

## CONCLUSION

The years between 1900 and 1915 saw no slackening of Capuana's creative rhythms. Aside from narrative for children, the period produced sixteen volumes of short stories, and though the financially necessary practice of recycling and renaming stories continued (so that only three stories of twenty-two were new in *Voluttà di creare*, for instance, and only one in *Passanti*) this was still a considerable output—especially since Capuana now faced the desolate fact that his volumes 'si seguono e passano quasi inosservati',<sup>1</sup> sinking with little trace beneath what to him was the dubious flood of irrationalism and mysticism unleashed by 'decadent' writers, from D'Annunzio and Pascoli to Nencioni, Graf, and De Bosis.

The stories cover the whole range of Capuana's interests: there are science fiction works, regional 'bozzetti', psychological studies in obsession, stories containing instances of telepathy or suggestion, conversational drawing-room pieces—showcases for society wits—and the outpourings of unrequited passion, these last two categories, in my view, representing the least acceptable strands in Capuana's production. There are signs of the anti-intellectualism and sentimental moralizing characteristic of *Rassegnazione*; traces of political didacticism (in 'L'Apostolo' from *Istinti e peccati*, for instance, a rich and naive socialist is exploited by those he seeks to liberate and manages only to 'destare cupidigie, a fomentare impazienze');<sup>2</sup> and evidence of that light-textured, seemingly facile composition—Capuana's 'transparent' style—which so often deprives his prose of strong individuality and density. But for all the diffuseness of his talent, its lack of a firm nucleus of inspiration, his stories were proof of a remarkable intellectual vitality. He remained capable of seizing quickly on topical themes—in their modernity the themes of Southern emigration and even the new American mafia, the 'Mano nera', do much to mitigate the pedagogic apologia for hard work, individual enterprise, and regional patriotism which Capuana addresses to the young readers of *Gli Americani di Rabbato*; 1910 found him at Marinetti's side defending *Mafarka il Futurista* on obscenity charges while Boccioni, Carrà, Buzzi, Cavacchioli, and Palazzeschi looked on.<sup>3</sup> Capuana had, in short, some justification for using on his personal postcards the motif of a tree, its trunk shattered but still bearing foliage, with the accompanying legend, 'sed non in corde senescens'.<sup>4</sup> Nor are his stories without some interesting new accentuations.

More and more the point of departure in Capuana's tales is a moral paradox, a scientific discovery explored in its extreme, often grotesque, consequences, a

case of bizarre human behaviour. The origin of the story in a concept may be more or less explicit. Maggioli in *Voluttà di creare* admits that his stories are 'ragionamenti che hanno preso carne ed ossa' but this rule extends beyond Capuana's fantasies on scientific subjects.<sup>5</sup> In this tendency to start out from an intellectual notion there would appear to be an attenuation of the idea (repeated nevertheless in the preface to *Coscienze*, the most important collection of stories of the period) that a work of art 'debba essere unicamente creazione di caratteri, di personaggi che vivono nell'opera d'arte come nella realtà, per conto loro [. . .] e che la forma debba essere così intimamente fusa col contenuto da non doversi distinguere affatto da esso'.<sup>6</sup> There was to be no advance on the methods devised in *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* for creating a total autonomy in the *personaggio*. Instead Capuana gave prominence to two procedures implicit in that novel which, without betraying the canon of impersonality, allowed him room for manoeuvre. The first of these was the creation of the temporary *alter ego*, the narrator-character. In the wake of Dr Maggioli came a host of narrators captured in the act of retailing their intimate secrets and paradoxical thoughts to a listener. This was narrative within narrative, a substantially first-person narration masquerading as third person, and it was to shift the responsibility for commentary, irony, humour from the author to the narrator. Many stories became dialogue; others, and this was Capuana's second device, became soliloquy; for Capuana made increased use of the first-person 'document'. In *Coscienze* alone there was the letter of protest to the '*Gazzetta Provinciale*' of 'Rettifica', the monologue of 'Sfogo', the letters of 'Risposta' and 'Lettera di uno scettico' and the soliloquy of 'Esitanze' set out as a play.

Though the erstwhile student of French amatory literature and Stendhal's *De l'amour* resurfaced in some of Capuana's fictional letters, insipid and fatally parochial epistles to stony-hearted enchantresses, and though world-weary noblemen and artists proved a hardy breed, the variety of Capuana's approaches to first-person narrative leads us to single out a second new characteristic of his storytelling. The first person of these tales carries with it not the predominantly historical tenses of *Rassegnazione* but the tenses of an eternal present: the narrative becomes the occasion of a meditation aloud, and a whimsical, lamenting or fantasizing voice formulates a bizarre philosophy of life, comments on its incongruities, expresses a protest or a perplexity. Capuana was increasingly interested in humorous writing. It was an aspect of his own work he had stressed earlier, and it is worth remembering how he discovered in *Novelle rusticane* a species of bitter tragic-comedy.<sup>7</sup> In the relatively few articles written after the turn of the century he returned repeatedly to the subject of humour, insisting that it 'consiste in un certo modo di vedere, di osservare', that it could not be 'superimposed' at will on reality for 'si nasce umoristi'.<sup>8</sup> The humour that he had once foisted on his own rustic subjects now spilled over into scientific and bourgeois-psychological tales, and invested a situation rather than a view-point. At last we find the figure of the marriageable young woman agreeably desecrated: no longer always a Fasma or a

Delfina, a victim of fatal disease, excessive sensibility of the nervous system, or of a tragic love-affair, she becomes the diminutive, obstinate, sweet-munching Giacomina of 'Perchè non prendo moglie?' or the shrewish Maria of 'Il villino' (both from *Delitto ideale*), part of a formidable family team whose clutches the *fidanzato* is eventually glad to escape; married, her counterpart becomes the pathetic, domineered *piccolo borghese*, Alfredo Rocca of 'Rettifica' (*Coscienze*). We may perhaps now speak of a reciprocal influence between Pirandello and Capuana, noting that Capuana singled out Pirandello's *umorismo*, his 'dolente sorriso', as the source of his great originality, and that Pirandello, like Capuana, insisted in 'L'Umoreismo' that such a vision was innate, not deliberate, not superimposed on the material, but embodied in it. Much has been written of Capuana's 'discovery' of Verga; no one has noted that in 1901 Capuana speaks of his certainty that sooner or later Pirandello's 'bell'ora di gloria [. . .] scoccherà',<sup>9</sup> while the theme of his own *umorismo* lies untouched.

We have ourselves paused over the topic because humour, in producing both a gentle satire on the hallowed institutions of the bourgeoisie and the perplexed soliloquies of the victims of circumstance, was an element of renewal in his work, a faint presage of future developments in Italian narrative and drama. But the question of *umorismo* also has, in our view, an indirect bearing on the overall interpretation of Capuana's work on which we must now say a final word.

The easy-going, good-natured Capuana of tradition has been replaced of late by a more troubled, 'spiritual' Capuana whose voice towards the end of the century had grown faint and lost much of its autonomy. Enrico Ghidetti, the most attentive reader of Capuana's *novellistica* to date, has stressed, in connexion with Capuana's stories on scientific and parapsychological themes, the author's 'rifiuto dello scientismo materialista',<sup>10</sup> and his sense of the inadequacies of science; Ghidetti quotes an article by Roger Callois to the effect that 'il racconto avveniristico riflette l'angoscia di un'epoca che ha paura dei progressi della tecnica; di un'epoca che, cessando di rappresentarsi la scienza come una protezione contro l'immaginabile la vede sempre più come un abisso nel quale va precipitando'.<sup>11</sup> Science had indeed lost its place of absolute privilege in Capuana's work and indubitably he was a party to the sense of defeat, disappointment and moral uncertainty which was one of the key-notes of the *fin de siècle* period. One might even say that the all-pervasiveness of his humour, desecrating the idols of the past, was proof of his participation. But to miss, as Ghidetti does, both Capuana's humour and that dimension of it which consisted in Capuana's playfully confronting a positivistic science, which in his view had become solemn and entrenched over the years, with problems it could not solve, is to exaggerate the 'portata dello slittamento dello scrittore verso l' "irrazionale"'.<sup>12</sup> The extreme result of this tendency has been to create a religious Capuana, from *Profumo* onwards.<sup>13</sup> Capuana's personal beliefs are clearly not in question (though it is worth noting that in his 'Spiritual Testament' Capuana merely wrote: 'come accettiamo tante

ineluttibili leggi fisiche dobbiamo accettare anche [. . .] le spirituali', and in speaking of 'il fatto religioso' he treated it as a category of the Spirit on a level with 'il fatto scientifico e filosofico' and failed to mention the idea of a personal God<sup>14</sup>). But religion in Capuana's later works exists simply as one among other antidotes to excessive cerebration: it is the modest non-intellectual's convenient and temporary reply to unanswered questions, and an aid to a healthy, productive acceptance of life; but the unbelieving doctor in *Rassegnazione* has achieved this end as efficiently as the priest, while there is no question of Dario's conversion. And Capuana's interest in the irrational, rightly stressed by recent critics, was no more bound to lead him in the direction of religion than Freud's enquiries into the unconscious caused him to repent of his atheism.

Returning to the question of Capuana's attitudes to scientific culture which were so great a force in conditioning his narrative, we must come to two conclusions: first that he had by no means given up his faith in positivistic reason, and secondly that his attitudes remained constant over a long period. When he presented for public scrutiny phenomena which appeared to challenge the fundamentals of materialistic thinking, he did so with a mixture of self-irony at the daring of his own 'amateur' impulses and hopefulness that science would address itself seriously and without hasty dismissals to a subject which so fascinated him. In 'Un vampiro', written in 1904, Capuana indeed has his scientist perplexed and shaken, restoring to the exhumation and cremation prescribed by superstition. But the story satirizes not science but the unimaginativeness and the *partis pris* of contemporary scientists. When Maugeri writes up his 'Un preteso caso di Vampirismo' the narrator wryly tells us:

Non ha detto: 'I fatti sono questi, e questo il risultato'. [. . .] Egli ha messo tanti *se*, tanti *ma* nella narrazione delle minime circostanze, ha sfoggiato tanta *allucinazione*, tanta *suggestione*, tanta *induzione nervosa* nel suo ragionamento scientifico, da confessare quel che aveva confessato l'altra volta, cioè: che anche la intelligenza è affare d'abitudine e che il mutar di parere lo avrebbe seccato.

Before reaching this ironic conclusion, the story (like many others) repeatedly expresses the view that everything, including superstitions, may be fruitful material for science: 'ne riceverà impulso a ricerche non tentate, a scoprire verità non sospettate';<sup>15</sup> and it is Maggioli who sums up Capuana's attitude: 'Tornare addietro, per prender un'altra strada non significa niente. Gli scienziati muoiono, ma la scienza ha la pelle dura: ha l'eternità davanti a sè. Quel che non è riuscita a fare oggi, l'opererà domani, domani l'altro.'<sup>16</sup> None of Capuana's critics has noted the plain fact that from the vantage-point of his times, when interest in psychic forces was so diffuse, there was no absolute divide or antagonism between respectable science and enquiry into paranormal phenomena. Capuana himself, in citing the names of Wallace and Crookes, reminds us of how often the gulf was bridged by nineteenth-century researchers;<sup>17</sup> and, as in the case of D'Assier, demonstrates

how he turned for information not to spiritualists but to notable scientists who, in Crookes's words, 'endeavoured to trace the operation of natural laws and forces, where others have seen only the agency of supernatural beings',<sup>18</sup> or who, like Wallace, argued that 'if the disputed fact did happen, it could only be in accordance with the laws of nature, since the only complete definition of the "laws of nature" is that they are the laws which regulate all phenomena'.<sup>19</sup> Lombroso had experimented with the noted medium, Eusapia Palladini, reaching, it is true, psychiatric conclusions similar to Maugeri's but revealing an interest in such matters which made Capuana's dedication of 'Un vampiro' to him less an act of friendly provocation than a humorous invitation to open-minded collaboration.

The attitudes just described had been expressed both in *Spiritismo?* and *Mondo occulto*, and in 1901 Capuana was still hoping that one day the whole world might be viewed properly in a monistic light: 'il soprannaturale è concetto arbitrario, convenzionale poichè noi ignoriamo i limiti della materia, nè sappiamo dove essa finisca per dar luogo a un'altra natura di essenza diversa. Perchè non credere, piuttosto, che l'universo sia *uno*, e che in esso non ci sia nè *sopra* nè *sotto*?'<sup>20</sup> The 'passaggio dallo spiritismo all'occultismo' which seems so significant to Carlo Madignani (but the critic is forced to admit that *Mondo occulto* 'non sa abbandonare il metodo positivo') was not a turning point in Capuana's values,<sup>21</sup> but a continuation of that ambiguous positivism, with its Hegelian superstructure, to which Capuana had long subscribed and which re-emerged in the most wide-ranging essays of these last years: *La Scienza della letteratura* and 'L'Arte e la vita'. As inconsistently as before, in *La Scienza della letteratura*, Capuana unites elements of Hegelian philosophy and positivism under the banner of historicism, and identifies the gradual mutations of Darwinian adaptation with the directional life-force of the Spirit. As we have said before, for Darwinian science a succession of changes is determined by a particular environment and implies no assumption about a substantial entity to which a series of higher manifestations in nature are ultimately attributable. But it is easy to see why Capuana the 'dilettante' philosopher was confused. Positivists categorized phenomena in terms of relative 'simplicity' and 'complexity', a terminology which, along with the myth of Progress, tended to foster the old concept of a Chain of Being in which man was the apex of a hierarchical system, and the goal towards which Nature had striven. Thus, in this slightly grandiloquent inaugural lecture, delivered in 1902 on his assumption of the Chair of *Stilistica* at the University of Catania, Capuana once again called upon De Meis's system to integrate and elevate the findings of positivism, bringing to literary criticism and literary historiography the concept of art as a developing 'organism'. He felt that literary theorists could thus at last leave behind the 'mortifera gora delle quisquiglie retoriche, arbitrarie, convenzionali' in which art had been considered only an 'arbitrario prodotto del genio', and the study of literature was reduced to the mechanical, directionless comparison between the 'diversi generi dell'opera d'arte della parola apparsi presso le varie nazioni lungo il corso dei secoli'.<sup>22</sup>

Recent criticism has aspired to reanimate and give definition to the lifeless yet enduring image of Capuana as leader of the naturalist movement in Italy, Capuana as theorist of Verga's practice, pale imitator of Verga's art. It has discovered on the whole a convinced materialist who was, however, overwhelmed in due course by the mysticism and religiosity of the closing years of the century, and increasingly attracted as a writer to what was unknowable and lay beyond the realms of reason. In so doing, as we have seen, it has tended to divide Capuana's career into two portions, the watershed variously identified between 1885 and 1890. We have demonstrated that this division does not bear scrutiny. It fails on the one hand to take into consideration Capuana's persistent view of himself as a modest protagonist in contemporary scientific debate: he asserted the usefulness of the unprejudiced amateur's 'intuizione divinatoria' as a stimulus to the scientist in *Spiritismo?*, communicated his findings as a naturalist to Michele Lessona,<sup>23</sup> took issue with and claimed to have influenced Cesare Lombroso in *Mondo occulto*,<sup>24</sup> and continued to the end of his life to prod at modern science in the hope that it would discover the laws that governed whatever remained a mystery. On the other hand insufficient emphasis has been laid on the contradictory, philosophical dimension of Capuana's thought, on the Hegelian evolutionism which we have shown as coinciding chronologically with his discovery of science, and which, in justifying a fatalistic view of the historical development of mankind, was sufficient to limit the powers of his science, and to make his materialistically-derived realism impotent to offer a radically new vision of life. It will be remembered that his doctor-figures all showed signs of Capuana's ideological ambiguity: from Cymbalus with his deep respect for Nature, to Follini whose unbelief in immortality was matched by belief in 'anima' and 'spirito', and whose profoundly materialistic culture was balanced by a questioning whether 'i nervi, il sangue, le fibre, le cellule' could ever explain the whole individual,<sup>25</sup> to Doctor Mola whose scientific reading left room for moralizing piety. These insidious reservations on the strengths and the sphere of application of science must be acknowledged from the beginning of Capuana's career as responsible in part for the enervations of his narrative realism which we have had occasion to note repeatedly. Instead of a career which may be divided chronologically, one must speak of a career which involves a continuity and at the same time a persistent duality.

But if the 'idealist' dimension in Capuana's thinking was present from the first, and not simply after 1885 or 1890 when in a changed cultural atmosphere it seemed to assert itself more strongly than before, its presence was, in my view, a much more superficial one in Capuana's work than that represented by his positivistic rationalism. Only when Science or Reason were for the moment baffled or had led men into a state of dolorous uncertainty was the voice of 'idealism' allowed to speak. Capuana's 'idealism' or Hegelian fatalism resulted in the facile elements of sentimentalization in *Profumo* or *Rassegnazione*, in the naive pretentiousness of *La Sfinge*, and contributed to the sense of gratuitousness provided by

the 'historical records' which were Capuana's regional tales; and, as Chapters III and IV showed, such departures from Reason were never adequate to undermine the realist strategies of Capuana's narrative or to eclipse the rationalism which all along had produced his most courageous and dignified attempts at understanding human behaviour.

Capuana has been seen as a typical representative of the late-nineteenth-century intelligentsia which turned from materialism to 'spiritualism', from reason to the irrational. His work certainly reflects aspects of this transition, but his critical voice also retains its autonomy amid the 'baraonda' of new 'concetti artistici', continuing to demand that imagination be schooled by observation of reality and that the work of art form an organized whole fit to vie with the living creatures of Nature. His narrative, despite its superficial and transient concessions to literary fashion, was fundamentally realistic. When it showed potential for self-renewal in *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* and in short stories written after the turn of the century, it found a place not within the idealistic current which reinstated neglected ethical and religious values in a spirit of opposition to positivism, but in that other current which refused to seek grand answers from without, and extended its ceaselessly ratiocinative enquiry deeper into the self to discover eventually its contradictions and grotesque inconsistencies.

In examining Capuana's narrative and criticism we have been led to modify conclusions drawn by earlier critics, discovering in particular a Capuana whose critical theory is more consistent than has been allowed. His impersonality pre-dated and outlasted the period (which was both briefer and less whole-hearted than normally acknowledged) of his unconditional approval of Zola and of the ideal of the scientific work of art. At that period, indeed, his impersonality was not to be identified, as is usually supposed, with the detachment of the scientist, but was rather the guarantee of the author's willingness to learn from reality and anxiety to understand its 'laws'. It was consequently the expression of Capuana's belief that reality and truth coincided, an ideology in itself to which Capuana permanently subscribed. In suggesting some of the limitations of the realism Capuana derived from France, and in insisting particularly on his failure to respond to that vital criterion of interpretation which for the naturalists was *milieu*, we came to several new conclusions. First, that the conservative nature of Capuana's 'scienza' was shared with contemporary scientists, with a Mantegazza or a Lombroso for whom criminality was inherited rather than socially determined; secondly, that the acknowledgement of these limitations also leads us to place in doubt the supposed primacy of Zola in Capuana's thinking during the late seventies: at least as important were the Goncourt brothers whose refined aspiration to a 'roman réaliste de l'élégance' Capuana immediately embraced, being less interested in social history as it affected individuals than in the 'pure' acquisition of literary and technical expertise and in complexities of human psychology; indeed he emphasized precisely the Goncourtian aspects of the theoretical Verga, eagerly

awaiting his compatriot's works on the urban bourgeoisie. There has been occasion also to stress that the traditional view of Capuana as providing the theory of *verismo* for his fellow Sicilian is inaccurate. The theoretical Verga of 'L'amante di Gramigna' and of the Ojetti interview in particular provided Capuana with crucial supports for his impersonality and for the dubious argument that the realism related to it was a neutral method capable of extension to all subjects. Through textual analyses of Capuana's apparently non-realist works we have shown the truth of De Roberto's contention that an artistic approach implies a philosophy, and that Capuana's was fundamentally rationalistic.

I have suggested, in my comments on *Giacinta* and *Profumo*, that recognition of Capuana's psychological acumen is overdue. It is a quality not normally associated with the exponents of *verismo*, and one which wrongly, in my view, has seemed to those recent critics who have been most sensitive to this aspect of Capuana's achievement a confirmation of Capuana's attraction to the mysteries and the 'magic' of the unconscious: rather it was Capuana's constant impulse to produce a rationale of the instinctive and irrational, to bring abnormal behaviour within the ambit of rational understanding. If the quality of the enigmatic attaches in any way to Capuana's treatment of psychological subjects, it is to be identified in his abiding sense of the inviolable isolation of individual experience. Even in *Giacinta*, side by side with the traditional story of failed romantic passion and the psycho-physiological examination of abnormality, there was the loneliness of Capuana's heroine, incapable of communicating to others the drama of her separateness; *Profumo* and *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* might be described as stories of misunderstanding and fateful reticence. In my view, therefore, Capuana's treatment of neurosis and obsession was not torn between the impulse to rationalize and the reluctant acknowledgement of vast areas of elusive irrationality, but between the confidence that even abnormality and seeming irrationality was reducible to logic and the perception that this logic was incommunicable to others. The sense of human tragedy (and later of tragi-comedy), much diminished during the age of reason amid the elucidation of material cause and effect, in as far as it survived at all in Capuana's work did so not *within* the individual but between one character and another, held apart in their separate, incommunicable compartments.

Capuana's criticism like his narrative spoke out for a robust art which gave pride of place to strongly individualized passions and characters, and asked the reader to recognize in them aspects of himself and of a familiar reality. His own creative work, it is true, contained conservative elements and his critical meditation tended to remain within the charmed circle of purely aesthetic concerns, so that for some critics he has become the representative *par excellence* of a ruling bourgeoisie whose democratic mission failed and abutted on the feverish, 'escapist' imperialism of the Crispean period. But 'democratic' principles also functioned within this representative consciousness: in Capuana there was an anti-'literary' impulse, where 'literary' meant style rather than 'form' and implied the existence

of a self-perpetuating élitist tradition rather than an 'organism' newly created in each work and born of contact with reality. His own work aimed at clarity and accessibility, and his criticism, with its dialogues and imaginary encounters, became, without sacrifice of dignity or urgency, a readable and skilfully-handled *causerie*. He remained to the end of his life finely attuned to the vicissitudes of current cultural debates. His responsiveness made him excessively prone to experimentation in his own creative work, but it also gave him the genuine character of a militant critic, constrained always, despite his own ambiguous attempts at impartiality, to state his own position courageously. Even his last stories contained a polemical message. As he reminded himself under the pseudonym of Renato in a prefatory letter to *Coscienze*:

Tu [. . .] sei testardo; non vuoi conceder nulla alla moda, al gusto passeggero, alle esagerazioni e anche alle perversioni del gusto. Io non ho letto di te, fra tante centinaia di pagine, una bella pagina smagliante di metafore ardite, di immagini luminose, di aggettivi rari, di frasi *stile-Liberty*—non so come chiamarlo—una di quelle belle pagine che fanno rimanere a bocca aperta il lettore, anche perchè spesso egli non capisce niente e si figura che debbano significare qualcosa di nuovo e di grande.<sup>26</sup>

There remained perhaps a touch of provincialism in all Capuana's intellectual activities, and his realist credo, though it originated from France, limited his responses to 'aesthetes' and 'symbolists' from Mallarmé to Maeterlinck, as to D'Annunzio in his own country. But if he was the initiator, as Mario Pomilio has said, 'di tanta parte della critica successiva, che non [riuscì] mai nè a stroncare nè a convalidare in tutto D'Annunzio',<sup>27</sup> his work on the favourite of the age was an example of intellectual honesty and independence of mind. He was, both as writer and critic, a sharp-witted, common-sensical point of reference for a generation that stood perplexed amid the 'baraonda dei concetti artistici' as the nineteenth became the twentieth century.