

PAOLA CAPRIOLO*

Rita Wilson

Monash University

Paola Capriolo, one of the youngest and most successful women writers on the contemporary Italian literary scene, was born on 1 January 1962 in Milan where she still lives and works. Since her publication debut in 1988, her books have continued to receive critical acclaim in Italy, many of them winning prestigious literary prizes. One of the first of the younger Italian novelists to transcend national boundaries, her books have been or are being translated in Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Japan, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and are beginning to attract critical attention in those countries.

In her first book, *La grande Eulalia* (1988), a collection of short stories, she uses the trope of the mirror to eliminate the boundaries between subject and object. The concept of the mirror as an object associated with the occult, the supernatural and the path to self-destruction is a dominant feature of the story which gives its title to the whole collection, 'La grande Eulalia'. Eulalia is a country girl, fascinated by the theatre, who enters into the service of an aging, itinerant actress, following her from place to place, watching all the plays. One day, a fire destroys the gypsy caravan in which Eulalia and the actress live. The musician who accompanies the two women leaves suddenly, and returns after a week with another, ornately decorated, gypsy caravan drawn by six black horses. Inside the caravan there is a room full of mirrors. Eulalia gradually becomes a prisoner of that room. The secret which

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keeps her locked in the room is the presence of a beautiful youth who appears in the mirrors and lives in that specular world. Eulalia falls in love with him; however, one day a beautiful woman appears in the mirror. Eulalia, awkward and badly-dressed, becomes ill with jealousy, until slowly the transformation begins. Eulalia begins to imitate the mannerisms and movements of the woman in the mirror, thus acquiring the other woman's beauty and grace. In this way, the 'great Eulalia' is born, a wonderful actress that people come to see from all over the world. One evening something changes: a man appears on the edge of the wood. Each day this figure comes closer until he becomes part of the audience. Eulalia feels a strange attraction to this presence, similar to the way she had felt when she shut herself in the mirrored room in the gypsy caravan. Finally, she meets him on the bridge over the waters of the lake, but immediately after the meeting she falls ill and the only words she utters are: 'non è lui. Non è l'uomo degli specchi' (67). Eulalia leaves the castle and returns to her room in the gypsy caravan, never to leave it again.

This complex story fabricates a world where representation becomes impossible. The mirror does not reflect images of the actors' world, but presents other worlds, different from theirs and unreachable. The 'backwards game' provides an underlying thematic continuity in the four stories in this collection, as does the search for identity which merges with the search for beauty and, ultimately, the search for death. In their quest(s), Capriolo's characters are driven by an obsession for aesthetic-artistic perfection rather than by an emotional need. Consider, for example, the diptych 'Il gigante' and 'Lettere a Luisa'. Both stories relate the story of a prisoner, for years kept isolated in a remote jail, especially constructed for him. In 'Il gigante', the prisoner is depicted as a gigantic black shadow that appears at the window every day, playing his violin. The story is written in the form of a diary, and the narrative point-of-view is that of the warden. Every day the warden and his wife, Adele, listen to the music, fascinated by its haunting melody. One day Adele responds to the music's

‘enchantment’ by playing an accompanying piece on the piano. Adele and the prisoner begin to play a series of complex sonatas, and as Adele’s musical ability improves, so her health deteriorates. She withdraws more and more into a kind of bewitched, absent, separated and protected world and finally dies.

‘Lettere a Luisa’ tells the same story from the prisoner’s point of view. It explores his nightmares; it depicts him intent on building paper prisons in which he places insects and spiders, companions in his loneliness. The music he plays on his violin replaces verbal discourse. He writes letters to Luisa, who seems to be the specular equivalent of Adele in the previous story. The reader soon realizes that Luisa does not exist, she doesn’t exist in the present nor does she exist as a memory of the past, her temporal reality is only in the prisoner’s discourse. While the letters he writes are never delivered and, therefore, never receive a response, the messages he sends through his musical notes are ‘answered’ by the warden’s wife when she decides to accompany him on the piano. The woman (pianist/Adele/Luisa) becomes the prisoner’s ‘prey’ (like the spiders he captures for his paper prisons) and is gradually entrapped by the new and always more complex melodies until she literally fades away. In the end, the reader is confused by a sort of Kafkian metamorphosis in which the prisoner/violinist is represented as a spider locked in a paper prison.

The two stories, ‘Il gigante’ e ‘Lettere a Luisa’, extend the game of reversal begun in ‘La grande Eulalia’. Capriolo creates pairs of ambivalent characters who could be seen as inverted doubles, at the same time identical and opposite. All the stories may be read as variations on the theme of pain, which only art (writing) can momentarily alleviate before revealing itself as an illusion, a game of metaphors which takes the flow of writing beyond the limits of its own existence. In most of Capriolo’s fiction, the line between explicable reality and the unreal is deliberately indeterminate as is seen in the places which separate the characters from the external world. The spaces described in the short stories (Eulalia’s castle

and her room full of mirrors, the sculptor's cave, the prison), and the island and the Villa in Capriolo's second published work, *Il nocchiero* (1989), are all allegories, representing a different 'temporality', other times in an unknown historical dimension.

Il nocchiero (awarded the prestigious Selezione Campiello Prize in 1989, and the Rapallo Prize in 1990) is an otherworldly novel that introduces the reader to a new concept of space-time in which external time makes no sense in relation to the internal time-space. While in 'Il gigante' the narrator figure is depicted as cut off from the civilised world, and thus unable to conduct a healthy sexual or intellectual relationship with his wife as the malady of the prison gradually infects them both; in *Il nocchiero*, the distinct two-world quality evaporates, as the uncanny is introduced into the regular, everyday life of the protagonist, Walter. Walter's job, imposed on him by the death of his father, is to act as a transporter of a mysterious cargo: there is a strong suggestion that the cargo is human – a suggestion that Walter tries desperately to overlook. Capriolo concedes that she was led to the subject matter of *Il nocchiero* by the image of a certain train driver who drank himself into a stupor in order to be able to deliver his human cargo to the concentration camp of Treblinka:

Si vede un treno addentrarsi dentro ad una foresta folta, di un verde scurissimo, seguendo il binario che porta ad una località che si chiama Treblinka. Al macchinista veniva dato vodka in abbondanza, in modo che fosse sempre ubriaco. Oggi è un vecchio e quando parla di quei tempi gli occhi si dilatano, quasi vedesse con una chiarezza intollerabile ciò che allora gli era forse apparso solo confusamente, attraverso un doppio velo fatto per metà di alcol e per metà di terrore di sapere. *Il nocchiero* non parla di questo, nasce da questo.

(A. Ambrosioni, 'Intervista con Paola Capriolo: Siamo tutti nocchieri?', *Secolo d'Italia*, 16 June 1989)

Walter is dominated by a desire to find meaning for his existence in a decidedly modern world deprived of spiritual and ideological reference points. His fixation on the purity of an ideal is a thinly-veiled desire for death. If Walter were to conform to the demands of the *Compagnia* rather than insisting on finding out about the island and the nature of the cargo,

he might survive. But his fear of mediocrity, of living a life without meaning in the eyes of an idealized, unidentified other, spurs him on to an all-or-nothing resolution. At the moment of Walter's death, the action is inexplicable. The third-person narrator offers no explanation, and the reader is left in some doubt as to whether the final vision of the woman's arm protruding from the hold is to be understood as some subjective representation of Walter's neurotic relationship to his environment or as a real event. With its omissions, its possible meanings, and its contradictions, *Il nocchiero* gives rise to a meta-narrative process of signification. A process in which the reader can only attempt to produce meaning by identifying what Capriolo has called the logic of [her] symbols: 'I write in a symbolic way and the logic of symbols in their development is fairly similar to that of a musical composition. A musician friend once told me that my novel *Il nocchiero* has the structure of a sonata' (Interview with Francesco Guardiani, 'Paola Capriolo,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Fall (1992): 119-12).

The musical 'architecture', as well as many of the themes and techniques present in the first two works, are evident in *Il doppio regno* (1991). There is the theme of the segregated woman and her progressive withdrawal from contact with others; there is the sense of a progressive dismissal, on the part of the fictional characters, of physical and emotional needs as they fall prey to an undefined enchantment; there is the description of a space-time dimension, filled with haunting music and incomprehensible languages. All of this contributes to render this story as elusive and enigmatic as Capriolo's earlier fictional works. The title of the book, the 'dual realm', suggests both the 'split' in the protagonist's identity and an ambiguous space, and Capriolo elaborates at some length on the 'double movement' in the story, which she regards as reminiscent of certain mystical experiences:

da un lato una spoliazione graduale, che alla fine è totale, della propria identità, e dall'altro il senso però che quest'identità cresce man mano che uno se ne priva; e questa propria volontà individuale, personalità individuale, cessando di essere tale,

finisce col coincidere con la volontà del tutto, dell'assoluto, di come vogliamo definirlo, che in questo caso è l'albergo. (Interview with Gillian Ania, 'Un altro mondo: interview with Paola Capriolo,' *The Italianist*, 18 (1998): 305-341).

The plot of *Il doppio regno*, is deceptively simple: a young woman is staying in a hotel in a seaside resort at the end of the summer. One morning, at dawn, exasperated by persistent insomnia, she goes for a walk along the seashore. Suddenly a huge wave appears and threatens to engulf the small seaside town. The terrified protagonist flees to a nearby hill where she finds another hotel, this one hidden in dense vegetation and with a peculiar labyrinthine structure. A waiter takes her to the manager, who gives her a room. The reader learns of these events by reading of them in the protagonist's diary, as she records them in an attempt to recapture her memories, lost after the episode of the wave. In this way, the reader also finds out that the young woman is unable to find her way out of the hotel, and that the manager and the waiters are reticent and ambiguous in their responses to her requests for directions to the exit. The protagonist, who turns out to be the only guest in the hotel, is progressively denuded of her sense of identity: the door of her room is removed on a pretext, her dress is taken away to be laundered and not returned, obliging her to wear the same uniform as the waiters. She is given a hair cut which further enhances both her resemblance to the waiters and her metamorphosis from elegant young woman to androgynous figure. She has no luggage and no means of identification. She can only look at herself in the small mirror of her powder compact: there are no mirrors in the hotel. The absence of mirrors reflects the successive losses suffered by the protagonist and is clearly a sign of the anguished cancellation of identity.

Il doppio regno is written as a journal, a first-person account representing past and present experience, an intermingling of real, dreamt or imagined events, as the main character attempts to find meaning in, or a reason for, her inability to leave the hotel. The novel raises questions of destiny, liberty, culpability: are human beings are free to act as they will? Is

destiny simply divine foreknowledge of what our choices and actions will be? The subtle philosophical game played out in *Il doppio regno* is Capriolo's forte. Her choice of the *romanzo breve* accords with her linguistic style: carefully constructed prose which assumes a deceptively natural flow. A closer reading will reveal that her linguistic texturing is, in fact, analogous to the 'architecture' of complex musical rhythms.

The text which most obviously reflects the influence of musical structures on Capriolo's work is *Vissi d'amore* (1992), a rewriting of the libretto of Puccini's opera, *Tosca*. The title of Capriolo's novel, taken from the opening line of Puccini's famous aria, 'Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore', sung by Tosca in her anguished response to Scarpia's lewd proposition, suggests the perspective from which one should approach this text. Capriolo chooses to focus on the ambiguous relationship between Floria Tosca and Baron Scarpia, as it is narrated in the first person by Scarpia. To this end, she has removed the historical references to the Napoleonic wars as well as any topographical references to Rome. The result is a narrative which, like the two previous novels, lacks precise spatial and temporal settings, focussing on deconstructing the characters' animating force.

This novel takes up, once again, the theme of specularity, both at the level of content (Capriolo's *Tosca* consciously imitates the character she plays on stage) and at the meta-narrative level (the text itself imitates a nineteenth-century libretto). Reflecting Capriolo's predilection for specular structures, the subject of this novel is based on a double layer of intertextuality: Sardou's play and Puccini's opera. The difference between opera and non-musical drama lies in the audience's awareness of the performance and the performers' artistry. Capriolo's choice of such a well-known operatic subject, which had already been reworked from a theatrical *pièce*, may be related to the fact that the pleasures of opera are involved with an obvious and immediately presented artifice. Capriolo is thus consciously presenting the reader with a double fabrication, a pretense of a pretense. In this way, she puts

the audience into complicity with the device itself, with a certain tradition of theatrical effect, and the reader's enjoyment derives, at least in part, from seeing the wheels of artifice turn. The highly conscious and self-referential character of this method, together with Capriolo's obsession with space, highlights the postmodern features of her work.

As is evident from her earlier texts, Capriolo is particularly gifted in the creation of atmospheres and gestures which announce themselves as theatrical. It is not surprising that the *theatrum mundi* is one of Capriolo's favourite images. Underlying the image of the theatre in her works is the shattering of the sense of identity, of the self's harmony with itself, the problem of the homogeneity of character, and of how to reconcile all the things that lie hidden behind a person's mask as can be seen in *La spettatrice* (1995). It is evident from the title of this novel that Capriolo shifts the focus away from the actress-as-subject to the spectator-as-subject. Indeed, the protagonist of *La spettatrice* is a gaze. A mysterious, dark-eyed woman returns to the theatre night after night and gazes rapturously only at the young actor, Vulpius. The intensity of the spectator's gaze attracts the attention of the handsome, young actor, who, captivated by her fascination is eventually compelled to step off the stage and attempt to join her in the 'real world'. However, he cannot find her, finding only a small gold watch on the seat where she was sitting. The watch has stopped, its hands pointing to two o'clock and Vulpius interprets this as a message: the time for a meeting. Thereafter he visits the theatre in the dead of night and becomes obsessed with 'le dorate creature che popolavano il teatro deserto [che] gli si erano svelate l'una dopo l'altra sotto il fascio di luce del proiettore' (70). He convinces Dora, the young actress who is in love with him, to accompany him on his nightly visits to the theatre, and obliges her first to recite different parts in different costumes and later to remain motionless on the centre of the stage while he tries out different lighting effects. In this episode, Capriolo draws attention to a motif which will recur several times in this narrative, namely that of the authorial point-of-view. Like

many other women writers in the 1980s, Capriolo realizes that the author as omniscient narrator may have a confused or imperfect gaze. The traditional role of the third-person narrator is effectively subverted. Capriolo's narrators move, often uncomfortably, between the omniscient and the silent, in some ways replicating the partial vision the subject has of its own experience. Clearly one of the fundamental themes in Capriolo's work is the destabilisation of identity. Equally important is the consideration given to language, its role in creating or obscuring meaning. Indeed, a central theme is the mystery and fascination of the unexpressed, the unsayable.

A theme that is taken up in the short novel, *Con i miei mille occhi* (1997), in which Capriolo investigates the liberating power of myth. The book also brings together, in a quite tangible way, Capriolo's love of music and her love of writing: it is sold together with an accompanying CD which contains music inspired by the story and composed by her close friend and well-known musician, Alessandro Solbiati. The story's point of departure is the Ovidian tale of Narcissus and Echo (*Metamorphoses* III: 356-510), a story which embodies numerous interrelated motifs and which is deeply concerned with the Self's origins and with identity. The role of language in the literal and the figurative dimensions of the story of Echo is emphasised in the later epigram by Ausonius, 'In Echo pictam', in which he identifies Echo as the daughter of air and language. In her version of the tale, Capriolo has made full use of this phrase from Ausonius. In particular, she focuses on the paradox expressed in the epigram's final line, 'I live in your ears, the penetrating Echo, and if you wish to paint a likeness of me then paint the sound'. The poem seems to question the qualifications of painting to reproduce the characteristic motif of this particular theme: Echo is something heard but not seen; she cannot be painted. It is this last paradox which Capriolo most successfully subverts.

Capriolo chooses a pastoral setting: the mythical enclosure of a timeless Forest. The

centuries-old stillness of the Forest is broken by the arrival of a handsome young man, who, accompanied by 'i soffi sinuosi di Eco', reaches a part of the Forest which has never been seen by humans, 'una vasta radura a forma di cerchio'. In this 'secret place' he constructs a simple hut and begins to paint beautiful landscapes populated by mythical figures. Despite Echo's desperate attempts to stop him (she doesn't want him to suffer the same fate as Narcissus), the artist, seduced by that 'other' echo (i.e., the 'voice' of the water) literally pushes through the nymph, and finds the spring. Thereafter, he becomes obsessed with the desire to reproduce in his paintings the image he saw in the water. Dissatisfied with all his portraits, he leaves the Forest for several days and returns with several enormous mirrors, which he hangs all around the hut. Echo tries to distract him from his self-obsession by breathing over all the mirrors so that they mist up. Finally, she uses her breath to sketch herself on one of the mirrors. Based on this sketch, the artist then paints her portrait. As the portrait nears completion, so Echo begins to acquire colour, corporeality.

Here the mirror is not presented as a simple metaphor of doubling or of self-discovery. Capriolo allows herself to be seduced by the game of 'speculations', in which mirrors, textual or otherwise, simultaneously grant temporary identity and 'dispossess' and fragment the subject. We can, thus, attribute to Echo, the essential function of a revealer of alterity. Narcissus in the face of the reflection in the spring can be taken as an image of rapture in face of beauty. It can also be the symbol for an aesthetic experience of a mystical nature, and thereby, as symbol for the creative artist. Recognising the self-awareness of the poet/writer and the text (narcissistic narrative) brings out new identifications with Narcissus/artist. Once more Narcissus is the symbol for the relation of poet to his creation, and, in Capriolo's story, is extended at the fictional level to the artist and the nymph.

It is Echo who serves as mirror for the artist (not his reflection) by presenting herself as (an)other, who, through desire, comes to language. What makes Echo 'speak'? The desire

of the artist to establish her identity. Echo assumes both the artist's voice and his creative function: she breathes onto the mirror, and with her breath sketches a female figure. It is clear that Capriolo draws on the connection between the Pygmalion myth and the story of Narcissus. Capriolo's Echo gives a face to that which does not have one (herself) so that she may represent herself and present herself to the alterity of the other, and, like Pygmalion, indulges in both a narcissistic act and an act of transformation.

The theme of metamorphosis or transformation was explicitly portrayed in one of Capriolo's early stories, 'La donna di pietra', in the collection *La grande Eulalia*. In this story, a sculptor, Mur, sees a woman closing a window and is fascinated by the graceful gesture of her arm. He tries to immortalize this feminine grace in stone. As he works on the sculpture, the 'real' woman and the stone statue become a single being for him. At this point, Capriolo subverts the Pygmalion theme which underlies this story: the sculptor cannot infuse life into his creation, and is punished for his hubristic behaviour, for viewing his own creation as 'real', by being deprived of his artistic inspiration. In this story, Capriolo explores the notion of loss associated with transformation and hints at the type of punishment that awaits those who avoid encounters with the human 'other'. The similarity between Echo's act and the creation of a female-centered symbolic which unites (female) desire with a material world becomes apparent. The Pygmalion myth allows women writers to reintroduce these themes from two opposing and thus seemingly more complete viewpoints in the text, the creator and the created, and Narcissism becomes a literary device representing a desire for self-understanding through mirror-introspection. The combination of the Narcissus theme with the Pygmalion myth emphasises the power of art to create life, in other words, the materialization of desire brings the inanimate to life /gives the invisible corporal substance. The artist imitates the image in the mirror, and in doing so, the distance between the imitating subject and the object imitated is annulled. Through the artist's sketches Echo acquires a new

materiality, and her nature becomes similar to that of the (painted) image.

In Capriolo's symbolic space myths allay the unbearable anxiety of living in the truth of the 'absolutism of reality'. We can thus conclude that the myth is not intended to be its own message but reflects a presumed reality. At the same time, language is aestheticized, becomes a 'stylistic myth', the only credo in which humans can believe, as is evident in *Un uomo di carattere* (1996), in which Capriolo seems to suggest that the value of writing, as art, is the 'aesthetic justification of existence'. Capriolo's characters, don't believe in progress or in the future; aware of their own impotence, they abandon themselves to their fate and the inevitability of death. But death is also a potential and effective reality to which it is possible to give meaning because it represents a change of status. The characters in the novels don't evolve, they are emotionally old, close to death. Walter, in *Il nocchiero*, is led to his death by the unresolved suspicion that the woman he married was not the same woman that he desperately desired. In *La spettatrice*, Vulpius leads Dora to her death in an attempt to transform her into the mysterious woman spectator who visits the theatre every evening. In *Il doppio regno*, the protagonist prefers the ascetic, unreal architecture and strange personnel of the hotel to returning to the real world; and Stiler, the engineer in *Un uomo di carattere*, chooses to dedicate his life to the creation of a perfect, but inanimate, garden, rather than personal relationships.

Un uomo di carattere is narrated in the first-person by a young, romantic painter, Bausa, who meets the engineer Erasmo Stiler, during one of his annual holidays in a country town. The two men are brought together by an unkempt garden, inherited by Stiler from his uncle and often visited by Bausa because he is fascinated by the garden's chaotic nature. Stiler is attracted by the idea of being able to tame the wild vegetation. Bausa is an acute observer and tells the story of his friend's efforts to impose order in his garden. Stiler's objective to reach an ideal perfection involves him in a relentless battle against reality, which

in the end will overcome him. Capriolo's narcissistic, self-reflexive writing is mirrored in Stiler's artistic recreation of the garden. In both cases the artistic act represents the only defence against 'death caused by truth'. The physical structure of the garden reflects a narcissistic vision of the world. The garden has no view, no external openings. Stiler believes he is conquering the space and is defying nature's reality - it is a microcosm which embodies the dream of an adamitic sovereignty over the world. The absence of fountains (flowing water) and birds or other creatures generally found in gardens, renders this garden static. Stiler negates the flow of time, imposing his will on the garden corresponds to the impossible objective of giving a finite sense to each moment of time; but the result of the continuous battles against nature is death, the only real sense of life.

As we have seen, Capriolo's spaces are ambiguous and unreal: they are simultaneously places of refuge and prisons for characters who do not know how to open themselves to life. There are many descriptions of large hotels (*Il nocchiero, Il doppio regno*), ancient noble palaces (*Vissi d'amore, La grande Eulalia*), theatres (*La spettatrice, Vissi d'amore*) or gardens (*Un uomo di carattere*) which although an open space, has no view because it is surrounded by high walls, and has no life because animals are denied access.

Like *Con i miei mille occhi, Barbara* (1998) is set in the space of virgin forests in which legendary horses cover enormous distances by night and day, and in a mythical time of castles and feuds. The novel reveals the influence of chivalric epic poetry and the paintings of medieval miniaturists. Once again there is an unnamed narrator, this time an old man who is close to death. He tells his story to an unnamed guest, symbol and personification of the reader. The scene is set in the nocturnal solitude of old man's ravaged castle. Why has the castle been stripped of all ornamentation and furniture? Why are there no servants? Why are the only musicians remaining the birds in the garden? The entire novel is a response to these questions. The old man's story begins on an evening long ago when, as young man, he was

told by his father that a marriage had been arranged for him with the daughter of a rich man, Barbara. Initially the relationship between the two young people is characterised by mutual diffidence, but gradually the young man begins to fall deeply in love. The effect of this change of feelings will be to make him jealous of Barbara's past when she reveals to him that she was abandoned by her former lover who left her without returning the ring she had given him. The ring has an unusual design: two gold serpents facing each other with open jaws and darting tongues. Only if the young man recovers the ring will Barbara be his. This is only the first of the deceptions that Barbara will practice on her betrothed: there will follow many adventures, a duel to the death, the revenge of the Bishop-Prince who owns all the castle lands, financial ruin. The monologue is a tribute to perfect solitude, a state of being which is only possible after having renounced both the desire for revenge and the present. Capriolo here espouses the ideological and aesthetic (postmodern) tenet that the present must be understood through a process of continuous critical re-interpretation of the past and recontextualisation of the self.

This story of unfulfilled love and desire, of physical and sentimental journeys and adventures, told through the revelations afforded by silences, looks, and minimal gestures is followed by a completely different work, a postmodern allegory: *Il sogno dell'agnello* (1999). The opening epigraph, 'Ai non tiepidi', is both an allusion to the Book of Revelations and a challenge to the reader. Set in a village where everything seems to work perfectly, like a middle-class Garden of Eden, in which entertainment and information is provided by the television and the computer (no-one reads books anymore), the story examines the existential anguish and psychological disorientation caused by the homogenisation of culture and society. All of the characters in *Il sogno dell'agnello* renounce life, give up living reality. All except for two: the stranger, who arrives unexpectedly looking like a vagabond and insisting on being addressed as 'prince', and the young girl he befriends, Sara, whose prophetic dreams

reveal the true nature of the apparently edenic village life. Through the language and perspectives of an old man and a young girl Capriolo conducts an in-depth exploration of Otherness. Like Anna Maria Ortese before her, Capriolo is concerned with the plight of the exploited and vulnerable creatures of this world. Indeed, the weak and defenceless are the subject matter of *Una di loro* (2001). At first glance it appears that this book, published ten years after *Il doppio regno* is another novel about a hotel. Actually this time there are two of them: the elegant mountain inn, the 'Flora', and the derelict 'Grand Hôtel d'Europe et des Alpes' inhabited by nameless refugees and mysterious women with names like Iasmina. In fact, *Una di loro* tells the story of Iasmina, 'one of them', that is, a member of the group of derelicts, old people, children, living in the ruined and abandoned Grand Hôtel. No-one knows where these people, who all have foreign accents, came from. Have they escaped from a tragic war, or a natural disaster? The lost splendour of the Hotel provides a strange fascination for the narrator, an aesthetics scholar who has gone on holiday to the mountain inn to correct the proofs of his latest book, and to plan the next one. The narrator soon realizes he can never escape from the images of these pallid, sad faces. These are the other side of reality - the victims, the bearers of our unnamed fears. Silence shrouds them like the mist shrouds the paths leading to the forest, and he feels compelled to try and understand their reality. Once again the reader is drawn into a metaphysical reality which recedes indefinitely behind illusory masks and ambiguous interpretations.

In several interviews, Paola Capriolo has stated that the kind of truth she searches for and tries to express is outside the sphere of everyday life. It follows then that literature for her is, as she tells Marisa Rusconi in an interview, 'astrazione: anche autoestraniazione e distacco dall'io. Quindi sia dalla realtà che dal realismo' ('Le neo-romanze', *L'Espresso*, 24 February 1991). By rejecting a realist approach, Capriolo invites definition of her writing as 'fantastic'. Yet judgements about Capriolo as a major exponent of the fantastic in contemporary Italian

literature vary considerably. Perhaps this is in part due to Capriolo's own rejection of the term 'fantastic' in favour of the term 'ambiguous'. In an earlier interview with Marisa Rusconi, Capriolo declares: 'Non credo molto alle etichette e alle separazioni per generi [...]. È l'ambiguità più ancora del fantastico, il mio elemento naturale' ('E Paola raddoppia...', *L'Espresso*, 5 March 1989). While it is difficult not to support Capriolo's rejection of labels, it is also necessary to acknowledge that she has gained extensive recognition as 'woman writer', a recent accolade being the award of the Francesca Colombrini Cinelli 'Prima Donna of Literature' Prize in September 2001; previously awarded to well-known writers Gina Lagorio, Francesca Sanvitale, Susanna Tamaro.

Paola Capriolo moves between philosophy and literature: by (re)exploring the ties between language and reality, her narrative simultaneously engages with the decentring of subjectivity and draws attention to those concepts and experiences which occupy the liminal space between physical and metaphysical, tangible and intangible.

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