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### **3 Gender and Self-Reflections Beyond the *caso psicopatologico*: From Fasma to Fulvia... Through L'Ignota and Faccia Bella**

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**Summary** 3.1 Delfina, Giulia, Fasma, Ebe, Iela, Cecilia... and the Struggle Between Form and Content. – 3.2 “Evoluzione”’s Fasma and a ‘Small (Metatheatrical) Archive of the Heart’. – 3.3 L'Ignota, Faccia Bella and Female ‘Visitations’. – 3.4 La Sfinge-Fulvia and the Historical Progression of Art.

If one does a dance, it is not easy to indicate that one means  
to say something about the general practice of dancing.  
Others will assume that you are simply doing a dance,  
not producing a meta-dancing commentary  
(Rimmon-Kenan 1997, 12)

As seen in the previous section, female characterisation in Capuana has been commonly understood – until very recently and with exceptions that still occur episodically – mainly as the testing ground for Capuana's theory, thus quintessentially ‘a place of practice’, as opposed to a place of narrative (meta)reflection. It is the creative locus in which Capuana puts into ‘mimetic’ literary practice the theoretical insights progressively developed in his numerous critical reflections: from the early work *Il teatro italiano* (1872) to the later collection *Cronache letterarie* (1899), which closes, with minor exceptions, the corpus of his major critical production. While that is certainly the case for *Giacinta*, *Profumo* and many of the *racconti* during his naturalist period, the aim of this chapter is to show that, in several crucial instances, the link between female characterisation and theory is

deeper and diachronically more multifaceted than has previously been acknowledged. Strong hints towards such further, ‘deeper’ meaning of female characters are provided by Capuana’s early short stories and this continues throughout his literary career. Female characterisations not only help, but even prompt him to articulate theoretically and negotiate the issues at the core of his (meta)literary thought: the form-content knot, the quasi-sexualised encounter between artist and form, and the historical progression of Art. While his very first work, the short story “Il dottor Cymbalus” ([1865] 1974a, 231-352), does not contain references to either female characterisation or self-reflexivity, traces of both appear in his first collection, *Profili di donne* (1877).

### 3.1 Delfina, Giulia, Fasma, Ebe, Iela, Cecilia... and the Struggle Between Form and Content

*Profili*, composed between 1872 and 1876 and published in Catania<sup>1</sup> by Fratelli Giannotta in 1877, was, in Giusi Oddo De Stefanis’ words, “la prima opera organica di Capuana narratore” (1990, 81). It consists of six short stories relating brief and ill-fated love experiences, each titled with the name of a woman and recounted in a first-person narrative voice. Explicitly constructed as masculine, the narrative voice owns a different name in each portrait and narrates his experiences retrospectively, representing the only prominent male character in each *profilo*. The collection has been mostly, and, I maintain, rather flippantly, disregarded by critics. Nearly all major critical contributions, such as Scalia (1952), Madrignani (1970) and Davies (1979), have considered it a rather mediocre and uninteresting example of naturalist and psychological narrative.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for the overall dismissal by most critics lie ultimately in what all of them consider major mimetic weaknesses: an insufficient degree of descriptive complexity and verisimilitude in the way the characters, especially the numerous female ones, are conceived, for which the many French allusions try to compensate unsuccessfully.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the whole collection is assessed as lacking a cohesive principle linking the portraits to one another. This supposed anti-realistic ‘fragmentation’ and excessive Gallicisation leads Judith Davies to consider *Profili* excessively “disdainful of a plot” (Davies 1979, 22) and Michelacci to con-

1 Composition dates are given only for “Fasma” (1874), and “Iela” (1876).

2 Neither Traversa (1968) nor Guarnieri (2012) mentions it.

3 These reasons are well summarised by Giovanni Carsaniga: “Capuana’s *Profili di donne* (*Profiles of Women*, 1877) is a series of portraits of women whose irredeemably conventional and novelettish style belies their pretence of psychological insight” (2003, 70).

clude that ultimately “i *Profili* non mettono in moto una esperienza [narrativa] innovativa” (2015, 123).

However, it would appear that the collection has been assessed on the basis of what it lacks rather than what it contains. It has been considered simply as a preparatory ‘draft’ of *Giacinta* and *Profumo*, without reaching the level of naturalist analytical accuracy of the two novels: “il laboratorio dei *Profili*”, as Michelacci has recently argued, “sta proprio a testimoniare la sua forma di ‘incunabolo’, di banco di prova per i concetti e per la forma narrativa breve dello scrittore siciliano. E si tratta in questa prima fase di uno studio prevalentemente fisiologico” (Michelacci 2015, 137).<sup>4</sup> Yet in recent years, many critics have come to touch upon the hypothesis that the most prominent elements in the collection might be actually those that hint at the presence of a (meta)artistic reflection in narrative form, albeit a quite rudimentary one, on the mode of literary/creative production, rather than the attempt to (re)produce ‘verisimilarly’ often pathological “psycho-sexual” (Davies 1979, 101) cases of masculine and, more frequently, feminine passions.

For Oddo De Stefanis, the protagonists of these *Profili* “sono tutte emblemi della donna in senso astratto” (1990, 82) and the central point of the collection is not that of depicting them in the most accurate way. Rather, the objective is to allow them to function as a (meta)narrative exemplification, depicting precisely the difficulties of representing/rendering on paper “una realtà enigmatica e sfuggente” (82). Similar considerations were proposed by Galvagno (2005), which I shall readdress below in relation to *Spiritismo?*, and by Forni (2015), for whom in “l’esperienza dei *Profili* [...] l’analisi della passione s’interseca con una filosofia delle ‘forme’ artistiche moderne” (86) in a way which is too overt not to be metareferential.<sup>5</sup>

Since those readings touch upon, but do not delve into the self-reflexive element, it is appropriate to review in depth the most relevant textual instances, with the aim of better foregrounding the metareferential value. This will be done specifically in relation to the progression and increased level of sophistication of Capuana’s theoretical thought, of which *Profili* constitutes the first stage. These tex-

<sup>4</sup> To support their argument, all these critics have referred to a web of intertextualities echoing exclusively French models, from the romantic memories of Dumas *filis*, Balzac and Benjamin Constant to the pseudo-scientific pretensions of Stendhal’s *De l’amour* (1868) and the diluted sociological/moral reflections of Michelet’s *La femme* (1860). For Raffaele De Cesare, for instance, in *Profili* “la familiarità, appassionata ed intelligente, di Luigi Capuana con il mondo letterario francese [...] è una realtà che [...] non può essere in alcun modo trascurata o contraddetta” (1992, 89). For the critic, Stendhal’s notion of *crystallisation*, explained in *De l’amour* and explicitly recalled in *Profili*’s “Prefazione” (1877, VII), constitutes the most obvious of these intertextualities, as do a few reminiscences of Balzac’s *Le lys dans la vallée* (1997, 62-3).

<sup>5</sup> But see also Giannetti-Karsienti 1996, 280.

tual instances are too numerous to be listed here, because the full breadth of intertextuality demands a separate discussion.<sup>6</sup> The focus here will be the way in which core theoretical points are articulated. The point of this analysis is to persuade the reader, following Wolf, of the collection's high 'self-reflexive coefficient'.

To start with, this collection of six short stories of unhappy love is anticipated by a *prefazione* – often either unduly ignored by critics<sup>7</sup> or mutilated by editors – that functions as a metanarrative framework, in which the narrator/author (Capuana) illustrates the fundamental characteristics of his art to the reader, thereby orienting their reading process:

Due parole per dire al lettore che queste novelle sono state scritte con l'unico intento di farne un'opera d'arte [...] sono delle sensazioni vere, dei sentimenti veri [...], l'autore si è prodigato di renderli [...] schiettamente, sinceramente [...] quando qualcuna di queste figure [femminili] gli è riapparsa innanzi limpida e quasi vivente si è messo a imprigionarla entro una forma semplice e schietta [...], è riuscito imperfettamente, nessuno lo sa meglio di lui. (Capuana 1877, V, VII)

Taken in isolation from the text it introduces, this *prefazione* is nothing but a textbook paragraph of *poetica verista*. Yet, if read contextually with the six short stories that follow, it becomes what Ansgar Nünning defines as a "paratextual" metanarrative passage (Nünning 2004, 23), one that alerts the reader – at least implicitly – to the need to pay attention not only to the content and to the story but also to its discursive rendition (*narration*: I terminologically follow Rimmon-Kenan 2002): that is, how the author has technically succeeded in turning the inspiration derived from those allegedly 'true' emotions into an effective narrative.

It is with this level of awareness that readers will encounter a series of intertextualities, mostly Goethean-Faustian, but also Hegelian and, to a lesser degree, Shakespearean, which increasingly endeavour to semiotise the female character and bring her progressively closer to the literary form. In so doing, these intertextualities establish and progressively strengthen an allegorical parallelism between the complexity of the female character and the difficulty, in art, of reaching perfection in crafting the form. Intertextuality in these *profili* is not always a self-reflexive element in itself, but one that becomes

<sup>6</sup> I discussed this topic more exhaustively in a philological piece on Capuana *germanista* (Zuccala 2019b).

<sup>7</sup> Even Ghidetti, in his crucially important modern edition of Capuana's *Racconti* (1974) reports the text in a truncated version and set apart from the rest of the collection (Capuana 1974a, 3-5).

such – as in some of the cases examined below – when it steers and prompts the reader to focus on the fictional nature of what they are reading (see Wolf 2009, 63-5), shifting their attention from the mimetic level of the content to that of the composition.

In the opening scene of the first *profilo* – titled “Delfina” – the narrator-protagonist witnesses the scene of the waltz in the third act of *Faust* by Gounod (1859),<sup>8</sup> where Faust acknowledges his love for Margarete, whilst searching through the crowd for his lover. What follows is a linguistic signpost, one that works both in Italian and in German, pointing to the identification of woman and flower: “Quei popoli che chiamano il fiore e la donna con lo stesso nome hanno indovinato un mistero” (Capuana 1974a, 14).

This metaphor is part of a series of correspondences that align the manner in which Delfina and her lover acknowledge their mutual attraction, in the garden of Catania’s Villa Bellini, to the way in which the same happens in *The Garden* scene in *Faust I* (15.3073-3205). In these texts, Margarete is both the name of the flower and the woman and, in *Faust*, Margarete realises that she loves Faust as she tears the petals off a daisy, playing the children’s game of ‘he loves me, he loves me not’.

Goethe appears again in the third *profilo*, in which Oreste, while gazing at the image of the mysterious guest, Fasma, finds himself thinking – “per una strana associazione di idee” – of “una di quelle serene e meravigliose pagine che Omero fra gli antichi e Goethe fra i moderni ebbero, quasi soli, la fortuna di poter scrivere” (Capuana 1974a, 59). Oreste then quotes a passage from the *Iliad* about the quasi-divine beauty and nature of Helen, who, in *Faust*, takes the symbolic role of guide towards the realm of ideal forms. Capuana’s *profilo*, as Galvagno points out, engages very productively with the feminine

<sup>8</sup> Capuana’s interest in the story of *Faust* and its main character matches the rise of attention paid to the play among Italian intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth century. Capuana’s first collection of critical works, *Il teatro italiano contemporaneo* (1872), in which Goethe is mentioned several times, was published after numerous Italian and French *mises en scène* of *Faust*: among others, Doinet’s *Faust et Marguerite* (1846), Adolphe d’Ennery’s *Faust* (1858), Arrigo Boito’s *Mefistofele* (1868) as well as the above-mentioned version of *Faust* by Charles Gounod (1859). This increasing intellectual interest in Faust is in turn reflected in Capuana’s personal collection, which includes a copy of Andrea Maffei’s 1866-69 translation of *Faust*, a copy of his version of *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (1874) and Riccardo Ceroni’s translation of *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1898) as well as a French copy of *Poésies de Goethe* (1885) and Ettore Gentili’s translation of Ettore Berlioz’s *La damnation de Faust* (1846). In relation to Capuana’s narrative, Goethe’s name appears only in Folco Portinari (1976) and in Barnaby (2000). Portinari’s portrait of the Marquis of Roccaverdina as “una sorta di Faust economico” (251) is expanded on by Barnaby’s suggestion of a network of allusions to Goethe’s *Faust* (110). No critics have mentioned *Faust* in relation to *Profili* nor has any critic focused on the connections between Capuana and the nineteenth-century German literary milieu. Interestingly, instead, some of the *Profili* were translated into German by Paul Heyse immediately after publication and included in his anthology of *Italienische Volksmärchen* (1914).

polarisation of its (in this case) two pre-texts in that Capuana “delinea nel racconto due ideali di donna che sono agli antipodi” (2005, 97). Such a dichotomy becomes patent when the narrative voice, Oreste, immediately after calling her “Dea”, in apparent contradiction states: “Elena! Elena! È la massaia!” (Capuana 1974a, 60). *Profili’s* hybrid, “interfigural” (Müller 1991, 115) account of Helen incorporates, then, through the lens of Oreste’s masculine focalisation, both her classic and her Faustian attributes of essentialised femininity and acknowledges how both poles of her characterisation conspire equally to exclude her from the worldly (male) sphere of action.

The link between Goethe’s pre-text and female characterisation is further strengthened at the end of the portrait of “Ebe”, in one of the most pathos-laden exchanges to be found in the collection. While the narrative voice, Alberto, recalls witnessing Ebe’s death, a maxim by Goethe is quoted in combination with one by Hegel:

Una sentenza dell’Hegel mi si presentava [...] limpidissima alla memoria, e me la ripetevo macchinalmente: “La necessità della morte è quella del passaggio dell’individuo nell’universale”. Rammemnavo un’altra sentenza del Goethe: “La nostra vita non è una vera vita, ma la morte della vita divina che viene ad estinguersi nella nostra. (1974a, 96)

This is further evidence to corroborate the hypothesis that these intertextualities allude, in *Profili*, to a (meta)literary discussion – filtered by the feminine and, more generally, by gender-dynamics – of the ideal-real in art. This double quotation is also embedded in a Faustian frame, as the unfolding of the whole scene echoes *The Prison* at the end of *Faust I*. That scene portrays Faust as being torn between abandoning Margarete to be executed, after deflowering and inducing her to commit infanticide, or attempting to rescue her from prison. The same inner struggle is portrayed in the *profilo*, where Alberto finally opts for a reconciliation that might save Ebe’s life. Alberto, as Faust, after a frantic drive in a carriage, reaches Ebe’s sickbed only to witness her death. Ebe, as Margarete, in the last moments of her life, commends herself to God as her ultimate consolation: “Iddio le ha concesso una tranquillità ch’ella stessa non sperava. Dimenticata la terra, tutti i suoi pensieri sono ora rivolti al cielo”, which “accoglie la sua anima afflitta” (1974a, 96). This image of salvation recalls Margarete’s resignation to divine judgment: “Oh my God, I bow to your righteous judgment” and the voice from heaven announcing that she has found God (Goethe, *Faust I* 25.4605; 25.4612) and has been saved.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In addition, Capuana’s citations of Hegel and Goethe both recall lines from Goethe’s poems. In the Hegelian quote, two verses of Goethe’s philosophical poem “Eins und Alles” [“One and All”] resound: In boundlessness to lose and find | Themselves, the sin-

Far from being a mere display of Capuana's erudition, these sophisticated intertextual 'dialogues' with the (two) classics strengthen the connection between the female characterisation in *Profili* and Goethe's masterpiece. The intertextuality, which insists on grouping together the woman and the work of art, can be better understood metareferentially when contextualised amongst the many Goethe-related notes scattered throughout Capuana's essays, bearing in mind, in particular, the way in which the topic of "the feminine" is dealt with in the little-known essay, "L'eterno femminile" ([1885] 1994, 79-83). As noted by Scrivano (1994, 5-16), "sotto l'apparenza di divagazioni sul tema della donna nell'arte, con gli effetti di incanto e di sensualità ch'essa può generare" (9), the essay actually addresses "un aspetto centrale della riflessione di Capuana: quello del comporsi in unità dell'Astratto e del Concreto, o desanctianamente dell'Ideale e del Reale" (9). In "L'eterno femminile" (then also in *Cronache* 1899, 89), Capuana explains how the concluding image of *Faust II*, *Das Ewig-Weibliche* (5.23.12104-11) lends itself to an allegorisation precisely of those form-content and ideal-real relationships. In Goethe, according to Capuana, woman becomes the almost incorporeal principle through which universal values, often of an abstract nature, are explored (Capuana 1994, 81-2). "L'eterno femminile" describes the agency of the Eternal Feminine in *Faust* as passive and unconscious, whereby any "azione diretta, immediata, volontaria della donna amata sull'amante" (1994, 81) is excluded. It also points to the substantial interchangeability deriving from their instrumental role. Despite appearing in the fashion of 'living' characters, they all perform an equally allegorical function. For instance, when "Margherita" reappears at the end of the fifth act as "*una poenitentium* once known as Gretchen" (Goethe, *Faust II* 5.23.12069), "avrebbe potuto rappresentarla qualunque altra figura: la *Magna peccatrix*, la *Mulier samaritana*, la *Maria Aegyptiaca*, la stessa *Mater Gloriosa*" (1994, 82). Owing to their essentialised gender features, they all participate in Faust's grand allegory of human struggle towards "[l]'ignoto" and "[l]'ideale" (82). Therefore, the very reason for Margarete appearing in a worldly, 'realistic' fashion is that Goethe endeavoured not to overtly expose the figurative meaning of his characters: "[Goethe] voleva sempre dare [...] qualcosa di concreto e di reale sotto cui l'astrattezza potesse nascondersi [...] e lasciare indovinare [...] la sua arida essenza" (82). In *Faust*, as elsewhere, Goethe endeavours not to leave those values at the level of abstraction, but rather, to imbue them in living characters.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely this ability of masterful

gle are inclined (1983, 69, lines 1-2). The final tercet of the same poem seems to provide the reference for the second quotation from Goethe: The eternal works in all that's wrought: | For all to nothingness is brought | If changeless being is its will (lines 22-4).

**10** This view is substantially shared by contemporary studies on the feminine in Goethe, amongst which see at least Jantz 1953, Hamlin 1994, Dye 2001. As Ellis Dye puts it,

ly merging form and content so as to bring the abstraction of the idea to life, that reveals Goethe's stature, "lo scrittore dalla forma perfetta" (Capuana 1882, 202):

Le creazioni fantastiche, ed anche, se così vuoi, le strane esuberanze della fantasia goethiana non riuscirono quindi un semplice ornamento poetico, sotto cui si cela il concetto filosofico dello scrittore [...], esse non ci scoprono la figura del poeta in lotta con l'idea astratta del suo tema ed affannato a concretizzarla, bensì ci appaiono esseri viventi. (Capuana 1872, 412)

These critical pages follow Faust's fictional journey from the flesh to the spirit, from sensuousness to knowledge and from the female allegorical forms to the abstraction of *Das Ewig-Weibliche*. Faust's attempt to capture the abstract essence of what appears before him in a worldly fashion (as a concrete form of the abstract eternal feminine) in "L'eterno femminile" becomes an allegory of the "travaglio della creazione artistica" (Muoio 2019, 137) entailed in Goethe's fiction-making process, to which "L'eterno femminile" looks from a reader-oriented perspective. Its reader (Capuana) follows and enjoys Faust's path towards the Ideal 'mimetically', but meanwhile decodes Goethe's allegorising technique. In this way the reader can "indovinare" the abstraction concealed in Margarete's realistic *forma* (and in that of the other female characters) without losing anything of the aesthetic/mimetic experience. "L'eterno femminile" thus uses Faust's 'theme' of the Eternal Feminine as a springboard to illustrate how such a successful process of fiction-making and character-designing as *Faust*, works.

Capuana does something almost identical in *Profili*. Like "L'eterno femminile", *Profili* under "la sua apparenza di divagazioni sul tema della donna" (Scrivano 1994, 9) also conceals a poetological reflection. Yet, it does so narratively rather than in the form of an essay. Its 'theme' is neither the mechanics of love nor the depth and mystery of the female psyche, but rather the narrativisation of some crucial elements pertaining to his conceptualisation of the mechanics of fiction-making. All the women in *Profili* are equally participative in this tension between the abstract concept and the living character, as are Goethe's and Homer's female characters. Beneath the thin veil of the superficial realism of their depiction as suffering lovers, all of

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the female characters in *Faust* are either "type[s]" or "allegori[es]" or "symbol[s]" in a "chain of signifiers" (111) of the Eternal Feminine, for they embody "the Transcendence in the World, [...] the Absolute in Nature [and] the Ideal in the Real" (102). Vittorio Mathieu notes that this unanimously acknowledged instrumental role of 'the Feminine' in *Faust* is tied to their characterological traits. What characterises *Faust*'s female figures is an "individuazione debole" (Mathieu 2002, 68), whereby "la donna è [per Goethe] meno *individuata* del maschio [...] e semmai più *individuante*" (68). She is necessary for man's progressive self-individuation, acting as his Schopenhauerian "*principium individuationis*" (68).



them stereotypically recline their beautiful heads (Capuana 1974a, 15, 47, 49, 53, 63, 93, 149, 139), their skin is “morbida”, “vellutata” [...] “fina”, “lucente” (32, 83, 132), their eyes are beautiful and filled with tears (18, 28, 95, 136, 143), their lips are rosy and trembling (16, 48-9, 40, 70): each and every one of them indeed allegorises, as they do in *Faust*, abstract universals such as sin (Giulia), mystery (Fasma), devotion until death (Ebe).

What increases the self-reflexive ‘coefficient’ of the collection, triggered by all these predominantly metafictional elements of self-reflexivity, are the (many) explicitly metanarrative passages. The third *profilo*, “Fasma”, is especially laden with such metacommentary. Among the most obvious references is a literary text by Verga published shortly before Capuana’s writing of the *Profili* (Galvagno 2005, 100). The eponymous protagonist finds her lover-narrator Oreste reading *Eva* (1873) and a debate ensues on the relationship between art and reality, of which the narrator recounts:

L’immaginazione traduceva, interpretava, a suo modo quelle pagine appassionate. Eva e Fasma si confondevano bizzarramente: [...] l’opera dell’artista toglieva ad prestito dalla realtà; la persona vivente dall’opera d’arte. (Capuana 1974a, 68)

And Fasma herself, overwhelmed by raging jealousy, comments on the nature of the artistic product, which not only imitates but even outperforms reality:

Quell’Eva par viva e commuove ed interessa e si fa amare come a una vera donna riesce di rado. Che infamia è l’arte! Possiamo noi entrare in lotta con la sua potenza, che spoglia la realtà da ogni triviale bassezza, da ogni accidentale stonatura e la rende immortale?! (Capuana 1974a, 69)

In addition, the fact that an excerpt from this fictional argument refers to a historical debate in which Capuana was a participant, regarding whether the arts should bear a moralising message, further increases this metareferential coefficient. “Quel libro è cattivo”, Fasma explains, and Oreste responds: “Credetti accennasse al falso concetto della moralità di un’opera d’arte che è in voga tra noi” (Capuana 1974a, 69).<sup>11</sup>

The passage in which Fasma quotes from *Romeo and Juliet* seems to have a similar function. To Oreste, who is asking her name, Fasma elusively replies, in English: “What’s in a name? ... That which

<sup>11</sup> See for instance *Per l’arte*, where Capuana comments on the critics’ scandalised reactions to his *Giacinta*: “La gente avrebbe dovuto discutere d’arte, e si è messa a strillare per la morale” (1994, 35).

we call a rose, | By any other name would smell as sweet!” (Capuana 1974a, 53). This Shakespearean intertextuality, too, serves “as a *medium* for poetological and aesthetic self-reflection” (Nünning 2004, 43) on the relationship between the concept and the object (*il contenuto*) and the literary sign (*la forma*) representing such a relationship.

Besides the specific contribution made by these self-reflexive instances to the coeval and historical debates – which one may even be inclined to consider rather vague and tautological at this stage – what all these passages make very clear, above all, is how at this point women are the privileged *medium* through which the metadiscourse on art of *Profili* (and elsewhere in Capuana) unfolds. Protagonist Oreste explains how art and woman are inextricably linked and how – in his relationship with ‘the feminine’ – “il sentimento dell’arte c’entr[i] spessissimo per più di tre quarti” (Capuana 1974a, 45). These love stories, which all end unhappily, come to represent allegorically that wrestling between form and content, and between writer and writing, that becomes a quasi-erotic dance where the form only extremely occasionally lends itself to the artist, and of which Capuana often speaks in his essays:

Tra il concetto e la forma vi è una lotta continua; che la forma non arriva sempre a imprigionare nel suo organismo le mille gradazioni di un’idea. (Capuana 1880, 162)

La *Forma* [...] cresce, si sviluppa, fiorisce e quando è pronta [...] cerca e trova il fortunato individuo che le occorre [...] e gli si concede, in un fecondo abbraccio spirituale. (Capuana 1994, 47)<sup>12</sup>

From the very early stages, then, it seems that in both Capuana’s essays and (meta)narrative, the narrative/creative act is configured quite explicitly as an act of (masculine) possession triggered by erotic desire. The very association of desire and the creative spark, in turn, immediately calls into play the vast contemporary corpus of critical works, informed by psychoanalysis, “preoccupied with questions of desire” (Stanford Friedman 1998, 134).<sup>13</sup> Given, however, that this scholarly corpus largely pivots on the myth of Oedipus, this specific

<sup>12</sup> See also *Diario Spiritico* (1870, first published in 1916); where the ghost dictates to Capuana what follows: “Creati, per così dire, un mondo a parte, e di tutti i cari fantasmi della tua immaginazione fattene dei *compagni amorosi*, e coltiva la loro compagnia come di amici reali” (1916, 340; emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> “Doesn’t every narrative lead back to Oedipus?” (Barthes 1975, 10), asks Roland Barthes. Variations of and additions to this view, deepening Barthes’ intuition, range from his own *S/Z* – and its known statement: “At the origin of narrative [is] desire!” (1974, 88) – to Scholes’ *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979, 26) to Peter Brooks’ “Narrative Desire” (1984) and Teresa De Lauretis’ “Desire in Narrative” (1987, 104-57), to Adriana Cavarero’s “La Storia di Edipo” (1997, 15-26).

link is best discussed in relation to the far more sophisticated novel *La Sfinge*, in which it is also far better metanarrativised. What is indeed relevant at this stage is that, as a consequence of linking female characterisation and fiction-making, *Profili* seems ultimately to talk primarily about fiction itself. It does so by narrativising intertextually and insistently what, in that chronological phase, is for Capuana the centre of the fiction-making process: the tension between form and content,<sup>14</sup> and the constant and often disappointing struggle of the artist to balance the concrete and the abstract, ideal and real in the literary form. In *Profili* none of the stories ends happily, as in none of these “abbracc[i] spiritual[i]” has the forging of the perfect characterological *forma* taken place. All of the women in *Profili*, these “figure gentili, forme aeree e tremolanti” (1877, VI), ultimately disappear without their ‘essence’ being fixed on the page as a *forma viva*.<sup>15</sup> The “Prefazione” had, after all, preemptively, self-reflexively conceded that “[l’autore] è riuscito imperfettamente, niuno [sic] lo sa meglio di lui” (VII), and the extreme difficulty of reaching such a Goethean balance and *perfezione della forma* is reiterated, one last time, as a metanarrative comment in “Ebe” by the narrator Alberto. He explicitly, yet wistfully, affirms: “Accade sempre a questo modo, nella vita, nell’arte, in ogni cosa; la giusta misura riesce impossibile e all’uomo e alla natura: è l’ideale che non arriva ad attuarsi” (Capuana 1974a, 88).<sup>16</sup>

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Albeit as stable and central as Capuana’s focus on characters (see Michelacci 2015, 2016), the concepts of *personaggi* as living embodiments of philosophical/poetological abstractions and an *amorosa unione* between *forma* and *contenuto* narrativised by *Profili* do not exhaust Capuana’s multifarious ‘narratology’.<sup>17</sup> In the twenty years after *Profili*, Capuana became increasingly articulate as a theorist and sophisticated as a (meta)narrator. Meanwhile, during those years, these themes are reworked over and over and to various degrees of detail in several short stories, where the ostensibly ‘mimetic’ quality of the love story underpinning the plot overshadows a self-reflexive preoccupation with the compositional labour. In the years

**14** See Capuana (1872): “[È] tempo ormai di riguardar [...] con animo più tranquillo, e di stabilire tra la forma e il concetto quell’adeguata proporzione ed armonia che rendono ad un’opera letteraria la sua vera sembianza” (10).

**15** Galvagno had asked: “Il lettore ha ragione di chiedersi perché mai tutti gli incontri irresistibili [...] portano a una fatale separazione [...] insomma che cosa impedisce questo amore?” (2005, 93).

**16** See Zuccala 2019b.

**17** The term is Scaravilli’s (2017).

during which Capuana was writing and publishing *Profili di donne* (1872-1876) and conceptualising *Giacinta* (1875-1879, see Capuana 1972), the female character-centred self-reflexive tension of *Profili* spills over onto some of the short stories of the period. “Contrasto” ([1877] 1974a, 192-8) features, like “Iela”, a male protagonist, Alberto, who longs for a female lover who, as in “Iela”, does not ever materialise. This agonising wait, however, albeit in a very short text, is interspersed with revealing glimpses of the poetic power of female inspiration – “Ah quella bionda testa di donna! Gli accendeva l’immaginazione di riflessi dorati, di rosei fulgori [...]. E il salotto gli s’illuminava di un vasto incendio di sole, e il pianoforte aperto in un angolo vibrava da tutte le sue corde un fremito armonioso, senza che nessuno lo toccasse, per sola virtù della presenza di lei!” (Capuana 1974a, 193). The *attesa* also hints, more explicitly, at the fact that reality is re-created from – *à la* Stendhal – the ‘crystallisation’<sup>18</sup> of memory:

Al brontolio del caminetto, al guizzo delle fiamme azzurrognole, ai bagliori d’oro che montavano ondulanti in alto quasi volessero scappar via per la gola affumicata, tutto il passato gli si risvegliava nella memoria, viveva una vita quasi più reale di quella vissuta una volta! (1974a, 196)

These rather tenuous glimpses unfold in a more sophisticated manner in “L’ideale di Piula” ([1879] 1974a, 199-208),<sup>19</sup> published the same year as *Giacinta*, where the protagonist is an artist of sorts, an ‘unconventional’ poet, consumed by an unattainable ideal:

L’ideale lo consumava, la natura lo aveva impastato male: un sensitivo, un poeta! Non già che egli avesse la debolezza di scrivere dei versi, nemmeno per sogno; i suoi studi, fortunatamente, non gli permettevano di poter distinguere un endecasillabo da un settenario. La poesia l’aveva tutta dentro, nelle sue viscere di sensitiva. Bisognava sentirlo ragionare della donna dei suoi sogni! Venivano le lagrime agli occhi. Una lirica di tenerezza, un idillio, un cantico di adorazioni e di mistici rapimenti...! Ma quel sogno tardava troppo a trasformarsi in realtà. (1974a, 200)

The daydreaming, idealistic Piula – who unsuccessfully yearns for his ideal woman – is described by the narrator as having a ‘poetic nature’, despite being completely untrained in literary composition.

<sup>18</sup> See Michelacci 2015, 118-19 and Ciavarella 1976.

<sup>19</sup> For Ghidetti the *novella* is published in 1880, and is the very first of the *paesane* stream (1974, XLII).

This is due to two personal qualities, which, combined, render the portrait of *Profili's* 'metaliterary' lover: on the one hand, his suffering/struggling nature, on the other, the fact that he is in constant search of an ideal in the real, despite – with Lukács – the daily 'prose' in which his ordinary (love) life unfolds. His short-lived, unsuccessful love quest takes on, albeit very briefly, the metanarrative quality of the ideal-driven, literary-poetic quests of the Faust-like narrators and protagonists of *Profili*. In these two early short stories there is little textual elaboration of the female characters, who, unlike *Profili's*, are both unnamed<sup>20</sup> and do not even appear physically. However, the gender dynamics as a whole – the 'love stories' themselves – acquire a self-referential tinge, in which the relationship between the lovers overshadows the relationship between concepts that are crucial, according to Capuana, to the art of fiction-making.

Along the same lines, particular emphasis is put on the "penoso lavoro" (Capuana 1888b, XXX-XXXI) of the creative struggle, in two short stories composed significantly later, towards the end of the Eighties. The device of the epistolary exchange,<sup>21</sup> intermittently attempted in *Profili*, is deployed more thoroughly in "A una Bruna" (1887). Here, seven letters are reproduced "Dalle lettere di Giorgio \*\*\*\*" – an 'evocative' name (see Sardo 2017 and more comprehensively Muoio 2019, 140)<sup>22</sup> that d'Annunzio had made famous since *Tigre Reale* (1875, G. La Ferlita) and would reuse in a few years time in *Il Trionfo della morte* (1894). The one-sided exchange between the male lover Giorgio \*\*\*\* and his mistress is intertwined with metanarrative reflections on trans-medial artistic composition. Giorgio's metacommentary ranges from the insufficiency and inadequacy of photography as a truly artistic method<sup>23</sup> – a cogent topic in *fin-de-siècle* 'verista vs antiverista' debates<sup>24</sup> and here entwined with speculations on the passing of time and the afterlife<sup>25</sup> – to the discussion of *occulti* phenomena. Occultism emerges

**20** For the link between name and character see Barthes: "When identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created" (1974, 67).

**21** For an overview of the links between epistolary fiction and aesthetic illusion, see Koepke 1990.

**22** Muoio focuses on the relevance of the change of name from Renato to Giorgio (Muoio 2019, 140).

**23** "La fotografia potrebbe forse darmi la malizia che deve brillarvi negli occhi quando mi scrivete certe cose? Potrebbe darmi il vostro sorriso quando me ne scrivete certe altre? Potrebbe rivelarmi quell'aria indignata" (Capuana 1897a, 194).

**24** See Sorbello 2008, 2014 as well as Gussaga, Zuccala 2019.

**25** "L'altro mondo! È la mia vivissima curiosità. Esiste? Non esiste? Confesso francamente di non saperne nulla. Se non esiste, mi sento anticipatamente rassegnato a dormire per tutta l'eternità. Se esiste, ne avrò un gran piacere" (Capuana 1897a, 206). The afterlife links death and photography in a way which is reminiscent, to a contem-

as particularly prominent, with the description of a (fictional?... imagined?... dreamed?... hallucinated?) *visita spirituale* turning into Giorgio's longing for an actual, either physical or 'spiritual' visitation from his interlocutor. The artistic quality of this tangle of reflections and speculations is enriched by Shakespearean quotations (so common in Capuana's *Profili*) and references ranging from Plato to Swedenborg's latest scientific publications. This multilayered, if unsystematic, allusive narrativisation of quasi-artistic phenomena peaks, once again, in a most explicit metanarrative comment, with the acknowledgment of both the centrality and the unattainability of the form-content knot:

Volere o non volere, il passaggio del concetto pensato nella forma letteraria, anche in questa, umilissima, epistolare, è proprio uno sforzo, una fatica da far disperare ... Ah, se sapeste che bei libri ho qui composti in certi quarti d'ora, all'ombra di un ulivo, sdraiato sull'erba!... E come me li sono goduti, solo solo, cogli occhi socchiusi, fumando una deliziosa sigaretta, felice di pensare che non avrei dovuto mai scriverli, mai!... (Capuana 1897a, 195-6)

In the midst of all this lies the semiotisation of Woman, who is no longer just the *Giacinta*-like case study to be dissected under the *microscopio* and *bisturino* of the "scenziato dimezzato" (Capuana 1994, 30) that is the naturalist writer. After all, a woman acquires enough 'active' literary agency to trigger mystery, temptation... inspiration.

Another short story with a female protagonist, titled "Avventura", appeared one year later (1888). "Avventura" is the story of two artistically self-reflexive subjects, "due pittori", Alberto and Giannuzzi (Capuana 1974a, 324). Here the thematisation of the characterisation process of the woman blends into a self-reflexive discussion. The two painters, upon seeing the "apparizione a cavallo" of a Russian *amazzone* by the name of Blichoff, discuss the "abbozzo" of her that one of them had drawn:<sup>26</sup>

Capolavoro d'abbozzo! - ripeteva il Giannuzzi, ammirando. - Oh! Tu intendi consolarmi... - No... - Quel bel corpo di donna, mezzo affondato tra la giubba d'una pelle di leone, già palpitava di vita, con le carni fine, candidissime, inondate di luce in mezzo al gran

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porary reader, of Barthes (see Gussago, Zuccala 2019): "Come mi addormenterò per l'altro sogno? Ho voluto averne un'idea, e mi son fatto fotografare da morto, col capo abbandonato sui cuscini, cogli occhi stravolti e la bocca semiaperta. Non ho, per dire il vero, un viso proprio da morto, scarno, abbattuto dalla malattia" (Capuana 1897a, 207). The contemporary reader is also immediately prompted to link these fictional reflections to Capuana's own playful "autoritratti da finto morto" (Comoy Fusaro 2018).

<sup>26</sup> The trope of the *femme fatale* has been extensively canvassed. See, for instance, Dijkstra 1986; Doane 1991; Stott 1992; Hanson, O'Rawe 2010.

verde della serra, tra le larghe foglie delle piante esotiche [...]. E negli occhi cerchiati di azzurro, nuotanti in voluttuoso umidore; e nelle labbra semiaperte, avido di baciare e d'esser baciato; e nelle brevi narici rigonfie, aspiranti i forti profumi di quell'aria greve, c'era, proprio [...] l'angoscioso desiderio di piaceri acri e nuovi, voluto esprimere dal pittore, isterica smania di donna che cerca di forzar la natura a ibridismi intentati. (Capuana 1974a, 324-5)

Yet, the painter was not able to complete the sketch, as his desire seamlessly shifted from achieving a full representation of the object, to seizing the object itself: "Ma il quadro è secco - osservò il Giannuzzi, passando il dito su la tela. Non vi lavori da un pezzo. - Da tre mesi, da che l'ho vista la prima volta! - E c'era un singhiozzo nella voce d'Alberto. - Che pazzia!... Ti compiangio" (Capuana 1974a, 326). The desire of "possederla" (326) reaches the point where he uses art - a well-crafted letter - to propose a kiss in exchange for his own life (326). Once the encounter is consummated, he commits suicide by poison (331-2). "Avventura"'s Alberto is the first of Capuana's artists to kill himself after an artistic failure, but not the last one, and here the ground is laid for the same theme to be fully developed in *La Sfinge* (1897b).

The tragic undertone of this metaliterary love links it to two short stories published a few years later, "Fausto Bragia" (1897a, 1-50) and "Ofelia" (1897a, 89-108), both released in 1893 and both featuring a prominent component of female character-centred metanarration. The eponymous protagonist of "Fausto" is a thirty year-old decadent artist, *à la* Andrea Sperelli, and one amongst a significant number of Capuana's musician characters, who tries to revitalise his stagnating musical inspiration by experiencing real passion for an aristocrat, "la non mai sospettata signora Ghedini" (Capuana 1897a, 2). Passion soon wanes, overshadowed by another and temporarily more powerful attraction for a younger woman, one who is also seemingly more useful to his art: "La graziosa civetteria di Cornelia lo eccitava, gli risvegliava nell'animo la passione della musica, se non la scintilla creatrice del compositore" (1897a, 30). The artist ends up committing - not a fashionable suicide like the protagonist of *Il piacere* (1889) - but a homicide to reach that meta-artistic objective, in what is, for Barnaby, a polemical attempt to resituate the decadent artist in the material and bourgeois context (2004, 17). "Ah, la terribile idea! [...] A quali infami accessi lo riduceva colei, spingendolo alla disperazione con la insopportabile gelosia!" (1897a, 34). The *crescendo* of Fausto's homicidal delusion - to be carried out by means of a poison stolen from a doctor-friend's cabinet - is mirrored in metaliterary terms, through the parallel conceptualisation of a sinister *sinfonia*:

[Fausto to his friend Dr Anguillieri:] Ho riflettuto su quella tua idea... bellissima... della Sinfonia dei baccilli, o della Morte. - Ah! [...] Vo-

glio farne proprio qualcosa di grandioso e di terribile, come tu hai detto. Ho già abbozzato... in testa... i punti principali, s'intende: Un crescendo, capisci?... dopo un pianissimo di violini e viole.... Poi, un unisono di ottoni.... Vengo per ispirarmi. – Mi hai fatto paura! – esclamò il dottore, stupito di quell'aspetto sconvolto, di quegli occhi che luccicavano sinistramente evitando lo sguardo altrui, di quelle parole pronunziate ora a scatti, ora esitando. (Capuana 1897a, 38-9)

Fausto's *delitto*, however, is doomed to remain uncommitted. The poisonous candy prepared for his lover ends up in the hands of her husband, who dies after consuming it, and thus, in a twist of fate, leaves her free to marry Fausto himself.

Similarly, in "Ofelia" the (anti)'hero' is the renowned painter Procci<sup>27</sup> who, in the opening scenes, charges himself with murder: "– In che modo? Perché l'ha uccisa? – Per gelosia. L'ho annegata" (Capuana 1897a, 90). He writes, in the form of a confession to a police officer, of how he has been looking for artistic inspiration in a 'real' woman, with whom he falls in love and of whom he becomes morbidly jealous. The starting point is once again an *abbozzo*, for which Procci is seeking a worthy model in a Rome dense with Dannunzian echoes. Here too, a metaliterary attack is detected, however poorly performed (Barnaby 2004, 18-9), on the fashionable motifs of d'Annunzio, the Uberman and the aestheticisation of life: "E che amavo in costei, che cosa? La sua bellezza, il suo fascino, oppure la mia opera d'arte, di cui ella era la riproduzione vivente, quella maledetta Ofelia sognata, idolatrata due anni con la gran passione dell'artista per la propria creatura?" (Capuana 1897a, 102). Here, too, are references – "il mago Donato" – to the fashionable *fin-de-siècle* circle of *sedute spiritiche* that features in the work of coeval writers ranging from Fogazzaro (*Piccolo mondo antico*, 1895) to Pirandello (*Il fu Mattia Pascal*, 1904).<sup>28</sup> Exposed to this cultural *temperie*, Procci decides to hypnotise the woman, not to force her to be faithful,<sup>29</sup> but to extract an honest confession. When the suspected betrayal is confirmed, hypnosis turns into a deadly weapon in the hand of a now completely humiliated Procci – "Io udivo poco; capivo pochissimo... Il cuore mi scoppiava..." (Capuana 1897a, 105) – and the artist is able to mesmerise the woman into drowning herself in the sea. The murder happens in the form of a double killing of both the artwork and the woman so as to stress the duality of the story:

<sup>27</sup> "L'ultimo suo quadro ebbe l'onore d'essere comprato da Sua Maestà il Re, all'esposizione della primavera scorsa" (Capuana 1897a, 94).

<sup>28</sup> See also Comoy Fusaro 2009, 89-90.

<sup>29</sup> "Avrei potuto imporle d'amarmi... Fui onesto; non volli. Che valore avrebbe avuto per me un amore così ottenuto?" (Capuana 1897a, 100).



E nello stesso tempo, rivedevo il mio quadro: Ofelia che affonda lentamente nella riviera tranquilla; Ofelia coronata di fiori, ancora sorretta a fior d'acqua da le vesti che le si gonfiano attorno... E vedevo pure Anna. La vidi sbalordire, smarrirsi, venir meno, affondarsi e sparire fra l'ondata che avvolse tutti in quel momento... (Capuana 1897a, 107)

### 3.2 “Evoluzione”’s Fasma and a ‘Small (Metatheatrical) Archive of the Heart’

The rather monothematic metareflection(s) of the aforementioned works - revolving around the theme of seizing the form - begins to be rearticulated in a more substantially multifaceted guise in two critically overlooked, female characterisation-centred short stories from the Eighties. After the first edition of *Giacinta* and two important collections of critical essays, *Studi sulla letteratura contemporanea (Prima and Seconda serie)* - “tra i quali si annoverano i memorabili saggi su Zola Balzac, Verga, Dossi” (Ghidetti 1974, XXX) - we encounter the short story “Evoluzione” ([1883-84] Capuana 1974a, 406-26). This story features a (relatively) newly married couple, Oreste and Fasma, two “transtextual characters” (Richardson 2010) who unmistakably echo *Profili*.<sup>30</sup> At a structural level, and even before considering the narrative/story, what strikes the reader is the number of framing devices Capuana-the narrator experiments with, largely by subdividing the text into sections belonging to different ‘genres’. The four sections consist of either an indirect narrative or (fictional) reproduction of fragments of correspondence between the two spouses. This quite lengthy piece opens with a narrative section, “Anniversario” (406-10), in which Oreste and Fasma are portrayed together, enjoying early spring. While the two spend a few days in the country, he is, in fact, emotionally distant and thinking about the sixteenth ‘anniversary’ not of his marriage, but of his past love for Iana (reminiscent of Iela in *Profili*). His *rêverie* unfolds along the self-reflexive lines of *sogno-realtà* and *ideale-reale*, which had become so central to Capuana’s work since *Profili*.

Oh, quel suo primo amore! [...] Ma tutti gli altri, affollatisi scompigliatamente nella sua scapata giovinezza, [...] erano stati soltanto prove mal riuscite dell’attuazione di quel sogno!... Din, din, don, don! Ed eran passati sedici anni! Gli pareva ieri. Ogni anno, in quel giorno sempre così. Intanto perché oggi il cuore gli era ri-

<sup>30</sup> Sardo (2017) refers to an “esplicita coscienza metalinguistica” specifically with regard to Capuana’s onomastic choices (128).

masto freddo freddo, e solo i nervi aveano provato il sordo risveglio delle care impressioni? Che voleva dire? [...] In quella malinconia dell'intera giornata, metà del suo organismo non c'era entrata per nulla?... Possibile?... Din!... Din!... Din!... Le ultime ondulazioni delle campane morivano lentissimamente per la calma notturna. - Che hai? - gli domandò Fasma, gettandogli le braccia al collo. Oreste esitava a rispondere. [...] Né poté aggiungere altro [...] non osava confessarle che in quel momento il dolce sogno del suo primo amore si era confuso con la bella realtà tremante di commozione fra le sue braccia! (Capuana 1974a, 410)

After "Anniversario" has thematised the *sogno-realtà* dichotomy, the second section steers this still seemingly 'abstract' discussion about past lovers and the way distant memories of them resurface, onto a more explicitly literary ground, by reproducing excerpts of Oreste's notebook ("Dal taccuino di Oreste", 410-16); the effect is that of weakening, at this point, mimetic immersion and illusion, both by shifting from 'unframed' third-person narration and by now referring to what is in fact a piece of fictional text within the text:

Le imposte della sala erano tempestate di nomi, di date. Altre persone che si volevano bene [...]. C'erano anche dei versi del Byron, che ora più non rammento. - Chi può essere questa Jenny [...] ? - Una vecchia zittellona brutta, sdentata, dagli occhiali verdi - dicevo io. - Una miss Chiaro-di-luna - dicevi tu. Sciocchezze! [...] [C]i venne l'idea di scrivere anche i nostri nomi su quell'album di legno verniciato. E tu scrivesti: Fasma (nome di adozione) col tuo bel caratterino. Io, Oreste, con le mie orribili zampe di gallina; e mettemmo la data, data indimenticabile! [...] Ti rammenti che io vi scrissi alcuni versi in lingua russa che tu volesti tradotti? "Ho visto passare l'Amore | Con un gran fascio di cure. - Dammene, Amore, - gli dissi - Dammene un po' - Ma egli tirò dritto". Sì, sì, versi russi, cara mia! Invece erano motti foggiate lì per lì, di nessuna lingua, senza alcun senso, che io ti tradussi sfacciatamente a quel modo. Quando penso che qualche *tourist* li copierà per cercare di farseli tradurre anche lui! (Capuana 1974a, 414-15)

Besides the striking temporal ambiguity generated by the uncertainty regarding whether the 'you'-addressee in the excerpt is his wife or his lost love, what is further intriguing in terms of textual 'self-consciousness' (Waugh 1984) is that the content of this excerpt is itself, to a large extent, metanarrative. The metanarrativity of this passage is increased through a passing reference to Byron, for example, and, more importantly, by mentioning an episode of pseudo or 'ludo'-translation of imaginary "versi russi" that, Oreste reveals, were nothing but his own creations disguised as translations. For any coeval reader acquainted with

the literary scene, or for a contemporary scholar, this is a rather overt reference, well beyond the fictional realm of the storyworld, to Capuana's own pranks played on the literary scene of the time, particularly to the "pseudo traduzione parodica" (Fulginiti 2014b, 150) that he had written a few years earlier, later published in *Semiritmi* (1888a) and discussed in the collection *Per l'arte* (1994, 131-8). The text was first published in 1882 in *Fanfulla della domenica* with the initials G.P., but in the 1885 essay "Un poeta danese", Capuana explained the prank, intending to satirise "i tanti pretesi cultori di letteratura straniera che in Italia traducono, o fingono di tradurre, da tutte le lingue europee moderne" (1994, 138). "È inutile aggiungere", Capuana continues,

che, come non è mai esistito un poeta danese chiamato Getziier, così sono un'invenzione i canti che si dicono tradotti e i giudizi dei critici citati. Al *Fanfulla della domenica* giunsero parecchie cartoline che incoraggiavano il presunto traduttore; nessuna che avvertisse il giornale di essere stato messo in mezzo da un burlone. Se qualcuno dei tanti nostri *traduttori di traduttori* [emphasis added] di poeti stranieri ha già, per caso, versificata la mia prosa, ora è pietosamente avvertito. (Capuana 1994, 138)<sup>31</sup>

Capuana uses this *escamotage* both to criticise the Italian habit of subserviently, almost obsessively, translating foreign poetry - implying also the principle of the language ethnicity and the 'dogma' of untranslatability<sup>32</sup> - and to experiment with a then virtually non-existent *verso libero* (Fulginiti 2014b, 143, drawing on Lombez 2005; and Miliucci 2014, 3). While in "Evoluzione" there is no breach, at this stage, of the veil of mimesis (the actual historical *burla* on Capuana's part is not mentioned), the allusion would be apparent to any reader of either *Fanfulla della domenica* or, from 1885, *Per l'arte*.

In the section "Presentimenti" (1974a, 416-21) the narrative pace/mode reverts to extradiegetic narration - describing Fasma's illness and her questioning of her husband's feelings - and then leaves room for one further, epistolary section, comprising three letters, two to his wife Fasma, within which the one to his friend Giorgio is nested. This framing structure juxtaposes truth and mystification in a way

<sup>31</sup> See also Miliucci (2014, 3), who explains the possible reasons for deploying such a device: "La traduzione da autori stranieri, specie se fittizia, è un espediente per cui vengono a scontrarsi in una terra di nessuno prosa e poesia, anticipando un movimento tipico del passaggio fra i due secoli, e aprendo lo scenario a una terza via che sembra costantemente in controllo nella nascita di ritmi nuovi". On this episode see also Fulginiti 2014a and 2014b.

<sup>32</sup> See Fulginiti: "Capuana prende di mira la moda della traduzione dalle letterature nordiche e delle 'traduzioni di traduzioni' da lingue non conosciute direttamente - una pratica di cui lo stesso autore si macchierà nel 1891, traducendo Ibsen dal francese" (2014b, 152).

which is in itself enticingly self-reflexive: in the two letters to his wife, the portrait of a devoted husband is evident, one who is disappointed to be kept away from his spouse by business obligations. Yet in “A Giorgio B\*\*\*”, Oreste surprisingly writes: “Con mia moglie è andata benissimo. Sono stato un commediante di prim’ordine, sublime a dirittura” (1974a, 424) and then discloses the stratagem that allowed him to spend time with his mistress Gilda.<sup>33</sup> He describes his ‘performance’ when, after receiving the letter from a fake client Bucci, the sending of which has been orchestrated with a friend, he pretends he must immediately depart and head back into town. The juxtaposition of ‘reality’ and fiction, both embedded in what is very clearly an ‘artwork’ (a fictional letter embedded in a sequence of letters, in turn embedded in a multi-section short story) stresses the importance of fictionality itself, both in dealing with a marital situation and, more fittingly, in dealing with writing: writing not only ‘constructs fiction’, but re-creates reality in some sense. In 1883-84 Capuana’s thought is still at a relatively early stage, but this will become a crucial principle from *Per l’arte* onwards. For Madrignani, from Capuana’s theorisation it emerges how:

La realtà illusoria che l’artista deve saper imporre [...] ha l’apparenza dell’altra realtà senza esserne la copia, ed anzi superi la natura attraverso una ricercata naturalezza artificiale. (1970, 120-1)

As Scrivano points out: “L’idea dell’opera d’arte come organismo succedaneo e parallelo [e superiore] della realtà è forse il più alto punto che la riflessione critico-estetica di Capuana raggiunge” (1994, 15). Capuana himself is quite explicit about the fact that his art “non sarà mai la fotografia” (1882, 129) but rather re-creation, mediated not only by reflection – as it is inevitable in a time of massive scientification and medicalisation of culture – but also by *fantasia* and *immaginazione*:

Dal momento che la realtà passa nel mondo della rappresentazione artistica, ha già perduto qualche cosa della sua natura materiale, e non è più precisamente quale può vedersi aprendo gli occhi; è più elevata. (Capuana 1994, 165)

However, on the basis of the already prominent self-reflexive (meta-fictional + metanarrative) aspect of the work, it could be argued that the structure of “Evoluzione” itself stages not the sentimental evolution suggested by the title, but rather the repeated sequences of ‘unframed’ narrative-‘paratextual’ narrative, suggesting an evolution in

**33** A mistress named Gilda is to be found in the late novel *Rassegnazione* (1907). Here too the name refers to one of the protagonist’s short-lived Milanese affairs.

the direction of, and a systemic gesturing towards, self-reflexivity. “Evoluzione” then represents, in a certain sense, a progression from *Profili*’s insistence on the sole theme of *forma* and *contenuto*, insofar as it introduces – albeit in an extremely allusive, undeveloped fashion – another, and somewhat broader, crucial path of metareflection on the evolution and macro-shifts occurring in ‘genres’ and ‘kinds’ of literary production, in which the notion of *realità ricreata* is also imbued. While in these early stages this macro-progression is still *in nuce*, by the end of this study it will be seen to reveal a pattern that allows one to account diachronically for the entirety of Capuana’s artistic experience.

Whilst compiling another very major critical (non-fictional) collection – the pivotal *Per l’arte* (1885) – Capuana returned to creative writing with a short story that deserves more attention than it has hitherto received, and for reasons akin to those that make “Evoluzione” an extremely intriguing piece of self-reflexive writing. The short story “Il piccolo archivio”,<sup>34</sup> which is dismissed by Ghidetti as nothing better than an “esercitazion[e] salottier[a]” (Ghidetti 1974, XXXIV), displays its metanarrative content in a very articulate manner. The title itself suggests a connection with the notion of meticulous storage, if not production, of ‘literary’ materials more explicitly than “Evoluzione” does. The case of this specific short story is rendered even more interesting because of its “transmodalisation” (Genette 1997, 277-8 and Boselli 2011, 53). It exists, as a “giocattol[o] a doppio fondo” (Zappulla Muscarà 1984, 169), in both a novelistic and a theatrical version, published in 1886: the *atto unico* “written before the short story with the same title, [yet] [...] published later” (Boselli 2011, 64 and Raya 1969, 72).<sup>35</sup>

The short story – whose latest title is the self-explanatory “Visita” (Raya 1969, 72) – is, once more, about two lovers ‘captured’ by the narration during one of their last meetings, before parting due to Maria’s husband being transferred to Napoli. Maria comes to Ludovico’s home while he is arranging his *archivio* of little collectables – “fiori secchi, lettere ingiallite, pezzettini di nastri, gingilli” (Capuana 1974a, 362) – which remind him of his diverse range of past flirtations: the daughter of his *fattore* (in 1866), then a classy woman, then an eager letter-writer, then a *marchesa*. This display irritates the nameless guest, who fears that the same destiny of ‘public’ revelation could be reserved for her own letters. She leaves embittered, hence revealing the actual depth of her now-betrayed feelings.

<sup>34</sup> Dated 1884, published in 1885 (and Raya 1969, 70, entry 1026) and later included in *Le passionate* ([1893] 1974a, 362-74).

<sup>35</sup> This is a variation on the usual progression in Capuana, with Ghidetti, “[un] abile manipolatore, in sede teatrale, delle più fortunate delle sue novelle” (Ghidetti 1974, XLII).

The most interesting insights into what appears as an otherwise entirely unexceptional<sup>36</sup> story are provided by Stefano Boselli. The critic focuses not so much on the short story itself, but on the play composed just before (Capuana 1999c, 3-12). He does so from the (often self-reflexive) perspective of intertextuality, building on a comparison with Verga's "Cavalleria Rusticana" (short story: 1880, 125-40, the play premiered in 1890), which is corroborated by paratexts where Capuana comments on its adaptation and vice versa. As a way of emphasising the versatility of the one-act format, Boselli points out that, while, on the one hand, in the context of realism, the one-act play was appreciated for its 'hypnotic' qualities, which allowed the hiding of the author's presence in a quintessentially *verista* fashion, on the other hand, the short play "offers a precious alternative, with a stronger role of intertextuality, at the theatre" than longer plays, which are inherently weaker when it comes to the presence and relevance of intertextuality (Boselli 2011, 51). Boselli continues:

Thanks to its brevity, [the one-act play] [...] may be used as a flexible tool that can dramatised dialogue between works before the eyes of the spectators, in the here and now of the performance [...]. By staging at least two short plays within the same event, a director is in the position to offer not an authorial sentence, but a series of utterances and a vision of dialogic interrelation, thereby leading the audience to ponder the larger intertextual matrix. (51)

The one-act play has an intrinsic self-reflexive potential, then, that can be exploited as much by a hypothetical 'director' as by a scholar seeking to find metareferential comments/traces. In the play, as in the text, "piccolo archivio" refers to the cataloguing of his lovers that the protagonist maintains - "il riordinamento del vostro piccolo archivio del cuore" (Capuana 1999c, 19) - through examining, one by one, the items that remind him of a specific woman. And yet, the purpose of this *spolio* is more subtle: "*Il piccolo archivio* is remarkable [...] as a collection of layers and motifs within an intricate intertextuality that connects not only to the *Verismo* school, but also to the dramatic tradition, which Capuana knew well thanks to his job as theatre critic" (Boselli 2011, 65). Firstly, the piece incorporates many explicit transmedial hints, "including writers Byron, Sévigné, Fogazzaro, and painters Raffaello and Correggio" (65). Even more crucially, it is the enumeration of "love samples" themselves that, for Boselli, contributes to metanarrativity: each love piece is linked

**36** For Pasquini: "Due personaggi, due amanti, come ce ne sono tanti nella letteratura e nel teatro ottocentesco" (Capuana 1999c, 8).

both to a ‘type’ of female individual<sup>37</sup> and, through it, to a theatrical tradition beyond realism:

His first woman was the daughter of his steward. When he comments “Allora amavo il rustico, l’ideale dell’ideale!” (20) he is in fact referring to the utopian portrayals of Arcadian societies that influenced the theatre as well. The next woman, the first real “lady” belonging to modern times, “fu così bestia [...] da provocare il mio rivale e buscarmi un bel colpo di punta al braccio, guaribile in dieci giorni” (21). It is easy to associate the events with *Cavalleria*, with the exception that the “hero” here did not (could not?) die. The third episode was an opportunity for Federico to vindicate himself of feminine volubility (“Tradii per tradire” 21) and reflects the tradition of bourgeois drama the verists were trying to supplant. Finally, the last abandoned woman is a clear example of emotional excesses: she writes too much and in a style suitable for Fogazzaro, but might at the same time anticipate D’Annunzio.

[...]

All the letters (i.e. types of sensibility and dramatic types) have now found their place in the little archive, and the play is actually a hypertext that not only alludes to, but playfully satirises the texts it quotes [...]. We are reminded of Capuana as critic: “C’incalza ancora l’accademia, l’arcadia, il classicismo e il romanticismo. Continua l’enfasi e la retorica, argomento di poca serietà di studi e di vita. Viviamo molto sul nostro passato e del lavoro altrui. Non ci è vita e lavoro nostro” (*Il teatro* xxi-xxii). (Boselli 2011, 65-6)

Therefore, Boselli concludes, “Capuana’s play alludes to the other [“Cavalleria Rusticana”] directly and attempts to archive it” (68) in a way that is eminently self-reflexive, as an *archivio* not so much of love memories, but rather of literary and, specifically, theatrical forms. As in “Evoluzione”, the focus of this (meta)reflection seems gradually to become broader, to go from the particularity of the quasi-sexualised act of creating fiction to the more ambitious reflection around liter-

**37** I borrow here from Capuana himself: “Noi creiamo dei tipi! - dice lei. Peggio per loro. Il tipo è cosa astratta: è l’usuraio, ma non è Shylock; è il sospettoso, ma non è Otello: è l’esitante, il chimerizzante, ma non è Amleto, e via via. Potrei facilmente moltiplicare gli esempi; ragionando con lei, basta un semplice accenno. Dei tipi! Ma tutta la letteratura moderna è la negazione di questo principio estetico classico, già sorpassato; lo afferma involontariamente lei stesso quando parla di individualismo. L’arte, signore, oggi crea (quando riesce a crearli) individui, non tipi. L’artista moderno si è convinto - e a questo convincimento l’ha indotto la scienza - che ogni creatura umana è un mondo a parte, immensamente ricco, immensamente vario, quasi altrettanto infinito quanto l’universo” (Capuana 1898, 46).

ary forms as such and their interrelation. If that is the case, though, it raises the question of what the subsequent shift to narrative form might signify. In fact, the primary concern is whether the short story not only ‘archives’ preceding dramatic forms but also the theatrical form itself. After all, Capuana had declared the demise of (Italian) theatre very early on: “Nella storia dell’arte drammatica la nostra parte noi l’abbiamo già avuta [...] il vero, l’unico teatro italiano fu già la commedia dell’arte” (1872, XXV). Boselli’s sophisticated appraisal fails to acknowledge that, in Capuana, this reflection is central and philosophically grounded in a Hegelian framework of historical progression, which only fully manifests itself (meta)narratively a few years later. What is significant here, in anticipation of that discussion, is that in the transition to the *novella* – a transition that, according to Luciana Pasquini (Capuana 1999c, 8) is “più semplice del previsto [...] [i]l passaggio da un genere all’altro è pressoché automatico” – there is the addition of a further and fundamental layer, which appears to bracket the theatrical art form itself. Nevertheless, it is only in *La Sfinge* that this very point is made metanarratively in a convincing manner and is therefore best discussed in full in relation to that novel.

### 3.3 L’Ignota, Faccia Bella and Female ‘Visitations’

The twofold piece, “Il piccolo archivio”, is a testament to both metareference and transmediality (from short story to theatre). In Capuana, self-reflexivity traverses both media and genres, being able to reach and infiltrate seemingly non-fictional and (quasi)autobiographical writing. In this category, firstly, one finds the very highly cited *Spiritismo?* (1884).<sup>38</sup> On the surface, *Spiritismo?* is a long essay, dedicated to Salvatore Farina, on the manifestations of the Occult such as medianic “comunicazioni e apparizioni” (Capuana 1884, 1).<sup>39</sup> Yet, one notices how its argument frequently unfolds through the parallels between these pretended and mysterious supernatural phenomena and the equally mysterious processes of artistic creation (see Giannetti-Karsienti 1996; Galvagno 2005; Mangini 2007; Foni 2007). The eminently literary quality of the piece can be seen in the very first lines, where the opening quotation comes not from a medical/scientific treatise, as one might expect from Capuana’s previous practice, but from his beloved Shakespeare, often used for (meta)narrative purposes:

<sup>38</sup> This was composed in a decade rich in narrative works (at least three renditions of *Giacinta* – ’79, ’86, ’89 –, the composition of *Profumo, racconti appassionati*), but in which the self-reflexive production is scarce.

<sup>39</sup> See Tropea 1994 and Cigliana 1995 for a contextualisation of the work and a critical commentary.



There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, | Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*, I. 5 (Capuana 1884, 1)

Then, after a passing review of some recent publications in the field of Spiritualism the text quickly turns to the topical issue of *scrittura medianica*, one that is closer to Capuana's own creative interests. The essay recounts how Capuana began by performing experiments of magnetism/mesmerism and hypnotism on the landlord's daughter in Firenze (1864), and how he soon tried to turn her into a means through which he could 'produce' literature:

Covavo, da mesi, una *Vita di Ugo Foscolo*, il mio idolo letterario giovanile, ed ero arrabbiatissimo di certe lacune incontrate qua e là, che non trovavo modo di riempire [...]. Fu così che mi venne la cattiva idea d'indirizzarmi allo stesso Foscolo, facendolo evocare dalla Beppina. (Capuana 1884, 93-4)

The description of his own, 'literature-driven' experimentations with magnetism then leads to a journalistic reportage of variously documented episodes of somnambulist writing. The metaliterary, self-reflexive quality of the work peaks at the centre of the collection. Within an argument that supposedly demonstrates the existence of the Occult, Capuana places an anecdote, presented as autobiographical, of a "caso di allucinazione artistica [...] complicata" (Capuana 1884, 226). Here the author (Capuana) recounts how, after seeing Van Dyck's painting *Ritratto d'ignota* in a museum in 1875, he is haunted by that image, which demands to be accepted and loved as a 'real' woman would:

Ogni notte [...] la fantasticata allucinazione della novella diventava quasi una realtà. Sentivo in quello stanzone di Via Ripetta la presenza della Ignota. [...] Aveva un tal fascino che io non sapevo più resisterle. (Capuana 1884, 232, 235)

The anecdote, writes Capuana, gave him the idea for a "novella fantastica" revolving around precisely this phantasmagoric 'persecution'. And yet, although tormented for days by the phantom of his inspiration, he cannot – unlike what, to some extent, happens in *Profili* – convincingly incorporate the feminine inspiration into the literary form:

Un bel soggetto di novella fantastica! Sì... Ma la chiusa? La catastrofe? E mi addormentavo nel cercarla. E così ogni notte, da capo, vivevo per qualche mezz'ora in uno stato strano, né di completa realtà né di allucinazione completa; talché, a volte, non sapevo più distinguere se fosse l'idea della mia novella che mi producesse quella piccola allucinazione, o se quell'idea fosse la semplice

sensazione di un fatto a cui io assistevo, spettatore ed attore nel punto stesso. Ma la chiusa? la chiusa? [...] quel fantasma di donna scappa[va] via appena accennavo di volerlo imprigionar nella forma e renderlo visibile agli occhi altrui. (Capuana 1884, 234, 235, 238)

The anecdotal-narrative quality<sup>40</sup> and self-reflexivity of this passage have not escaped some of those critics who have focused on this, in truth, rather widely known episode of *Spiritismo?*. According to Cedola, notwithstanding the ‘pretended’ artistic failure, what is left is *de facto* a (short) novel nesting in the pages of the essay:

Naturalmente la novella risulta invece essere stata scritta [...], proprio la storia non narrabile è raccontata di riflesso, con un operazione (forse consapevolmente) iperletteraria - trasposta in quest'altro contesto che è il saggio sullo spiritismo. (Cedola 2007, 32-3)

In the same vein, there is also a metanarrative passage in *Spiritismo?* that retraces the compositional process of the last of the *Profili* (Giannetti-Karsienti 1996, 282). Here Capuana narrativises his creative experience, adopting a non-autobiographical third person - “il caso seguente [...] tratta d'un tale che allora stava per pubblicare un giovanile volume (249)” - and transforming it into a narrative excerpt, which - as in *Profili*, to some degree - describes how the author of the *caso* was prey to an eroticised relationship with the (feminine) form-object of his narration:

Per due giorni, una vera ossessione lo aveva posseduto; e la creatura della sua fantasia, più viva, più evidente d'una creatura reale, gli avea ripetuto dentro [...] il lungo processo d'una passione morta di sfinimento poco prima. Col cuore sconvolto, col cervello in fiamme, egli avea lavorato dodici ore al giorno, di seguito. [...] Aveva amato e posseduto, nella sua allucinazione artistica, l'adorato fantasma; e quel processo di passione così rapidamente ripetutosi nella sua immaginazione e nel suo cuore, avea prodotto gli effetti della passione reale. (Capuana 1884, 253-4)

These hybrid inserts, in what remains fundamentally and primarily a critical essay with an autobiographical undertone, infuse *Spiritismo?* with sections of narrative that have a high self-reflexive com-

<sup>40</sup> For Failli: “Non può certo essere trascurato il fatto che anche questo testo non è compreso in un volume di narrativa, ma in un testo di interesse scientifico; questa collocazione e un'esplicita dichiarazione di esperienza autobiografica fanno sì che il lettore si trovi di fronte a un testo che non possiede la realtà arbitraria propria dei testi letterari, ma che d'altra parte non è possibile considerare pura e semplice cronaca vera” (1985, 155).

ponent, rather like that of *Profili*. This is further corroborated by the fact that even the main claims for autobiographical truth are on occasion undermined by hints of the narrator's unreliability: "Senti, caro Farina; io ti racconto l'impressione schiettissima del fatto, come fu allora provata; non l'analizzo, non la commento; e mentirei se ti dicessi di esser proprio sicuro che in quel momento non fossimo, anche noi, sovraeccitati in sommo grado e mezzi colpiti di allucinazione..." (Capuana 1884, 120).<sup>41</sup>

It is, therefore, by ultimately walking the line between scientific essay and 'autofiction' that *Spiritismo?* negotiates 'the (meta)fictional' into the space of the non-fictional. This experiment both precedes and is conducive to the self-reflexivity of *Ricordi di infanzia e di giovinezza* ([1893] 2005),<sup>42</sup> the only text by Capuana that has explicitly autobiographical ambitions.

In *Spiritismo?* he mainly uses divulgative non-fiction to underpin metareference. It is along the same lines that the first chapter of the little-known *Ricordi*, where self-reflexivity liaises more heavily with the genre of (quasi) autobiographical writing, should be analysed. While the whole of *Ricordi* is useful and informative, especially in regard to the depiction of Capuana's precocious pro-*Risorgimento* convictions, it is in the opening chapter (1839-1845) that Capuana describes his infantile, recurring vision/dream of a woman entering his room and embracing him. In this story, a very young Capuana first encounters a 'fictional' character and the product of his imagination, who takes the shape of a flesh-and-blood 'visitation' (Davies 1979, 100):

Ricordo [...] un fenomeno, notevolissimo di cui serbo netta memoria, come se si trattasse di caso recente; avevo tre o quattro anni. In quella camera, su quel lettino, ho fatto, notte per notte, lo stesissimo sogno. Oggi che fin la scienza comincia ad occuparsi di visioni, di apparizioni forse non dovrei dire sogno, tanto più che anche allora lo credevo proprio una realtà. Non ne ebbi mai pau-

<sup>41</sup> This kind of occasional bracketing of the certainty of truth does not seem to be, after all, too far from what 'canonical' authors of contemporary Italian autofiction produce. See for example Giulio Mozzi: "Anche questo ricordo è inventato, e io sono costretto a chiedermi che cosa sto facendo. Sto raccontando cose vere e false insieme, sto fantasticando cose che non sono accadute e forse sto cercando di convincermi che sarebbero potute accadere, e che ciò che allora desideravo accadesse erano appunto queste cose. E allora non so se ciò che sto raccontando è solo ciò che mi è accaduto [...], nel qual caso dovrei fare qualche tentativo per limitare l'invenzione, per costringermi a raccontare esattamente ciò che è stato, oppure se ciò che sto raccontando è una mia fantasia che riusa senza scrupoli ricordi veri e ricordi falsi, invenzioni vecchie e invenzioni che mi vengono in mente nel momento stesso in cui scrivo" (1998, 125).

<sup>42</sup> See Fichera's introduction (2005) for the editorial history of the work: "Le pagine memorialistiche dei *Ricordi di infanzia* non sono il risultato di una pulsione nostalgica o di una rievocazione appagante del mondo conosciuto, ma sono a pieno titolo un esempio di letteratura verista tout court, di cui il nostro fu teorizzatore" (6).

ra, non ne parlai mai né alla mamma né ad altri; mi compiacevo di quel segreto; e vistolo replicare per più notti di seguito, la sera affrettavo l'ora di andarmene a letto per vedere se continuasse a riprodursi identicamente; si riproduse ripeto, notte per notte, due anni o poco meno. (Capuana 2005, 13)

Using the anecdote to build suspense, Capuana stresses the recurrence, the almost obsessive nature of the visitations – which go on for a staggering ‘almost two year’-period – as well as the ‘realistic’ quality that characterises them: “lo credevo proprio una realtà”. Then, he goes on to recount the episode, and the *visitatrice* in vivid detail:

Una notte, dunque, *sognai o vidi* [emphasis added] un luccicore che s'insinuava nella mia camera [...] diventando di mano in mano più intenso; poi, senza che l'uscio si aprisse, apparve una bellissima signora, vestita di raso bianco [...]; i biondi capelli le splendevano attorno al capo come un'aureola, ma i lineamenti della faccia e gli occhi erano immobili. S'inoltrò lentamente fino al mio letto, guardandomi fisso, mi prese *ignudo* [emphasis added] su le braccia, e mi portò via con sé, facendomi passare per l'uscio chiuso. Alla luce blanda, quasi lunare, che si diffondeva dalla sua persona. [...] La bella signora mi fece passare a traverso [lo stanzone] [...] tenendomi sempre su le braccia, e sentii lo stento del passaggio; poi non vidi né sentii più niente. Né sveglio potei ricordare altro. Ogni notte così [...], il sogno dimenticato lungo la giornata mi tornava vivissimo alla memoria, e attendevo impaziente l'apparizione di colei che avevo soprannominata *Faccia Bella*. La notte appresso, d'acapo. Mi rimane di questo sogno o visione un ricordo così preciso che scrivendo mi è parso di rivedere, come allora, il fievole luccicore che diventava di mano in mano più intenso, e poi l'apparizione della bellissima donna. (Capuana 2005, 13-14)

The way in which these numerous visitations take place vaguely recalls how the “forme aeree e tremolanti” of *Profili* (Capuana 1877, VII) invade the narrator-author's memory. Even more strikingly, however, the mechanics of these encounters echo almost verbatim the above-illustrated, self-reflexive anecdote in *Spiritismo?*. Whether or not, in the fictionality of the story, the young Capuana-character makes the literary association with *Faust*, what is significant is that Capuana-the mature narrator<sup>43</sup> explicitly does so: “Ora, anzi, posso dare un'idea più precisa del suo costume. Il lettore rievochi il fantasma di qualche prima donna vestita da Margherita per le rappresentazio-

<sup>43</sup> For a case study-based analysis of how Capuana exploits the device of splitting narrating- and narrated-self, see Carta 2011, 59.

ni del *Faust* o del *Mefistofele* e vedrà la mia *Faccia Bella*" (Capuana 2005, 14). Although constantly reassuring the reader about the truthfulness of the anecdote – "Particolare importantissimo, allora io non avevo nessuna idea di un costume simile, né d'altro che avesse potuto suggerirmene qualche immagine approssimativa" (14) – Capuana cannot refrain, towards the end, from associating even the very first episodes of his infancy with the 'production of an artwork': following the visitations, a depiction of the Holy Mary magically appears, which is, in turn, quasi-sexualised in a way that is at odds with the infantile focalisation of the episode:

Al capezzale del mio lettino era apparsa una Madonna dipinta sul vetro: visino roseo, dagli occhi cilesti, contornato dalle pieghe di una mantellina azzurra che non lasciava vedere altro. Quella Madonna è stato il mio primo amore. La guardavo rapito, la baciavo come persona viva e non con sentimento religioso: le volevo bene perché era bella, perché quei grandi occhi cilesti erano più belli di tutti gli occhi da me visti e mi pareva mi guardassero e sorrissero nel guardarmi. *Faccia bella*, benché fosse trascorso solo qualche anno, era già una visione lontana [...] e la Madonnina rappresentava qualcosa di più concreto; di queste prime rivelazioni del cuore m[i] [...] è rimasto un senso vago. (Capuana 2005, 14-5)

Yet, in this instance too, the narrator cannot help but introduce a *caveat* regarding the absolute truthfulness of what he is narrating:

Dormivo o ero ancora sveglio quando l'apparizione si rinnovava sempre allo stesso modo e con le identiche circostanze? Qualche volta, ripensandoci nella giornata, mi pareva che non avevo [sic] affatto sognato e *Faccia Bella* diveniva soggetto di breve fantasmatica infantile. (Capuana 2005, 13-4)

In so doing, *Ricordi di infanzia e di giovinezza* realises the tension not so much between 'fiction and reality' as between 'truth and reality' (Marchese 2014, 7), to the extent that Marchese's generic formulation of autofiction can be reworked on the basis of this chapter of *Ricordi*. In *Ricordi*: "Non è mai agevole, e in certi casi impossibile, discernere i fatti inventati da quelli invece avvenuti realmente" (8) with the testimony that "si inquina alle radici" (8) and "reale e fittizio [...] si presentano agli occhi del lettore [...] come i due bracci di una forcella che non riusciamo a focalizzare [...] è [Capuana] [...] l'unico ad avere una visione esatta della forcella, ma non mostra alcuna intenzione di condividerla" (8). Such a tension is, in *Ricordi*, espoused to the issue of fiction-production, and bent to serve metanarrative purposes.

While this already tenuous autofictional impulse in Capuana's work appears to fade after *Ricordi*, what peaks in the Nineties is fe-

male character-centred self-reflexivity. The motif of the female visitation and/or of the woman semiotised into a self-reflexive device, in fact, can be traced, in the most sophisticated way, in *La Sfinge* (1895-1897).

### 3.4 La Sfinge-Fulvia and the Historical Progression of Art

As I have pointed out more comprehensively elsewhere (Zuccala 2019a), *La Sfinge* represents the most complex theorising effort carried out by Capuana in a single self-reflexive narrative piece. Here, Capuana's narrativisation and comments on his artistic theories reach maturity. The many, partly undeveloped, female characterisation-centred self-reflexive threads that have intermittently come to the fore in previous works are here recomposed in a vastly superior narrativisation, one that by its very existence counters some critics' claims of theoretical approximation<sup>44</sup> on Capuana's part, particularly in his 'post-*verista*' phase. As in some of his earlier stories, *La Sfinge*'s plot revolves around the story of a Roman playwright, Giorgio Montani, who, in a fit of inspirational crisis, contemplates exploiting his own love affair with the seemingly candid widow Fulvia, as a source of narrative material. Fulvia, however, turns out to be more and more mysterious and contradictory (i.e. Capuana 1897b, 43, 46, 66), to the point where Giorgio is prompted to identify her by association with a symbolist painting of the Sophoclean Sphinx that dominates the wall in his study.<sup>45</sup> "La Sfinge mitologica; sei tu, siete tutte, è la donna, l'enigma insolubile!" (Capuana 1897b, 95), screams Montani,<sup>46</sup> before killing himself with a shot-gun. After decades of being utterly disregarded, the obvious, and yet not unproblematic, meta-artistic theme was tackled for the first time by Annamaria Pagliaro.<sup>47</sup> For Pagliaro, the novel's self-reflexive elements are to be found mainly in Giorgio's (meta) literary comments, which are mostly directed to his only interlocutor in the story, his lover Fulvia. Given the prominence of such comments in the narrative, and the correspondence one finds between them and Capuana's critical pieces, it seems to Pagliaro that in *La Sfinge*, Cap-

<sup>44</sup> See at least Azzolini 1988.

<sup>45</sup> For Barnaby (2004, 19) it is a metareference to *Le Sphinx Vainqueur* by Moreau (1886). The pattern of female characterisation that emerges from the story is that, put in Rimmon-Kenan's terms (2002), of an increasing or developing 'complexity'. For a more complete synopsis of the novel, see Zuccala 2019a.

<sup>46</sup> These words are overtly reminiscent of Fausto's: - "Ah! La mia Venere infernale è proprio lei! - esclamava Fausto disperatamente".

<sup>47</sup> For a review of earlier critical appraisals - Fuller 1897, Scalia 1952, Marchese 1964, Caccia 1962, Tonelli 1928, Lucini 1971 and Davies 1979 - see Zuccala 2019a.

uana “fa[ccia] del suo protagonista il portavoce della propria ideologia artistica” (1989, 67). However, the realistic plot, the many and excessively overt metanarrative comments and equally excessive symbolism, render *La Sfinge* a less than satisfactory work, from many points of view, realistic, symbolist, and self-reflexive:

Nella *Sfinge* il lettore invece di trovarsi partecipante, di fronte a un brano di vita, si trova a cercare di mettere insieme un puzzle che dovrebbe corrispondere alle macchinazioni della mente alterata del protagonista. (Pagliaro 1989, 70)

Such “uso di simboli un po’ forzato” (69),<sup>48</sup> revolving around the image of the Sphinx, inharmoniously combined with Giorgio’s too explicit artistic reflections, mars both the reader’s possibility of aesthetic immersion and that of appreciating the novel metanarratively. In Pagliaro’s view:

Sia il dramma del protagonista, sia l’ambiente sono così artefatti che riesce impossibile al lettore sentirsi di fronte ad una rappresentazione di vita immediata o ricostruirsi nella mente il procedimento della creazione artistica. (1989, 69)

In the case of *La Sfinge*, any analysis intending to shed new light on this dimension of the novel cannot dwell on an all-too-obvious metanarrative layer, but, rather, ought to examine how the numerous, openly self-reflexive comments, combined with the intricate symbolism of the Sphinx in the Oedipus myth, allow for the exegetic path opened by Pagliaro (1989; and enlarged by Barnaby 2004), to be expanded. This, in turn, leads to reconsidering *La Sfinge* as a substantial piece of self-reflexive writing, one that at once narrativises and puts into practice crucial theoretical principles, as they were being articulated by Capuana in his critical pieces with increased clarity, and as we have seen them self-reflexively emerge, more or less convincingly, in the works analysed earlier.<sup>49</sup>

In the light of all that has been discussed above, it is possible at this point to understand how Capuana’s theory – one that unfolds with increasing complexity decade after decade – can be understood in relation to two core, intertwined principles, the first of which is the principle “delle forme artistiche e del loro svolgimento nella sto-

<sup>48</sup> This is reminiscent of Caccia 1962: “Una simbologia un po’ falsa, che non piace [...], non è possibile non rilevare la gratuità di certi atteggiamenti e motivi. [...] Una raccolta, potremmo dire, di cattive cose di pessimo gusto” (2907-08).

<sup>49</sup> This narrativisation has been discussed in a more complete manner in Zuccala 2019a.

ria" (Sportelli 1950, 39).<sup>50</sup> Capuana conceives Art as one unified and evolving macro-organism of the literary genres, that is, Art itself as a historically progressive form. For Capuana, genres are like biological organisms, which are born, grow and decay.

Le forme artistiche sono quasi identiche alle forme naturali, e non capricciose, accidentali; ma svolgonsi con un logico processo, arrivano alla loro perfetta applicazione, decadono e muoiono. (1950, 39)

La storia d'un'opera d'arte va calcolata preciso come la storia d'un organismo. Il dramma degli indiani, la tragedia dei Greci e i lavori di Shakespeare non sono da reputarsi una cosa affatto diversa. (Capuana 1872, XVII)

This organic progression of art leads artists to abandon 'exhausted' forms spontaneously in favour of newborn ones. More specifically, in Capuana's times, this principle is what had led to – see the hints in "Il piccolo archivio" – the exhaustion of theatrical art (especially drama, which was most appreciated during the *Risorgimento* in that it was infused with historical patriotism) – and to the increasing prominence of the "incipiente forma del romanzo moderno".<sup>51</sup> Each stage of this evolution represents a natural stage of the pseudo-Darwinian artistic progression from 'sentiment' to 'reflection'.<sup>52</sup> If reflection played a bigger role in contemporary naturalist (and post-naturalist) literature than it had done previously, that did not imply that the imaginative function was dead and art had become a fully speculative endeavour, but rather, that the proportion of imagination and fantasy and reflection had shifted.

This very stable and solid principle in Capuana's theorisation<sup>53</sup> was found in the works of the French Positivists, Taine and Bernard, but it can actually be traced back to Hegel. The philosopher, in the *Aes-*

**50** On the importance of this metaphor and some important distinctions regarding its use, see Fishelov 1998.

**51** But, Capuana clarifies: "Questo non vuol dire che la produzione teatrale non continui o non possa continuare anche dopo; ma vuol dire però che continua come accidente, come forma vuota di contenuto reale, più retorica che arte" (1872, XIX). On this matter see Balloni 2007, 147.

**52** As Capuana explains in *Teatro*, "Ostinarsi nella ricerca dell'Epopea [...] vuol dire non accorgersi che le forme dell'arte, in generale ed in particolare, abbiano subito straordinari e radicali cambiamenti [...] non avvedersi che noi possediamo al giorno d'oggi un'opera d'arte non meno difficile dell'epopea e popolare quant'essa al suo tempo, ma più seria, più variata, più efficace, diremmo quasi più eccellente, e questa è il romanzo" (389).

**53** The durability of this principle is well illustrated by Anna Storti Abate (1993, 35) and also emerges from Giorgio Luti's overview of the collection *Gli 'ismi'* (1973, XV-XXI).



*thetics* (1831), uses the Sphinx as a “symbol of symbolism itself” (Hegel 1975a, 360), of the progression of the human Spirit in history and the progression of genres in the history of art: from the ‘primitive’ epic of Homer to the speculative thought of nineteenth-century philosophy, through *commedia dell’arte* and Shakespearean tragedy. For Hegel, this symbolism is intrinsic to the hybrid form of the Sphinx (see also Regier Goth 2005, 120), with the human head (i.e. human reasoning) emerging from the primitive and twofold animality of the eagle’s wings and the lion’s body.

Out of the dull strength and power of the animal the human spirit tries to push itself forward, without coming to a perfect portrayal of its own freedom and animated shape, because it must still remain confused and associated with what is other than itself (Hegel 1975a, 361)

Capuana absorbs the Hegelian theory of the historical progression of the arts, not only from De Sanctis’ *Saggi critici* (1866) and Camillo De Meis’ *Dopo la laurea* (1868, 126, 180), but also by reading Hegel directly (see Patruno 1980, 1996; Pupino 2004, 23-39; Balloni 2007, 139);<sup>54</sup> it, therefore, does not come as a surprise that, much like Hegel in the *Aesthetics*, Capuana decides to pick precisely the image of the Sphinx to symbolise that progression in the novel. The human (feminine) head progressively emerging from the animal body perfectly signifies the struggle of a superior, more ‘reflexive’<sup>55</sup> art form – the modern novel initiated by Zola and, before him, Balzac – to overpower the ‘animality’ of prior, more ‘primitive/sensuous/imaginative modes of artistic expression. Furthermore, as Regier Goth remarks, the Greek Sphinx – like her sister,<sup>56</sup> the Chimera – has in fact a “tripartite anatom[y]” (2005, 79): she is partly human and partly bestial, with her bestial part in turn subdivided into two, between lion and raptor. Inconsequential though this nuance may appear, this ‘disunity’ even within the unity of the animal part appears signifi-

<sup>54</sup> Patruno (1996) and Pupino (2004, 23-39) both examine in further detail the way in which Capuana’s theory merges the Darwinian struggle for life with the Hegelian evolution towards speculative prose.

<sup>55</sup> See *Spiritismo?*: “la riflessione entr[a] oggi nell’opera di arte in maggior quantità che non pel passato” (1884, 216); and *Per l’arte*: “Questa benedetta o maledetta riflessione moderna, questa smania di positivismo di studi, di osservazioni, di collezione di fatti, noi non possiamo cavarcela di dosso. È il nostro sangue, è il nostro spirito; chi non la prova può dirsi un uomo di parecchi secoli addietro smarritosi per caso in mezzo a noi. Ed è naturale quindi che dal nostro sangue e dal nostro spirito la riflessione positiva passi a rivelarsi anche nell’opera d’arte” (1994, 43).

<sup>56</sup> Pasquini gives a minimalist account of the relationship between the Sphinx and the Chimera: “il mostro chimerico è generato, come la Sfinge, dai rapporti incestuosi della comune madre Echidna, quindi partecipa appieno del suo mistero enigmatico” (Pasquini 2012, 19).

cant when associating the anatomy of the Sphinx with the ‘anatomy’ of the modern artwork as it emerges from both the novel, *La Sfinge*, and Capuana’s critical works. In Capuana’s essays, an artwork is the combination not of two, but of three components: *riflessione*, *fantasia* and *immaginazione*. “Fantasia” and “Immaginazione”, as Enrica Rossetti shows (1974, 99-119), are often used in combination in Capuana’s essays (for instance *Per l’arte* 1994, 40-2), appearing as the twofold opposites of *riflessione*: “l’immaginazione è una delle forme nella quale [sic] si esprime il pensiero; la riflessione ne è un’altra” (1974, 106). Capuana’s essays show the reader that *fantasia* and *immaginazione* are really two facets of the same non-reflexive pole: “per rappresentare [un soggetto] [...] ci vogliono sempre quelle due divine facoltà: la fantasia, l’immaginazione, che potrebbe anche darsi siano un’identica cosa” (1994, 45). The duality of the concept of *immaginazione*, then, seems to be captured well by the duality of the Sphinx’s animal body.

Art forms, explains Capuana in *Cronache letterarie* (1899), appear, “proponendo ai giovani scrittori, come la mitica Sfinge, enimmi insolubili [...] e colpendoli fatalmente se non riescono a risolverli” (158).<sup>57</sup> In such a progression, theatre is the exhausted form, one that after peaking with Shakespeare’s tragedies, decays. Indeed, Capuana states very clearly:

Io mi son rifatto per conto mio e secondo cotesto piano semplice e naturale tutta la storia dell’arte drammatica nelle sue linee più larghe, ed ho visto uscirne fuori la rigida conchiusione [sic] che la forma tragica raggiunse, è già tempo in Inghilterra, il suo ultimo sviluppo con Shakespeare e la forma comica in Francia con Augier e Dumas figlio ai di nostri. (1972, XXV)<sup>58</sup>

These critical pages by Capuana are echoed by Giorgio Montani’s metareference in the novel, where the protagonist explains to Fulvia – who is unsuccessfully trying to “urge Montani back to his writing desk” (Barnaby 2004, 23) to make him finish drafting his play, *Arianna*:

I capolavori [teatrali] son tutti già fatti. Noi siamo arrivati troppo tardi. Rifarli è cosa stupida; dovremmo accorgercene facilmente. (Capuana 1897b, 84)

<sup>57</sup> See *Cronache*: “O Romanticismo, chimera della generazione che precedette la nostra! O Verismo o Naturalismo, che sei stato anche la mia chimera. [...] O idealismo, o Simbolismo, chimera della generazione presente! [...] O unica e sola Chimera, che assumi diversi aspetti, iridando le penne delle tue ali ad ogni nuovo riflesso di luce, e che sei stata Romanticismo e poi Verismo e oggi idelismo e Simbolismo e assumerai domani chi sa quale inattesa e più lusinghiera sembianza!” (1899, 154-5).

<sup>58</sup> As Ghidetti’s above-mentioned essay, *L’ipotesi del realismo*, highlights, Capuana was referring to his project of writing a universal history of theatre, which, however, he would never complete (1982, 82-3). See also Capuana 1872, 389.

Indeed, it is due to such an inherent exhaustion of theatre as an art form that the creative efforts of the protagonist are inevitably doomed to fail. What may look simply like the evidence of a pessimistic stance is in fact the affirmation of the historically determined superiority of a genre. Giorgio personifies the inherent exhaustion of theatre as an art form, as postulated by Capuana's critical pages. Theatrical works as such are seen as intrinsically incapable of capturing the vitality of reality in its outmoded and insufficient forms. This is the reason why, in the story of *La Sfinge*, the composition of the *Arianna* play is not completed and, instead, procrastination is endless. In contrast, the novel *La Sfinge* is successfully completed and published. The failure of Giorgio as a playwright is not, in this instance, the failure of Capuana the novelist.

The choice of the Sphinx as a central symbol in the long *racconto*, therefore, is more than a naive homage to a fashionable symbolist trend. It is, in embryo, the fundamental principle of the biological-idealistic evolution of literary genres, one that, as has been shown, previous short stories had only been able to touch upon metanarratively.

The presence of one particular intertextual reference further reinforces this thesis, a "mezzo verso dello Shakespeare" from Act Five of *Othello*: "Eccolo! Io son colui Che Otello fu!" (53) [That's he that was Othello: here I am]<sup>59</sup> (Shakespeare 2005, 205). Here Giorgio is talking about himself as a disappointed suitor and refers to himself as a 'new' Othello. In a self-reflexive light, Giorgio comparing himself to a Shakespearean character makes Capuana's theoretical point: Giorgio, one of Capuana's best-crafted fictional characters, represents the natural evolution postulated by Capuana's own evolutionary theory of genres, according to which Shakespeare's dramatic characters (e.g. Othello) become living characters of fiction. Immodest though this claim may sound on the part of both Giorgio and Capuana, it is nonetheless perfectly aligned to Capuana's theory.

In *La Sfinge*, the other crucial aspect of Capuana's theory, the 'micro-theory' of the individual act of artistic creation (on which previous works also focus in a self-reflexive manner, but without an adequate content basis), is effectively narrativised. In all the works discussed above, the self-reflexive focus is almost exclusively on the eroticised struggle, on the artist's part, to merge *forma* and *contenuto*: on 'desire', as contemporary critical theory would put it, as a basis for narrative. Overviewing the scholarly corpus, from Barthes to Cavarero, it is noticeable how crucial the image and the story of the Sphinx are. In particular, De Lauretis and Cavarero seem to focus most thoroughly on the unfolding of the encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx.

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**59** Barnaby regards the quotation as a "self-aggrandising Shakespearean imagery" combined to "Hackneyed decadent rhetoric" (2004, 21).

By doing so, De Lauretis' erudite discussion reaches the conclusion that what underlies Western narratives of all times is the universal (masculine) desire of the (male) hero - the mythical (male) subject - to gain knowledge (and therefore power) through penetrating, trespassing into the (feminine) regions of the mysterious, the unknown and the forbidden. The myth of a male Oedipus defying and defeating the female Sphinx so that he can reach the object of his desire is thus paradigmatic of the key role played by desire in any narrative (De Lauretis 1987, 104-5). Cavarero's reading, too, points out that the knowledge Oedipus craves is itself the knowledge of a narrative - his own story - and that both the Sphinx who speaks in riddles, symbolising the obstacles to the hero's desire, and the (incestuous) object of that desire, Queen Giocasta, are feminine. Thus, narrative generates and is generated by desire, and vice versa (1997, 15-26). It is all the more plausible, then, to expect *La Sfinge* to provide some sort of self-reflexive hint in this direction, as well as for the symbolic power of *La Sfinge* to unfold through the story of Giorgio and Fulvia, particularly one framed explicitly as Giorgio's attempt to penetrate Fulvia's riddle.

When approaching Capuana's conceptualisation of the creative process in his critical work, it becomes obvious that his critical pages explain its phenomenology not only as a heterosexual struggle/intercourse, but also as a sort of "allucinazione artistica" (1884, 356), and that they do so by drawing - in the manner of *Spiritismo?* - a scientific parallel between artistic inspiration and somnambulist and hypnotic states.<sup>60</sup> Following Richet's studies on the human psyche in *L'homme et l'intelligence* (1884) and Taine's *De l'intelligence* (1871), Capuana describes the artistic spark as a "sdoppiamento di coscienza" (Giannetti-Karsienti 1996, 277), in which the artist experiences a state of intermittent lucidity, consisting of a series of very brief "amnesie dell'io cosciente".<sup>61</sup> These *intermittenze* take place in a semi-conscious state, very similar to that of the *medium* in the experiments of *somnambulisme provoqué*, as described in *Spiritismo?* and metanarratively touched upon in some of the works hitherto examined. While in this state, the artist's mind transforms the "fantasmi" floating in the recesses of its memory in "figure" (279); when emerging from this condition, the artist tries to fix, to imprison these 'figures' in artistic form. Owing to its semi-conscious nature, the very core of the creative process remains for Capuana "forse per sempre un fenomeno inesplicabile nella sua essenza" (269), not only to those who study it but also to the artist himself: "C'è sempre un punto, nell'atto della produzione, in cui la facoltà artistica agisce con

<sup>60</sup> On this parallel in both Capuana and Verga see also Mangini 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Giannetti-Karsienti 1996, 269, 278. See also Cigliana 1995; Foni 2007; Michelacci 2015.

completa incoscienza [...] il vero punto della creazione si avvolge [...] nelle misteriose oscurità dell'incoscienza" (Capuana 1884, 216-17).

In examining the love-story between Giorgio and Fulvia, one finds that it is indeed characterised by such "intermittenze" of consciousness, as Giorgio's jealousy obscures, at times, his lucidity. But it is again an intertextual reference, at the very beginning of the story, that enables the reader to connect the description of the creative process in Capuana's critical pages more compellingly with its (meta)narrative rendition in *La Sfinge*. The key element here is not a quote, but rather a place, the Pincian Hill in Rome, where Giorgio had first seen Fulvia. This intertextual element points directly towards Capuana's writings: the pages recalling how the inspiration to draft the first version of *Giacinta* came to him:

Fu certamente in una dolce serata di ottobre del 1875, lungo un viale del Pincio, che la irresistibile tentazione mi si presentò tutt'a un tratto alla mente [...] così m'apparve all'immaginazione per la prima volta Giacinta, seducente visione, a traverso la calda parola di un senatore del regno. (Capuana 1972, 32)<sup>62</sup>

By beginning with this intertextual element, the narration links the tormented liaison between Giorgio and Fulvia/*La Sfinge* to the turbulent 'love story' between the writer and his beloved character, Giacinta. The more the affair unfolds in the novel, the more the impression is reinforced that it must carry a metanarrative meaning related to the fictional process of sign-production, owing to the progressive semiotisation of Fulvia. In Giorgio's eyes, she progressively turns from a flesh and blood woman into, literally, a written 'sign' and a writing tool. She loses her surname first: "Fulvia Fiorelli-Crispi era divenuta soltanto Fulvia per lui" (1897b, 39). Then her forehead turns into a page to be read:

La guardava con occhi dilatati, frugandola con lo sguardo. Era dunque proprio innocente o affatto impenetrabile colei? Non leggeva niente di quel che si attendeva di leggere in quella fronte ombrata da riccioli [...] Ah, potessi leggere qui dentro! Le picchiava delicatamente con le dita d'una mano su la fronte, spalancandole in faccia gli occhi ansiosi. (Capuana 1897b, 95)

On Fulvia's 'page' a question mark is 'carved': "due fossette, rileva[vano] leggermente le gote sotto quelle caratteristiche pinne nasali, simili a un punto interrogativo tracciato orizzontalmente" (64). When Giorgio discovers that her page has been written on by

<sup>62</sup> Ghidetti's *L'ipotesi del realismo* also comments on this anecdote (1982, 60-1).

others, such as when Dottor Butironi tries to kiss her hand, he states that it must be erased and rewritten: “Ma egli l’aveva già presa per una mano – per la mano baciata da colui! [...] Vo’ scancellare! Vo’ scancellare! [...] Nessuno deve toccarti, neppure con un dito!” (146).

However, it is not even the semiotisation itself that matters the most, but the fact that it is Fulvia who spontaneously lends herself to such a gender-based instrumental function: “Per un uomo come te, la donna non può, non dev’essere uno scopo, ma un mezzo” (Capuana 1897b, 100). This act of self-surrender and self-objectification echoes Capuana’s theory once again: a female character who portrays herself as a *medium* is immediately reminiscent of the instrumentalisation of a woman for literary purposes, as described in *Spiritismo?*’s experiments, where Capuana “aveva voluto mettersi in contatto, tramite la sua sonnambula, con lo spirito di Ugo Foscolo, per chiarire alcuni episodi di una biografia che aveva in mente di scrivere” (Cigliana 1995, 30). Such a consonance with both Capuana’s essays and his previous short stories is further corroborated by the fact that in the novel, in order to activate Fulvia’s inspirational power, Giorgio repeatedly asks her to visit his studio:

Vieni a farmi una visita, vieni a lasciarmi nello studio, assieme col profumo del corpo, il tuo lieto fantasma in tutti gli angoli, su le poltrone, su le seggiole. Vieni a toccare, a rovistare i fogli dell’*Arianna*. (Capuana 1897b, 87)

The sketch of the Sphinx – as Barnaby points out – is already in Giorgio’s room when he first meets Fulvia, but, crucially, it is unfinished, as often occurs in Capuana’s work: “figure appena delineate, [...] contorni indecisi, [...] segni tracciati con mano febbrile e che in qualche punto bisognava interpretare per intenderli” (Capuana 1897b, 21-2). As a result of Fulvia’s “visitations” (Davies 1979, 101), in his moments of lucidity Giorgio stares at the piece of art<sup>63</sup> – “S’era distratto un istante, stupito della vivissima e nuova impressione che gli veniva da quelle note figure” (Capuana 1897b, 44). In those interludes of consciousness, he works creatively on those hallucinatory images: “gli era parso che la impassibile e bellissima faccia della Sfinge si fosse animata e negli occhi e sulle labbra le fosse balenato un sorriso, oh! Il sorriso di Fulvia” (48).

The device of the unfinished painting of the Sphinx that comes to life perfectly objectifies the phases of Giorgio’s creative process: after he has reworked his memorial impressions of the observed object (Fulvia), he vivifies the sketched artwork while semi-conscious.

**63** “Lasciatosi cascare sulla poltrona, di faccia all’abbozzo della Sfinge, incrociando le mani dietro il capo, socchiudeva gli occhi desolatamente, abbattuto da colpo mortale” (43).

This rather unoriginal<sup>64</sup> narrative device, however, does more than simply echo Wilde's and Poe's theme of the *tableau vivant*. The way in which Giorgio's mind (almost) vivifies the artwork also fictionalises the future trajectory of art that Capuana envisions in *Cronache*. In *Cronache* he foresees, following Hegel and De Meis, a time when pure thought will translate into art without the need of a material *medium*:

Immagina dunque cosa potrà essere l'opera d'arte quando il pensiero non incontrerà più ostacoli nel marmo, nella tela, nei colori, nei suoni, nella parola, quando l'opera d'arte si formerà, si esplicherà con la stessa rapidità e la stessa nettezza dell'idea [...] cioè quando il pensiero diventerà visibile, tangibile. (1899, 29-31)

Thus, in *La Sfinge*, Capuana's framing theory of genres and 'internal' phenomenology of fiction-making masterfully intertwine, and eventually coalesce. The "fantasma artistico individuale" intermittently haunting Giorgio's mind and triggering the artistic creation effectively fictionalises Capuana's theorisation of the creative process. In the Hegelian 'life-like' evolutionary scheme, however, art is not yet at that point, either in the historical present in which Capuana lives, or in the *fin-de-siècle* narrative present which Giorgio Montani inhabits. The literary work in the age of symbolism and of Decadentism still needs a physical support, however imperfect and finite. For this reason Giorgio Montani's completion and vivification of the painting just by sheer power of thought are realised and performed only at the level of somnambulist hallucination, and neither the sketch of the Sphinx in his studio nor the new theatrical piece he is working on, *Arianna*, ever reaches completion. What is written and published quickly is the novel *La Sfinge* itself, which best represents - with its high metareferential coefficient - this tectonic shift of art as a whole, towards philosophical and aesthetic (self)reflection revitalised by form.

<sup>64</sup> On the currency of this topic in nineteenth-century literature see Pellini 2001.

