

## LOST IN THE ART(IFICE) OF MALE LANGUAGE: FINDING THE FEMALE AUTHOR IN PAOLA CAPRIOLO'S *IL DOPPIO REGNO*

### *Introduction*

The fictional output of Paola Capriolo (b. 1962)<sup>1</sup> is something of an exception on the Italian literary scene because of the difficulty of aligning it with any type of experimental postmodern narrative, the author's rejection of the label 'woman writer', and her unusual set of influences, drawn principally from the German philosophical and literary canon. Capriolo's work has attracted international interest, and none more so than her third book, *Il doppio regno* (1991). In this novel Capriolo employs a fantastic mode that prevents the reader from reaching a definitive conclusion about the outcome of the narrative, which has intrigued readers and critics alike. What has been overlooked, however, is that the novel also implicitly raises the phantoms that potentially haunt the contemporary female writer, and thereby emphasizes the continued need to pay careful attention to her precarious position in patriarchal culture.

Paola Capriolo has always complied with critics who make out the presence of a 'biblioteca paterna' in her background.<sup>2</sup> Although her father is a translator and literary man, I use the term 'biblioteca paterna' to refer to the wide range of canonical male literary influences often listed by Capriolo in interview and detected by critics in her work. This background provides a good example of how the female use of a male-dominated genre like the fantastic is affected by intertextual relations and expresses a female authorial anxiety. Two of the short stories in Capriolo's debut work, *La grande Eulalia* (1988), the title story and 'Il gigante', pointed towards a crisis in the definition of a space of female authorship, articulated through the fantastic treatment of physical and cultural space, in which both female protagonists are bewitched into a deadly performance of femininity over which they have no control. Her second work, the novel *Il nocchiero*, continued the more conventional theme of an earlier short story, 'La donna di pietra', in its male protagonist's desire to discover truth through his relationship with a woman, split between a 'donna mondana' (a term Capriolo uses to denote a woman focused on a banal, quotidian materiality) and an ethereal *femme fatale*. It was her third work, *Il doppio regno*, which returned to the female subject with a much more obvious autobiographical bent. Of all Capri-

<sup>1</sup> *La grande Eulalia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988), *Il nocchiero* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1989), *Il doppio regno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1991), *Vissi d'amore* (Milan: Bompiani, 1992), *La spettatrice* (Milan: Bompiani, 1995), *Un uomo di carattere* (Milan: Bompiani, 1996), *Con i miei mille occhi* (Milan: Bompiani, 1997), *Barbara* (Milan: Bompiani, 1998), *Il sogno dell'agnello* (Milan: Bompiani, 1999), *Una di loro* (Milan: Bompiani, 2001), and *Qualcosa nella notte: storia di Gilgamesh, signore di Uruk, e dell'uomo cresciuto tra le gazzelle* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003). She has also written three fairy stories for children: *La ragazza dalla stella d'oro* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Sixteen of twenty-two reviews of Capriolo's first work cite her influences repeatedly as Mann, Borges, Nietzsche, Wagner, Schubert, Buzzati, Poe, Stevenson, Kafka, Bizet, Conrad, Flaubert, Calvino, and Wilde, but these are rarely pursued. This approach continues into assessments of her subsequent work. In interview Capriolo often lists similar influences.

olo's protagonists, the narrator of *Il doppio regno* is the only one who creates, rather than performs.

*Il doppio regno* is a first-person account in the form of a journal of the experiences of a young woman suffering from amnesia to the extent that she cannot remember her name. All she knows is that, after witnessing the approach of a tidal wave in the seaside resort where she was staying, she has sought refuge in a strange hotel in the woods, populated by an anonymous and impersonal staff of identical male waiters. In this hotel even the manager cannot direct her to the exit, nor does he seem concerned or able to explain many of the hotel's odder features, such as its lack of news from the outside world. The narrator's memories of her previous life are vague, coming in flashes and dreams, the real connection of which with her own past in an outside world she questions increasingly. This doubt is underlined for the reader by the fact that most of the memories cited are references to famous literary texts, such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. The erosion of the narrator's grip on the boundary between text and world is underlined by the fact that the poetry she claims to have written herself is in fact quoted from a range of poets, from Leopardi to Rilke.

The first half of her journal charts her failure to leave the hotel as she refuses to make a determined search for the exit in its labyrinthine structure, haunted by her terror of the tidal wave and feelings of guilt that she did not warn anyone of its approach. Her sense of privacy is eroded by the removal of the door of her room and she gradually assumes the identity of the hotel staff, as her hair is cut short and her dress is replaced by a uniform. Each development encounters an initial resistance on her part, which is broken down by the implacable calm of the waiters and her desire for the comfortable immutability of the hotel. She finds two particular places of interest in the hotel, a library of indecipherable texts and a small hothouse garden through the barred window of which she can view the sky, where she can hear an unidentified rustling. She adapts to the new way of life, but still feels unable to join the waiters in their nightly music-making, for which, as for the hotel itself, she feels a strange mixture of attraction and repulsion.

In the second half, this passive resignation to her stay is disturbed by the arrival of three visitors from the outside world: a woman, Laura, and two men, Guido and Bruno. At first she is able to avoid them, hiding behind her apparent identity as a waiter. The younger man, Bruno, notices, however, that there is something odd about this particular waiter and when he approaches her she breaks down, asking for help. Bruno is attracted to the mysterious narrator and reawakens the tension in her between the desire for the immutability of the hotel and the lure of the outside world. He attempts to prepare the narrator for her departure and names her 'Cara'. However in his/her own way each guest undermines the attempt to persuade the narrator to leave: Bruno himself raises memories of gender conflict, Guido is sympathetic towards her desire for immutability, and Laura reintroduces her to a stifling notion of femininity. Despite her inner turmoil, up until the night before they are due to leave the narrator agrees to depart with them, but the following day they leave alone. On their departure the narrator realizes that she has to follow them. However,

on paying a farewell visit to the hotel garden she discovers the cause of the mysterious rustling: a cat. Up to that point she had thought this cat belonged only to memories from her life prior to the hotel, but its appearance in the hotel garden convinces her that these memories were fictional and that there is no outside world into which she can follow the guests.

Generally the novel has been regarded as a postmodern reworking of modernist themes, such as the crisis of the self and the loss of faith in language that ultimately, in the footsteps of Calvino and Borges, privileges the text as the only possible site of meaning.<sup>3</sup> I would like to build on this interpretation with a potentially controversial emphasis on the author's sex. I question to what extent uncritical reproduction of male-authored literary form is actually possible, or desirable, for a female writer in a 'post-feminist' era. Not only is mine a reading that Capriolo herself is opposed to, but it is also one that critics bypass, giving rise to a singular failure to produce a convincing interpretation of the role gender and sexual difference play in her work.

The marked autobiographical content of the novel is evident from its opening line: 'Credo di avere una trentina di anni' (*Doppio*, p. 9: Capriolo was twenty-nine at the time of publication), and the author herself described the novel as 'quello in cui mi riconosco di più come essere umano'. The fact that for her 'l'unica volta in cui [. . .] ho dovuto usare come protagonista una donna, perché non sarebbe stato possibile per me fare diversamente è nel caso de *Il doppio regno*'<sup>4</sup> suggests that this text above all others is a working out of her own experience of gendered identity. I read this text as a 'fictitious autobiography', a notion developed by Mattias Hattemer. The specificity of the fictitious autobiography lies in two particular features that are present in Capriolo's text. The first is its description of an unstable self.<sup>5</sup> The second is that, rather than constituting an exploration of what the self *could become*—a traditional pattern of the autobiographical novel—the fictitious autobiography is a process of liberation of the self from what it has become.<sup>6</sup> This deliberate alienation from the self takes us to Capriolo's statement in an interview that this novel was one of 'autoestraniazione e distacco dall'io',<sup>7</sup> implicating both the narrator's experience and her own.

The texts Hattemer chooses to illustrate his theory constitute an all-male cast, but Capriolo's text presents a female fictitious autobiography. The lack of a name for the fictitious protagonist can be seen as connoting that unstable, nameless self from which Capriolo is writing to free herself. In this sense she performs a negative parabola of autobiography as a creation of identity, similar to that proposed by Shoshana Felman: 'the female speaker speaks from an auto-

<sup>3</sup> See Gillian Ania, 'Cara's "Creative" Writing: The Fiction of Originality in Capriolo's *Il doppio regno*', in *Essays in Italian Literature and History in Honour of D. Thompson*, ed. by G. Talbot and P. Williams (Dublin: Four Courts, 2002), pp. 156–71 (p. 171).

<sup>4</sup> From an unpublished interview of mine with Capriolo in Milan, July 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Mattias Hattemer, *Das erdichtete Ich: Zur Gattungspoetik der fiktiven Autobiographie bei GrimmeLshausen, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Thomas Mann und Rainer Maria Rilke* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1989), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> '[The author's] goal is prescribed only as negation: to free the writing self from his biography, by reclaiming its inner independence from the trodden lifepath' (Hattemer, p. 20).

<sup>7</sup> Marisa Rusconi, 'Le neo-romanze', *L'Espresso*, 24 February 1991, pp. 94–99 (p. 95).

biographical position that is defined as what cannot be simply named, or what can be named as, precisely, nameless, missing'.<sup>8</sup> Hattemer suggests that the negation of a past self in a fictitious autobiography is liberating, but a woman has to negate a self which is already beyond naming, beyond language, which makes her fictitious autobiography the story of an identity never achieved.

Capriolo's intertextual and self-reflexive approach questions the signifying practices of literature and should stimulate a metacritical response, as well as a hermeneutic one. One of the primary concerns of this metacritical agenda is the relationship between language, literature, and experience. I shall begin by analysing the novel's treatment of this relationship, since it provides the most direct route to the links between gender and representation that I wish to explore. As Sherry Simon observes, language includes 'the conceptual structure of patriarchy, a masculine mode of perceiving and organising the world, a male view encoded in the centuries of learning so that it appears natural and inevitable',<sup>9</sup> making language a minefield for the woman writer. Of the many literary influences on Capriolo evident in this text, one of those that most clarifies her response to the question of language is Gottfried Benn, who is, for her, 'uno dei più grandi poeti del nostro secolo'.<sup>10</sup> Although he is not cited directly (or indirectly) in the text, his thought lies behind it. An examination of Capriolo's views on the poet and essayist in her published degree thesis on nihilism and the world of expression in his essays makes this clear,<sup>11</sup> as do her comments in interview that she feels his interests are hers when it comes to 'la centralità di una vocazione artistica', as 'un assoluto ma nello stesso tempo non universale, quindi privo di garanzie'. She admits that 'molti dei miei personaggi o delle mie storie sono poco o tanto benniani. *La spettatrice* è un libro interamente centrato sul Nulla come del resto *Il doppio regno*'.<sup>12</sup> The post-lapsarian notion of language as something no longer natural to man that dominates Benn's writing is accompanied by an emphasis on the symbolic function of woman as the possible solution to this unhappy alienation. It is therefore largely through Capriolo's use of Benn's philosophy and writing that I shall identify some of the knots in the transitional thread from reading male authors to writing as a woman that face the female author. Finally, I shall show how these knots shape the novel's imagination, making it a uniquely female work of postmodernism that portrays the tenuous position women writers occupy in the realm of 'pure thought'.

<sup>8</sup> *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> Paola Capriolo, 'Benn, mistico che non crede', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 8 November 1989, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Paola Capriolo, *L'assoluto artificiale: nichilismo e mondo dell'espressione nell'opera saggistica di Gottfried Benn* (Milan: Bompiani, 1996). Henceforth referred to as *Assoluto*.

<sup>12</sup> Mirella Appiotti, 'Paola Capriolo: un maledetto per seduttore', *La Stampa*, 1 August 1996, p. 19.

*The Labyrinth of Language*

As a regular translator,<sup>13</sup> Capriolo underwent her own crisis of faith in language through the experience of translation. Discussing the translation of *Death in Venice*, she contrasts this activity with the fluid consistency between word and thought she normally experiences in the act of creation:

Quando si traduce è come se l'anima di ogni frase, di ogni parola, si presentasse dapprima disincarnata e ci lasciasse la scelta fra diversi corpi possibili ai quali unirla. Il dualismo dei nostri concetti metafisici, che l'atto creativo sembra incaricarsi di confutare, trova invece continue conferme nei problemi della traduzione.<sup>14</sup>

The alter-ego narrator of *Il doppio regno* finds herself in a more radical position, in which certain signifiers no longer correspond to any recognizable signified: 'Mi ostino inutilmente a premere un tasto al quale non corrisponde nessuna corda' (*Doppio*, p. 70). The seeds of doubt about Capriolo's own mother tongue, triggered by translation, were possibly already sown in her mind by her passion for another modernist German text, 'The Letter of Lord Chandos' by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1902).<sup>15</sup> In his letter the fictional writer-narrator of the text justifies his decision to stop writing as a result of a fundamental breakdown:

I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently [. . .] Abstract terms, of which the tongue must avail itself as a matter of course in order to voice a judgement—these terms crumbled in my mouth like mouldy fungi.<sup>16</sup>

This moment of disillusion is not, however, a sense of language defining the limits of our world in the Wittgensteinian sense, but an acute sense of nostalgia for a means of communicating a reality beyond language.

For Capriolo one of the most fundamental aspects of this linguistic 'fall' is its isolating quality. When speaking of her closeness to Mann's text, she stresses how the act of translation made her aware of the limits of that closeness, concluding, perhaps somewhat self-ironically, that 'predilezioni diverse in fatto di aggettivi scavano [. . .] abissi più invalicabili di quelli creati da una diversa fede politica o religiosa' ('Ho scelto Mann', emphasis added). Such spatial metaphors dominate the modernist relationship to language, as a comment by Richard Sheppard suggests: 'For the writer who feels that "society is a blind alley", language ceases [. . .] to be a means of communication and becomes *an opaque and impenetrable wall*'.<sup>17</sup> There is a close connection between the oppressive confinement of the hotel and the inadequacy of language for the novel's narrator. The latter seems to be a new experience for her, as if that

<sup>13</sup> Her translations of fiction include: Thomas Mann, *La morte a Venezia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991), Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *I dolori del giovane Werther* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993), Gottfried Keller, *Romeo e Giulietta al villaggio* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Le affinità elettive* (Venice: Marsilio, 1995), and Franz Kafka, *Il castello* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Paola Capriolo, 'Ho scelto Mann', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 7 April 1991, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> In an article entitled 'Fede nella realtà e fede nella parola', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 29 June 1991, p. 7, she claims that this was one of her favourite adolescent texts.

<sup>16</sup> Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, 'The Letter of Lord Chandos', in *Hugo von Hoffmannsthal: Selected Prose*, trans. by Mary Hollinger and Tania and James Stern (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), pp. 129–41 (pp. 133–34).

<sup>17</sup> 'The Crisis of Language', in *Modernism 1890–1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 323–36 (p. 328, emphasis added).

might even be one of the crises that has precipitated her into the hotel.<sup>18</sup> When she arrives there she wants to communicate the experience of the wave, but finds that its appearance ‘mi aveva eretto intorno un muro invisibile, e le parole non erano in grado di valicarlo’ (*Doppio*, p. 19).

In one way the hotel itself becomes the physical manifestation of this metaphorical wall, the site of alienation from language, in that it incarnates the isolating properties of language. Its incomprehensible *preconstruction* is ‘langué’ itself, isolating the narrator from her real experience to the extent that she doubts its ever having taken place. Like language, the hotel has a self-referential system of logic which extends beyond its architecture. However, the narrator also observes its mechanism through a metaphor of construction, when, in talking of the sense behind the rules of the hotel, she compares it to the ‘logica paradossale e scrupolosa con la quale i folli *edificano* le loro ossessioni’ (*Doppio*, p. 41, emphasis added). That she uses similar vocabulary in relation to the disagreement which unfolds between her and her admirer-antagonist, Bruno, over the structure of the hotel hints that she regards language as a space controlled by men:

È Bruno, e solo Bruno, [. . .] a riprogettare mentalmente l’edificio e la vita che vi si svolge secondo i criteri di un’*inoppugnabile* ragionevolezza. Lo smantella con le parole, mattone dopo mattone, e lo ricostruisce su fondamenta diverse. (*Doppio*, p. 92)

Just as literature is the generator of Capriolo’s own sense of alienation through language, the hotel’s library is the essence of the obstructive labyrinthine structure for the narrator. The narrator’s conscious engagement with its unreadable (in the conventional sense) texts points towards an interpretation of the hotel as a site of linguistic crisis. Here the unbridgeable gap between desire for self-expression and language is self-consciously foregrounded. The series of handwritten texts she initially attempts to decipher later frighten the narrator away as she muses that they may be journals like her own, that her journal too may eventually become a foreign language to her and any eventual reader (*Doppio*, p. 56). Once again language is the mechanism of isolation, not only of individuals but even the self at different points in time, reinforcing on a self-conscious level the notion that this is a fictitious autobiography, because it is about a self left behind.

The novel articulates an unresolved struggle with language, as something alluring which does not fulfil its promises. This idea has always also been central to theory about the fantastic itself. In Sartre’s vision the modern fantastic does not so much conceive of what is absent, but of an absence which is language: ‘of peculiarly empty utterances, of non-signifying signs’. He makes a clear link between the fantastic use of man-made space and its relationship to language:

La loi du genre [fantastique] le condamne à ne rencontrer jamais que des outils. Ces outils [. . .] n’ont pas mission de les servir mais de manifester sans relâche une finalité fuyante et sangrenue: de là ce labyrinthe de couloirs, de portes, d’escaliers qui mènent à rien; de là ces poteaux indicateurs qui n’indiquent rien, ces innombrables signes qui jalonnent les routes et ne signifient rien. [. . .] Dans le monde à “l’endroit” un message suppose un expéditeur, un messager et un destinataire, il n’a qu’une valeur de moyen;

<sup>18</sup> Ania, ‘Cara’s “Creative” Writing’, p. 162.

c'est son contenu qui est sa fin. Dans le monde à l'envers, le moyen s'isole et se pose pour soi.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, not only is the hotel of *Il doppio regno* a repetitive labyrinth in which the narrator continually loses herself, but every so often she comes across a pyramid symbol in a corner, on her writing paper, or in the margin of the handwritten texts. These pyramids represent the value of the symbol emptied of 'content': 'singolarmente espressive, ma ciò che esprimevano era qualcosa di così puro e privo di determinazioni da coincidere con la più totale assenza di significato' (*Doppio*, p. 45).

The hotel of *Il doppio regno* certainly confirms expectations that the fantastic can symbolize the inadequacies of language; what Capriolo does with her fantastic space of the hotel, however, is to highlight a particular absence in language, namely the lack of space for the female subject to express herself outside the limiting constraints of gender. In the narrator's encounter with the hotel as a site of literary linguistic enquiry, there is a deliberate questioning of the gendered nature of language. On two occasions she talks of trying to rhyme masculine and feminine words when writing poetry: 'spesso, chissà perché, io mi convinc[o] persino che rimino fra loro parole come "mondo" e "onda"' (*Doppio*, p. 39). The 'chissà perché' is an invitation to the reader to speculate upon the absurdity of gendered language, but its importance to the author also points to the fact that language itself may shape our reality. Language's impact upon reality is something Capriolo herself highlights: 'è l'ambiguità delle parole a fondare la libertà della sfera espressiva e la possibilità stessa da parte dell'uomo di interrogarsi su quella realtà'.<sup>20</sup> This is taken to an extreme in the hotel, one of whose waiters tells the narrator that he cannot find the exit because 'i termini "interno" e "esterno" non significano nulla, sono puramente convenzionali' (*Doppio*, p. 29). Thus, confined to a world in which form is everything, the narrator believes she can decide: she *was* a woman but *is* no longer.

However, it is this restoration of ambiguity into language, through the dissolution of the constraints of the gender binary, that Judith Butler argues is hard to come by:

The limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. [ . . . ] These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender.<sup>21</sup>

The notion of a third space for language, purified of gendered constraint, is something the narrator of *Il doppio regno* strives for in her poetry. This search is suggested by her attempts to rhyme 'ferita' and 'miracolo' 'certa che esiste una lingua nella quale si può passare dall'uno all'altro termine con la semplice aggiunta di una lettera' (*Doppio*, p. 65). As Ania observes, the language she is referring to is German (*Wunde/Wunder*).<sup>22</sup> The fact that another language can

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Aminadab" ou du fantastique considéré comme un langage', in *Situations*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), pp. 122-42 (p. 130).

<sup>20</sup> 'Dov'è più l'ironia?', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 30 December 1991, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Gender Trouble* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ania, 'Cara's "Creative" Writing', p. 165 n. 30.

draw two concepts closer together underlines the arbitrary nature of linguistic systems. Yet Capriolo's own attempts to slip beyond the formal constraints of gender are in fact thwarted by her cultural roots, by the very space of her literary experience. The traces of the rigid linguistic gender binary negate the recognition of sexual difference that would have to precede imagining its erasure.<sup>23</sup>

### *Gottfried Benn and Artifice*

In order to understand where Capriolo situates herself philosophically in relation to the role of language in this novel, it is helpful to look at a newspaper article in which she contrasts von Hofmannsthal's belief in a reality for which words are inadequate with Stefan Georg's belief that language has the power to give reality a form:

Improprio mi appare qualsiasi tentativo di 'conciliazione dialettica' delle due tesi. Ciò che entrambe rivelano, è l'incompatibilità di fondo fra fede nella realtà e fede nella forma, o in quella particolare forma che è il linguaggio. ('Fede nella realtà e fede nella parola', p. 7)

Even the most cursory reading of *Il doppio regno* would point towards its illustration of that very impossibility of the 'conciliazione dialettica'. The narrator's last letter leaves the reader suspended between, on the one hand, the possibility that if 'un mondo vero' does exist, then language cannot reach it ('fede nella realtà'), and, on the other hand, the nihilistic notion of the self addressing itself in an autonomous language ('fede nella parola'). If the end leans decidedly more towards 'fede nella parola', it is perhaps inevitable that, as a writer of fiction, Capriolo is attracted to that option in which language can exist as an independent system. This attraction is made clear by her interest in Benn's notion of 'l'assoluto artificiale'—an idea of art that she outlines in her thesis. In this book she explains that what draws her, as a writer, back to his work is his elevation of art to 'una sfera indipendente e compiuta della vita spirituale dell'uomo' (*Assoluto*, p. 94). Capriolo consistently displays disdain for any emphasis on reality,<sup>24</sup> which we might read as a reaction to the notion of 'impegno' that has dominated post-war Italian literature, but it is also a disdain that she admires in Benn (*Assoluto*, p. 95).

It is in the veneration of artifice that many traces of Benn's thought lie in Capriolo's work. Her choice of the fantastic, for example, may be driven by its adaptability as a prose mode which can achieve an autonomy similar to verse, through the creation of worlds independent from reality: 'non esiste nessuna realtà, esiste la coscienza umana che dal suo patrimonio creativo plasma mondi' (Benn, quoted in *Assoluto*, p. 32). This creation of a new reality is one, Capriolo emphasizes, in which art as artifice constitutes the only absolute: 'per Benn "il mistico che non crede in niente", l'assoluto è una realtà prodotta e derivata,

<sup>23</sup> See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> See the interview in which, asked her about 'reality' in her work, she responds: 'Cosa significa la realtà! Io non ci credo molto nella realtà' (Gillian Ania, "Un altro mondo": Interview with Paola Capriolo (Milan, November 1996), *The Italianist*, 18 (1998), 305–41 (p. 317)).



non è verità ma artificio' (*Assoluto*, p. 76); and it is something which inevitably makes the 'io lirico' 'un abitatore di camere singole' (Benn, quoted in *Assoluto*, p. 85), paralleling the isolation of nearly all Capriolo's fictional characters. This interest in Benn may also explain why poetry is the preferred form of expression for the narrator of *Il doppio regno*, along with music, in that it provides her with the opportunity to reflect Benn's philosophy that 'la poesia è "assoluta" [. . .] perché eleva a proprio contenuto esclusivo la poesia stessa' (*Assoluto*, p. 83). As a reader in the hotel library, the narrator reads the text as a form of 'absolute' poetry:

Trascorrevo interi pomeriggi contemplando quegli arabeschi, quelle greche, e poco a poco mi abituai a considerare lettura tale occupazione. A paragone di essa, quella che per afferrare meglio i significati si fa cieca alla bellezza dei segni mi appariva un'attività disprezzabile. (*Doppio*, p. 61)

Shortly afterwards, her 'own' compositions start to imitate this elevation of form over content and contrast with her journal-writing, which she regards as a product of her 'mediocre' self (*Doppio*, p. 66). In a review of Benn's poetry Capriolo concludes that the destiny of Benn's lyrical self is to find sense in 'intessere un gioco di forme "attraverso la notte e il silenzio" attraverso il nulla'.<sup>25</sup> This form of aesthetic transcendence could be all that is left to the narrator at the end of the novel, when she writes:

Tesso la trama, ricopro delle sue maglie serrate quanto mi circonda, e sempre torno a disfarla per tesserne una nuova, abbandono l'idea che avevo seguito consciamente in ogni sfaccettatura per ritentare con un'altra il medesimo gioco. (*Doppio*, p. 151)

It is what Vazza describes as Benn's 'esercizio dello stile espressivo',<sup>26</sup> the celebration of linguistic style for its own sake, that the narrator is trying to tap into as she develops her new method of reading the library volumes. To complement this we also see the memory of life itself denied the possibility of truth, and fiction, or poetry, remembered as life, not only by the narrator, but even by the other characters. Guido's fear 'di non essere mai stato veramente in nessun posto' (*Doppio*, p. 160) echoes the poetry of Montale.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately the hotel itself, like the books in the library, reflects 'langue' and creates, as Ania suggests, its own kind of absolute.<sup>28</sup>

However, the application of Benn's thought thus far does not account for the ongoing tug-of-war in Capriolo's text between the isolated completion of the artistic form and contact with life itself, beyond the merely textual. Despite the narrator's evident enthusiasm for the purity of form, something keeps her writing a journal. What emerges from a closer look at Benn's work is that the hotel can become 'l'assoluto artificiale' for the narrator only after a struggle, because the web which connects woman to the 'mondo vero' does not resemble that which connects a male artist like Benn.

<sup>25</sup> 'Benn, mistico che non crede', p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Marco Vazza, 'Gottfried Benn, il nichilismo redento dalla bellezza', a review of Paola Capriolo's *L'assoluto artificiale*, in *L'Unità*, 5 April 1997, pt. 2, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> 'Non sono mai stato certo di essere al mondo', in *Montale: tutte le poesie*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), p. 311.

<sup>28</sup> Ania, 'Cara's "Creative" Writing', p. 169.

Although Capriolo's thesis is based upon a detailed analysis of Benn's essays, she is clearly familiar with his poetry.<sup>29</sup> She acknowledges the infrequent convergence of his poetics with his poetry (*Assoluto*, p. 10), and in fact Benn's poetry is clearly inscribed with irreconcilable difficulties for the female reader. The first of these returns us to questioning the possibility of fragmentation for a female self. In the novel-narrator's fading individuality we witness clear traces of the following lines:

Io, diramato appena e nel profondo  
disancorato e sciolto dai legami,  
io, senz'essere e pur senza apparenza,  
per lo più nell'assalto del cordoglio  
è ormai andato oltre il proprio nome,  
solo a tratti ne ha il lampo di un ricordo.  
(Benn, quoted in *Assoluto*, p. 33, preface to ch. IV)

Vazza writes that 'per Benn, come per Nietzsche, non esiste più l'uomo ma soltanto i suoi sintomi, una catena di singolarità prive di ancoraggio, una successione di istanti e un avvicinarsi di istinti'.<sup>30</sup> However, the philosopher Adriana Cavarero has recently highlighted the difficulties inherent in such a view from a female perspective, when she tackles the notion of 'weak thought'—a current of contemporary Italian philosophy that tries to make the lack of a strong sense of self into a positive: 'It is truly pathetic to wish to speak oneself in the form of a weak subject when woman is lacking a language which would, at the very least, speak her as a subject.'<sup>31</sup> The lack of a female-owned language with which one could create an autonomous world of style is one element which separates Capriolo from Benn's aims.

This becomes more evident in the way the narrator's own difficulty in entering this autonomous language is symbolized. One way in which she attempts to create this autonomy of expression is, as I suggested, in her music-making. This too has possible roots in Benn's thoughts that art can arise from the rare convergence of mind and body:

Non esiste affatto una realtà, [. . .] ma certi cervelli realizzano a certi intervalli di tempo i loro sogni, immagini del grande sogno primordiale, in un sapere che ricorda a ritroso. Questa realizzazione si compie in 'pietra, verso, flauto', e allora sorge l'arte; a volte soltanto in pensieri ed estasi. (Benn, quoted in *Assoluto*, p. 19)

The flute-playing of *Il doppio regno* has an obvious source here. The pull away from her journal-writing to a music which forms the essence of the hotel represents her attempt to return to the sense of oneness with the universe, through art, desired by Benn. However, this music is revealed as a closed Other—a male language, masquerading as universal. The phallic symbolism of the flute is reinforced by the narrator's response to it:

All'idea di toccare quello strumento, di accostarlo alle labbra, fui colta da un orrore e da

<sup>29</sup> See her 1989 review 'Benn, mistico che non crede'.

<sup>30</sup> 'Gottfried Benn, il nichilismo redento dalla bellezza', p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Adriana Cavarero, 'Towards a Theory of Sexual Difference', in *The Lonely Mirror: Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory*, ed. by Sandra Kemp and Paola Bono (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 189–221 (p. 194). Henceforth referred to as 'Towards'.

un disgusto tanto intensi quanto era stata poco prima la mia felicità. Mi alzai e uscii di corsa dalla sala. (*Doppio*, p. 79)

While many read her later participation in the music-making as an acceptance of the annihilation of the self, I would suggest that it also points towards assimilation into the philosophical system in which only the symbolic order (of the father) and the assumption of the phallus offer resolution. In the labyrinth of male cultural mores the narrator's exit into a real alternative seems to be blocked at every turn.

Another point at which the female reader encounters Benn's thought differently without being able to share the mode of transcendence is in the foundational importance of an act of violence towards the female, identified by Capriolo herself as 'il matricidio d'Oreste, con il distacco violento di "ciò che pensa" da "ciò che vive"'. Western man's 'nume tutelare', she acknowledges, 'è Pallade Atena, la dea senza madre'.<sup>32</sup> Taking this event as the foundation of language perpetuates the act itself: 'the earliest matricide is an inexorable past that is always already repeated in the language of the sons'.<sup>33</sup> This eternal return leads Cavarero, who draws heavily upon Luce Irigaray's interpretation of this matricide as more important to Western culture than the Freudian Oedipal myth, to the suggestion that

there is no mother tongue, since there is no language of woman. Our language is a foreign language which we have not learned by translation from our own tongue. And yet, it is not ours, it is foreign, suspended in a faraway place that rests upon the missing language. ('Towards', p. 197)

This female alienation from language is crucial to finding the female author in *Il doppio regno*. The narrator's attempt to re-enact the matricide in order to speak the 'foreign language' without alienation is evident in the gradual erasure of the memory of a mother figure, which she has speculated earlier may recall a moment of traumatic separation from her own mother, or even her mother's death (*Doppio*, p. 60). The names she associates with this memory, Rosa and Maddalena, reflect Capriolo's own maternal line.<sup>34</sup>

Benn's expressionist autonomy is predicated on the symbolic function of the female in more than one way, however. She is also his muse: 'Una poesia [. . .] è rivolta alla musa, e quest'ultima esiste tra l'altro per mascherare il fatto che le poesie non sono rivolte a nessuno' (Benn, quoted in *Assoluto*, p. 85). As this muse she is also vacuum, thus made into a symbol herself and negated as subject or 'content'. The 'conventional "privileging" of woman as a conduit into the depths of man's soul' is mirrored, according to Rachel Jones, by a 'cliché-ridden portrayal of woman as dangerously excessive corporeality'.<sup>35</sup> The body evidently has its role to play in Benn's paradoxical transcendence of reality:

<sup>32</sup> 'Benn, mistico che non crede', p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Philosophy*, trans. by Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Áine O'Healy (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Rosa and Maria Maddalena are the names of Capriolo's grandmother and mother respectively; see Gillian Ania's introduction to Paola Capriolo, *The Dual Realm*, trans. by Gillian Ania and Doug Thompson (Market Harborough: Troubador, 2000), p. xxxi n. 14.

<sup>35</sup> 'Mosaics of the Self: Kantian Objects and Female Subjects in the Work of Claire Goll and Paula Ludwig' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 1997), p. 105.

Il corpo trascende l'anima: precisamente su questa 'svolta' antiplatonica si fonda l'idea dell'arte come trascendenza. [. . .] Il corpo trascende l'anima; l'arte è 'corporea'; l'arte è trascendenza. (Benn, quoted in *Assoluto*, p. 17)

Capriolo observes that Benn shares with Thomas Mann a 'decadent' attraction to physical suffering as an artistically productive mechanism: 'L'io lirico ha in se stesso il proprio confine invalicabile e di se stesso deve nutrirsi in un continuo processo di autovampirismo' (*Assoluto*, p. 86). However, this not entirely healthy body is more often than not projected onto the female. It is less an act of vampirism of the self for which Benn's poetry is notorious than an engendering of the male subject dependent on the cancerous female body.<sup>36</sup> Jones, writing on Benn's representation of woman in poetry, suggests that man 'steals his own freedom from the constraints of individuality, whilst simultaneously repeating the reduction of woman to an unchanging sexed materiality'.<sup>37</sup> Although this depiction of woman is particularly acute in Benn's work, it foregrounds the dominant mode of relationship between women and the male canon: the latter speaks a language which symbolically excludes the former. Indeed, woman 'does not represent herself *in* language, but rather accepts with language the representations of her produced by the man' (Cavarero, 'Towards', p. 197).

As the narrator's memories of herself as fiction and her attempts to achieve Bennian artifice would suggest, seeking to speak this language leads to an alienation from the sexed self: 'Ma il mio corpo mi parla un linguaggio che non comprendo' (*Doppio*, p. 25). This tendency in Western thought has led Irigaray to declare that

We have to discover a language [*langage*] which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language [*langue*] attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal.<sup>38</sup>

By drawing further on the work of Adriana Cavarero, one of the most inventive followers of Irigaray's thought in Italy, I shall show how the philosophical grounds of this exclusion from language have made their mark on Capriolo's *Il doppio regno*.

#### 'That Logic of The One'

It is generally accepted that Capriolo subscribes to the separation of body and mind endorsed by many of those writers from whom she openly draws inspiration. As analyses of Benn's poetry have indicated, gender often comes into play in this binary, through the association of the mind with the masculine and the body with the feminine, the former repressing its implicit dependency on the latter. Many critics have observed that this association of long standing

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. 'Husband and Wife Going through a Cancer Ward', in *Gottfried Benn: Selected Poems*, ed. by Friedrich Wilhelm Wodtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 51–52. Although the couple are mentioned in the title, only the man is given speech to articulate some potent images, almost all of the sexual decay of the female body, which convey a chilling impression of 'Schadenfreude'.

<sup>37</sup> *Mosaics of the Self*, p. 109.

<sup>38</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', trans. by David Macey in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. and intro. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 34–46 (p. 43).

demands reconsideration,<sup>39</sup> and I believe we must pay special interest when women choose to duplicate it, as Capriolo does. When confronted with the visitors from the outside world, the narrator says:

la solitudine non ha sesso, e nel mio aspetto non vi è nulla della femminilità di Laura. Ma potrei davvero tornare a essere come lei? E se potessi, lo vorrei ancora? (*Doppio*, p. 99)

According to most critics, this highlights the narrator's attempt to lose her gendered identity—which gender this is should be a matter of indifference. The narrator's particular attention to Laura ('osservavo soprattutto la donna, con un misto di ostilità e attrazione' (*Doppio*, p. 86)) is supposedly a result of the fact that she too once regarded herself as feminine. It is easy to overlook the narrator's attempts to lose a female body, as well as the trappings of femininity. Casting off those trappings of gender cannot, however, be equated with bypassing sexual difference.

One conversation between the narrator and her would-be Pygmalion, Bruno, gives us a telling insight into the importance of the link between feminine clothing (in this case a gauche over-sized evening dress loaned by Laura) and readmittance into a heterosexual economy:

'Se ho abbandonato la divisa, non è stato certo per vanità.'  
'E allora perché?'  
'Perché ricambio, almeno in parte, il vostro affetto.' (*Doppio*, p. 132)

Although the 'vostro' does refer here to the affection of all three guests, Bruno is the character in whom it manifests itself as heterosexual desire, and whose approval she tentatively seeks. The narrator explains how she has reassumed a conventional female identity by casting off the supposedly neutral uniform given to her by the waiters of the hotel. However she had a very specific goal in donning that waiter's uniform—that of entering the male symbolic order, which is directly related to the author's experience of becoming a writer among (male) equals. The question of language makes this even clearer. Most critics who discuss the role of the waiters in *Il doppio regno* share the view that they represent some acceptably 'androgynous' being. Yet the Greek roots of this adjective underline that it should be applied only to something having the characteristics of both male and female, or being neither specifically. According to Cavarero's argument, however, the acceptance we witness in the critical reception of the novel of the male as androgynous serves to highlight the conflation of male with the universal-neutral that lies at the root of Western philosophy's non-thinking of sexual difference.<sup>40</sup> As Cavarero writes: "'Man" holds good then, first of all as a phenomenon sexed in the masculine, but it also holds good, and precisely because of this, as universal neutral of the masculine gender and of the feminine one' ('Towards', p. 190). It is in language's betrayal of women that the fault-line of Capriolo's understanding of universality appears, as the following comment demonstrates:

<sup>39</sup> See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> See Gillian Ania, 'At Capriolo's Hotel: Heaven, Hell and Other Worlds in *Il doppio regno*', *Italian Studies*, 14 (1999), 132–56 (pp. 137–38).

Anziché creare un contrasto, quell'abbigliamento era in perfetta armonia con i corpi, con i movimenti, forse con i pensieri stessi di *quegli uomini*, mentre nel mio modo di portare il vestito si rifletteva senza dubbio un'intima lacerazione. (*Doppio*, p. 133, emphasis added)

There is no doubt about the fact that this is a *male* identity she assumes. The hairdresser's reply to her dismayed response to her haircut ("È un taglio maschile." — "Signora, è l'unico che io sappia eseguire") (*Doppio*, p. 68)) gives rise to the idea that in the hotel there are no other options. To be accepted by the staff of the hotel, to transcend the trammels of mortal flesh, she must *not* be female, but neither is she truly androgynous. Within the binary economy of language this makes her new identity a male one. This fact is clear throughout the book—from the moment of her arrival, when she says, 'mi aspettavo di veder giungere una cameriera, invece si presentò un *uomo*' (*Doppio*, p. 25, emphasis added), the waiters are always referred to as *men*. This idea of becoming an 'honorary man'<sup>41</sup> is one long associated with women attempting to enter the public realm of writing, but anticipated less in readings of late twentieth-century works.

However, the assumption that men represent the neutral-universal, the opportunity to separate the body from mind, persists and is indeed 'the true monster', as Cavarero insists: 'man recognizes himself fully in the neutral universal without the need for any addition, precisely because of that monstrosity which makes a neutral and a male cohabit in the universal man' ('Towards', p. 192). It is no coincidence, then, that the dream from which Capriolo drew inspiration for this novel was in fact populated by more obvious monsters:

*Il doppio regno* è nato proprio da un sogno. All'inizio l'ho trascritto tale e quale, poi ho deciso di cambiarlo quasi totalmente, mantenendo solo l'idea di partenza. Per fortuna: era un incubo terribile, l'albergo appariva come un luogo di supplizi e allucinazioni, i camerieri non avevano facce umane bensì da mostri, sembrava di stare tra le pagine di un romanzo di Lovecraft, suscitava solo orrore e desiderio di risvegliarsi.<sup>42</sup>

Felman suggests that dreams are

susceptible of telling us *about our own autobiography another story* than the one we knew or had believed to be our own, delivering a different kind of evidence and transmitting, thus, a narrative that cannot be narrated, or even imagined, in any other way. (*What Does a Woman Want?*, p. 122, emphasis original)

In this respect they may be helpful in overcoming that notorious difficulty for women of writing their own story. Thus we might consider that *Il doppio regno* tells a story about this female writer which could not be told any other way.

The desire to return to oneself, to 'risvegliarsi', that Capriolo felt in her dream is something the narrator continually fights, because of the negative valency which a return to the self as female would imply. Cavarero explains this negative valency as follows:

<sup>41</sup> Carolyn Heilbrun, 'Non-Autobiographies of "Privileged" Women: England and America', in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. by Bella Brodzski and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 62–76.

<sup>42</sup> Capriolo, quoted in Marisa Rusconi, 'Paola Capriolo: il rifiuto del giorno', *Tuttetorie*, 6–7 (1992), 6–8 (p. 8).

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Thus woman is the universal man with 'a plus' of feminine gender. We well know how this addition does not empower the universal, but rather disempowers it: in fact the 'plus' is more coherently a 'minus', that is, the neutral-universal man minus the masculine gender which is precisely the real content and the true genesis of this universalisation. ('Towards', p. 193)

The narrator cannot forget the negative 'plus' in her own appearance as a waiter:

Vedevo uno dei camerieri, simile a loro come essi sono simili gli uni agli altri, e al tempo stesso quella che vedevo ero ancora io. Un io profondamente umiliato, sul punto di dissolversi, ma non dissolto del tutto. La sua incongruenza, ora me ne rendo conto, era dovuta appunto a questi relitti di individualità, a *un atteggiarsi pur sempre di donna del viso e del corpo* che faceva della divisa, con le sue linee squadrate, un assurdo travestimento. (*Doppio*, p. 72, emphasis added)

With the appearance of the outsider, Laura, not only is the narrator's former *femininity* presented as a negative cultural construct, but also her having been *female*. It is not only on the shedding of the cultural construct of gender that the attainment of pure thought is based. The 'liberazione' (*Doppio*, p. 43) of which the narrator dreams is one of freedom from the sexed self as *female*, which is perceived to be inferior. Universal thought is represented as accessible through a tacit compliance with the masculine assumption of universality. Cavarero argues that this is premised upon the exclusion of the live sexed body, associated with the female, from a thought defined as a male, 'neutral' territory.<sup>43</sup> The narrator's rejection of her gender and sexual difference in relation to her analysis of Laura's physical appearance goes beyond her own inability to wear a dress any more. Her refusal to be a 'donna' is undercut by an awareness of her own female body in spite of herself:

Eppure ho lineamenti più regolari dei suoi, più delicati. Non lo dico per vanità né per rivalità femminile: sentimenti del genere appartengono a un modo di essere cui ho rinunciato, e mai mi sono sentita meno donna che di fronte a lei. (*Doppio*, p. 90)

Despite rejecting her socially constructed 'feminine', the female narrator cannot find a satisfactory new reality in the hotel's neutrality to replace this construct because that neutrality is false. Her rejection of Bruno—'l'arrogante samaritano'—and his failure to understand her is founded in his Pygmalion-like desire to take her and mould her according to his will, the archetype of the male able to recognize his own gender only through the difference of the 'other' constituted by the female. So neither the hotel nor Bruno's world offers the narrator a chance to realize herself. It is no wonder the creation of her own transcendental myth—*il doppio regno*—becomes her only way forward. What Capriolo's narrator is trapped by is, in Cavarero's terms, 'the entire conceptual castle of the logic of the one':

We women are at present inside, not outside, this castle: it is thus also necessary to refine our weapon of self-diffidence. [. . .] It means [. . .] to be suspicious of the purported neutrality of language, of its scientific objectivity, and also of its beauty. ('Towards', p. 219)

It is the siren call of beautiful language and form, described by Capriolo in her thesis on Benn (*Assoluto*, p. 97), to which the narrator of *Il doppio regno* finds

<sup>43</sup> *In Spite of Plato*, p. 26.

herself succumbing, whether in the form of poetry, music, or ultimately the linguistic structure of the hotel itself.

### *Conclusion*

The dramatization of Capriolo's struggle to resist the siren call of male language shows how her postmodern, intertextual approach blends with fictitious autobiography in order to address an issue that still haunts the female writer: the lack of her own literary language and the temptation of a beautiful (male) one that excludes her. The narrator finds herself caught between the world of thought which demands that she behave as a universal figure (therefore a man) and the 'real' world which demands that she masquerade behind its limited idea of 'femininity'. Her sexed self remains in the double kingdom somewhere between these two constructions. Thus the struggle between the 'albergo' and the 'mondo fuori' centres on the issue of sexual difference and gender as experienced by a woman writer.

The 'dual realm' of the narrator's journal-writing expresses her inability to choose between the two worlds, in so far as it precludes closure. In a similar way the author herself can contemplate her own experience of disorientation and distance it through the model of a fictitious autobiography that aims to leave a past self behind in fiction. She uses the fantastic genre to render it stranger, to keep the reader outside, intrigued, trying to fathom the mystery of the narrator's relationship to the hotel. What Capriolo wants to distance in *Il doppio regno* is a self in conflict—a split self whose inescapably female identity fits uncomfortably into Capriolo's own idea of a writer's neutrality. Thus reading the autobiographical aspect of Capriolo's text becomes a reading of her own relationship with her cultural autobiography, which emerges as conflictual and fragmented, full of unconscious resistance. The fantastic space provides Capriolo with a language to articulate her otherwise inexpressible relationship as a female author to the 'biblioteca paterna'.

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

DANIELLE HIPKINS