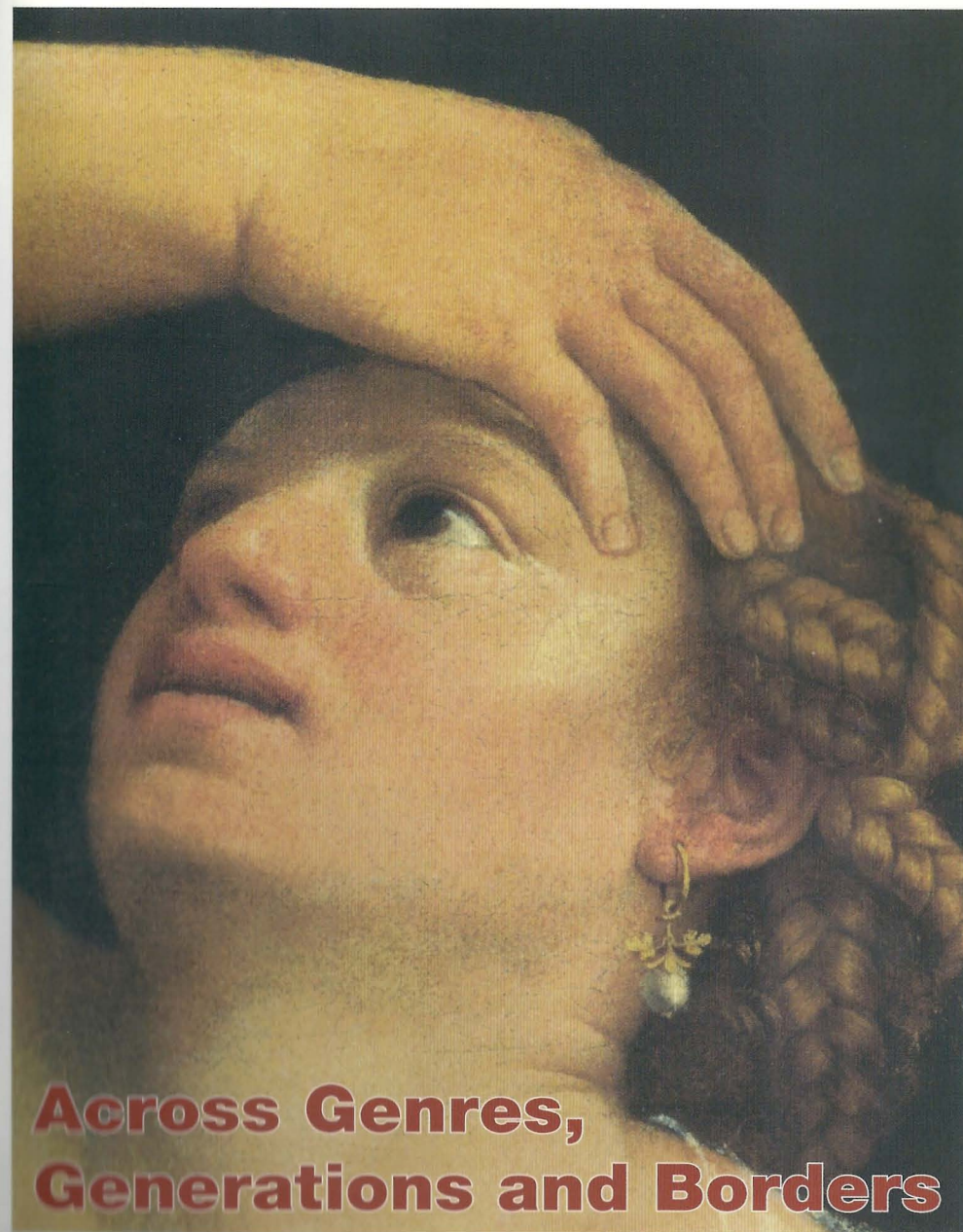


This book examines the processes involved in writing the lives of women, both as autobiographies and as biographies. Some essays are theoretical discussions about the constructions of self-articulation in women's life writing. Others are more autobiographical, emphasising the importance of self-articulation for creating possibilities for self-direction.

Adopting different theoretical approaches, chapters in this collection highlight the connections between subjectivity and history, feminist concerns about mothering and the mother-daughter relationships, autobiography, discourse and its framing of the relationship between text and life, and the ethics of constructing biographies.

The book is divided into three parts: the first part focuses on the process of writing lives as expressed but also contested in epistolary narratives, autobiography and historical fiction. The second part considers notions of female genealogy and the relationship with the maternal, both biological and symbolic. The third part comprises articles which deal with writing outside geographical and metaphorical borders.



Across Genres, Generations and Borders

Italian Women Writing Lives

Edited by Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson

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Generations and
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Monash Romance Studies

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Re-Thinking the Politics and Practice of Life Writing

Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson

ACROSS: *prep.* from one side to the other side of; intersecting; passing over at any angle; opposite; in contact with; *adv.* crosswise; transversely from one side to the other. (*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*)

As the title, *Across Genres, Generations and Borders: Italian Women Writing Lives*, suggests, the essays in this volume question, investigate and problematise the terms 'life,' 'writing,' and 'woman.' We have deliberately chosen a title that is open to multiple interpretations to highlight the book's two interrelated aims: namely, to examine the processes involved in writing the lives of women, both as autobiographies and as biographies, and to link the process of narration (*narrazione*) to the act of writing lives and the search for the subject-woman. The accounts of identities which emerge from this collection of essays are set off by an understanding of life writing as a political practice. All of the essays in this collection give voice to practices and traditions which are usually lost in monolithical representations of dominant (especially male) culture, and show ways in which such representations can be challenged. Some essays are more autobiographical, emphasising the importance of self-articulation for creating possibilities for self-direction. Others are theoretical discussions about the constructions of self-articulation in women's life writing.

The two chapters by Paola Bono and Ida Dominijanni, frame the theoretical arguments of the collection. Bono's essay refers specifically to women's auto/biography as a political project in the making, while Dominijanni's contribution is an example of the practice of this politics. All of the essays develop and defend the insight that there can be no fixed identity, that there is no ultimate knowledge, and that representation is no longer a matter of veracity or accuracy but merely of competing discourses. Notions of authenticity and truth are, by all accounts, outdated. Yet, within certain discourses there emerges the desire for affirmation of self or origin. In particular, in women's life writing the need to reconsider, reclaim and reconcile hybrid forms of self-definition is not just a moral, but also an epistemological requirement – a necessary condition for understanding one's 'place in the world.'

As Paola Bono and Graziella Parati have argued, there are risks in but also good reasons for avoiding clear definitions of biography and autobiography. Parati writes that "autobiography as a genre allows for a constant redefinition of its boundaries and limitations." As such, it is "a hybrid and malleable genre that partakes of other genres and becomes a literary space where a woman can experiment with the construction of a female 'I' and, sometimes, a feminist

Gender and Patriotism in Carla Capponi's *Con cuore di donna*

Maja Mikula

Introduction

Carla Capponi (known also by her wartime names of *inglesina*, the “little English girl,” Elena, and Silvia) was born in Rome on 7 December 1918, as the firstborn of Giuseppe Capponi, a mining engineer, and Maria Tamburri, a schoolteacher and union activist. Carla and her sister Flora, sixteen months her junior, received their primary education at home from their parents, who wanted to protect them from fascist indoctrination characteristically imparted through the public education system. The two sisters developed a close bond, central during Carla's formative years. The third sibling, Piero, was much younger (born in 1928) and thus could not take part in their youthful exploits. The economic hardship the family endured after the death of Carla's father in a mining accident in 1940 forced both sisters to forego further studies and enter the workforce in their early twenties. Carla joined the Communist Party in the same year (Slaughter 46).

Soon after the fall of fascism and the ensuing German occupation of Rome, Carla's home in the Foro di Traiano became a distribution centre for the Communist Party newspaper, *L'Unità*, and the newspaper of the Catholic left, *Voce Operaia*; safehaven for partisans and runaway Italian soldiers; and a venue for meetings of various antifascist groups, including Patriotic Action Groups (*Gruppi di Azione Patriottica*, or GAP) – the urban antifascist guerilla engaging in acts of sabotage and attacks on German strongholds – of which Carla later became an active member. She participated in numerous actions against the Germans, including bomb strikes and armed attacks against prominent individuals and the key establishments run by the occupying forces. She was also a vice-commander of a partisan unit on the outskirts of Rome, at Palestrina and Monti Prenestini.

In the postwar period, she was a Member of Parliament for the Communist Party on two occasions (1953 and 1972), a member of the Justice Commission in the early 1970s, and of the Presidential Committee of the National Association of Italian Partisans (ANPI) until her death in 2000. As a woman who was actively involved in the armed resistance, one of only sixteen Italian women decorated with a gold medal for military bravery in World War II, Capponi is a legendary figure who bends the traditional perceptions of patriotism and gendered agency.

Together with other organisers and executors of the controversial Via Rasella attack on a division of SS military police in Nazi-occupied Rome in March 1944, Capponi has been held responsible by some for the subsequent German reprisal, in which 335 persons were brutally killed in the Ardeatine caves near Rome. The prompt reprisal was announced by the Germans *post facto*, three days after the attack, on the front page of the Roman daily *Il Giornale d'Italia*. The announcement read as follows:

“Nel pomeriggio del 23 marzo 1944, elementi criminali hanno eseguito un attentato con lancio di bomba contro una colonna tedesca di Polizia in transito per Via Rasella. In seguito a questa imboscata, 32 uomini della Polizia tedesca sono stati uccisi e parecchi feriti ... Il Comando Tedesco, perciò, ha ordinato che per ogni Tedesco ammazzato dieci criminali comunisti-badogliani saranno fucilati. Quest'ordine è già stato eseguito.”¹

However, the myth that the Germans first publicly pledged to forego the reprisal if the partisans responsible for the attack turned themselves in has been present for decades in the popular imagination.² In 1948, a group of relatives of the Ardeatine victims initiated a legal suit against the perpetrators of the Via Rasella attack. Notwithstanding the court's decision, which exonerated the partisans from any responsibility for the reprisal and declared the Via Rasella attack a legitimate act of war, public condemnation has persisted until the present. For decades, Capponi was the target of threatening phone calls and abusive graffiti. Interviewed in the 1980s by the Canadian documentary filmmaker Shelley Saywell, she described this persistent exposure to public abuse as “personally very upsetting.” She also felt that most of the attacks targeted her in particular (Saywell 100), perhaps taking advantage of her assumed greater vulnerability as a woman. In 1954, the case was taken to the Roman Court of Appeal, but it was dismissed again, only to be resurrected in the 1990s, with yet another judicial inquiry (1996-99) seeking to classify the Via Rasella attack as a crime. For a second time, the case was concluded in favour of the accused, and the attack was sanctioned by the court as a legitimate act of war.

A bequest to posterity

In her book *Con cuore di donna* (With the Heart of a Woman), Carla Capponi constructs her identity through the moral dilemmas and choices she had to work through in a crucial moment in the history of contemporary Italy, namely during the two decades of the consolidation of fascist dictatorship (1922-43) and the resistance period (1943-44). Although her decision to fight in antifascist resistance seems to challenge the conventional gender expectations of her time, she interprets it as the only natural response in the given historical circumstances. Moreover, the text displays a particular version of patriotism, associated with antifascist resistance and the first post-World War II constitution, based on ostensibly universal values, yet firmly rooted in the specific Italian historical and socio-cultural context. This study examines Capponi's construction of her gendered and national identity, interpreting it as

a politically charged act of resistance by someone whose version of truth has been under attack, and as a master narrative with a therapeutic potential for the author.

Capponi's book is not easily classifiable in terms of genre. Published by Il Saggiatore (Milan) as part of the *Collana storica* (History Series), it is simultaneously an autobiography in which the author's life is interpreted as an intersection of verifiable historical circumstances, and a history in which the historian herself was one of the participants. In this history, the author's own recollections serve as the key primary sources, at times reinforced by other material, such as official documents, newspaper articles and oral history. Reading Hobsbawm's *A Short Century*, Capponi becomes aware of the extent to which the public affairs recorded in his book have made an impact on her own life, making her a valuable witness of the events which shaped her country's recent history (Capponi 11-12). She sets out to take her memories out of the private sphere, motivated by a desire to claim a place in history for the numerous fellow resistance fighters whose names would otherwise be forgotten (12).

It is evident that Capponi, like many women autobiographers before her, goes to great lengths to explain the motives that prompted her to produce a text intended for public consumption, to "justify [her] entry into the realm of public (thus, male) discourse" (Morgan 8). In the Preface, she offers a number of interesting thoughts on the relationship between personal and social memory, autobiography and history. The reader is told that *Con cuore di donna* was commissioned by the publisher and that the author's immediate response was one of "panic," "torment" and "profound depression." Memory, says Capponi, follows a logic all of its own: "[u]na memoria ha molte altre memorie, attaccate al tronco di un albero come rami scomposti ma pure armoniosi" (7).³ Once fixed in the narrative form, thought is reduced to a lifeless skeleton, "come se perdesse interesse, divenisse noioso (7, as if it lost interest and became boring)." Writing is further perceived as a kind of life mapping, which forces the author "a considerare gli spazi entro i quali si è svolta la [sua] vita, a misurarne il valore (to consider the spaces within which [her] life has unfolded and measure their worth)." (8) It also conjures up thoughts of death, as the author comes to terms with her advanced age and the limited time left for new experiences (8).⁴

Published in late 2000, and officially launched a week before the author's death at the age of eighty-two, *Con cuore di donna* may be read as Capponi's bequest to posterity, in which her memory of personal experience is offered to validate the truthfulness of historical interpretation. The detailed account of the events that unfolded immediately after the Via Rasella attack, in which the author implicitly addresses the accusations she was exposed to day after day throughout the postwar period,⁵ opens up the possibility of reading the entire text as a therapeutic endeavour, that is, an undertaking by the author to exculpate herself before the judgment of history.

With the heart of a woman: a gendered perspective

The title of the text, as well as its discursive framework, reveal the author's subjectivity as highly gendered. The title itself captures the ambiguity of a gendered war experience by inviting different readings of the word "heart," with its overlapping semantic fields – as the locus of both love/compassion and spirit/audacity. With the "heart of a woman," Capponi does not engage in acts of violence lightly, seeing them first and foremost as forced upon her by historical circumstances. Time after time, taking life presents moral dilemmas, which can only be resolved by calling to mind the remedial intent of each action, to prevent further violence by the Germans. In particular, immediately before the Via Rasella bombing, Capponi has to find strength to perform the attack by reminding herself of all the atrocities committed by the Germans, of the devastation of Rome caused by allied bombing, of the torture and executions of her comrades, of deportations, concentration camps and the numerous Italian soldiers who perished on the Russian, Greek or Yugoslav fronts (Capponi 229).

By joining the armed struggle against the occupying forces, Capponi and other female combatants in the Italian Resistance transgressed the popular expectations that permitted women a limited range of stereotypically female duties, such as care for the wounded; assistance with food, clothes and sanitary equipment; sabotage of enemy supplies; organisation of strikes, demonstrations and various cultural and educational activities; and engagement in the production and distribution of an underground press. Capponi's choice would have been considered unusual, if not emphatically improper, by many of her contemporaries. In fact, even her mother considered it downright madness. When, in the growing turmoil upon the announcement of the armistice on 8 September 1943, Capponi declared that she wanted to join a group of armed civilians inviting Romans to resist the impending German occupation, her mother's immediate response was: "Ma sei matta! Ma che ci va a fare una donna? Quell'invito è rivolto agli uomini" (96).⁶ Capponi herself explains her decision as a natural, commonsensical response to the "orrore delle aberranti teorie nazifasciste (horror of aberrant Nazi-fascist theories)" (13).

However, the entire first chapter of her autobiography, entitled "The garden and the world" ("Il giardino e il mondo"), seems to be an endeavour by the author to 'justify' her decision by constructing a well-matched identity through an account of her family background and early childhood. Indeed, when asked by a co-fighter, Lucia Ottobrini (wartime name Maria), what motivated her to participate actively in the war, she realises that her choice was determined by the isolation of her family, which had a "culture" of its own, different and far removed from fascist reality (142).

If such a socially unsanctioned decision came to her as the only natural course of action, this has to be explicable in terms of who she was, of what stock, and how she spent her formative years. The story of her family over

several generations conveys the rootedness and the Italianness of her male ancestors (with origins traceable to the sixteenth century, in Tuscany and the Marche region), as well as their open-minded spirit, demonstrated by their marriage choices: “le consorti dei miei avi sono inglesi, tedesche, polacche, protestanti, ebrei, cattoliche: segno che i Capponi non erano per il detto ‘moglie e buoi dei paesi tuoi’ e avevano quantomeno una visione europea del loro mondo di interessi” (15).⁷ The family’s nobility and considerable fortunes in land and mansions derived from the ownership of a number of paper-mills in the Marche region, which were supplying paper to the Vatican State until the annexation of Rome to the Italian Kingdom in 1870.

Thus, the narrative structure of Capponi’s text reflects a tendency, characteristically female according to some critics (Hooton), to accord a significant role to childhood experiences. The memoir covers two main periods: the author’s childhood and early adulthood during the two decades of fascism (1922-43), and the occupation of Rome (September 1943 to June 1944) when she actively participated in the armed resistance.

Women’s narratives [...] seem characteristically bent on cherishing the past for its own sake, recreating its sensuous flavor, rediscovering the nuances of relationships or the sensations of old familiar rhythms. The patterns that women perceive in their lives tend to converge around the central early experience; childhood is the heart of the later story, which frequently attempts to explain itself in terms of the early life, to perceive itself as an elaboration on a given pattern, or a reconstitution of given ingredients. (Hooton 35)

The early years spent in the isolation of her parental home, away from society and protected as much as possible from fascist propaganda, are seen by Capponi as a period of primeval innocence, lived as a “simulation of reality” enclosed in an “eden” inside the walls of their garden (27).

Furthermore, the subject of Capponi’s autobiography is not a self-contained, unified, ‘specular’ self. Rather, the speaking voices, both individual and collective, are many. In the preface, the author identifies this multi-vocality as an essential part of her authorial intention:

Vorrei poter scrivere veramente per gli altri, degli “altri,” [sic!] di tutte le persone, i fatti, gli avvenimenti che hanno attraversato la mia vita. Non dire di me come soggetto che si mostra e si fa riconoscere e indagare, ma di me come tramite per far conoscere personaggi, paesaggi, situazioni, abitudini di vita e tutto il mondo che ha popolato la mia esistenza e quella delle persone del mio tempo.⁸ (8)

The child Carla, the Resistance fighter Elena, and Carla the author, are engaged in a perpetual dialogue with one another and with a number of ‘significant others’: family, friends, acquaintances, political allies and opponents. This multiplicity of voices may be interpreted as a mark of what Hélène Cixous has called *écriture féminine* (feminine writing), or Luce Irigaray *le parler femme* (womanspeak). Notably, Irigaray’s womanspeak is interpreted as arising naturally when women speak among themselves, but vanishing again

in the presence of men (Moi 144). Capponi likewise dedicates her text to the schoolgirl Betta, thus framing it as a dialogue between two women of different generations, in a stereotypically ‘women’s business’ gesture of handing down tradition.

Feminist literary theorists have identified a “primal connection to significant others” and a “sense of the self as plural” as crucial elements of female autobiographical tradition: “from at least as early as the Renaissance [...] women have been aware of their roles/identities as multiple – and, given societal constraints on women’s aspirations, frequently in conflict with one another” (Morgan 8). Capponi’s account of her childhood during the Fascist *ventennio* focuses on family relationships, primarily with her sister Flora and mother Maria, as well as her father Giuseppe, whose quiet, yet unswerving antifascism has an indelible impact on Carla’s development. Three carefully selected episodes substantiate Giuseppe’s political stance: his refusal to remove his hat and stand during the playing of the Fascist anthem in the late 1920s (30); his indignation at Carla’s participation in a swimming contest organised by fascist youth in the early 1930s (44-46); and finally, his straight refusal to join the National Fascist Party in 1935, which resulted in his forced four-year working sojourn in Albania, only to be revoked after his wife’s pragmatic acceptance of fascist Party membership. (64-65)

Yet, Giuseppe does not actively resist the fascist regime, perhaps for a lack of courage to oppose the dictatorship more decisively, “come avevano fatto altri, ora costretti nelle carceri, relegati al confine politico, emigrati all’estero o ridotti ai margini della società nelle borgate, perseguitati e ributtati in carcere ogni qual volta si svolgevano le manifestazioni ‘patriottiche’ del PNF” (54).⁹ Carla’s father thus performs an important narrative function in the text: he is the key for interpreting her motivations and moral choices later in life. His compelling adherence to his political persuasion in fact reaches its full potential only through his daughter’s audacious, unconditional resistance.

On the other hand, the female ‘significant others’ of her early life, her mother and sister, despite their assumed or demonstrated sharing of Giuseppe’s basic ideological standpoint, appear to be more clearly existentially driven by the vicissitudes of daily life than by a clear political vision. Flora thus participates in Carla’s early “acts of resistance” against Fascism: together, the two girls steal a copy of a pamphlet about the Matteotti murder, make five copies of it by hand and distribute it among their friends at school (48-52); together, they play a practical joke on a young fascist soldier, by dropping into the sea his precious gold ring, part of his booty from the Spanish Civil War (63). Throughout their childhood, Capponi notes, the two sisters would always talk about themselves in the plural, so strong was the oneness of the spirit with which they engaged in their youthful adventures.

However, Flora’s marriage to an army officer, Giulio Calenti, signifies a rupture of the relationship between the two sisters. Capponi does not tell us much about Giulio, apart from a hint about his possible pro-fascist stance.

We are told that the moment he proposed, in the year following Giuseppe Capponi's death, and while Flora was still under age, he expected his future wife to discontinue her office job (71). The young couple soon moved to the provincial town of Pesaro, where Flora was isolated from her family, friends and the vibrant Roman atmosphere (89-90). After a brief reunion with Flora in the summer of 1943, Carla left her sister's house in Pesaro, saddened by Flora's pervasive melancholy and her inability or unwillingness to talk about it. After this emotional episode, which conveys a feeling of mourning for a Flora as she had been in their childhood and as she could have been had she not been repressed by an unhappy marriage, Flora does not appear at all in the remaining text.

Carla's mother Maria is portrayed as a woman with a primary allegiance to her husband and children, and a charitable spirit sensitive to people's suffering. When Giuseppe is sent to Albania, following his refusal to join the National Fascist Party, she cannot "sopportare la solitudine nella grande casa e la lontananza del suo uomo (bear the solitude of the big house and the absence of her man)" (64-65). Following her friends' advice, she takes the opportunity of enrolling in the Fascist Party and using her connections to bring him back (65). However, listening to the radio announcement of the armistice on 8 September 1943, she is convinced that the Italians have to contribute to the liberation of their country, as the "unica soluzione che può restituirci dignità e onore (only solution that can restore our dignity and honour)" (94). Initially, her own activities are limited to offering shelter and assistance in food and clothing to the homeless and the wounded through a women's charitable organisation (*le dame di San Vincenzo*).

Later, at Carla's initiative, she consents to opening her house in Foro Traiano for the political meetings of various women's organisations, the Communist Party and the Patriotic Action Groups. She takes this decision aware of the risks associated with it. Indeed, in early 1944, she is forced to leave the flat with her teenage son and hide at a friend's house for several days to avoid arrest by the Germans (175). Later, with the help of the concierge, they re-enter their own flat, which has been sealed by the Germans, via the service staircase, and remain there until the end of the occupation of Rome, hidden behind closed windows and with blinds fully drawn (176).

Thus the microcosm of the Capponi family encapsulates the wide range of responses to the fascist dictatorship – with the exception of wholesale support – that were present during that period in Italian society as a whole: from pragmatic adherence and the "wait and see" attitude (*attendismo*), to passive resistance and, finally, active opposition. Yet, in her text, Capponi carefully avoids any moral judgement, which would privilege one response over another and thus 'silence' the voices of those whose choices were different from her own. This is a refreshing strategy, as the author seems to be aware that only a more inclusive narrative can demythologise the resistance rhetoric, to reinstate it as a true foundation stone of national consciousness.¹⁰

While the first two chapters of Capponi's autobiography, focusing respectively on the author's childhood and adolescence, reflect a characteristic authorial perception of self in an intricate network of relationships, the rest of the text, covering the period of the occupation of Rome, places more emphasis on the collective agency of Roman antifascists. Even Rosario Bentivegna, whom she married soon after the war, is portrayed as one of many comrades united by a common political vision and a determination to take an active part in the resistance. There are only sporadic intimations of the "sentimenti di solidarietà, di lealtà, di coraggio nella paura (sentiments of solidarity, loyalty, courage in fear)" (259), which inspired the romantic liaison between the two through the many actions they performed together; hints at the shared love of poetry and music (135-36); and a brief account of their first kiss, in the midst of a burst of machine-gun fire on the way to join the partisans in the countryside (269).

In addition to a "definition of the self in a context of relationship," critics have identified a "judgment of the self in terms of ability to care" (Hooton 34) as another common characteristic of women's autobiographies. In *Con cuore di donna*, Capponi's "ability to care" emerges as an instinctive need to protect others – even those on the enemy side – and spare lives whenever possible. This is particularly true when children are concerned; one of Carla's most pressing preoccupations before an attack is to make sure that there are no children around (207; 233). The occupying forces, on the other hand, are defined in terms of their "inability to care," that is, their disregard for human life, including the life of children. Accordingly, the period of the German occupation of Rome is symbolically circumscribed by two tragic events in which innocent children were killed by the occupying forces – at the beginning of the occupation, two brothers, aged nine and eleven, are brutally murdered by a German soldier while rummaging through a garbage heap to find some food; a day after the liberation, a twelve-year old boy is killed while trying to prevent the retreating German soldiers from blowing up an iron bridge (307-9).

In line with her judgment of the self in terms of ability to care, death emerges as one of the central themes of the book, both in the story of her childhood and in her account of the resistance period, when it was part and parcel of her daily existence. This fixation with death can be interpreted at several levels, encapsulating the multiplicity and interplay of speaking subjects in the text: as a reflection of the moral dilemmas which accompanied her war-time activities in which taking life was a *sine qua non*; of her advanced age at the moment of writing; and finally and most importantly, of her assumed gendered predisposition towards giving life, rather than taking it.

Saving the honour of the fatherland: reclaiming the *italianità* of the resistance movement

"Do you know what they call you here? They call you the little English girl, but you are more Roman than I am!" (Saywell 88)

So far, the focus of this paper has been on an analysis of Capponi's text from the perspective of gender. In this section, I look at the national sentiment emerging from the book, in relation to the current debate surrounding the elusive notion of *italianità*. Since the early 1990s, which saw the collapse of Italy's postwar party system and the growing impetus of European integration, Italian national identity has been at the centre of heated debates. In this context, *italianità* came to be seen as both a potential unifying force above party politics and a safeguard against the would-be assimilation into the European melting pot. During the latter half of the twentieth century, the country's two major parties – the Christian Democrats and the Communists – espoused a rather cautious attitude to nationalism, which had acquired a negative aura through fascist propagandist manipulation. Ostensibly, the universalising aspirations of both parties and their allegiance to their 'ideological homelands' – the United States and the Soviet Union, respectively – also undermined the possibility of creating an integrative national discourse for Italy's so-called First Republic. When this weak model of identification lost its *raison d'être* at the end of the Cold War period, laments over the apparent lack of an alternative nation-centred model entered public discourse from across the political spectrum.

Despite the complexities of this discourse, it is possible to distinguish two general trends within it: an emphasis on 'loyalty to the nation,' based on an essentially ethno-cultural identification,¹¹ which is commonly advocated by the cultures of the political right; and a focus on 'love of country,' or republican patriotism, championed by the cultures of the left.¹² Maurizio Viroli, for example, insists on a clear distinction between nationalism and patriotism and on a dialectical relationship between the two discourses, which, according to him, compete "on the same terrain of passions and particularity" (Viroli 8). Patriotism, in fact, may be interpreted as a continuation of the national discourse prevalent during the First Republic, albeit more clearly entrenched in the specific Italian historical and socio-cultural milieu. According to Viroli, republican patriotism has always been linked to an identifiable 'homeland,' despite its universalising rhetoric:

Even the theorists who wanted to make the distance between the political values of the republic and the sphere of ethnicity and culture as wide as possible, always meant the republic as it was expressed by the common liberty of a particular people with its particular background and its particular culture. The crucial distinction lies in the priority or the emphasis: for the patriots, the primary value is the republic and the free way of life that the republic permits; for the nationalists, the primary values are the spiritual and cultural unity of the people. (Viroli 2)

This emphasis on the embedded nature of patriotism, which may have become more manifest in the last decade or so, is not without precedents in recent Italian history. In his masterful account of liberal socialism, written in exile in 1929, antifascist intellectual Carlo Rosselli urged the socialists not to ignore the "valori più alti della vita nazionale," because by ignoring them they could only facilitate the "gioco delle altre correnti che nello sfruttamento del mito nazionale basano le loro fortune" (Rosselli 135).¹³ Thus, in order to compete with exclusivist nationalism and possibly serve as its "antidote" (Viroli 8), republican patriotism has to call attention to its own version of *italianità*, with which a large proportion of Italians could identify. I would like to suggest that Capponi's book does precisely that, through a number of strategies outlined below.

The period of antifascist resistance and the first republican constitution (1948) would appear to be the natural foundation stones of the republican patriotic national narrative. However, the Italian memories of the two decades of fascism and the early years of the republic are markedly disharmonious, contributing to what historians have called the "most serious lacuna in contemporary Italian culture," that is, an "incapacity to recount the nation's history in a convincing way" (Rusconi, "Will Italy Remain a Nation?" 316). According to Gian Enrico Rusconi,

"[rimangono] reticenze e cautele che impediscono che la Resistenza reale, non la sua trasfigurazione retorica, sia riconosciuta come l'evento fondante della democrazia italiana – come dovrebbe essere. Attorno ad esso persistono memorie divise, inconciliate, antagoniste che nella nuova congiuntura politica sono alla ricerca di un riconoscimento se non di una rivincita."¹⁴ (Rusconi, *Resistenza*, 7)

Indeed, since the early 1990s, historians such as Renzo De Felice (*Rosso e nero*) and Ernesto Galli della Loggia (*La morte della patria*) have challenged the assumptions, rooted in the national rhetoric of the First Republic, of an overwhelming dissatisfaction with and opposition to the fascist rule among the Italians of the time; of the substantial role of the resistance movement in the country's liberation; and, finally, of the moral righteousness of the violent acts committed by the Italian partisans.

Rather than being considered a period of national awakening, or, as it was called by some, a "second Risorgimento" (Adams and Barile; Traniello), for these historians the resistance in fact marked a demise of the Italian sense of national identity. De Felice called for its thorough re-evaluation, "per capire il danno alla moralità nazionale consumato in quel biennio e le ragioni della mancata ricostituzione di quel tessuto morale andato perduto" (De Felice 61).¹⁵ A scholar who has devoted years of painstaking research to recording oral testimonies of the Italian resistance, Alessandro Portelli, has endeavoured to reconcile the discordant memories by shifting his focus away from any moral judgment:

C'è chi ha chiamato queste giornate la "morte della patria," e chi le ha chiamate "secondo Risorgimento." Hanno ragione tutti e due, ma l'uno non si capisce senza l'altro: muore una patria che non era di tutti, e un'altra – per iniziativa e coscienza di molti, se non per consenso e partecipazione di tutti – sta provando a nascere.¹⁶ (Portelli 126)

There is no doubt that Capponi's text seeks to address the contemporary polemic surrounding the role of the resistance in Italian nation building. She interprets the debate in terms of historical revisionism and negationism, used by the right to mask the return of "vecchie ideologie infauste" (old dismal ideologies) (12). Although the target audience of Capponi's book is not limited to a particular age group, the text is meant to carry a message of major consequence for younger generations. In some way, it is dedicated to the schoolgirl Betta, whose letter of admiration inspired Carla to talk about her generation "as it really was" and dissociate it from the many myths that have formed about it in popular imagination. In the preface, Capponi writes: "mi sono determinata a scrivere minutamente di quel tempo ormai 'mitico' o 'mitizzato' perché sento che occorre convincere i giovani di oggi che ognuno di noi fu esattamente un giovane come loro, stretto fra dubbi e paure, convinto di non fare nulla di così eccezionale, di 'storico'" (9).¹⁷ Passing an exam at school, or escaping from the SS by jumping from a window and disappearing into the night, may give us the same feeling of fulfilment, and "[è] solo la spettacolarità della vicenda che ci illude sul valore di quella prova" (10).¹⁸ By dedicating her memoirs to the younger generations, Capponi constructs the resistance as a process that continues in the future, based on a perception of democracy "come sbocco naturale della partecipazione (as a natural outlet for participation)" (10). She structures her version of *italianità* first and foremost on moral grounds. It is an *italianità* based on a belief in tolerance, freedom, and an imagined better future for the country.

Capponi sees the resistance movement as primarily motivated by a desire to "salvare l'onore della patria (save the honour of the fatherland)" (12). This desire resonates with what Rusconi has termed the "explicative patriotism of a part of the Italian population [...] diffused among the people with the disastrous course of the war" (Rusconi, "Will Italy," 317), a "spontaneous feeling of national solidarity developed through a common suffering perceived as not wholly undeserved" (Rusconi, "Will Italy" 318). Although based on the author's reading of universal values, which goes hand in hand with communist internationalism and the rhetoric of inclusion, Capponi's patriotism – with its declared explicative intent – has a uniquely Italian flavour. In the previously mentioned interview with Shelley Saywell, Capponi noted that she and her fellow resistance fighters "wanted to change Italy into a more civilised, freer, more democratic nation where there would be greater social justice. We were young, and young people are affected by injustice. They possess qualities, such as generosity, and feel sympathy towards their fellow men. That is what drove us to organise against Fascism – and later to fight" (Saywell 75-76). *Con cuore di donna* thus reaffirms Maurizio Viroli's thesis that republican patriotism

does not say to the Italians [...] that they should think and act as [...] lovers of an anonymous liberty and justice; it tells them that they should become Italian ... citizens committed to defend and improve their own republic [...] and it says so by using poignant images that refer to shared memories and by telling meaningful stories that give color and warmth to the ideal of the republic. (Viroli 8-9)

Indeed, *Con cuore di donna* abounds with images drawn from a pool of shared memories at the heart of Italian national sentiment. They emerge first and foremost from the topography of the text, in which Rome and its surroundings provide an unambiguous epicentre. The two focal sites, staging the events described in Capponi's book, are the districts of Porta Fabrica,¹⁹ adjacent to the Vatican walls, where she spent most of her early childhood, and Foro Traiano, one of the imperial forums at the heart of Mussolini's monumental Rome, to which her family moved in 1929 and where she lived during her formative years, including most of the period of the armed resistance.

The Rome of Carla Capponi's childhood was undergoing profound transformations during the fascist period, as paligenetic nationalism called for interventions in urban development, which would reinforce the rhetoric of a revival of past greatness. The Duce wanted Rome to "appear marvelous to all the peoples of the world – vast, orderly, powerful, as in the time of the empire of Augustus" (Mussolini, quoted in Fried 31). In order to achieve this, he had to demolish the medieval and Renaissance residential districts, such as those described by Capponi, and relocate their residents to the outer Roman suburbs. When the offices of the prime minister were moved to Piazza Venezia, in the immediate neighbourhood of the Foro Traiano district, many locals were turned out of their homes and shops in order to provide space for enlarging the square and opening up access routes, to make it the focal point for fascist rallies and ceremonies. Interviewed by Alessandro Portelli, Capponi recalls the story of a distinguished local restorer, who, evicted from his little shop in one of the narrow lanes of Foro Traiano and forced to live in a desolate hut in a distant suburb, had to go to the center of Rome on a daily basis to look for families to whom he could offer his services (Portelli 84). On the other hand, Mussolini's oceanic rallies provided an occasion for the Capponi family to seek refuge in the countryside, given their aversion to the show of force of the fascist regime (Capponi 59-60). Thus, while the public, monumental Rome was expanding at the expense of the private, intimate world of local residents and small shop owners, Capponi's sympathy stayed decidedly on the side of the latter.²⁰

Capponi's topography, zoomed in on the districts of Porta Fabrica and Foro Traiano, emblematises two important elements of the Italian national narrative, namely a strong influence of Catholicism and the continuity with the traditions of ancient Rome. Capponi divests the two historical districts of their ceremonial grandeur and presents them from an insider's point of view, as intimate spaces where ordinary people live their daily lives, increasingly

afflicted by the exigencies of modernisation and fascist interventions in urban development. She considers herself privileged for spending her childhood “in quelle strade, in quella Roma antica dove ogni pietra ha una storia (in those streets [...] where every stone has a story to tell),” where the everyday life of the residents unfolds “sulla strada, davanti alle botteghe, sulle sedie poste avanti casa con le donne quiete, intente a lavorare la maglia o a mondare i piselli per la cena” (31).²¹ She describes the still bustling activity of the kilns of Porta Fabrica, producing everything from bricks, vases and earthenware to terracotta saints, nativity cherubs, babies in cradles, and even a particular brand of terracotta whistles shaped like figures of contemporary policemen, for which the resourceful street vendors invented the irreverent advertising slogan of “Il carabiniere! Il carabiniere con il fischio nel sedere! (Policeman, policeman, with a whistle in his back side!)” (21). Capponi’s nostalgic memories of the yet un-sanitised central Rome, with scents of roast chestnuts, fritters and milk emanating from carts, shops and taverns seem to ‘resemanticise’ the images of the same spaces exploited in the nationalist narrative, by ‘contaminating’ them through a lens of intimacy and familiarity.

In a similar fashion, Michelangelo’s magnificent dome of St Peter’s, illuminated during the celebrations to mark the end of the first Jubilee year of the fascist period (1925),²² is seen by Carla at the age of seven as a fairytale spectacle, with hundreds of acrobats hurling themselves from incredible heights to light the myriad of oil lanterns adorning the vault-ribs of the basilica (29-30). The Palatine Hill, the mythical birthplace of the city of Rome, where, according to the legend, Romulus and Remus were found by the she-wolf that kept them alive, becomes a playground for Carla and her sister Flora, who enjoy roaming in the midst of marble pedestals, columns and porticoes, searching for relics of the times gone by (33).

In her account of the period of the occupation of Rome, pivotal for the understanding of the text as a whole,²³ Capponi continues to view the city through a lens of intimacy, now underscored by her awareness of the devastation the war causes to monuments of national heritage. In this section, Rome emerges as a national museum, with “tutti quei preziosi monumenti antichi di duemila anni (all those precious two-thousand-year old monuments)” (102) threatened by allied bombing and continuous gunfire. In one instance, machine-gun fire is described as coming from the Temple of Venus, the “luogo che i romani avevano destinato al tempio della dea della bellezza, dell’amore e della romanità (place the Romans assigned to the goddess of beauty, love and the Roman spirit)” (102). Capponi thus foregrounds a reading of the symbolic value of ancient Rome for a national narrative quite different from that espoused by the fascists, in that it purports to be primarily based on harmony and tolerance. Monuments associated with fascist power have no part in this narrative. They conceal “la vista dei bei tetti di Roma (the view of the beautiful roofs of Rome),” and the *Gappisti* vindicate themselves by covering them

with the graffiti of the hammer and sickle and communist slogans (Capponi 127-8).

Conclusion

From the observations outlined above, it is evident that *Con cuore di donna* aligns itself with the tradition of female life writing at several levels. The text speaks in a multiplicity of voices, rather than constructing a ‘seamless,’ specular self. The author perpetuates another *locus comuni* of female autobiography by going to great lengths to justify her writing endeavour. Throughout the narrative, she questions and implicitly refutes patriarchal constraints. She defines herself in the context of the relationships she has with her significant others, especially when recounting her childhood experiences. She judges herself primarily in terms of an ability to preserve and nurture life, developing a complex moral argument whereby taking life by the resistance fighters is seen as abominable but necessary to prevent further injustice and devastation.

The therapeutic intent of the text is particularly evident from the author’s expression of her national sentiment, which emerges in the form of “expiative patriotism,” informed by a declared desire to “protect the honour of the fatherland.” Furthermore, she positions herself at the heart of the Italian national narrative, by claiming an intimate relationship with the places figuring prominently in its symbolic geography. By emphasising the feminine, caring aspects of her identity, as well as her quintessential *romanità* and *italianità*, Capponi implicitly addresses the revisionist debate and the accusations she was exposed to in later life and offers a definite account, as far as she is concerned, of a controversial episode in recent Italian history.

Notes

1. “In the afternoon of the 23rd March 1944, criminal elements have executed a bomb attack against a German police column in transit through Via Rasella. Following this ambush, 32 German policemen were killed and several were wounded [...] The German command has therefore ordered that for each killed German, ten communist-Badoglio criminals will be shot. This order has already been executed.”
2. It was recently exposed as a myth by the literary historian Alessandro Portelli (1999).
3. “[e]ach memory has many other memories attached to it just like branches are joined to a tree trunk, disarranged, yet harmonious.”
4. “allora più chiaro mi è apparso il margine di tempo che mi resta in essa [la vita] e le ultime pochissime speranze.”
5. For example, she emphasises that, for the resistance movements throughout Europe, surrendering oneself to the enemy meant “treason.” Not knowing the exact time and place of the execution, it was impossible for the partisans to prevent it by, for example, attacking the convoys carrying the condemned to the Ardeatine caves. No ultimatum was issued, but, had there been one, “avrebbero certamente messo in crisi la nostra coscienza, ma non avrebbero incrinato le leggi che regolavano il comportamento di fronte al nemico.” (“this would certainly have provoked a crisis in our conscience, but it would not have undermined the rules regulating our behaviour towards the enemy.”) (Capponi 240)
6. “Are you mad? What can a woman do there? That invitation was addressed to men.”

7. "the spouses of my ancestors are English, German, Polish, Protestant, Jewish, Catholic: a sign that the Capponi did not agree with the saying 'choose women and oxen from your own village,' but had no less than a European vision of their sphere of interest."

8. "I would like to be able to write truly for others, about 'others' [sic!], about all the people, facts and events which have crossed my life. Not to talk about myself as a subject revealing itself, making itself acknowledged and examined, but about myself as a medium for bringing into the light the characters, landscapes, situations, everyday practices and the whole world which has inhabited my own existence and that of the people of my time."

9. "like others have done, those who are now confined to prisons, sent to political exile, emigrated abroad or reduced to the margins of society in villages, persecuted and thrown into prison every time a 'patriotic' manifestation of the Fascist National Party [is] taking place."

10. Capponi's non-judgemental attitude extends beyond family boundaries. A case in point are her reflections on the volunteers in Mussolini's Abyssinian campaign (1935-36): "I finally understood what impelled them to go so far as to risk their lives: they had the dignity of a uniform, of some money to feed their starving children; they felt they were 'legionaries in the conquest of an empire,' the fatherland needed them and did not forget them." (58) "Capii finalmente che cosa li aveva spinti a rischiare anche la vita: avevano avuto la dignità di una divisa, di un 'soldo' con cui sfamare i figli; si erano sentiti 'legionari alla conquista di un impero,' la patria aveva avuto bisogno di loro e non li aveva dimenticati."

11. See Galli della Loggia *L'identità italiana* and Veneziani.

12. See Rusconi "Will Italy Remain a Nation?," and *Patria e Repubblica, Se cessiamo di essere una nazione*; and Viroli.

13. "highest value of national life" "facilitate the game of other currents which base their fortunes precisely on the exploitation of the national myth."

14. "[r]eticence and caution remain, which impede the real resistance, not its rhetorical transfiguration, from being recognised as the founding event of Italian democracy – as it should be. Around this issue, divided, recalcitrant, antagonistic memories persist, which in the new political constellation demand recognition, or even vindication."

15. "in order to understand the damage inflicted on national morality during those two years and the reasons behind the subsequent failure to reconstitute the lost moral fabric."

16. "Someone has called those days the 'death of the fatherland,' someone has called them the 'second Risorgimento.' Both are right, but one cannot be understood without the other: a fatherland not shared by everyone dies, and another one is endeavouring to emerge, through the initiative and conscience of many, if not through a consensus and participation of all."

17. "I have decided to write in minute detail about that time that has now become 'mythical,' or 'mythologised,' because I feel that the youth of today need to be convinced that every one of us was exactly a youth like they are now, afflicted by doubts and fears, convinced not to be doing anything exceptional or 'historical.'"

18. "[it] is only the spectacular nature of the event that gives us the wrong impression about the value of the trial."

19. 'Kilns' Gate,' named after the many kilns producing bricks for the building of St Peter's Basilica. The gate itself, which used to provide thoroughfare for the building material for St Peter's, was closed after the annexation of Rome to the Italian Kingdom in 1870.

20. For example, her aunts who have to discontinue their regular visits to a café in Piazza Venezia, as all the cafés are relocated from the square, which becomes dedicated solely to fascist rallies (Capponi 27).

21. "in the streets ..., on the chairs placed in front of the houses, with quiet women absorbed in knitting or shelling peas for dinner."

22. The Holy Year was inaugurated by Pius XI, the same Pope who later became one of the signatories of the controversial Concordat with the Italian state (1929), which recognised Catholicism as the only official religion in Italy. The Jubilee of 1925 was in some way the first public occasion to inaugurate the new bond between the state and the church, and the Fascist authorities marked it by introducing a number of measures foreshadowing the future rapprochement. In the same year, a number of old houses adjoining the colonnade of St Peter's were demolished by the Commune, to make the Basilica more visible, and a considerable part of the Borgo Sant'Angelo was pulled down to make way for the new Via della Conciliazione, connecting St Peter's to Castel Sant'Angelo and the Tiber river.

23. This section is reminiscent of Roberto Rossellini's neorealist classic *Rome Open City (Roma città aperta, 1944)*, which deals with the same historical period and incorporates references to the same real-life personages of the Roman resistance. Rossellini's Don Pietro is thus modelled on the priest Don Giuseppe Morosini, who was executed by the Gestapo in April 1944 (see Capponi 155); Pina, the heroine of Rossellini's film, is based on another victim of Nazi terror, Teresa Gullace. (Capponi 220)