

OCCULT INFLUENCES ON LUIGI CAPUANA AND LUIGI PIRANDELLO

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Abstract: Luigi Capuana (1839–1915) and Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) were two of the most important Italian writers who lived between the XIX and XX century. Capuana was an author, poet and journalist influenced by the works of Émile Zola, French author and founder of Naturalism, who was also one of the most important members of the Verist literary movement in Italy. Pirandello was a novelist, poet, short story writer, dramatist and author of 40 theatre plays. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1934, and his work is famed worldwide. Both authors were also influenced by the Western Esotericism, especially by French Spiritualism and Theosophy, which is noticeable not only in their novels and theatre plays, but also in their writings about the theory of literature and related articles. This paper deals with the presence of Esotericism and Occultism in the works of these authors and in the overall culture in fin de siècle Italy, in order to show just how important these topics are to better understand their poetic opus and ideas about literature, culture and society at that time.

Keywords: Western Esotericism, Luigi Pirandello, Luigi Capuana, Esotericism and Literature, Italian Literature

Western Esotericism is an integral part of the European cultural heritage and literature, and as such it has always been the most immediate and direct expression both of the culture of a society and of an era, inevitably influenced by esoteric thought and in close contact with it at different times of its historical evolution.

In Italy, the last decades of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century constitute, as had already happened in other periods, a moment of particular intertwining between the esoteric culture and the “official” culture, the effects of which can be analyzed today without prejudice.

The interweaving of these two branches of the great tree of human knowledge has generated new stimuli both in the cultural and social sphere, and has given new energy to the development of thought and to the Italian cultural evolution of the time.

In Italy, in fact, as well as in other countries such as France, Germany and England, between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, many writers and entire cultural currents tried to undertake ways of expression still unexplored in pursuit of knowledge capable of overcoming the codified expressive patterns of time. This yearning found a particularly fertile ground in esoteric cul-

ture, in the occult sciences, and in that dimension of the oneiric and the unconscious in general, identifying itself with a desire for the unknown, poised to overcome the boundaries of the material world and consolidated certainties, serving as an inspiration for a new generation of writers and intellectuals.¹

Luigi Capuana (1839–1915), a writer, literary critic, journalist and theoretician, is among the most important people of Italian Verism. At the beginning and throughout his career as a scholar, he became very interested in the scientific debate on mediumistic phenomena that played a role in all of his literary production. Capuana was a regular reader of Kardec and the occultist Eliphas Lévi, and often participated in the events organized by the Society of Psychological Studies of which he was an honorary member, and where Antonio Fogazzaro², another renowned Italian writer of the time, held the honorary presidency.

Several studies have already been published in Italy on the relationship between Capuana and the esoteric culture, namely: *Luigi Capuana, originale e segreto* [Luigi Capuana, Original and Secret] by Corrado Di Blasi (1967), *Mondo occulto* [Occult World] (1896)³ by Simona Cigliana (1995), and another relevant essay from 1997, entitled “La vita oltre la morte : spiritismo, ipnotismo ed esperienze metapsichiche nei romanzi e nelle novelle di Capuana” [Life beyond death: spiritism, hypnotism and metapsychic experiences in the novels and novellas of Capuana] by Mariacarla Bondio (1997: 38 –50). Capuana did not only display the influence of Spiritism in his literary works, but also throughout various essays and articles, as well as psychic research⁴ in general, which makes him by far the most involved author of the occult culture in contemporary Italy, especially regarding Spiritism.

In 1862, at the age of 23, and long before writing the works that would consecrate him among the protagonists of Italian literature, Luigi Capuana already manifested his interest in the occult, as is shown in a letter to Giuseppe Costanzo, in which he confesses to reading spiritual literature and proposes writing on the subject .

In 1879, Capuana wrote an article in the *Corriere della Sera* entitled “The religion of the future” in which he tackled the premise of whether Spiritism can be considered a new form of religion. In 1884, he published the volume *Spiritismo?* (1884) written in the form of a long monologue addressed to his friend and writer Salvatore Farina, in which he traces the most important episodes of his experiences in the field of magnetism and occult sciences in which he became interested since 1859. The book achieved considerable success and piqued the interest of another

1 See Cigliana 1996, Ruggiero 2016: 344 –357, Ruggiero 2015: 14 –18.

2 On Fogazzaro and Spiritualism, see Wittman 2013.

3 See also Pavone 1968: 131

4 See *Corriere* 1879. This article, and others related to this subject, are available in Cigliana 1995.

important Italian writer belonging to the Verista current, Giovanni Verga. In February 1896, Capuana published the book *Mondo occulto* (1896) with dedication to Benedetto Croce and Vittorio Pica. Collected in the volume is a series of articles previously published and revised for various conferences at the Philological Circle of Naples (capital of Italian spiritualism)⁵. Capuana is known to have succeeded in innovating the canons of fictional narratives in Italy, but he was more than an author of novellas and stories, drawing from the observation of the real as well as the great heritage of folklore and the tradition of his homeland — he was also an eclectic intellectual and creator of theatrical works, an art critic and a photographer.

But there is a smallest common denominator for all of these activities and it is precisely the interest in the paranormal, a field in which all these interests seem to converge. Formed by positivism, Capuana strived to give paranormal phenomena a scientific legitimacy, a typical attitude of many other Italian intellectuals and illustrious scientists of the late positivist era who took an interest in the occult. In the text “Lettera aperta a Luigi Pirandello: a proposito di un fantasma. Credenti e non credenti dello spiritualismo” (1906)⁶ Capuana polemizes with the Italian playwright, writer and poet Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936), who is skeptical about these phenomena, and reminds him of his participation in séances during which they had witnessed together an unexplained phenomenon on that Pirandello himself had recognized as such. The belief in spirits was a source of creativity for Capuana, and he was among the very first in Italy to deal with the subject and publish several studies on it⁷, dedicating to the theme novellas such as *Veggenza*, *Un vampiro* (dedicated to the scientist Cesare Lombroso), *Forze occulte*, *L'invisibile*, *Un caso di sonnambulismo*, etc.⁸ With the fantastic and spiritual novellas that he begins to publish starting in 1881⁹, Capuana wonders about the limits of the real, a category particularly dear to the realists, and attempts an analysis of the unsolved mysteries of the psyche. Reading his autobiographical memoirs, one immediately notices his affiliation with alchemy, magic, kabbalah,

5 See Bracco 1907.

6 In *Gazzetta del Popolo*, Turin, 2 Jan. 1906. Capuana, addressing to Pirandello, writes: “I have not forgotten the sitting of the medium Politi to whom we sat together, in the house of that Roman prince whose name escapes me at this moment. We saw things that were astounding: phosphorescent globes that eroded under the vault of the room where the experiments were done; bright crosses that appeared, disappeared, returned to appear on the walls; the profile of a ghost on the top of the tent behind which the Politi was in a trance ... From then on what happened, dear Pirandello, to make the spirits gloomy? Let them be themselves; they are not as boring as you judge them”.

7 In addition to the already mentioned *Spiritism?* and *Occult World*, Capuana was the author of various articles in magazines on the paranormal.

8 See Cedola 2007.

9 Although, in reality, Capuana already wrote a novel, *Il Dottor Cymbalus* (Dr.Cymbalus), fully considered a tale of the fantastic.

etc.¹⁰ His interest in the occult world, however, was not merely theoretical. In fact, in the essay *Spiritismo?* he writes about his “operativity”, both in the field of red magic¹¹ and in that of true Spiritualism. Particularly interesting as well as emphasized in the essay *Spiritismo?* are the events that link Capuana to the medium Beppina Poggi, daughter of the owners of the boarding house in which he stayed in Florence in 1864. The young “sleepwalker” was the subject of various experiments in the medium of the scholar, photographs of which exist, taken by the writer himself. Through the presumed or real qualities of Beppina, Capuana tried to get in touch with the spirit of another great man of letters: the poet Ugo Foscolo¹². His intention was to write an unpublished biography of Foscolo, through unpublished revelations by the poet himself from the realm of the dead, or better, through Beppina’s mouth. But, according to the writer’s own story, not only was the spirit of the poet of the *Sepulchres* not particularly collaborative, it also “tortured” the poor Beppina for a while. But, beyond the numerous and interesting anecdotes that link his life to the occult (found particularly in *Spiritismo?*), one of the most interesting things is the relationship Capuana maintains exists between art and mediumship, specifically making a comparison between the poetic process of art and the one at the base of mediumistic manifestations, finding among these two a certain correspondence. Capuana argues that the unconscious mental processes, into which it is possible to insert the mechanisms that give rise to literary creation, have to do, in a certain sense, with spiritualism as well. This is because they are at the basis of the magnetic trance and of the seances on the one hand, and on the other of the work of art flowing out of the artist, being often already fully formed by the artist’s imagination. Artistic creation always has a completely unconscious line of action, for Capuana, which is true of the typical séance phenomenon. It is an altered state of consciousness that allows one to tap into a dimension that can not normally be reached in the ordinary waking state. Capuana writes:

It is not infrequently that the work of art flows out of the imagination so intimately permeated with form, so completely formed, without any preparation or elaboration, that the almost unconsciousness of the work becomes a pleasant surprise. An unconsciousness sui generis. There is no real development, coordination, assimilation, organization of either personal or recent, remote, hereditary elements; but rather a kind of flowering of the imagination in the spring temperature of the spirit, in a radiant light from no one knows where. The analogy between artistic creation and the spiritual communication is quite strong. (Capuana 1884: 241 –242)

10 Also see Finocchiaro 1979.

11 The term red magic refers to sexuality or sentimental sphere. On the topic see Francione 1994.

12 Foscolo himself was no stranger to esoteric thought because of his affiliation with Freemasonry.

As mentioned before, Capuana was among the first Italian authors to deal with spiritualism and the paranormal, and the first man of letters, with *Spiritismo?*, to publish an entire monograph on the subject. As regards the presence of the occult in his narrative work, the first to show the influence of occultism was *Dr. Cymbalus*. Capuana wrote this story at the age of 28 and published it in *La Nazione* in 1867¹³. In this paper, Dr. Franz Cymbalus carries out an operation on Mr. William Usinger who had asked to be deprived of his feelings. Cymbalus intervenes on William's heart in such a way as to eliminate emotions. The operation succeeds perfectly, but William, reduced to an automaton without feelings, commits suicide.

Another story among the first to deal with the fantasy-occult themes is *Un caso di sonnambulismo*, dated March 25, 1873, and published for the first time in 1881 in the volume *Un bacio e altri racconti*. This story, along with the others mentioned, is considered one of the early examples of a vein between fantastic-spirit and science fiction¹⁴ which would be very important throughout Capuana's life and would leave traces even in his last works, such as *Novelle inverosimili* of 1913. This interest in the occult is absolutely not in contrast with the best-known image of Capuana, that of a Verista. Rather, between Capuana the Verista and Capuana the disciple of the occult, there is a logical connection.

"Spiritual diary or communications received from the spirits for intuitive mediumship" is a work from 1870, published in 1916 in the magazine *Luce e Ombra*. It contains 26 communications of Capuana with the spirits, which took place between October and December 1870. In this text there is a sentence very important for clarifying the true relationship between Spiritism and the positivist conception of reality. He says that "the explanation of the world that gives you philosophy is exact and perfect: spiritualism does not fight it, it completes it" (*Luce e Ombra* 1916: 339). His attitude towards mediumistic phenomena is in fact typical of the *modus operandi* of Positivism. In fact, he intends to study the spiritual facts in order to give an explanation that does not deviate from a scientific explanation. Perhaps this is the feature that distinguishes Capuana from other Italian authors who would later succumb to the fascination of the occult, namely the fact that when it comes to the latter we can speak of a real rebellion against Positivism, whereas with Capuana the contrast has not yet emerged. He writes:

But just to be cautious and not to put the foot in error, even by granting a real value to this comparison of facts of a different order, we must not draw consequences that go beyond the sphere of facts. With phenomena such as those of spiritualism, if it does not turn out that these are superhuman phenomena, if it is not proven that they are superhuman phenomena, it is not even true that

13 The story was released on the 3, 5, 8 and 9 of October 1867.

14 See Cedola 2007: 7.

they are only absolutely natural and human phenomena, in the very narrow sense that we are bound to give to these words. (...) And here, dear Farina, because my letter headed with a timid interrogation of the curious, can, without contradicting, end up the same way, asking: SPIRITISM? (Capuana 1884: 274– 275)

In an 1899 book entitled *Alla scoperta dei letterati* (Ojetti 1899) the Italian writer, art critic and journalist Ugo Ojetti (1871 –1946), published a collection of interviews with 26 notable people of Italian culture, including Arturo Graf, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Antonio Fogazzaro, Matilde Serao, Giovanni Verga, Luigi Capuana and others. The discourse focused on the state of literature in Italy and on its future prospects. It is particularly interesting to read the opinions of the writers that Ojetti classifies into “pessimists” and “optimists” regarding the destiny of literature in Italy, but the book is also interesting because it seems to suggest a certain “eruption” of the occult in the literature under the more general term of “mysticism”¹⁵.

In the interview with Capuana, Ojetti asks a question worth quoting:

U.O. Fogazzaro, Serao and others have spoken to me with enthusiasm that it seems sincere, of a mysticism that pervades today's art and literature like a fluid. Many give this very recent phenomenon an extraneous cause, specifically “a buses of truth” made by naturalism. You, along with Verga, have been the head of the Verist movement in Italy. How would you comment on this ?

L.C. I accept the work of the neomystics. It is fatal. You see, as a student, I was an atheist, and now I'm a believer. Science was not enough, and in any case it satisfies only the intellect, and even that not always. What could replace religion now? Duty? An uncertain word, without support. And the most important form of religion is Catholicism. I intentionally study the writers of religious doctrines. Do you see over there? Swedenborg, Vacherot, Lefèvre, Tolstoi ... I also deal with spiritualism, as much is necessary to form a dispassionate opinion on these phenomena. (Ojetti 1899: 190–191)

Despite the scepticism attributed to him by Capuana, Luigi Pirandello (1867– 1936) also displayed occultist influences in his artistic production,¹⁶ above all by spiritism and theosophy.

The relationship of Pirandello's life and work with spiritism and theosophy is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, the author often treats the themes with irony ; on the other, he shows great knowledge of the subject and many of his works are influenced by the occult sciences. This duality is precisely the reason why so many scholars, past and present, study him. One of the first systematic studies on the subject is that of prof. Antonio Iliano (1982) titled *Metapsichica e letteratura in Pirandello* [Metapsychic

15 Even if the text does not speak openly about occultism, we feel entitled to relate with the term and with the term of “neomysticism”.

16 See Dal Monte 2005.

and L literature in Pirandello]. In it, Iliano, who had already dedicated several studies to Pirandello, reconstructs the ways in which Pirandello assimilated theories of theosophy and spiritism into his literary work (especially his theatrical plays, with regard to the genesis of his characters, with continuous references to the works of theosophical authors including Charles W. Leadbeater, Annie Besant, etc.). Many other studies in more recent times, on the relationship between Pirandello and occultism, have been conducted by scholars linked to the academy, such as Simona Cigliana, Regina Dal Monte, and relevant others.

Whether Pirandello was drawn to the occult for pure fashion or for genuine interest is hard to say. The fact is that the references to occultism in his literary production are certainly not negligible and denote an interest in the matter decidedly not superficial. In Pirandello's writings, in fact, there are many ghosts, unexplained phenomena, strange presences and many other elements drawn from both the popular culture as well as the folklore of his homeland, Sicily, which the writer knew well, both from his studies and personal experiences with the form that Western Esotericism assumed during the period in which the writer worked, that is, spiritualism and theosophy of the Blavatskian matrix. It is no coincidence, then, that even a character from his best-known novel *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* (1904), Anselmo Paleari, is enrolled in the "theosophical school", and is given to mediumistic experiments. In Chapter 10, Pirandello describes Paleari's library with exact titles of books on theosophy and occultism in French, books that were well known to scholars of esotericism in the early twentieth century. Among these are *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), one of the fundamental works of the theosophical literature, written by Blavatsky; *Astral Plane* of Charles W. Leadbeater (1904), Christian bishop and theosophist; *The Seven Principles of Man* (1893) by Annie Besant; *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), also by Blavatsky, and others. In this chapter, while considering Paleari an extravagant and distracted character because of his interests for occultism, Pirandello shows that he is very well acquainted with this type of literature and the issues discussed by theosophy, such as the matter of which the soul is composed, the place of man in the scale of beings, and even the concept of "Kamaloka", the afterlife plane that, according to theosophy, would be equivalent to Christian purgatory and hell. Pirandello, via the protagonist Adriano Meis serving as a mouthpiece, although at first fascinated by the strange interests of the bizarre Paleari, later considers this "kind" of doctrines to be "comforting" for the existence. But the Paleari house is also the place where a seance is held, a practice that Pirandello knew very well from his personal experience and which is, not surprisingly, also included in this important work. In the novel, Adriano Meis attends the session with curiosity and a certain skepticism, the same attitude that Pirandello, as can be inferred above from the "polemic" with Capuana, had for that type of phenomena. It is therefore to this character, Adriano Meis, among the many other

Pirandelliani, and to this work, *Il Fu Mattia Pascal*, that we can look to understand what was most likely the true attitude that Pirandello had toward occultism; an attitude of skepticism, on the one hand, but, at the same time, of profound interest in this real and not at all negligible social and cultural phenomenon of its time. Perhaps because the occult was fashionable at the time, Pirandello undoubtedly drew from it precious elements for his poetics, which he used with cunning and mastery, regarding both content and form, and doing so showed how important this component was for him as a writer, and perhaps for his life in general.

But *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* is not, as we have said, the only source that relates Pirandello's literary work to the occult world. In fact, ever since his first novel, *L'esclusa* (1908)¹⁷, the presence of the occultist component can be found in his work. This is evident, for example, in the character of Sidora Pentagora, Antonio's sister. Antonio, like his father and grandfather before him, is betrayed by his wife. Sidora has a special relationship with the fire element and with the fireplace of her house, lit in winter as well as in summer, (She would like to burn the bad luck of the family with fire). This and other attitudes make her similar to the witches typical of the popular tradition of Southern Italy, which Pirandello knew well. But the spirits will also be present in many other works of the Sicilian master, especially in the *Novelle per un anno*, such as in the story "Il corvo di Mizzaro", in which Cichè believes in the existence of spirits that interfere with his everyday life; *Mal di Luna*, *La casa del Granella*¹⁸, *Notizie dal Mondo*, and many more. Pirandello also wrote some articles, including *Un fantasma*¹⁹, which suggests he paid great attention to the phenomenon of Spiritism.²⁰

In a 2005 article entitled "Pirandello e l'ombra metafisica dei personaggi" (Cigliana 2005), Simona Cigliana, among other things, highlights how in *Novelle per un anno*, the presence of the occult is clearly visible, and lists the titles of the stories and the topics covered in them. She writes: "Starting from two distant stories of 1896 (whose publication date coincides with that of *Mondo Occulto*), the whole corpus of the *Novelle per un anno* is, in fact, studded with *rêvenants*, hallucinations and bizarre cases that border with supernatural and the unbelievable" (Cigliana 2005: 112).

And she goes on to quote the stories "Visitare gli infermi", "Chi fu?", "Acqua e lì", "Il dono della Vergine Maria", "Notizie dal mondo", "Il figlio

17 *L'Esclusa* (The Excluded) is the first novel by Pirandello, which was completed around 1893 with the title *Marta Ajala*. It was published for the first time in 1901 in the magazine *La Tribuna*, only to be released in 1908 in Milano by Br. Treves.

18 Also in this novel, published in *Il Marzocco* in August 1905, Pirandello tells of a haunted house and of lawyer Zummo, an expert of occultism and deep knowledge of literature on the subject, quoted by authors such as Crookes, Zoellner, de Rochas, Aksakov...which further demonstrates the non-superficial knowledge of the writer about the occultism.

19 In *La Gazzetta del Popolo*, 24 December 1905.

20 Another work dedicated to the subject is Pupino 2000.

cambiato”, “Il corvo di Mizzaro”, “Mal di Luna”, “La casa del Granella”, “La toccatina”, “Dal naso al cielo”, “Storia dell’ Angelo Centuno”, “Lo spirito maligno”²¹, “La trappola”, “I pensionati della memoria”, “La camera d’ attesa”, “Il treno ha fischiato”, “Soffio”, “Visita” ...

All clear examples of the non-marginal presence of the occult in Pirandello’s works.

Occult suggestions, spirits, paranormal phenomena and magical atmospheres are also present in the work *I Giganti della Montagna* (1931–1933), which Pirandello thought about until the end of his life. The work comprises many elements taken from occultism that already appear in the writer’s previous works, both in those composed for the theater and in the prose works. An interesting research topic appears from the analysis of all these Pirandellian works that, in one way or another, have something in common with the spirits and the paranormal, but which goes beyond the intentions and possibilities of this paper; namely, the relationship between female characters and occultism. Pirandello, tracing the folklore tradition of Southern Italy, often links the woman with the occult. We are sure analyzing this would yield further ideas for reflection on Pirandello’s work and on its relationship with the esoteric culture. Returning to the studies on Pirandello by Simona Cigliana, she believes that “Central, for Pirandello, is in fact the opportunity, generously granted by theosophy, to take away the vision of the real from the much-deprecated reductionism of a positivist mold, which still, at the height of the twentieth century, risks making its effects felt” (Cigliana 2005: 115).

It is also true that Pirandello probably drew from esotericism because, in the end, he was intimately close to some of the positions or teachings typical of this line of thought²². This could explain the numerous references in his works, which have led many scholars to deal with the presence of esoteric thought in his writings, which due to the sheer quantity of references would soon put to rest the thesis that the writer has inserted “the hidden” in his production only to accommodate a widespread literary trend of the time. As we have seen for Capuana, who deals with the analogies between artistic creation and mediumistic trance in *Spiritismo?*, Pirandello too in *Arte e Scienza* (1908) argues against the claim of wanting to totally rationalize the phenomenon of artistic creation, which, according to the writer, would have to do with a state of altered consciousness in the same way as those described by Alfred Binet in the writing *Les altérations de la personnalité* (1902).

In fact, Pirandello writes:

21 In this novel, for example, Carlo Noccia believes he is tormented by an evil spirit that is haunting him.

22 Due to a lack of evidence, it is not possible to say with certainty if Pirandello was a follower of any esoteric school, (for example theosophy); at the same time, however, there is also no evidence of the contrary.

Rereading in the book of Alfredo Binet *Les altérations de la personnalité*, that review of marvelous psycho-physiological experiments, from which, as is well known, it is argued that the alleged unity of our ego is nothing more than a temporary and changeable aggregation of various states of consciousness more or less clear, I thought that party could draw from these experiments the aesthetic criticism for the intelligence of the phenomenon no less marvelous than the artistic creation, if today had not come in use and in flair to show an excessive disdain for the intrusion (others say intrusion) of science in the field of art. Of course, this disdain is aroused in us rightly, at least in large part, by the excesses of some, so to say, too fantastic professors of anthropological criticism, who, although sometimes protesting not wanting to enter judges in art and literature, they follow imperturbably to apply to this and that artist their pathological ruminations almost always founded on the ignorance of the artistic and literary matter, and therefore inconclusive. Moreover, even when you do not have the crass ignorance, it is quite natural that a scholar, who passes from a physiology laboratory or a psychiatric clinic to the study of aesthetic phenomena, does not succeed in doing so, to strip the habit of giving, in the examination of these phenomena, a preponderant part to the importance that the pathological case may have in the various artistic expressions. (Pirandello, Macchia 2006)

The quotation of Binet by Pirandello (Macchia 2006) at the beginning of *Arte e Scienza*, is certainly not accidental. As Simona Cigliana emphasized in the above-mentioned paper: “The Treaty of Binet, continuing the research of the Paris neuropsychopathological school, was inserted, at the time of its appearance, in the heated debate at the turn of the century on the reality of the latent powers of the mind and on the nature and origin of ‘metapsychic’ phenomena”²³. This is further proof, if it were still necessary, that despite the critical attitude Pirandello had towards certain mediumistic phenomena (which caused, it will be recalled, the disapproval of Capuana), Pirandello took this question very seriously, and even if not one hundred percent convinced by things such as dancing tables and mediums in a state of trance who spoke with the spirits of the dead, he had a different attitude regarding the deep psychic causes of certain manifestations such as, for example, that of artistic creation. In addition, various studies have been conducted that have related Pirandellian characters to spiritualism and theosophy, one of these being *Metapsichica e Letteratura in Pirandello* (1982)²⁴, which offers a very interesting overview of the subject.

As has been highlighted in the works of authoritative scholars, esotericism played a particularly important role in the history of Western culture and thought. From the Renaissance period, all the way to the most modern phenomena of spiritualism and the Theosophical and Anthroposophical Societies, the ideas of schools, esoteric movements and

23 See Cigliana 2005: 104.

24 See Iliano 1982.

people, these ties have exerted a great deal of influence on society and on the various academic fields, albeit with varying degrees of intensity²⁵.

In particular, the relationship between the culture of the twentieth century and esotericism has been scientifically studied not only by independent researchers, but also in the academic field, where it has been demonstrated that this phenomenon was anything but marginal in the creation and the evolution of the culture of the Old Continent, and certainly not of secondary importance for an in-depth analysis of the complex historical period that was the twentieth century²⁶.

From the analysis in particular of the relationship between Capuana and Pirandello with the esoteric culture we can see how, unlike what one might be led to believe, esotericism and occult sciences have seen unprecedented development in the positivist period. Even when positivistic culture, with its exact science, technological progress and the precise measurement of the real, reigns in Europe, the fascination for the arcane and the occult was alive in the minds of those who considered the human dimension, with its unanswered questions about life, death and the meaning of existence, which can not be reduced to the sphere of research, which science, with its method of investigation, had been overwhelmingly and progressively conquering for almost two centuries.

Too often we explain this interest in the occult, in vogue between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, simply as a rebellion against the scientific, materialist and rationalist eighteenth-century philosophy that reached its climax with the affirmation of positivism, and as a reaction to the crisis of this thought. Undeniable though this is, especially in the first decades of the twentieth century, it is equally true that the interest of man for the occult and for the mystery has always been a constant in history and culture, and it would be reductive to confine such interest to this historical period. The age of positivism, which decreed the triumph of objective empirical verification, is not necessarily always in contradiction with the spread of beliefs about spirits, the afterlife and paranormal phenomena in general.

In fact, the empirical method was applied to mediumistic phenomena as well, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which is why we often speak of “occult sciences”, precisely because, at the time, it was possible to make these phenomena fall under the scope of the same scientific research according to the canons of the time. The spiritualists

²⁵ See for example, Gibbons 2001, Hanegraaff 2013. Hanegraaff traces the history of Western esotericism from the Renaissance through the Reformation, the Enlightenment and Romanticism, up to the modern time, and demonstrates that esotericism has exerted a considerable influence on culture.

²⁶ In addition to the cultural sphere, esoteric thought has also influenced political and social life in general. Here to studies of authoritative researchers abound. In Italy, much of this is due to the research of Giorgio Galli, a university professor and a well-known political scientist who wrote various essays on the subject.

themselves invoked the official science in support of their theses and experiments and scientists of international renown such as Cesare Lombroso²⁷ and Enrico Morselli²⁸, practitioners of psychiatry and neurology, devoted themselves with great interest to these same experiments. The governments promoted commissions of inquiry to investigate the rampant phenomenon of spiritism which had impressive repercussions on the society of the time on all levels and that, at a certain moment, risked becoming a proper new religion.

According to the theory of Prof. Wouter Jacobus Hanegraaff, of the University of Amsterdam, next to the three pillars of European cultural identity — namely the Jewish Christian religious tradition, rationalist philosophy and modern science — there would be another, fourth one, that had been ignored for a long time: Western Esotericism²⁹. The latter is also confirmed in the analysis of the relationships between this field of knowledge and the European literature of the recent centuries. In Italy, as we have seen, this bond was present and growing strong — not only in the avant-garde circles, but also previously, in writers and poets of the preceding generation, who were anticipators, witnesses, as well as protagonists of the positivist culture crisis and of the paradigm shift that affected the Italian society in all its aspects between the nineteenth and twentieth century. We believe we can now, without fear of committing an error, say that esotericism and occultism have given a particularly important impulse to the Italian literary movement in the years of the positivist paradigm crisis and the affirmation of a new vision of the world. In that social and cultural context, in which the need for a humanism alternative to that of a purely Christian kind was strongly felt and often perceived by the new generation of Italian intellectuals as inadequate and limiting in nature. The presence of esotericism, occultism and the fantastic in the Italian literature are probably the most evident proof of that epoch-making transition that involved all areas of knowledge, in Italy and beyond, in the period examined; the transition from a theocratic type of worldview to an anthropocentric one, which once again challenged man's place in the universe and that manifested its effects on the society and culture of the time. If, therefore, as Hanegraaff and many other scholars insist, Western esotericism is part of the cultural heritage of our civilization, and since literature has always been one of the most immediate and direct expressions of the culture of a society and of an era, it necessarily follows that literature and esotericism must inevitably come into contact

27 See, for example, Barzini 1907, Lombroso 2010.

28 See Morselli 1908, Morselli 1909, Morselli 1911.

29 See Hanegraaff 2013: 1. According to Hanegraaff, Western esotericism has been a pervasive presence in Western culture from late antiquity to the present day, but until recently, it was largely ignored by scholars and surrounded by misconceptions and prejudice.

About the relation between Esotericism and culture, see also Stuckrad 2005. In this book, 'Western Esotericism' has come to influence more mainstream religious practice and culture and has significantly shaped our understanding of modernity.

at some point in their historical development. Of course, the same argument also applies to the other branches of human knowledge, regarding which, in fact, there now exists a non-negligible amount of fascinating scientific literature.

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Мауро Руђеро

Ушницјај окултној на Луиђија Капуану и Луиђија Пирандела

Резиме

Луиђи Капуана (1839–1915) и Луиђи Пирандело (1867–1936) два су најбитнија италијанска писца на прелазу из 19. у 20. век. Капуана је био писац, песник и новинар под утицајем Емила Золе, покретача натурализма, а такође и један од најистакнутијих присталица веризма у Италији. Пирандело је писао романе, песме, приповетке и позоришне комаде. Добио је Нобелову награду за књижевност 1934. године, а дела су му позната широм света. Оба аутора су била под утицајем западног езотеризма, нарочито француског спиритуализма и теозофије, што се може видети не само у њиховим романима и драмама, већ и у њиховим написима о теорији књижевности и сродним чланцима. У раду говоримо о присуству езотеризма и окултизма у делима ове двојице аутора али и у широј култури Италије поткрај 19. века. На тај начин показујемо колико су те теме важне за разумевање како дела ових аутора тако и њихових ставова о књижевности, култури и друштву тог времена.

Кључне речи: западни езотеризам, Луиђи Пирандело, Луиђи Капуана, езотеризам и књижевност, италијанска књижевност

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