramente e quindi efficacemente qualificarlo*',<sup>42</sup> his unusual attentiveness to the technicalities of the *métier* is explained by the reflection that '*la esattezza dell'espressione implica uguale esattezza d'osservazione*' (p. 82). And in connexion with this equivalence of expression and observation, he makes a revealing linguistic comparison between Verga and D'Annunzio (the positive and negative poles in his current thinking, despite admiration for the latter's gifts). Anticipating the Pirandellian distinction between '*stile di cose*' and '*stile di parole*', he notes that for Verga there must be a correspondence or better, a 'fusion', between the idea or object and the word that expresses it; for D'Annunzio on the other hand words have '*un valore quasi per sè stesse*' (p. 11). In '*La Chimera*' Capuana the parodist makes his own attitude plain: '*O sogno di bellezza estetica che dinanzi al vocabolo raro, al periodo armonioso e voluttuosamente snodantesi come collo di cigno o come corpo di serpe che rinnova la sua spoglia sotto i raggi canicolari, dimentichi che il vocabolo è segno e confondi l'essenza della musica con l'essenza della parola!*' For Capuana a word is not *primarily* a sign, it is *only* a sign: it exists only in function of the object it designates. To this functional view of language we must attribute his approval of the stylistic qualities of '*trasparenza*', '*lucidità*', and '*semplicità*', particularly stressed in *Cronache letterarie*. Language was to be so self-effacing, so *transparent* that its intermediacy between a reality and its expression was imperceptible. Homer's greatness is attributed to a '*meravigliosa trasparenza della forma che rende la concezione talmente reale e viva sotto gli occhi, che la stessa realtà non potrebbe darci di più*'. The implication is, of course, that only 'reality' has meaning and importance: there are '*altrettanti stili quanti sono i soggetti*', but not vice versa.<sup>43</sup> Hence the condemnation of the '*stilista*', whose language rather than being subservient to a reality purveyed it only in as far as was consistent with experimentation, say, with rhythm and sonority. In D'Annunzio and likeminded writers Capuana found not the 'sincerity' engendered by the unique, unrepeatable

experience of reality, but often self-conscious literary or linguistic reminiscence, a communication of elites ('si regalano a vicenda gli epiteti di *puri, d'impeccabili*' (p. 10), he noted wryly), the lack of a strongly individual artistic voice; in short, literature as a self-referential superstructure.

On one occasion there is a hint that Capuana perceived a link between his own method and what might be called an ideology. It was of course his impersonality, his willing subservience to an observed reality, that produced the 'semplicità, la nudità del suo stile', and he confessed his fear that it might be 'attribuita al [suo] naturalismo e non sembri una prova lampante di esso'.<sup>44</sup> But with the unconvincing rejoinder that he too might have become a '*stilista*' had he so desired, the dawning *aperçu* faded. Capuana found it inconceivable that if the language of a D'Annunzio, as he said, transformed reality rather than translating it, this might in itself be in the nature of a communication, for as far as Capuana was concerned the meaning of a work always corresponded to a reality more or less 'outside' it. Though he knew that the reality embodied in a work of art was always somebody's and not simply anybody's, he assumed a consensus vision which conferred upon it a species of objective truth. Moreover, with the disappearance of naturalism, the consensus vision excluded the scientific view-point, and in becoming ever less specialized seemed to aim too at an ever more general acceptability. So it was that Capuana saw no objection to asking: 'È creatura umana Claudio Cantelmo? È almeno creatura equilibrata, sana, da poter dare l'illusione che essa continui nelle pagine del libro le pagine della vita?' Only the perception, which he failed to discover, of an 'intenzione satirica' (p. 36) would have satisfied him that *Le Vergini delle rocce* was a meaningful enterprise; but he himself was in the process of writing that 'satirical' version: *Rassegnazione*.

That Capuana should deprecate an excess of cerebration as compared with action on the part of Claudio Cantelmo, or, commenting on Albertazzi's *Ave*, judge that the hero's love for a woman was 'un sentimento più naturale che non siano quelli già destati dai teoremi di Carlo Marx' (p. 89) was an indication not simply of the anti-intellectualism perceptible in *Rassegnazione*, nor was it only a result of what we may call the 'average' view of reality. If he preferred the Don Abbondios, the Baron Hulots, and the Père Goriots of the world of art (pp. 22-3), it was because they acted on and in society. Their reality did not remain in the sphere of psychological or intellectual disquisition but became perceptible in the conflicts they concretely provoked. In the course of a polemical interchange with D'Annunzio's admirer, Ugo Ojetti, Capuana confirms this interpretation of his fondness for characters like Don Abbondio:

Vorrei credere che lei non arrivi fino al punto di negare che l'anima nostra possa rivelare quel che ha in sè di più profondo e di più umano altrimenti che con le azioni, col carattere, con le passioni; e non solitaria, ma in relazione con altre anime rivestite di corpo al pari di essa. (p. 35)

For Capuana our profoundest nature lies not in the private, subjective dimension but in the social, external one—it is hard to determine whether the doctrine of impersonality has given birth to a species of ideology or vice versa. There is, however, a significant, new emphasis on the character's moments of 'passion' and 'action', on those manifestations of his existence which can most easily be represented without betrayal of impersonality. *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* does not, as we might have expected, search out technical loop-holes which will give Capuana an unobtrusive area of operation within the text, rather the reverse: there is an attempt to translate all psychological data onto the plane of action, thereby eliminating any sense of the author's privileged knowledge. The average view-point and the doctrine of impersonality collaborate to produce a starker model for the realist work of art than ever before.

There are passages in *Gli 'ismi'* which give a precise indication of how this rigorous realism will function in *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*. In two reviews which deal with novels by Corradini and Gualdo, Capuana seems to view 'narration', the connective tissue of the narrative, as something of a necessary evil: 'Il romanzo deve raccontare, è vero, ma deve anche rappresentare', he reminds a Gualdo given to 'narrating' 'fin là dove il dialogo drammatico vorrebbe sgorgare impetuoso' (p. 80). And in Corradini he finds moments of 'representation' when the characters 'entrano decisamente in scena e si abbandonano ai moti di passione' (p. 94) far superior in their hold on reality to those 'parti dove i personaggi [. . .] son costretti a digrumare il passato, a far l'esame di coscienza per comodo dell'autore' (p. 94). 'Drammatizzare la scena' (p. 80) is the advisory slogan Capuana brandishes before Gualdo, but by implication before all other novelists. The theatrical vocabulary and frame of reference are no accident. Their dual activity as narrators and playwrights, their multiple experiments in transcribing prose-works for the stage (from *Cavalleria rusticana* to *Giacinta*) attest the special relationship of the 'impersonal' novelists, Capuana and Verga, with the theatre. A few years hence, reviewing Verga's narrative adaptation of *Dal tuo al mio*, Capuana will declare that in the world of the novel 'l'evoluzione è dalla forma narrativa verso la drammatica: non già che quella debba confondersi o perdersi in questa: ma assimilare quanto più può delle virtù di essa'.<sup>45</sup> The present stress on the direct intervention and the *viva voce* of the character is a pointer to Capuana's attempt in *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* to push the canon of impersonality to its uttermost limits. The novel becomes 'theatrical' because drama, in being devoid of narration, represents a situation of maximum impersonality.

Capuana's determination to see the inner truth of the character translated into speech, action and gesture is undoubtedly awkward, given the fact that the subject of *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*—and to this extent it betrays the impact of Capuana's cultural environment—is the drama of a conscience. But certainly the idea of an implied, non-explicit psychological depth in works of realism was stressed by its post-Zolian adherents. Chief among them was Maupassant who wrote:

au lieu d'expliquer longuement l'état d'esprit d'un personnage, les écrivains objectifs cherchent l'action ou le geste que cet état d'âme doit faire accomplir fatalement à cet homme dans une situation déterminée. [. . .] Ils cachent donc la psychologie au lieu de l'étaler, ils en font la carcasse de l'œuvre, comme l'ossature invisible est la carcasse du corps humain.<sup>46</sup>

And Capuana and Verga were not the only writers to justify their aesthetic allegiances by emphasizing such implications as best harmonized with current psychological and spiritual preoccupations. The impulse to make a revolution into an evolution was general. Thus J-K. Huysmans, whose rupture with naturalism dated from *A Rebours* of 1884, underlined the coherence of his own artistic operations within the changed context of *Là-Bas* (1891):

Il fallait [. . .] garder la veracité du document, la précision du détail, la langue étouffée et nerveuse du réalisme, mais il faut aussi se faire puisatier d'âme [. . .] Il faudrait, en un mot, suivre la grande voie si profondément creusée par Zola, mais il serait nécessaire aussi de tracer en l'air un chemin parallèle, une autre route, d'atteindre les en deça et les après, de faire, en un mot, un naturalisme spiritualiste.<sup>47</sup>

Even Brunetière, so critical in *Le Roman naturaliste*<sup>48</sup> of naturalism as practised by the Goncourt brothers and Zola went on to admit that 'ses procédés ou ses moyens lui survivront', and mentioned naturalism's 'probité d'observation', 'l'obligation pour le romancier de situer ses personnages dans un *milieu* qui les explique en partie', and 'celle de ne laisser passer de sa personne dans son œuvre que le moins qu'il pourra'.<sup>49</sup> Encouragement thus came from prestigious quarters. But Capuana was to take matters to extremes. The absolute value he placed on impersonality and, by extension, on observable reality, even while it produced the relative success of *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*, suggested how ill-adapted it might be to serve the intellectual or introspective hero.

One final aspect of *Gli 'ismi' contemporanei* has a bearing on *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina*. As is well known Capuana came full circle on his assessment of dialect literature, producing plays in Sicilian dialect towards the end of his career, and asserting 'la necessità di passare pel teatro regionale prima di arrivare a quel teatro nazionale', if the latter was to be 'un'opera d'arte e non opera d'artificio'.<sup>50</sup> It is noteworthy, especially in view of the vague geography of *Rassegnazione*, that *Gli 'ismi'* expresses the same attitude and in particular sees the regional work as the fit antidote to contemporary, centrifugal trends in literature. Indeed where Capuana finds a robustly Neapolitan novel (Lauria's *Povero Don Camillo!*) to contrast with the 'sfilata di gente travestita da russi, da norvegiani, da danesi, da decadenti francesi' of more modish works, his polemical impulses function at the expense of a well-articulated rationale of regionalism. His praise for Lauria turns exclusively and repeatedly on the sense of a 'diretta irradiazione della realtà' so sadly lacking in a literature which 'fa il verso ad altre creazioni dell'arte ammirate e rimaste impresse nella memoria' (p. 110). But perhaps his explanations were now

superfluous. He had come to feel that no amount of discussion produced a work of art, that the sick novel's medical attendants did it more harm than good. Concluding 'la crisi del romanzo', he left his own credo uncommented:

**Il romanzo, probabilmente, se vorrà e potrà rimanere romanzo, non si metterà a servizio di questa o quell'idea, di questo o quel sistema; continuerà a sviluppare il suo organismo adoperando sempre meglio il metodo impersonale, divenendo sempre più nazionale, anzi sempre più regionale, per dare alle sue creazioni la stessa varietà e ricchezza delle creazioni della Natura. (pp. 52-3)**