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**Unmanned Territories:  
Contemporary Italian Women Writers and the  
Intertextual Space of Fantastic Fiction**

**by  
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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**University of Warwick, Department of Italian  
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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and confirm that it has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

## **Abstract**

### **Unmanned Territories: Contemporary Italian Women Writers and the Intertextual Space of Fantastic Fiction**

The thesis examines how some women writers of fiction relate to the question of literary tradition in the 1980s and 1990s. Contemporary literary practice appears to be dominated by postmodern anxiety about a state of 'late arrival' as writers. I wish to explore how women writers' experience of the weight of literary predecessors is affected by their different subject position. I choose to site this study within the area of fantastic fiction for several reasons. The fantastic tradition in Italy was largely overlooked by the critics until the 1980s - a factor which has exacerbated the neglect of women's contribution to it. More importantly the fantastic is now vaunted by contemporary criticism as an area conducive to transgressive challenges to traditional literary practice, particularly for women writers. At the same time, however, the traditional tropes of the predominantly male-authored canon of fantastic literature offer a problematic and challenging range of gender stereotypes for female authors to 're-write'.

I choose to focus on the notion of space both literally and metaphorically in the development of this thesis. In the opening chapter I tease out the threads which connect space, Italian women writers and the fantastic. I begin by showing that the fantastic itself is often construed spatially as a genre and offers potential for spatial innovation. This suggests a subtler way of looking at women writers' use of literary models, which avoids falling into simplistic analyses of gender portrayal. I then outline the position of women writers in Italy in relation to the genre of the fantastic. I suggest that the missing sense of a women writers' tradition in this genre may be one reason why the fantastic is used to explore self-consciously the relation between the female writer and the male authored text. Finally I show how the fantastic offers women a space in which to re-write, namely through their manipulation of the literal and metaphorical spaces of the text.

The following two chapters execute this study with close reference to texts by four authors. The second chapter is dedicated to the early fiction of Paola Capriolo whose experience of literary tradition as a particularly claustrophobic space inspired this thesis. I agree with the widely held view that her use of a Gothic-oriented fantastic, which privileges a world of enclosure in labyrinthine interiors, reflects a typically postmodern anxiety about the end of literature. I argue however that the anxiety of the writer's relation to literature is more closely linked to her identification with a predominantly male literary tradition. This gives her writing some interesting links with much earlier examples of women's writing. It also provides an interesting springboard from which to look at the treatment of similar themes of enclosure in work by other women writers.

The final chapter follows the emergence of new models of the fantastic in the work of the writers Francesca Duranti, Rossana Ombres and Laura Mancinelli. I suggest that in their work we see a contemporary use of the fantastic 'al femminile' which juxtaposes the external space with the internal space, giving rise to the recurrent motif of travel. I argue that this use of the fantastic genre pushes the genre in a new direction, towards a space in which the internal fantasy and dialogue co-exist.

## List of Abbreviations

*La casa – La casa del tempo*

Cl – *La casa sul lago della luna*

dr – *Il doppio regno*

Ig – ‘Il gigante’

LB – *La bambina*

Ldp – ‘La donna di pietra’

LgE – ‘La grande Eulalia’

LL – ‘Lettere a Luisa’

*Memorie – Memorie di una dilettante*

*Menzogna – Menzogna e sortilegio*

MLN – Modern Language Notes

MLR – Modern Languages Review

*Principessa – Principessa Giacinta*

SIS – Society for Italian Studies

*Sogni – Sogni mancini*

teoria – ‘Per una teoria della differenza sessuale’

## INTRODUCTION

‘La musica degli altri è come un discorso rivolto a me, io devo rispondere e sentire il suono della mia voce: più ne ascolto e più so che il mio canto e il mio suono sono diversi.’ - ‘Lavinia fuggita’, Anna Banti<sup>1</sup>

In ‘Lavinia fuggita’ Banti tells the story of a sixteenth-century convent school orphan whose gift for musical composition is actively repressed. Her disappearance in the face of this frustration makes her the Italian equivalent of Virginia Woolf’s ‘Judith Shakespeare.’<sup>2</sup> The premise behind both fictional creative women seems to be that if women were given the same material circumstances as men (‘a room of one’s own’ in Woolf’s case, in Banti’s story encouragement and patronage) their genius would blossom unhindered. Second wave feminism has had the opportunity to question the inevitability of this development and begun to probe the less visible consequences of millennial exclusion from artistic production. This thesis springs from a desire to understand how a number of contemporary women writers in Italy, both beneficiaries and causes of the recent boom of women’s writing there, experience the thorny question of literary tradition in their fiction. As Jon Thiem observes, the postmodern era makes an epigone of every writer who must then ‘transcend the readerly condition.’<sup>3</sup> I wish to establish how this sensation of ‘late arrival’ affects women, who lack same sex predecessors and have always and only been regarded as readers. In the light of Lavinia’s comment about music I would like to address two questions about the position of women writing postmodern fiction: How does the language of literature address them? Do the responses they give help them to hear their own voices more clearly? I would suggest that the weighting towards a male-authored tradition does cause them to feel a different kind of inhibition from that sense of epigonality associated with the postmodern period. Whilst the very absence of same

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Banti, ‘Lavinia fuggita’, *Le donne muoiono* (Firenze: Giunti, 1998), p.101. First published in 1937.

<sup>2</sup> ‘It would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare. Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister.’ Woolf famously envisages this sister receiving no education, running away, attempting to get involved in the theatre, but as a result of the lack of genuine support or patronage, getting pregnant, being abandoned and dying by her own hand. See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Grafton, 1997), pp. 52-54.

<sup>3</sup> He writes that ‘many of the characteristic features and strategies of postmodern writing - such as the preoccupation with the past and historical representation and the reliance on quotation, pastiche, and parody - arise out of the feeling of being late and derivative.’ Jon Thiem, ‘The Textualisation of the Reader in Magical Realist Fiction’ in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy. B. Faris (London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 235-247 (pp. 241-

sex forerunners may liberate them from the sensation that 'everything has already been written,' the form imposed upon them by the male-authored text presents other challenges.

Most feminist critics are interested in establishing what happens when a woman becomes the writing subject, as opposed to its object - when a female reader decides to become a female writer. Reading informs and forms the work of every writer, but many critics, like Elizabeth Bronfen, believe that in the case of the female writer the bonds between reading and writing are tighter: 'Because the historically real woman writer cannot articulate herself entirely devoid of cultural fictions of femininity, writing as a woman transpires into an act of reading cultural texts [...] critically, so as to enact the implied contradiction.'<sup>4</sup> This act of critical reading was a necessary step towards writing and away from the nineteenth century image of the woman reader whose relationship to the text is one of such passivity that it can constitute a corruptive danger. Does this still hold true towards the end of the twentieth century?

This is not so much a *quest* to trace a 'female' quality in writing, but rather, as Maria Rosa Cutrufelli suggests, a *questioning* of how 's'incarna nella scrittura l'esperienza del singolo corpo di chi scrive e, allo stesso tempo, l'esperienza storica del 'genere sessuale' a cui chi scrive appartiene.'<sup>5</sup> It is this general emphasis on tracing the experience of women as subjects in the present, as opposed to striving towards a utopian future or idealised past notions of an essential female, which has found a particularly favourable reception with some Italian theorists. The leading light of this movement is Adriana Cavarero, for whom 'the female subject can emerge when she decides to be her own subject, to think about her own subject taking herself as a starting point, here and now.'<sup>6</sup> It is this subject, frequently riddled with contradictions, who, as a writer, also finds herself increasingly aware of her dialogue

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<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 404.

<sup>5</sup> Maria Rosa Cutrufelli cit. by Carol Lazzaro-Weis in *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing, 1968-1990* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p.17. Cutrufelli writes: 'non si tratta dell'eterno quesito se esista o meno 'una qualità femminile' o 'una qualità maschile' della scrittura. Quesito che, così posto, risulta ambiguo e forse d'impossibile soluzione (a meno che non si voglia banalizzare il tutto, come pure spesso si fa, proclamando la neutralità della scrittura e l'androginia dello scrittore).'

<sup>6</sup> Adriana Cavarero, 'The Need for a Sexed Thought' originally given in 1986 at the first nationwide conference of Women's Cultural Centres, held in Siena and published in *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. by Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 181-185 (p.185).

with the text of the past, which informs that self in the here and now. Shoshana Felman sees this state of flux as permanent:

Whereas the first-stage feminism simply blocked, *foreclosed* male insights because of the (necessarily prejudicial) bias of their male enunciation, what [...] we will never finish learning is [...] how to *relate* - in ever new ways - to a male genius: how to work *within* male insights so as to displace their oversights not from without, but from within, in such a way as to learn from their inspiration and thus derive fresh (female) insights from their past conceptions.<sup>7</sup>

This aspect of second wave feminism is close to Banti's much earlier notion of a dialogue, in which voices exchange ideas but remain autonomous.

The fantastic mode represents a particularly interesting area within which to explore the potential for such a dialogue because it offers the dizzying possibility of reconfiguring the reality paradigm, and is thus widely associated with an invitation to transgression. At the same time it draws upon a canon in which some of the most problematic intensely literary representations of the female appear, to cite but three: the succuba, the madwoman and the medium.<sup>8</sup> In this respect it is both a danger and a challenge which forces a female writer to dream in the way Scarpa describes Calvino doing, 'con un lobo cerebrale solo: l'altro è sempre impegnato ad analizzare le immagini e i suoni che trascorrono per la mente.'<sup>9</sup>

Fofi suggests that the current female desire to re-think life takes on a visionary quality in the tension between the desire to go beyond limits and the need for verbalisation that gives women writers a project of metaphysical and moral proportions.<sup>10</sup> In the fantastic women writers find opportunities to transgress self-

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<sup>7</sup> Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> To trace the representation of women in fantastic fiction would constitute a project in itself. It has been covered by few works on the fantastic, see a rare example in Deborah Harter, *Bodies in Pieces: Fantastic Narrative and the Poetics of the Fragment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996). More often the representation of women is approached in work-specific criticism or thematic surveys of the representation of women, for example, Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). To validate the claims made here for the intensity of fantastic representations of women it is only necessary to turn to Calvino's anthology *Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento*, 2 vols (Milano: Mondadori, 1983) which abounds with succubae (Gautier, Potocki), automata (Hoffmann), witches (von Eichendorff) and vengeful goddesses (Mérimée).

<sup>9</sup> Domenico Scarpa, *Italo Calvino* (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p.123.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Fortini raises this in discussion with Goffredo Fofi in 'Una nuova civiltà letteraria: intervista a Goffredo Fofi', *Tuttestorie*, 6-7 (1996-1997), 13-14:

'Fofi: Se volessi trovare un antecedente di questa tensione a voler ridefinire tutto, voler capire tutto, lo troverei in Rimbaud.

Fortini: Perché Rimbaud?

consciously many textual boundaries and by re-forming language, re-form notions of self and reality. Their choice to focus on (inter)textuality is concerned with an emphasis on their *re*-interpretation of the Real. As De Lauretis writes, drawing on the work of Jameson, interpretation 'can be seen as a rewriting of the text intended to show how the text itself is "the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext," which the process of interpretation (re)constructs as the symbolic resolution of determinate contradictions in the Real.'<sup>11</sup> By writing such *interpretative* texts these writers unpick that symbolic resolution, returning to the contradictions of the Real and working with this material rather than against it. The fantastic is used to shift reader and writer into a new spatial relationship with the text and the real.

The fantastic is a genre that has only begun to gain substantial critical attention in Italy recently. It is no coincidence that the first instance of the recent integration of the fantastic into the mainstream was a female-authored novel: *La casa sul lago della luna* (1984) by Francesca Duranti.<sup>12</sup> Mavina Papini, one of the few so far to attempt to profile the history of the women's fantastic, draws attention to the string of twentieth century female voices sidelined because they seemed anomalous, which in fact form a clear lineage of a female tradition of the fantastic.<sup>13</sup> It is still the case, however, that as a result of the perceived lack of tradition of this kind of writing amongst women, these writers have suffered neglect and demand the justice of

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Fofi: Perché Rimbaud con il suo bisogno di uscire dai confini, di ripensare la vita, ha avuto un tipo di tensione che presenta lo stesso carattere di visionarietà. Il vero dilemma è tra questo bisogno e la verbalizzazione: un bisogno avvertito oggi più dalle scrittrici e di conseguenza dalle critiche.' (p.14)

<sup>11</sup> Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.81.

<sup>12</sup> Gianfranco De Turris, ' "Made in Italy" Il fantastico e l'editoria' in *Geografia, storia e poetiche del fantastico*, ed. by Monica Farnetti (Firenze: Olschki, 1989), pp.217-229, (pp.225-6). He writes of 'una nuova significativa "rivoluzione" editoriale: la caduta inavvertita ma progressiva degli steccati di "genere", con la conseguente assunzione di piena "dignità culturale" da parte della letteratura dell'Immaginario e i suoi autori, fino a quel momento esclusi dal circuito delle grandi collane di narrativa - con qualche nota eccezione: Buzzati, Calvino, un certo Landolfi. A partire dal 1984-5 vennero infatti pubblicati, accanto a opere "realistiche", anche romanzi di autori italiani appartenenti o almeno vicino a questa area. Il primo fu *La casa sul lago della luna* di Francesca Duranti (Rizzoli), poi fu la volta di *Dio e il computer* di Roberto Vacca (Bompiani) e di *Cercando l'imperatore* di Roberto Pazzi (Marietti), quindi toccò a *Concerto rosso* di Pier Luigi Berbotto, a *Palladion* di Valerio Manfredi e a *Partiranno* di Luce D'Eramo (tutti editi da Mondadori). Fantastico e fantascienza, mito e fantastoria, orrore e gotico, allo stato puro made in Italy, facevano irruzione nella grande editoria con opere di qualità, ben scritte, ed aprivano la strada - è da sottolineare: in collane non specializzate, quindi indirizzata un pubblico medio - ad altri autori italiani che si avventurano in questi territori, come oggi accade quasi normalmente.'

<sup>13</sup> Mavina Papini, *La letteratura fantastica femminile del Novecento: L'esperienza di Anna Maria Ortese* (unpublished degree thesis, University of Florence, 1996-1997), p.1. In the introduction she writes: 'L'analisi qui presentata attinge a un campionario di voci femminili contraddistinte da tratti evidentemente "fuori dalla norma". Voci apparentemente isolate nella polifonia del discorso letterario, se colte singolarmente, esse si rivelano segni riconoscibili di un ampio e fluido percorso del fantastico

juxtaposition and comparison. Their work remains largely absent from the few general anthologies of the Italian fantastic,<sup>14</sup> despite the fact that most anthologies of women's writing include a substantial number of fantastic tales and the number of anthologies dedicated solely to women's writing of the fantastic is increasing.<sup>15</sup>

In many ways this parallels the earlier Anglo-Saxon rediscovery of the female fantastic, in particular the gothic, which is described by many critics as an area of female expertise.<sup>16</sup> The writers studied here certainly draw upon the gothic, with its ability to infuse terror and rouse emotion, particularly to express preoccupations with the supposed limitations of the female body, often in the form of terrifying spatial enclosures.<sup>17</sup> Understanding the gothic as a tradition based in English language texts that draws upon a nineteenth century popular print culture largely absent in Italy, I choose the broader term fantastic to describe the work of these writers. It encompasses many gothic tropes whilst, at the same time, suggesting that Italian women writers do not regard themselves as belonging to a tradition of the 'Female Gothic.' This makes their use of the fantastic, I argue, very much an engagement with male-authored texts. This intertextual fantastic space can also present ways of both exploring and moving beyond fear, by seeking its origins in the male-authored text.

The writers studied here are all persistently stepping away from the women-only publishing presses and anthologies into mainstream publishing. In facing up to

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femminile.'

<sup>14</sup> There are no female writers in *L'Italie Fantastique de Boccaccio à Landolfi: anthologie établie et présentée par Jacques Finné* (Paris: André Gerard et Marabout, 1975). *Notturmo italiano: racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento e Novecento* ed. by Enrico Ghidetti and Leonardo Lattarulo, 2 vols (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1984) includes short stories by Anna Maria Ortese ('L'Infanta sepolta') and Matilde Serao ('Leggenda di Capodimonte') only. They do say in the introduction that they have not included Elsa Morante because of copyright difficulties. No other female writer is mentioned. It is hardly worth emphasizing the importance of these anthologies to the promotion of research. Marie-Anne Rubat du Merac, for example, writes in her article 'L'iguana d'Anna Maria Ortese: un exemple de fantastique féminin' in *Les Femmes écrivains en Italie aux XIXe et XXe siècles* ed. by Marie-Anne Rubat du Merac (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1993), pp.191-204 (p.191) that she discovered Anna Maria Ortese through Ghidetti's anthology.

<sup>15</sup> See *Italian Women Writing*, ed. and introduced by Sharon Wood, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); *Racconta* ed. by Rosaia Guacci and Bruna Miorelli (Milano: La tartaruga, 1989); *Il pozzo segreto* ed. by Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, Rosaria Guacci and Marisa Rusconi (Firenze: Giunti, 1993), and *New Italian Women: A Collection of Short Fiction* edited by Martha King (New York: Italica Press, 1989). In 'Riletture: Il genere fantastico' Elena Romanello observes that 'ultimamente, però, c'è stato, sia in Italia che all'estero, un fiorire di scrittrici di fantastico che hanno rinnovato il filone' and mentions three recent anthologies: *L'altra volta della luna* ed. by De Turreis, (Solfanelli); *Stelle dell'orsa minore*, ed. by Monica Lanfranco (Solfanelli); *Racconti crudeli* (Junior Mondadori) ed. Malorie Blackman' in *Leggere Donna*, 56 (1995), p.28.

<sup>16</sup> See Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: Women's Press, 1978) and Susanne Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999)

<sup>17</sup> See Ellen Moers, 'Female Gothic' in *Literary Women* (London: Allen, 1977), pp.90-110. 'In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural

the challenge of reaching out to a broader readership - both male and female - they are also making new demands on that readership. Inevitably the female writing subject does present what Filippo La Porta reluctantly recognizes as 'una irriducibile, imbarazzante *diversità* (nel rapporto con la scrittura e con il mondo),'<sup>18</sup> but it is an embarrassment which he and many other critics do not know how to deal with. This is illustrated by Antonio Corsaro's dismissive comment about 'autori solo marginalmente dediti al fantastico (ma all'interno di questo possibile raggruppamento esistono esempi che non andranno sottovalutati: da Pazzi alla Mancinelli alla Bompiani alla Morazzoni alla Duranti).'<sup>19</sup> His review of Italian fantastic fiction in the 1980's is fairly typical of the critical response. It is significant that four of the five are female writers - he makes no attempt to incorporate them into the category of the postmodern fantastic. Only those perceived, like Paola Capriolo, to show a 'sapiente devozione a modelli sempre funzionanti' (ie. those belonging to a male-authored canon) gain admittance. In this way the canon of postmodernity continues to leave women writers on the sidelines. Difference is either squashed between brackets or ignored and re-assimilated. Monica Farnetti observes that one of the only well-known female writers of the fantastic, Anna Maria Ortese (1914-1998), met with extremely mixed critical success<sup>20</sup> because her variant of the fantastic has not only undermined the realist project in Italy, but shown up 'le insufficienze di una già provata teoria del fantastico',<sup>21</sup> in its privileging of what is usually bracketed under the marvellous. It is however this very resistance to 'facili e rassicuranti discriminazioni categoriche' presented by these later women writers of the fantastic which gives the genre a heightened vitality in their hands.

I have largely chosen works falling within a limited time period, between 1980 and 1996, as the early years of complete equality between male and female writers in terms of market presence, although to situate these works in the author's production I may cite works outside this period. This choice features writing from women of two generations: from Rossana Ombres (b.1931), Laura Mancinelli (b.1933) and Francesca Duranti (b.1935) to the younger Paola Capriolo (b.1962). Despite the

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over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare.' (p.90)

<sup>18</sup> *La nuova narrativa italiana* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995), p.110.

<sup>19</sup> See Antonio Corsaro, 'Percorsi del fantastico nella narrativa degli anni '80', *Stazione di Posta*, 51/52 (1993), 57-65 (p.59).

<sup>20</sup> Monica Farnetti, *Anna Maria Ortese* (Mondadori: Milan, 1998). She describes 'un impatto con la critica singolarmente in bilico tra riconoscimenti da un lato (consistenti soprattutto in premi letterari), stroncature e silenzi dall'altro.' (p. 4)

divergence in period, style and philosophy between these writers they all choose the fantastic as a means of articulating their relationship to the textual space in a substantial part of their literary corpus. What they all also share is a self-conscious interest in a dialogue with a predominantly male-authored 'high' literary discourse.<sup>22</sup> No study to date has approached this common ground between them.

One of the principle challenges to the feminist critic of women's writing is the attempt to preserve difference without ghettoization.<sup>23</sup> Although an analysis of the intertextual aspect of women writers' work would appear to present an ideal way of striking this balance, more often than not it too leads to one pole or the other. In the case of the youngest writer studied here, Paola Capriolo, I will show how the intertextual criticism has obliterated that gender difference. Other female authors chosen in this thesis have often presented critics with difficulties regarding the categorisation of their work as fantastic. This has not only frequently left it on the margins, but even, in the case of Ombres, out of print. To articulate the relationship between the individual text and the literary canon I intend to work with the broader definition of intertextuality retermed *transtextuality* by Genette,<sup>24</sup> which includes allusion, citation, the use of literary topoi and metatextual references. It therefore articulates all facets of the relationship between the writer and literary tradition, pointing towards a notion of literature as a continual re-telling. I will also focus on the issue of self-reflexivity in the text that is not necessarily covered by Genette's term. By specifying the ways in which these uses emerge in the works examined here, I will interrogate the meaning of this 'intertextual' fantastic for women's writing.

This will be a study of the writers' use of the language of literary form, showing to what extent the subtle shifts in representation in women's writing, as Carol Lazzaro-Weis suggests, make it 'more than a space that allows women to speak

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<sup>21</sup> Monica Farnetti, *Anna Maria Ortese*, p.6.

<sup>22</sup> This does not preclude an interest in 'low' literary discourse, as we will see.

<sup>23</sup> JoAnn Canon explores the implications of this challenge in 'Women Writers and the Canon in Contemporary Italy' in *Italian Women Writers from the Renaissance to the Present: Revising the Canon* ed. with an introduction by Maria Ornella Mariotti (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp.13-23. She concludes that 'in order for "canon revision" to take place, in order for unappreciated writers to be recognized and assimilated into the critical canon, it may be useful for them to be situated in a context, a cohort of "like" writers. This does not necessarily have to take the form of a countercanon (which implicitly rejects the traditional canon) but may simply be a subgenre within a canon.' (p.17)

<sup>24</sup> See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982), pp. 8-16, for 'cinq types de relations transtextuelles' which include intertextuality (quotation, plagiarism and allusion), the paratext (title, subtitles, preface, etc.), metatextuality (relation the text has with another without quotation - a critical relationship), hypertextuality (relation text has with a previous

to one another of their sexual difference, as was perhaps always the case; it is a space in which they can modify the now obvious partial interpretations previously accorded to certain forms and motifs.<sup>25</sup> The metaphor of space lends itself most easily to highlighting women's relation to the canon and it is one that we meet over and over again in feminist criticism. It dovetails in a more original way, however, with the fantastic. The reliance of this mode upon the inner world of the imagination offers the prospect of potential space unexplored because it originates in the individual.<sup>26</sup> This individual stands with her feet firmly in her social context, however, leading to a fantastic space in which intertextual anxiety and creative pleasure collide in the female writer's work. Often the writer's use of fantastic space offers an insight into her attitude towards the male-authored canon.

Exploring the links between literary space and the fantastic manipulation of space also takes us beyond the idea of female/feminist writer telling 'her' story as a re-working of female stereotypes. This latter approach could be described as a journey through an enchanted forest in which any attempts to escape the wicked witch only lead to further encounters. As Marina Warner astutely points out, the re-formulation of the female stereotype can lead to a further reinforcement of the very notions one wishes to avoid, whether as author or critic:

This defiance results, it seems to me, in collusion, it can magnify female demons, rather than lay them to rest, for men and women. The limits of the carnivalesque, of turning the world upside down as a rebel strategy have long been recognised: make the slave king for a day and he'll be docile for a year.<sup>27</sup>

The same approach presents similar problems for Sigrid Weigel leading her to the conclusion that 'alla domanda se le donne posseggano un immaginario diverso

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text, which is not one of commentary) and architextuality (reference to the text's genre).

<sup>25</sup> Carol Lazzaro-Weis, introduction, p.xv.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Anca Vlasopolos' question: 'Where does this leave us, late twentieth century women facing oceans already explored and whose deepest canyons bear the mark of the conquest - the ubiquitous beer can? Perhaps we can stand with Marge Piercy's hero Connie on the edge of time, turning to the recovered, cleansed seas of a future without externally imposed gender differences. This new liminal zone might explain the attraction of fantasy and sci-fi for so many women writers in the twentieth century, for this frontier offers us the open, uncharted non-territory the three novels I have discussed have sought over and under the sea.' in 'At Sea in Deep Water: Women's Spaces in *Persuasion*, *The Awakening* and *The Voyage Out*' in *Proceedings of the XIIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association: Space and Boundaries Munich, 1988* (Munich: iudicum verlag, 1990), III, pp. 480-486 (p.485).

<sup>27</sup> Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time, The 1994 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994), p.10.

(Irigaray) non si può in ogni caso rispondere semplicemente con un sì.’<sup>28</sup> Any exploration of this area must also confront the Kristevan notion that contemporary women may risk everything in the deconstruction of the symbolic order because their fragile psycho-sexual self is dependent upon the existence of that same order.<sup>29</sup>

Weigel’s reticence regarding the definition of a female imaginary, however, is also reinforced by a general fear within the study of women’s literature of smothering female creativity with the uncomfortable blanket of uniformity.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, as Adrienne Rich says ‘It is easy to say that we cannot ever know what is truly male or truly female. There is much that we can know.’<sup>31</sup> The responsibility for a deeper understanding of the language of form, which includes the female voice, lies with the reader, as well as the writer. Whilst many of the writers studied here are re-working stereotypical notions of the female self inherent in the fantastic and therefore running the risk of misinterpretation, it is vital to see how the re-worked self relates to its context. Space is not only understood as a literal national, physical and domestic space, but also as a metaphorical cultural space. The concept can create a bridge between texts and reveal obliquely the means writers have at their disposal for a more profound re-working of the literary space itself as a relationship between reader and

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<sup>28</sup> The argument is as follows: ‘Spesso la ricerca di immagini contrarie o addirittura di concetti di identità proprie, alternativi finisce col rivelarsi come ripetizione o variazione di vecchi modelli, che rimangono imprigionati nelle strutture dell’immaginario dominante oppure come desiderio ingenuo o struggente del ritorno di momenti irrevocabilmente perduti della storia del soggetto o della cultura, di cui possediamo soltanto una conoscenza rudimentale e sommersa, forse solo un vago sentore.’ ‘La voce di Medusa. Ovvero del doppio luogo o del doppio sguardo delle donne’ in *Donne e scrittura*, ed. by Daniela Corona (Palermo: La Luna edizioni, 1990), p.54. It is worth observing that Weigel uses one such stereotyped idea or myth from a different perspective to conclude her argument on a hopeful note. Speaking of the myth of Athena who uses the head of the vanquished Medusa as a trophy for her armour she suggests that women writers ‘facciano delle vittime della storia ornamento della loro forza.’ This somewhat ambiguous conclusion could be read in two ways - firstly that female writers recycle old gender stereotypes for their own ends, but secondly that they might pick up on buried traditions of their female forbears, reinforcing the necessity of considering both aspects.

<sup>29</sup> Julia Kristeva, ‘A woman has nothing to laugh about when the symbolic order collapses. She can take pleasure in it if, by identifying with the mother, the vaginal body, she imagines she is the sublime, repressed forces which return through the fissures of the order. But she can just as easily die from this upheaval, as victim or militant, if she has been deprived of a successful maternal identification and has found in the symbolic paternal order her one superficial, belated and easily severed link with life’ from ‘About Chinese Women’ in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 138-159 (p. 141).

<sup>30</sup> Lazzaro-Weis writes: ‘Theories concerning difference in women’s literature that are based in gender and defend a woman’s right to express herself differently often end up prescribing limits and emphasizing sameness. Theories of the innate oppositionality of women’s literature, whether they value experimental or traditional forms, end up ignoring differences among women writers and their individual innovations because the critic searches for general communal types of oppositional strategies that fight the same, often undifferentiated enemy.’ (introduction, p.xiii)

<sup>31</sup> Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (London: Virago, 1980), p.78.

writer - as a narrative space. The fantastic, which presupposes ruptures in the relationship between the self and its everyday world, is an appropriate mode in which to look for traces of this reconfiguration.

The critic must work to foster ways of understanding women's writing if it is to be guaranteed a place in the literary mainstream, by developing a new language of criticism which is still widely regarded as absent.<sup>32</sup> Any contribution, however small, to the growing list of innovative studies of women's writing necessarily draws upon an eclectic synthesis of approaches to create this critical language. Making the connection between gender and writing shifts every critical approach to a text. In the first chapter therefore I attempt to tease out some of the individual threads which run through this particular study, marking out the ways in which they will be re-woven later in the study. First I develop a working theory of the fantastic for the purposes of this thesis. I allow this theory to be coloured by the texts themselves and examine the impact of space, both literal and cultural, in the development of the genre. I follow this with a brief survey of the history of the fantastic genre in Italy, and women writers' role in that history. Subsequently I look at contemporary theories of the female fantastic, considering the extent to which this genre may present Italian women writers with problems and possibilities for the forging of a relation to the canon. I look with particular interest at the chances of a dialogue with a female-authored canon, which have to date been relatively slight in Italy.<sup>33</sup> Finally I examine briefly the relevance of psychoanalytical theory to an understanding of women writers' use of the fantastic as an intertextual space.

In the second chapter I choose to concentrate upon the younger writer, Paola Capriolo, using her early work in particular as a litmus test. I believe that the difficulty she presents when one attempts to align her work with that of other women writers is the key to understanding the textual space of the female fantastic. Her early

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<sup>32</sup> 'Cutrufelli argues that the patrimony of older women writers is less easily transferred because their works have always been studied according to non-literary criteria, including that of finding their feminine qualities which are idiosyncratically defined and rarely in relationship to one another. Thus she recommends a genealogy of structures and forms that would show how women have expressed their political, sexual and personal concerns and how their writings differ from those of men. A genealogy constructed in this manner would be communicable, transmittable, and, above all, literary.' (Carol Lazzaro-Weis, p.52)

<sup>33</sup> As JoAnn Canon writes in *Italian Women Writers from the Renaissance to the Present*, 'Indeed, Rasy goes so far as to suggest that the tendency of women writers to look to the works of other women writers as a natural point of reference is one of the common threads linking all women writers. Whether contemporary Italian women writers will embrace this notion and define themselves vis-à-vis other women writers remains to be seen.' (p.20)

texts concern the textual enclosure in which women find themselves attempting to articulate their selfhood. This textual enclosure reflects the restrictions imposed upon Capriolo by her adherence to a male-authored canon. The dangerously close manner in which her artistic women protagonists imitate their male role models leads to the misinterpretation of her work - not least of all because Capriolo herself refuses to be considered a woman writer. In fact two of her early works, *La grande Eulalia* (1988) and *Il doppio regno* (1991) present a fascinating opportunity to see the theme of a female textual-spatial anxiety magnified and projected as the principle struggle of the fantastic text itself. Seen in this light her example illuminates work by past women writers and that of her contemporaries, suggesting that common modes of textual experience have persisted for some female writers into the period of 'post-feminism'.

If the early work of Paola Capriolo can be used as a magnifying glass through which to explore the themes of spatiality and the fantastic in an intertextual context, this is partly because the author has always complied with critics who make out the weighty presence of a 'biblioteca paterna' in her background.<sup>34</sup> Although Capriolo's own father is a translator and literary man, I use the term 'biblioteca paterna' to refer to the wide range of 'classic' male literary influences often listed by her in interview and read by critics in her work.<sup>35</sup> Capriolo and her critics may cite a wide range of authors and philosophers, but Capriolo's work shows a clear preference for German thought, somewhere between Romanticism and Modernism. I believe that this background provides an opportunity to see how the female use of the fantastic is affected by intertextual relations. It makes Capriolo's work a magic mirror in which to reflect other female writers' treatment of the same themes. Looking into this textual mirror, and comparing one fictional space with another alters our perception of both. In this way I hope to establish a set of criteria for understanding female-authored texts

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<sup>34</sup> Mirella Appiotti, 'Paola Capriolo: un maledetto per seduttore', *La Stampa*, 1 August 1996, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> In most reviews concerning Capriolo's first collection of short stories critics take the opportunity to demonstrate their own cultural capital with dizzying lists of the supposed sources of Capriolo's texts. Sixteen of twenty-two reviews of her 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 only rarely taken anywhere beyond their ostentatious name-dropping. In the worst of these cases and the only highly critical one the idea of the poor female relative is evident in the title alone: 'Gelida Nipotina di Kafka e dell'inutile artificio' (Claudio Marabini, *Il Resto del Carlino*, 20 April 1988). In only four cases are women writers mentioned as well and two of these are Elsa Morante whom Capriolo herself recognises as a primary influence in successive interviews, but the link is never pursued. Critics repeatedly cite the influences cited by other critics in order to cover their own tracks, with a subsequent accumulative sterility in the reviews written. This practice continues into assessments of her all her subsequent work. In interview Capriolo is always happy to reel off a substantial list of similar influences.

in relation to one another and the male-authored text.

The most obvious way in which Capriolo shows the influence of the 'biblioteca paterna' is in her apparently unquestioning replication of a traditional system of gender representation. To the question as to whether in her work 'si può collegare l'ordine con l'uomo e il disordine con la donna, la natura' she admits that 'simbolicamente' that is the case.<sup>36</sup> When I asked about how she decides on the gender of certain characters she appeals to 'le necessità della storia.'<sup>37</sup> The very fact that a story *can* demand a certain gender, rightly or wrongly, surely impels us to examine the function of gender in artistic creation. For many critics Capriolo's pursuit of existential questions means that she shows no gender 'bias', but I will suggest that in bowing to the 'necessità della storia' Capriolo often participates in a millennial refusal to recognise the inherent bias which is part and parcel of the gendered system.<sup>38</sup> This author also vehemently opposes any consideration of her work as a female writer.<sup>39</sup> Taking the clichés of gender difference as an inevitable given, albeit an unfortunate one, of man or woman's existential wilderness creates a hairline crack in this author's work between her chosen narrative approach and personal experience.

Capriolo's work is marked by a predilection for enclosed spaces, which she professes arises from her fascination with the oppressive space of the individual psyche. The mirroring of the two spaces in one another represents the most constant theme of her work.<sup>40</sup> Trapped in a closed human mind, locked in an eternal present, these are 'luoghi chiusi' in which her characters pursue unrealisable illusions. The

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<sup>36</sup> Gillian Ania, "Un altro mondo": Interview with Paola Capriolo (Milan, November 1996)', *The Italianist*, 18 (1998), 305-341 (p.323). Further references to this interview will be indicated after quotations in the text by (Ania).

<sup>37</sup> From my own unpublished interview with Capriolo, Milan, 30 July 1997.

<sup>38</sup> See Gillian Ania's introduction to Paola Capriolo, *The Dual Realm* trans. by Gillian Ania and Doug Thompson (Hull: Troubador, 2000). She writes: 'She chooses both male and female protagonists, as both subject and object of desire, appearing to suggest some sort of equality between the sexes, a lack of "bias".' (p. xii) Lawrence Venuti in his review of *La spettatrice* and *Un uomo di carattere*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 04 October 1996 is one of the few to write of her first work as 'a collection of fantastic yarns that meditated on the relation between desire, gender and artistic representation.' It is a view which seems refreshingly distant from Capriolo's own reluctance to acknowledge any connection between intellectual inquiry and the question of sexual difference.

<sup>39</sup> Capriolo is consistent on this point. In interview with Francesco Guardini she rebukes him: 'by defining my writing as "feminine", however, you are saying something that displeases me' and goes on to say that in the discussion of an author, 'whether or not we are dealing with a he or a she is not a fundamental factor.' Francesco Guardini, 'Paola Capriolo', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 12 (1992), 119-133 (p.120).

<sup>40</sup> As Gillian Ania writes: 'The outside, the objective condition of the tormented psyche, thus reflects the inside, the process or processes going on in the mind, and the growing exclusion from the 'real' world and the consequent identification with, and concentration on, the one closed image proceed in parallel', 'Inside the Labyrinth: The Thematics of Space in the Fiction of Paola Capriolo', *Romance*

inward-looking nature of these spaces is often exacerbated by an absence of windows and a profusion of mirrors, which dramatize the introspective nature of her fantasy worlds. The closed space has long been recognised as the privileged space of the fantastic. According to Rosemary Jackson the fantastic creates 'an additional space' and 'this space is frequently narrowed down into a place or *enclosure*, where the fantastic has become the norm. Enclosure is central to modern fantasy'.<sup>41</sup> This pattern seems to coincide with a large number of female-authored fantastic texts. With further depictions of the enclosed space as a prison, labyrinth, grave, cave, it has traditionally been the locus of the female character and rarely a positive one. As such it also coincides with women's hitherto limited space within literature. The otherness of the fantastic space suggests that art offers some form of liberation only to present another set of walls. One of the principal reasons for this is the necessity of using a (literary) language that always articulates woman as Other. In this analysis of Capriolo's work I will explore how this anxiety manifests itself as link between spatial enclosure and the limitations imposed by literary tradition, and more generally the dominant cultural text which governs women's lives. Literary tradition may form just one part of that cultural text but its primary connection to fiction gives it a privileged position in the symbolic expression of that dominance.

The most obvious way in which women are situated differently in relation to enclosure is through a perception of the female body as imprisoning mechanism. This perception has been reinforced historically by establishing female worth around the potential to function as a reproductive tool. Subsequently the enclosure of the body has been one of the few acceptable ways in which women have been able to access the sphere of creativity, always on many conditions. Female interiority, which women writers are at pains to reappropriate in order to gain access to a creative space, is dogged by its associations with the reproductive space.<sup>42</sup> The protagonist of 'La

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*Studies*, 18 (2000), 157-171 (p.159).

<sup>41</sup> Jackson, pp. 46-7.

<sup>42</sup> In *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1981, first publ. 1969, pp.210-219) Kate Millet cites Erik Erikson's notoriously essentialist study of male/female attitudes towards space, in which he equates anatomy with destiny. See Erik Erikson, 'Womanhood and the Inner Space' (1964) in *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968). Adriana Cavarero suggests that the recent focus in Italian feminism upon the maternal has provided some attempts to reappropriate the space of female creativity by expanding our understanding of the maternal. She cites Silvia Vegetti Finzi, who suggests that the infant desire of the girl child to produce autonomously is channelled by social codes into a desire to produce a child: 'La sua proposta è così la ridefinizione di un campo simbolico che permetta alla pulsione generativa femminile di realizzare la propria creativa che ha, da un lato, il vantaggio di unire in un solo nodo il corpo e il pensiero, e ha d'altro lato, la possibilità di trascendere la generazione

grande Eulalia' finds her mental space dominated by a male and conforms her body space to his imagined wishes. In this first short story we see how Capriolo's depiction of this space is defined by the specificity of her female subject position. Her protagonist attempts to escape the limited space imposed upon women by their scripted performance in a male-authored text. Capriolo's preoccupation with the physical nature of female subjection betrays an agonistic vein in her relation to the much cited male influences, a conflict suppressed in the name of avoiding 'gender bias'.

From the trace of suppression emerges an 'introjective authorial anxiety', that is an anxiety about allowing the male-authored figures of women, already waiting in the wings of the female psyche, to enter into the theatre of the female writer's text. I suggest that one way Capriolo dramatizes this fear convincingly is by turning to a female tradition of writing. This helps her to produce a form of female fantastic, but the fragility of women's relationship to any maternal influence is underlined by the shadowy narrative presence of a mother figure. The difficulty of reconciling the fantastic with a liberating space of enclosure emerges in a comparison with other stories in the collection, in which male-authorial models take the upper hand.

The strength of the introjective anxiety in the face of male creativity is raised by another story in the same collection, 'Il gigante'. In this story however, the walls of the heroine's enclosure are much more in evidence: she is in a prison. Within this prison the realm of domesticity, made by the sexual division of labour into another 'natural' aspect of female enclosure, underlines the corporeal nature of the heroine's experience. The heroine's defeat within this enclosure arises from Capriolo's wholesale adaptation of male-authored (Romantic) models of femininity, in which sickness and death are held at an aesthetically pleasing distance from the male.<sup>43</sup> The shadow cast over the heroine of this novel is that of a prisoner. He may be a small man but as a man his mental dominance reigns supreme – he casts the shadow of a

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biologica del figlio per rivolgersi al mondo.' Adriana Cavarero, 'Per una nuova cultura della madre', unpublished paper given at Warwick University, 28 October 1995.

<sup>43</sup> See Bronfen for a detailed analysis of how: 'an elimination of the feminine figure is a way of putting closure on aspects of mortality allegorically embodied through her' (p.205). In this respect, she argues that 'woman' fulfils a function similar to that of art, distancing the encounter with death itself: 'In this duplicitous function of threat and assurance femininity takes on a similar position to the one culturally ascribed to the image. Because of the detour, the mitigation, the non-identity between image and model, art images can give the viewer a threatening sight and protect him from its danger. Beautification and aestheticisation mitigate a direct threat by severing image from its context or reference, as in the myth of Medusa, where a direct glance at the woman's head turns the viewer into stone while the head reflected in the mirror can be gazed at with impunity.' (pp.121-122)

giant. His larger than life presence and musical communion with the heroine highlights her own subjection as domestic furnishing. Female submission is also a prerequisite for her entry into the realm of high art.

The complete closure of this story, offering no exits for the heroine, is linked to the intertextual space of the story. Capriolo abandons a promising female space of the fantastic, allowing the giant, Mann, to cast his own shadow over her text. The story reminds us of the dangers of the interior space for the female writer. Withdrawal and solitude are essential to creation but they have negative connotations for women. With only art as a companion one is rendered more susceptible to the male voices dominant in that art, all the more powerful for their disembodiment and apparent neutrality. In the realm of art women can also be channelled into reproduction, if only textually.

Five years after its publication Capriolo herself acknowledges the anomalous nature of her second novel in a discussion of gender. On the question of whether she conceives of the sexes as equal she muses, 'Penso di sì. Però non lo so. Poi in fondo, il protagonista più importante, più ricco dei miei libri è la protagonista de *Il doppio regno*, quella più sfaccettata che in qualche modo li contiene tutto, ed è una donna.' (Ania, p.324) This novel, which she also describes as her most autobiographical, brings us to the crux of Capriolo's relation to the male-authored text. Not only does the novel dramatize the introjective authorial anxiety but it self-consciously thematizes that anxiety as well. This coincides with the fact that the protagonist of *Il doppio regno* is the only female in Capriolo's texts who creates rather than performs.

Reading *Il doppio regno* as a form of cultural autobiography confirms the stifling presence of Capriolo's literary models. The fantastic provides an ideal model with which to express this anxiety spatially – here in the form of a labyrinthine hotel from which the protagonist cannot escape, where she is haunted by male authorial voices. The sinister aspect of this hotel, which the protagonist is variously seduced by and resistant to, proves once again the potential of the fantastic to express a specifically female authorial anxiety. The protagonist's encounter with the hotel is also the author's encounter with a labyrinthine text that claims to speak for and of a universal subject. The protagonist's confusion is also the author's confusion when faced with the fact that the universal subject is in fact male. Unable to make contact with a mother figure, identification with whom must be abandoned in the struggle to

write, neither author nor protagonist can see a way out.

The fantastic can dramatize this state of textual entrapment so powerfully as to reinforce it. Its access to subjected female figures, particularly the hapless gothic heroine, make its spaces potentially deadly. For this reason Capriolo's work can easily be read as a dead end, in its implicit suggestion that the dominance of the male text *made universal* is the only reality, admitting no alternatives. In disregarding the gender bias of fantastic enclosure and aestheticizing its form, the author attempts to distance her own wrangles with its false universality.

Some of Capriolo's early works do therefore betray an understanding of the specificity of the female subject position, with which the author then hesitates to identify, endorsing a 'universal', male subject. This is a crevasse that gradually grows larger and larger, finding its most acute expression in *Il doppio regno*. Tracing the appearance of this divide and its links with the author's cultural autobiography reveals the spatial potential and risks of the fantastic for the female writer, which I then develop in a study of works by three other women writers.

What characterizes the work of Duranti, Ombres and Mancinelli is an awareness of their marginal position to cultural heritage and defiance in the face of that knowledge. We will see that they set up a sequence of movements towards and away from the male text, based on an awareness of the potential enclosure dramatized in Capriolo's earlier texts. Whether writers, or simply readers, their male subjects have to learn to read reality from a female perspective. Their female subjects have to learn to take a distance from the male text, which is so often treacherously close to their own spaces of fantasy. At the heart of this process of repositioning, however, is an acceptance of the realm of the fantastic, the unknown, the unknowable at the core of the subject. Recognizing this foreigner *within* the self allows the subject to recognize the Other *outside* itself as well. The driving force of this female fantastic becomes the aim to recognize and accept this difference within, without being subjected to it. The notion of play, of assuming and casting off identities as the subject moves between the ideal and the real, allowing neither to subsume him/her is reflected in a new relationship to the male-authored text. These authors enter into a dialogue with the male text, in which they negotiate new spaces in movement between the internal and the external.

I begin this chapter with a study of two of Duranti's works because her first bestselling novel appears to have many features in common with Capriolo's work. *La*

*casa sul lago della luna* (1984) shares a clearly decipherable set of predominantly male authorial influences and intertextual references,<sup>44</sup> an obviously autobiographical input and a hero dedicated to artistic ideals with a love of enclosed spaces. However Duranti has never shied away from analysing the differences imposed by the gender system,<sup>45</sup> and this gives each of these features a distinctly new tone. Duranti learns to meet the male text half way, admitting her own dependency on it, without being blind to its potentially imprisoning effect. She shows how the power of fantasy can make enclosure the only option, but by setting the tale against the crossing of real national boundaries shows that other alternatives exist.

For a while Duranti's suspicion of the enclosed realm of the male-authored fantastic and male textual construction in general means that she keeps it at this distance – always experienced by a male protagonist. However, as her confidence increases, in *Sogni mancini* (1996) she produces a more innovative use of the fantastic. She uncovers its potential for multiple spaces of fantasy, which shatter its imprisoning power and make it a modality of transformation in the (de)construction of female subjectivity. In this female subject we see the first of several for whom taking up the active role in a quest motif demystifies the enclosed space, without draining it of all its symbolic power as creative and protective space. Duranti's novel suggests that the female subject can also develop an art of living.<sup>46</sup>

By looking at this fantastic manifestation of the 'nomadic subject' we gain a new insight into Rosi Braidotti's ideal of postmodern feminist subjectivity as situated (locally), yet free, able to settle anywhere, but never with permanence in mind.<sup>47</sup> The relevance of Braidotti's philosophy to contemporary Italian women writers who have a particular tendency towards the regional/international has been observed on more than one occasion.<sup>48</sup> The fantastic allows a similar subjecthood to find itself new

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<sup>44</sup> See Donatella De Ferra's thorough analysis of the intertextuality of the novel in her introduction to *La casa sul lago della luna*, ed. and introduced by Donatella De Ferra (Hull: Troubador, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> This does not extend to her acceptance of the title woman writer.

<sup>46</sup> Susan. J. Rosowski, 'The Novel of Awakening' in Abel, Elizabeth, Hirsch, Marianne and Langland, Elizabeth (eds), *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Self-Development* (Hanover, NH, London: University Press of New England): 'The direction of awakening follows what is becoming a pattern in literature by and about women: movement is inward, towards greater self-knowledge that leads in turn to a revelation of the disparity between that self-knowledge and the nature of the world. The protagonist's growth results typically not with an "art of living", as for her male counterpart, but instead with a realization that for a woman such an art of living is difficult or impossible; it is an awakening to limitations.' (p.49)

<sup>47</sup> See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> See Adalgisa Giorgio, 'Moving across Boundaries: Identity and Difference in the work of Fabrizia

spaces by wandering in between and transforming traditional literary spaces. To do this it creates itself temporary spaces of enclosure, which like the text are in movement and ready to metamorphosize.

In the remainder of the final chapter I choose to juxtapose the work of Capriolo and Duranti with the work of the two lesser-known female writers, Rossana Ombres and Laura Mancinelli. Not only does their work deserve more attention in both Italian and English speaking contexts, but it also provides further and diverse examples of how the fantastic is used by women writers to explore intertextual anxiety and pleasure, particularly through the authors' manipulation of fantastic space. Like the protagonist of *Sogni mancini* the women of Ombres' novels undertake a quest. In Ombres' novel *Serenata* (1980), which will be the main text of hers studied, this quest does not just involve some travel but takes the form of an actual journey. This combination of woman plus quest journey presupposes a subject in conflict with space.<sup>49</sup> Initially the author appears to side-step this problem by placing her female character within a plot in which limited movement is permitted: a journey towards the beloved. The pretext of the 'love interest' is rapidly unmasked however by the experience of travel as a fantastic encounter with a self in conflict with the textual mores imposed upon it.<sup>50</sup>

Thus Ombres' work provides the opportunity to focus further on the themes of

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Ramondino' in *The Italianist*, 18 (1998), 170-186. According to Giorgio, 'Like this nomadic subject, Ramondino is a nomad among languages and cultures, her identity an inventory of traces, her life an act of continual repositioning and contextualisation.' (p.177) See also Claudia Bernardi, "'The Road to Berlin': Displacement and Cultural Exile in New Italian Fiction of the Nineties', *New Readings*, 4 (1998), 23-38.

<sup>49</sup>Teresa De Lauretis has pointed out that Lotman's plot typology would have us believe that a woman who travels is travelling against herself, as a man: 'In the mythical text, then, the hero must be male regardless of the gender of the character, because the obstacle, whatever its personification (sphinx or dragon, sorceress or villain), is morphologically female - and indeed, simply, the woman, the earth, the space of his movement. As he crosses the boundary and "penetrates" the other space, the mythical subject is construed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter.' *Technologies*, p.43. The construction of the female body as background is also highlighted by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément. The list they create of the binaries associated with man and woman draws attention to their respective gender constructions in relation to space:

'Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress

Matter, concave, ground - where steps are taken, holding and dumping ground

Man

Woman' (pp. 63-64)

<sup>50</sup> This confirms Elizabeth Abel's suggestion that: 'The tensions that shape female development may lead to a disjunction between a surface plot, which affirms social conventions, and a submerged plot, which encodes rebellion, between a plot governed by age-old female story patterns, such as myths and fairy-tales, and a plot that reconceives these limiting possibilities; between a plot that charts development and a plot that unravels it.' Introduction to *The Voyage In* ed. by Abel, p.12

movement and polarity of the journey, in which the female subject assumes a new relation to space through travel. This movement between Self and Other gradually becomes blurred to the point of a recognition of Self as Other. The active immersion of the female body in the spaces which typically define her as Other are transformed into a sensual contact between the female subject and those spaces. The author pushes this surrender to the intoxicating power of the female stereotype to the point of rupture and madness. Her relation to female space, as passion, as nature, as theatre for male desire becomes so essentialist as to force the reader and subject to reject this essentialism. Rossana Ombres' work takes a very different path towards the exit from that fantastic enclosure of the male plot to that of the other authors studied here. Developing a poetics of excess, she immerses the female subject in all its stereotypical spaces: those of the body, of hysteria, of passionate sentiment, of pagan sensuality, of mystic communion. Her preoccupation with the potential of female Otherness as a passage towards understanding aligns her writing with the work of philosophers like Luce Irigaray and some works by Alda Merini and Elisabetta Rasy which explore female Otherness as the first-hand experience of the female subject. For Ombres this is both a celebration of the taboo areas of female experience, plunging her protagonists into the heart of fantasy about female power and also a radical break with that excess. The abrupt and unexpected endings of her novels constitute the blowing of a symbolic fuse. The female figure overloaded with significance cuts out and withdraws into a new and puzzling interior space. In her dizzying rush through the theatrical wardrobe of fantastic females Ombres beats the male-authored text and the closed space of fantasy at its own game. Refusing to be pinned down to any particular literary influences she fences with classical mythology, fairytale, folklore, figurative art and, in particular, biblical references. Eventually she allows none of these textual origins to stick, creating, in keeping with her own literary roots as a poet, elusive female subjects, whose final movement towards interiority promises a new dialogue with the external.

Mancinelli's place at the conclusion of the thesis is governed by the coincidence of the themes of dialogue and exchange, of movement and stasis in a space that transcends the tensions of home and away to become one of reconciliation and mutual recognition. The literary interests of Laura Mancinelli, as a former

Professor in Medieval German Philology at Turin,<sup>51</sup> are no secret. Her fascination for the medieval period has led her to make it and some of its literary figures the subject of much of her fiction. Arguably her relation to this literature lightens the potential for introjective anxiety, so clearly distanced are the characters of the medieval period from our own time. Mancinelli works hard to bring these figures back to life, by infusing both literary and historical material with the gender consciousness of our own time. She also sets some of her work in contemporary society where it is frequently marked by a self-conscious interest in our textual links with the past and the complex links between gender and that artistic inheritance. The most important factor in her 'leggerezza' in dealing with such works as *Tristan* and the legends of the Holy Grail lies in her willingness to mingle such 'high' literary sources with those regarded as more mundane: the detective story, the fairy tale and even cookery books. This tendency to mix her literary sources from 'high' and 'low' categories is common to all three of the women writers of this chapter.

A comparison of a text set in the present day, *La casa del tempo*, (1993) and the last of her so-called medieval trilogy, *Gli occhi dell'imperatore*, (1993) shows that, regardless of the temporal setting, her texts stage a dialogue between male and female viewpoints, in which the Other is recognised and respected. The approach towards this dialogue is through a spatially disruptive fantastic, which shakes up roles, turning the male into the passive victim of the bewitching enclosure. It is in keeping with the gentle tone of all Mancinelli's work that he will not die a terrible death, but learn to cede some of the control he had tried to keep for himself at the expense of the women in his life. Through his new relation to space he is forced to relax his grip on a rigid notion of gender which imprisons both men and women differently. The fantastic becomes the key, as in all the work in this chapter, to open a textual (s)exchange up between characters and between the author and her predominantly male-authored influences.

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<sup>51</sup> She retired to write fiction in 1994, after developing MS.

## CHAPTER ONE

### An Italian space for the female fantastic

#### i. Towards a spatial definition of the fantastic

The complex knot of theories which clouds and sometimes eclipses the literary term 'fantastic' is anticipated by, and in part results from, the simplest etymological analysis of the word. Its close links to the term 'fantasy' and 'fantasm' and its subtly different permutations and connections across different Indo-European languages inevitably blur perceptions of it as a distinct genre.<sup>52</sup> At the same time a more penetrative inquiry, such as that carried out by Giulio Lepschy, opens our eyes to the potential for the dense layering of signification which is also its most vital quality and which endows it with a seemingly inexhaustible vitality.<sup>53</sup> It is the very enigma of the word 'fantastic' which best defines its function on the contemporary literary scene, in the words of Secchieri 'un fenomeno cui sembra davvero attagliarsi l'ossimorica etichetta di "indefinibile per definizione."' <sup>54</sup> Whilst this flexibility certainly sounds conducive to creative freedom, I will show that ultimately it is the distinctive mode of expression of this 'indefinibility', conveyed by Secchieri as peculiar to the fantastic, which holds the powerful attraction for the female writer rather than a sense that

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example the distinction Italo Calvino makes in 'Definizioni di territori: il fantastico', *Una pietra sopra* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), pp.260-263. This article was originally published by *Le Monde*, 15 August 1970 as a series of responses to questions on the occasion of Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. 'Nel linguaggio letterario francese attuale il termine *fantastico* è usato soprattutto per le storie di spavento, che implicano un rapporto col lettore alla maniera ottocentesca: il lettore (se vuole partecipare al gioco, almeno con una parte di se stesso) deve credere a ciò che legge, accettare di essere colto da un'emozione quasi fisiologica (solitamente di terrore o angoscia) e cercarne una spiegazione, come per un'esperienza vissuta. In italiano (come originariamente anche in francese, credo) i termini *fantasia* e *fantastico* non implicano affatto questo tuffo del lettore nella corrente emozionale del testo; implicano al contrario una presa di distanza, una levitazione, l'accettazione d'un'altra logica che porta su altri oggetti e altri nessi da quelli dell'esperienza quotidiana (o dalle convenzioni letterarie dominanti)' (p. 260) See also his introduction to *Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento* in which he explains that 'L'uso italiano [contrasted with the French term *fantastique*] associa più liberamente "fantastico" a "fantasia"; difatti noi parliamo di "fantastico ariostesco", mentre secondo la terminologia francese si dovrebbe dire "il meraviglioso ariostesco".' (p.6) Indeed, in the light of these considerations, in my provisional definition of the fantastic I intend to refer as much as possible to contemporary *Italian* theoreticians of the term, although as we shall see many of them have been drawn closer to the French understanding than Calvino was.

<sup>53</sup> Giulio Lepschy, 'Aspetti linguistici del fantastico' in *Nuovi saggi di linguistica italiana*, (Bologna: Il mulino, 1989), pp.199-230. He writes: 'Attraverso la radice di fantasia ci siamo collegati alla luce e alla visione, al parlare e al linguaggio, non senza incontrare, lungo la via il fallo e il nome del padre: un vero paradiso lacaniano.' (p.201)

<sup>54</sup> Filippo Secchieri, 'Il coltello di Lichtenberg: fantastico e teoria letteraria' in *Geografia, storia e poetiche del fantastico* ed. by Farnetti, pp. 145-164 (p145).

‘anything goes’.

The generic space occupied by the fantastic has probably been more hotly disputed than that of any other genre. We can trace two principal divergent patterns emerging from this debate, which can in themselves uncannily be described in terms of fantastic phenomena. The first is the fantastic as a very traditional ‘phantom’, dead and buried and only to be perceived by the gifted reader on rare occasions, always by visiting it in its historical context - like a trip to the haunted castle. The most famous formalist proponent, Todorov, in his seminal work *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*,<sup>55</sup> presents the ‘pure’ fantastic as both occupying a limited temporal space, (namely the nineteenth century) and even in that past tense fighting for a liminal position on the razor-blade edge between the uncanny and the marvellous, dependent on the relationship set up between the narrator and reader. Unfortunately this definition provides us with very few examples (two at least, twelve at the most).<sup>56</sup> Calvino has described Todorov’s as ‘molto preciso su un’importante accezione del fantastico e molto ricco di suggestioni su altre accezioni, in vista d’una possibile classificazione generale.’<sup>57</sup> It is the attempt to disentangle these two strands that has caused a great deal of critical response to Todorov’s theory and attempts to apply it to possible subsequent examples of the genre. Todorov’s staunch followers, however, write about the fantastic as an historical genre, whose texts remain to haunt us.<sup>58</sup>

The other more recent school of theorists, however, moving from the Borgesian notion that all fiction is fantastic, makes a wily demon of the fantastic, capable of assuming every form with which to ensnare its prey: everywhere the reader reads the fantastic is. Remo Ceserani describes this as a limited “fantasticizzazione” of other narrative genres.<sup>59</sup> Often, however, this is a view of its megalomaniac expansion into the twenty-first century in which it embraces every kind of anti-realist text from science fiction to magic realism and inevitably annihilates itself in its

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<sup>55</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve, 1973). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. Originally published as *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris, 1970.

<sup>56</sup> See Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.64. See also Jacques Finné, *La Littérature fantastique. Essai sur l’organisation surnaturelle* (Bruxelles: Editions de l’Université, 1980).

<sup>57</sup> Italo Calvino, ‘Definizioni di territori: il fantastico’, p. 261.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example Deborah Harter, ‘most agree that by the end of the nineteenth century the form had exhausted itself.’ (p.8)

<sup>59</sup> Remo Cesarini, ‘Le radici storiche di un modo narrativo’ in *La narrazione fantastica* ed. by Ceserani and others (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1983), pp.7-36 (p. 23).

hubris.<sup>60</sup> This is caused, I believe, by the usage of the term, particularly in Italy, that does not acknowledge the (at least) two very different interpretations of it: as the ‘fantastic’ (noun) which is a specific genre and ‘fantastic’ (adjective) as an umbrella term synonymous with anti-realist. As noun and adjective are obviously interchangeable, unsurprisingly most usages sit somewhere rather uncomfortably between the two. This is probably inevitable in the face of a perceived contemporary erosion of distinct generic categories. The critic of women’s writing is even more reluctant to close the door on cross-generic fertilization. My primary concern is with the fantastic genre, although I am interested in tracing the degree to which upon women writers stretch the boundaries of the genre through their incorporation of other elements.

More recent developments have attempted to move beyond the morass of competing genres that push in upon the space of the fantastic or expand it indefinitely. Such approaches usually result from its thematic or procedural definition and from the acceptance that it is not an immutable entity. As a different genre at different moments in time its contemporary manifestation is most concretely presented as a development of Todorov’s interest in it as a mode of narration that implies a certain mode of reading.<sup>61</sup> Lugnani underlines this as a

fondamentale criterio di delimitazione del racconto fantastico, e cioè che il fantastico è non solo narrare certe cose ma è anche il modo di narrare certe cose; è il racconto d’uno scarto irriducibile, ma è anche, se non più, un modo specifico di raccontare la storia di quello scarto. Diremo persino di più, e cioè che storicamente nasce, col fantastico, un modo narrativo nuovo molto più di quanto esso non inventi cose nuove da narrare.<sup>62</sup>

What emerges from its own history then is a twofold definition of the fantastic, which contemporary writers, enjoying (or lost in) the dissolution of more rigid generic conventions, can draw upon. A *primary* function which focuses on the narrative mode as the relationship between narrator-protagonist-reader, and a *secondary* store of thematic and procedural devices upon which the writer of any genre can draw in truly postmodern fashion. The main texts which I have chosen to analyze in this thesis

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<sup>60</sup> L. Lugnani underlines these two points in ‘Per una delimitazione del “genere”’ in *La narrazione fantastica* ed. by Ceserani and others, pp. 37-73, writing that ‘il genere rischia di svuotarsi quasi del tutto o di gonfiarsi a dismisura fagocitando anche porzioni di generi presumibilmente limitrofi.’ (p.37)

<sup>61</sup> It is worth considering that this element has only developed recently within Italian theory. This is in part due to the later development of this branch of theory in Italy.

<sup>62</sup> Lugnani in ‘Per una delimitazione del “genere”’ in *La narrazione fantastica* ed. by Ceserani and others, p.64. In fact this is an argument which emerges from several of the essays in this book, perhaps

illustrate both elements and can therefore be defined as 'fantastic', to the extent that this is the dominant generic pact they establish with the reader.

This emphasis on the intentionality of the authorial voice is in keeping with recent developments within the field of the fantastic. An emphasis on authorial control marks a move away from the more traditional emphasis. This focused on the necessity of conditioning a reader's response through a process of identification with the first person narrator or protagonist.<sup>63</sup> Benedetti suggests however that the 'reazione del lettore si determina a partire dal rapporto che il narratore intrattiene con il proprio enunciato nel momento stesso in cui lo produce.'<sup>64</sup> This theory allows us to trace the fantastic in many texts that lie outside Todorov's insistence on the unsuitability of the unrepresented narrator.<sup>65</sup> In her shift of interest towards the authorial voice, Benedetti does not underestimate the role of the reader. However she sees this reader's response as conditioned by the authorial voice:

La soggettività coinvolta nel fantastico si iscrive sempre al livello dell'enunciazione nella sua globalità, ma all'interno di una relazione intersoggettiva tra un soggetto enunciante e un destinatario della quale è il primo a detenere, in prima istanza, l'iniziativa.'<sup>66</sup>

The view of reading as a function of the narration must nevertheless take into account the psychoanalytical notion of the unconscious in the text, developed by Pierre Macherey.<sup>67</sup> It is particularly important to consider the possibility of a 'silent

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because they sprang from a seminar group.

<sup>63</sup> Todorov's theory privileges the 'represented ("dramatized") narrator' as quite suitable to the fantastic. 'He is preferable to the simple character who can easily lie [...] But he is also preferable to the non-represented narrator [...] if a supernatural event were reported to us by such a narrator, we should immediately be in the marvellous, there would be no occasion, in fact, to doubt his words.' (Todorov, p. 83)

<sup>64</sup> Carla Benedetti, 'L'enunciazione fantastica come esperienza dei limiti' in *La narrazione fantastica* ed. by Ceserani and others, pp.289-353 (p.294-5): 'è con la soggettività narrante e con il suo atteggiamento enunciativo che il lettore entra in relazione, per identificarsi e distanziarsene.' (p.296)

<sup>65</sup> Benedetti focusses on the fact that, even in the nineteenth century text a 'non-represented narrator' can still be staged: 'Quel che Todorov non sembra tener presente è che qualsiasi narratore, che sia estraneo alla vicenda narrata (che sia cioè, nei termini comunemente usati, anche se imprecisi, un narratore 'in terza persona'), o che sia presente nella storia come personaggio (narratore in prima persona) in entrambi i casi ha la possibilità di rappresentarsi nel racconto in quanto soggetto dell'enunciazione narrativa, diventando protagonista di quella vicenda che consiste nel fatto di raccontare.' (p. 297) In a contemporary context Todorov's comment that 'there is no reason to doubt a non-represented narrator's words - thus any supernatural event becomes "marvellous"' (Chapter Five, Todorov) has perhaps in itself been undermined by the postmodern project to question "authority". A recent example of both instances lies in Paola Capriolo's novel *La spettatrice* (Milano: Bompiani, 1995), in which the narrator foregrounds his/her own weak grasp of the narrative material: 'Nessuno può dire con esattezza come si sia compiuto il destino di Vulpius, quali eventi, quali pensieri abbiano scandito la sua vicenda.' (p.7)

<sup>66</sup> Benedetti, p.298.

<sup>67</sup> Pierre Macherey, 'The text says what it does not say' in *Literature in the Modern World* ed. by

function' of the text in relation to women writers, some of who still operate under constrictions about appearing and being labelled feminist. These texts must also be influenced by and have varied repercussions for the readership implied by their narration. Macherey's theory has much in common with theories of women's writing which repeatedly refer to notions of 'double-speak.' We will see that the degree of the unconscious not only shifts between authors but perceptions of its presence also fluctuate according to the reader. Through a critical awareness of this kind of 'double-speak' we can retain an emphasis on the narrator as source of the fantastic, without ignoring the input of the implied and actual readers.

If women writers' relation to the canon is similarly marked by 'double speak', it is because they find themselves in a double bind, as Bronfen suggests with two pertinent questions:

How do women constitute and establish themselves as authors within a culture which has not drafted this role, except as a blank, an aporia, a presence under erasure? How can they substantiate their authorship as women, even though this concept is culturally predetermined in such a way as to contradict their claim, and even though they cannot offer a definition outside these discursive formulations?<sup>68</sup>

I believe that the dilemma between the erasure of imitation and the silence of her 'Otherness' can find a potent form of expression in the fantastic, because the fantastic lends itself to a spatial definition that sustains the contradictory tensions of intentionality and the unconscious.

### **i.i. No-man's land - doubting interpretation**

A recent work by Paola Capriolo describes how a male artist, working deep in the forest, will react when the invisible nymph Eco breathes her shape on to the mirror before his eyes:

Ne sarà disorientato, come sempre accade ai mortali, quando si imbattono in qualcosa che superi la sfera ristretta del loro raziocinio e intuiscono, senza tuttavia poter ammetterla, l'esistenza d'una realtà diversa da quella di cui si ostinano a credersi signori. Che le due realtà poi possono addirittura confondersi, e così inestricabilmente da comporne in effetti una sola, è divenuta per loro un'idea tanto estranea e remota da gettarli nella più profonda

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Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.215-222.

<sup>68</sup> E. Bronfen, p. 404

costernazione o da spingerli a gridare al miracolo, se proprio non riescono a negarlo.<sup>69</sup>

The triangle of reactions to the fantastic event described here embodies one of the issues in the contemporary debate about the moment of hesitation posited as central to the fantastic by Todorov. They point beyond Todorov's idea of hesitation: that the protagonist/reader should never be able to decide between an 'uncanny' interpretation, and a marvellous one. In the uncanny interpretation the strange is reincorporated into the subject's rational understanding of previously established natural laws, whose application was simply not immediately visible, and the marvellous interpretation pushes the subject into a 'marvellous' world, no longer adherent to those laws shared by the reader. He writes that 'the fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural evil' (Todorov, p.25). The conviction that the supernatural must be evil seems outdated, but it does explain why Todorov only dares to consider 'hesitation' as a razor edge of indecision between two states (evil demands solutions), rather than a 'profonda costernazione' as a state of mind in its own right.

A primary point of opposition to the Todorovian view is in the choice of the axis uncanny/ marvellous. Goggi argues that Todorov does not justify the choice of the axis natural/supernatural over other possible pairs of oppositions within the fantastic such as 'veglia/sonno, sanità/pazzia, realtà/allucinazione, realtà/apparenza.'<sup>70</sup> In fact Goggi sees the only possible opposition as existing rather between the natural and the unknown (incognito) '(naturale -> x)'.<sup>71</sup> The notion of binary is seen as increasingly eroded within the fantastic, as the Capriolo quotation would suggest, perhaps in tandem with a development towards what Calvino describes as the 'fantastico quotidiano'<sup>72</sup>, that is a move to include what Lugnani describes as: 'la natura inquietante "interna all'uomo"' and which can 'occupare quella stessa zona d'ombra irriducibile al discorso che in altri racconti fantastici è riservata al

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<sup>69</sup> Paola Capriolo, *Con i miei mille occhi* (Milano: Bompiani, 1997), p.63.

<sup>70</sup> G.Goggi, 'Assurdo e paradigma di realtà: alcuni nodi del fantastico' in *La narrazione fantastica* ed. by Ceserani and others, pp. 75-176 (p.76).

<sup>71</sup> G.Goggi, *ibid.*, p.78.

<sup>72</sup> In his introduction to *Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento* Calvino describes how 'il racconto fantastico in cui il soprannaturale resta invisibile, "si sente" più di quanto non "si veda", entra a far parte d'una dimensione interiore, come stato d'animo o come congettura' and later names this the 'fantastico "mentale", o "astratto", o "psicologico", o "quotidiano"'. He describes this later kind of fantastic moving in an opposite direction to that practised earlier in the nineteenth century: the 'fantastico visionario' which 'crea attorno a sé uno spazio popolato d'apparizioni visionarie.' (pp.10-11)

sopranannaturale.’<sup>73</sup> It is no longer possible to see this solely as ‘evil’, although it may be unsettling. More importantly the idea of a fantastic which refuses to succumb to binary schemes presents a clear affinity with feminist rejections of a binary system which has always held ‘woman’ at arm’s length as its darkest ‘evil’ half.<sup>74</sup> It would not be impossible to read into Todorov’s scheme the same binary, in which the ‘uncanny’ reads as the experience of the empirical, enlightened male, ultimately surmountable by reason and the ‘marvellous’ reads as the dangerous female which must be kept at a distance to sustain it. Little wonder that the two rarely meet in his version of the fantastic.

If Todorov’s theory of hesitation has survived so long, the cause lies perhaps in this very refusal to take sides. However more recently critics have attempted to flesh out this hesitation into something more than a ‘neither’ ‘nor’. For Lugnani the move is beyond hesitation to:

il dubbio gnoseologico assoluto connesso appunto alla non soluzione del racconto, alla sua chiusura perfettamente imperfetta ed è uno *stato* dubitativo che si pone interamente al di là della definizione toдорoviana di *hésitation* [...] non si tratta dello stato di chi è incerto fra due alternative, ma di chi è indotto a dubitare della validità e adeguatezza del paradigma di realtà come codice culturale e assiologico e come meccanismo di conoscenza e interpretazione del mondo’<sup>75</sup>

I certainly see this ‘blocco conoscitivo’, which moves beyond a hesitation between two clear options to a (temporarily?) closed door, as a valid definition of the fantastic. It does not mean that the author has not hinted at what may lie behind the door, or does not even open it briefly and shine a torch into the darkness beyond. This

<sup>73</sup> Lugnani in *La narrazione fantastica* ed. by Ceserani and others, p.312

<sup>74</sup> See Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing and introduced by Sandra M. Gilbert (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp.63-4. Also Julia Kristeva: ‘The economy of this system requires that women be excluded from the single true and legislating principle, namely the Word, as well as from the (always paternal) element that gives procreation a social value: they are excluded from knowledge and power. The myth of the relationship between Eve and the serpent is the best summary of this exclusion. The serpent stands for the opposite of God, since he tempts Eve to transgress his prohibition. But he is also Adam’s repressed desire to transgress, that which he dare not carry out, and which is his shame. The sexual symbolism helps us to understand that the serpent is that which, in God or Adam, remains beyond or outside the sublimation of the Word. Eve has no relationship other than with that, even then because she is its very opposite, the “other race”.’ (‘About Chinese Women’, *The Kristeva Reader*, p.143)

<sup>75</sup> ‘Anziché muovere alla ricerca d’una soluzione il fantastico le elimina via via tutte e per questa strada lascia alla fine sussistere l’evento inesplicabile come scarto irriducibile. In questo sta, ad un primo livello, la sua particolarità: non c’è paradigma di realtà (né naturale e positivo, né meraviglioso e trascendente) legittimamente capace di comprendere e spiegare l’inesplicabile coprendo il salto logico che lo scarto comporta. Il principio di casualità è insufficiente e il pandeterminismo del meraviglioso è interdetto.’ (p.64)

redefinition of the fantastic offers another opening to contemporary women writers in giving them an opportunity to close the door on the weary repetitions language has a habit of forcing upon them. It may constitute a caesura in the daily cycle of signifier and signified, without forcing them to retire completely from the act of self-expression. It also forces a reconfiguration of the reality paradigm on the part of the reader.

As Luigi Punzo observes, the very doubt surrounding the definition of the genre, 'questa apertura problematica', itself highlights 'la natura dinamica, coinvolgente del fantastico, implicita nelle scelte che comunque si è costretti ad operare rispetto al significato da attribuire alla concatenazione dei fatti narrati.'<sup>76</sup> Often the central force of this involvement is a vacuum, a doubt or a hesitation. Increasingly critics draw attention to the simultaneous foregrounding and frustration of the hermeneutical process: although the reader feels compelled to attribute some kind of a permanent meaning to attribute to the facts narrated, s/he is ultimately deprived of the means to do so. In fact, the label 'fantastic' is the only signifier of any certainty s/he can apply to the work. Women's creativity has been defined as absence, but their passivity and mystery has been over-defined and featured merely as a tool in male subject formation. The active proposition of a more profound uncertainty presents an ideal way of (re)establishing some leverage on the unknown. Only by pointing towards the unknown do we gain control of our knowledge.

It is important to probe changes in the spatiality of the fantastic that may result from the erosion of the Todorovian hesitation. Obviously that hesitation has been construed by theorists of the fantastic as occupying a clearly liminal position, between two worlds. However, what happens to that notion of space in a non-dualist notion of the fantastic? I would argue that it maintains its liminal position simply by means of a shift of the boundary line into a vision of worlds of cognitive understanding, one familiar, one unknown:<sup>77</sup>

Il momento centrale dell'esperienza [...] Lo si può caratterizzare come momento di superamento di una soglia che sta tra uno *spazio chiaro*, analitico, dominato dalle distinzioni, e uno *spazio nero*, in cui le distinzioni svaniscono.'<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Luigi Punzo, 'Intersezioni dell'immaginario letterario' in *I piaceri dell'immaginazione. Studi sul fantastico* ed. by Biancamaria Pisapia (Roma: Bulzoni editore, 1984), pp.13-35 (p.16).

<sup>77</sup> Brian McHale is one of many critics to conceive of it in this way: For him the postmodern fantastic is 'a zone of hesitation, a frontier - not, however, a frontier between the uncanny and the marvellous, but between this world and the world next door.'cit. by Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p.151.

<sup>78</sup> G.Goggin in Ceserani and others (eds), p. 88.

Thus the threshold position of the fantastic has been preserved as the narrow gap between signification and its negative. For Jameson, for example, the modern fantastic presents 'an object world forever suspended on the point of meaning; forever disposed to receive a revelation, whether of evil or grace, that never takes place.'<sup>79</sup> The expectation distances the fantastic from pure deconstruction and brings it closer to psychoanalysis as defined by Toril Moi: 'poised in the space suspended between One Meaning and the deconstructive rejection of all truth.'<sup>80</sup> An ideal space for any subject in the process of redefinition, but whose temporary nature is suggestive of a journey.

One must ask *what* it is that causes the narrator and reader to reach that liminal place. I have chosen to focus on space as the site of interruption, the trapdoor, the instigator of doubt. Indeed Buzzati believed it enough to have one 'fundamental element (the plot, the atmosphere, the characters) appear[s] more or less unrealistic.'<sup>81</sup> The trio of temporal/causal/spatial is generally regarded as the foundation stone of logic. The overlap between the process of enunciation itself and the thematic preoccupations of the genre lies primarily in the treatment of space, particularly for women writers.

If, as a process of interpretation that is blocked, the fantastic is often described as occupying a liminal position, the theme of crossing-over becomes vital to the desire of the narrator and reader. Consequently the dichotomy home/elsewhere becomes a common motif and one of the many sites at which Freud's 'unheimlich'- generally described as the affective aspect of the fantastic - comes into play. Here the homely and familiar (heimlich) is also the source of the uncanny (unheimlich) and the secret (heimlich) is revealed. Such are the encounters engendered through the relation to space. It allows for the emergence of the unfamiliar within the familiar, the intrusion of the stranger in familiar space - that kind of boundary crossing. Freud's question as to whether we are 'after all justified in entirely ignoring intellectual uncertainty as a factor [in the creation of the uncanny], seeing that we have admitted its importance in relation to death?'<sup>82</sup> further reinforces the idea that the fantastic doubt is linked to the

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<sup>79</sup> Frederic Jameson cit. by Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.159.

<sup>80</sup> *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 15.

<sup>81</sup> A. Lagoni-Danstrup, 'Dino Buzzati et le rapport dialectique de la littérature fantastique avec l'individu et la société', *Cahiers Buzzati*, 3 (1979), 75-115.

<sup>82</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' in *The Penguin Freud Library*, Vol. 14, Art and Literature, ed. by Angela Richards and Albert Dickson, pp. 339-376 (p.370). Further references to this essay are given

most troubling of all boundary crossings.

The motif of the journey, however, as a fantastic catalyst, often becomes an encounter not with the completely unknown, but with the margins of the familiar. Listing some themes typical of the fantastic Ceserani begins with the idea of the border:

È caratteristica del fantastico non allontanarsi troppo dalla cultura dominante e andare piuttosto a cercare le aree geografiche un po' marginali dove si colgono bene i rapporti fra una cultura dominante e un'altra che si sta ritirando, dove si vedono i modelli culturali a confronto e in compresenza. O addirittura il nuovo modo va a cercare le aree di frontiera dentro di noi, nella vita interiore, nella stratificazione culturale all'interno dei personaggi che ormai appartengono alla cultura dominante<sup>83</sup>

Ceserani cites the example of the educated, enlightened nineteenth century man who finds himself faced with the necessity of acknowledging possible truths of old schemes of thought. However a consideration of his model of conflict between old and new cultures might also suggest the tension between patriarchy and an increasingly female input into culture. Edges and barriers which delimit the familiar are also the occasions of its rupture and if woman herself has been used to define the limits of experience, then she can also actively define them. This dovetails with Lucie Armitt's suggestion that the fantastic text,

endlessly open and thus non-containable [...] must therefore pose as a dangerous threat to established notions of fixity and conformity, a characteristic that obviously makes the fantastic a particularly appealing form for the exploration of socio-political marginality and ex-centricity.<sup>84</sup>

Through its uncanny affects, Rimondi even sees the fantastic as constituting a temporary break through the symbolic order to reveal 'uno spazio di verità.'<sup>85</sup>

Kristeva has built upon Lacanian theory to establish the relationship between the symbolic order and the semiotic, suggesting that women have a privileged relationship with the semiotic stage, which they have to abandon to join the Law of the father. The fantastic is generally recognised as offering a mode of breaking

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after quotations in the text and denoted TU.

<sup>83</sup> Remo Ceserani, p.20.

<sup>84</sup> Lucie Armitt, *Pushing Back The Limits: The Fantastic as Transgression in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 1992), p.11.

<sup>85</sup> Giorgio Rimondi, 'Dall'Unheimlich all'oggetto a' in *Geografia, storia e poetiche del fantastico* ed. by Farnetti, pp.165-176 (p. 176).

through this Law. It will also be worth questioning whether the female subject regards this return to the semiotic with the same horror as the male subject, or whether her access to 'quella verità solitamente resa inaccessibile al soggetto dalla barra che gli concede l'accesso al simbolico'<sup>86</sup> is any smoother. The marked female predisposition to the neighbouring genre of the gothic with its emphasis on fearing the return of the repressed may suggest it is not. In fact the spaces of the gothic are often interpreted as representing the heroine's encounter with the 'uncanny' female body.<sup>87</sup> Kristeva's view that for those women who have identified with the Law of the father the breakdown of that Law entails the death of their own subjecthood is reflected in the conventional endings of the gothic novel (see introduction, footnote 29).

For those women who are drawn to identify with the mother the fantastic allows them to articulate spaces beyond the labyrinth of the maternal body, namely in the 'poli dell'orrore e della fascinazione'<sup>88</sup> exercised upon them by the male text, and more importantly their place in it. By pushing horrifying gothic spaces into the intertextual realm of the fantastic women writers also foreground the role of the male-authored text in their alienation from the female body. The open endings of the fantastic are more conducive to the potential liberation from a fear of the feminine.

The choice of space as a dynamic deserving attention in a definition of the fantastic comes more sharply into focus when we consider the close relationship between the language of the fantastic and that of dreams. In both the familiar is made strange and alters our perception of it, often through spatial metaphors. Monica Farnetti draws attention to this aspect of the fantastic in her essay concerning the oneiric writings of three twentieth century writers, citing Hillman's theory that "Il linguaggio fondamentale del profondo [...] è dato [...] dallo spazio" e che il profondo "si presenta in primo luogo come strutture psichiche in metafore spaziali."<sup>89</sup> She consequently draws attention to 'un rapporto di reciproca corrispondenza tra le

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<sup>86</sup> Rimondi, p.176.

<sup>87</sup> See Claire Kahane, 'The Gothic Mirror' in *The(M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Criticism* ed. by Shirley Nelson Gardner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp.334-351: 'The heroine's active exploration of her relation to the Gothic house in which she is trapped is also an exploration of her relation to the maternal body that she shares, with all its connotations of power over and vulnerability to forces within and without.' (p338)

<sup>88</sup> Rimondi, p.176.

<sup>89</sup> J. Hillman cit. by Monica Farnetti, "Sogni di locazione": Malerba, Romano, Morante' in *Stazione di Posta*, No 51/52, (1993) 45-56, (p.45). A good example of this use of metaphorical space occurs in Jeanette Winterson's novel, *The Passion* (London: Vintage, 1996), 'In our dreams we sometimes struggle from the oceans of desire up Jacob's ladder to that orderly place. Then human voices wake us and we drown.' (p.74)

categorie del sogno, del fantastico e dello spazio'. In the closeness therefore between the dream and fantastic literature, space emerges as a primary common denominator, suggesting that any emphasis on its role in the fantastic will inevitably be closely bound up between the fantastic and its relationship to the unconscious.

The relationship between literature and dream is one which Malerba describes as follows: 'il sogno esprime una lontananza ansiosa che portiamo dentro di noi e che sfugge ai riti di geometrizzazione e misurazione del mondo che impone l'invenzione letteraria.'<sup>90</sup> Perhaps the fantastic offers a mid-way point between the two in its uncanny likeness to a dream - like a dream it seems familiar but it is a much more densely symbolic form of language, which tantalizes the reader with the suggestion that there may be a meaning. This makes it more similar to the state of hypnagogia, the state of half-waking in which the mind has a partial control over its imagination, a frequent source of inspiration for artists and writers. Its relationship to space then may well be similar - half infused with the unconscious, but an attempt to mould something out of them - closer to the unconscious than most fiction, but not oneiric writing. This engagement between the unknown and the act of interpretation which can never reach a conclusion often characterizes the experience of the female subject under patriarchy as well as the interpreter of dreams.<sup>91</sup> Fantastic fiction is marked out as the field in which the two impulses can germinate.

Farnetti also suggests that the world of dreams is closer to the female form of the fantastic, which is in turn more akin to the 'marvellous' of Todorov's definition.<sup>92</sup> Much is made of the worlds of fantastic fiction, of the fantastic moment of doubt arising when two worlds clash. Yet the principle of a sudden, *violent* intrusion into the world of the normal by the 'inexplicable' upon which Todorov's definition is predicated is not so prevalent in contemporary forms of the fantastic generally. For Farnetti its total absence from the female fantastic is what distinguishes this writing and makes it so close to the marvellous:

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<sup>90</sup> Luigi Malerba, *Diario di un sognatore* (Torino: Einaudi, 1981) cit. by Farnetti, 'Sogni di locazione', p.45.

<sup>91</sup> Thus I would also claim for the fantastic the power Shoshana Felman discovers about dreams in psychoanalysis: 'I learned how dreams are indeed, concretely and materially, the "royal road to the unconscious", how they were 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.' (p.122)

<sup>92</sup> Monica Farnetti, 'Irruzioni del semiotico nel simbolico. Appunti sul fantastico femminile', in *Le soglie del fantastico*, ed. by M. Galletti (Roma: Lithos, 1996), pp. 223-235.

È caratteristico infatti della letteratura fiabesca femminile uno spazio del soprannaturale accettato nelle sue leggi, magico e metamorfico, *mal differenziato* tuttavia da uno spazio riconoscibile - in base ai modelli vigenti - come fantastico, dove vigono come di norma l'incertezza e la disponibilità a suggestioni di ordine psichico e sensoriale, il turbamento e l'inquietudine derivati essenzialmente dall'ambiguità del reale.<sup>93</sup>

Farnetti's definition seems not to account for the doubt that the reader must experience as a result of the many links between the 'ambiguità del reale' and the world of the text. Like the dreamer the reader is forced by the nature of the text to take continual recourse to his/her own experience in order to assess the world of the text.<sup>94</sup> S/he finds however that the rules of *that* world are no longer stable as a result of the links between the two. The female fantastic can forge these links through the use of transtextuality, which constantly prevents the reader from losing him/herself in the text.

Awaking from a dream is often associated with a new form of vision, not in the visionary sense of seeing what is not there but in the sense of seeing the old space anew, infused with the dream space. If fantastic literature is a 'dream with open eyes' can it too lead to new vision? The conclusion about permanent hesitation reached earlier would imply a negative. However I believe that in the light of this close connection between dreams and the fantastic<sup>95</sup> we can agree with Goggi when he concludes that:

la stessa sospensione sembra invitare e spingere al suo superamento:... Due sono le vie d'uscita: o ripristinando il funzionamento del meccanismo della veridizione e quindi riacquistando, attraverso lo svelamento della situazione, la pertinenza dell'opposizione che l'assurdo sembrava neutralizzare (assurdo degradato a enigma), oppure metarealizzando un punto di vista superiore che inglobi e superi la contraddizione stessa (assurdo risolto in metanaturale).<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> 'Irruzioni del semiotico', p.225

<sup>94</sup> Clear links emerge here between the fantastic which I am outlining and the close genre of magical realism. However Rawdon Wilson makes the point that the latter is a 'hybrid space' in which, 'plural worlds, like distinct kinds of writing, like parabolic trajectories, approach each other, but do not merge', 'Metamorphoses of Fictional Space' in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, pp. 209 - 233 (p.228). I argue here that the fantastic does merge worlds to create a new one, even if the original elements are still perceptible, with a visionary quality which distances it from what I see as the more concretely political aims of magical realism. The differences between the two genres can seem slight, but I would also foreground the principle of doubt as unique to the fantastic.

<sup>95</sup> Also observed by Goggi himself when he writes that 'L'esperienza onirica, l'esperienza della droga, forme e modi di esplorazione dell'immaginario possono assumere, pur essendo salvaguardata l'opposizione essere/apparire (e quindi: la distinzione soggettivo/oggettivo, dentro/fuori), un tale peso e spessore di *verità* da spingere a uno sbilanciamento assiologico del paradigma, in conseguenza del quale il sogno, ecc. diventa il positivo, il reale il negativo. In tale sbilanciamento è da ravvisare una forma di rottura e di lacerazione del paradigma distinta ma in qualche modo complementare di quella connessa alla crisi conoscitiva che porta alla scoperta dell'assurdo.' (in Ceserani and others (eds) p.90)

<sup>96</sup> G.Goggi, *ibid.*, p.90.

If finishing the book is like awaking from a dream, it is as likely that the subject will see his/her environment differently, whether in terms of his/her own inadequacy to rise to its interpretation or, more positively, in terms of an expanded horizon. As Capriolo's opening quote suggested, the fantastic narrator (represented here by the nymph Eco) may work his/her reader towards a merging of two viewpoints, neither a negation nor a recourse to the supernatural. Like Lucie Armitt's vision of the radically utopian text, these fantastic texts:

positively invite disruption rather than closing off dissenting voices. In refusing to shut up, they invite readers in, desiring us to enter into the discursive spaces they leave. Such texts will never be guilty of putting words in our mouths; on the contrary, they leave us to do that to them.<sup>97</sup>

In the light of the argument for a degree of control on the part of the fantastic narrator, however, I believe that the discursive spaces remaining necessarily leave us with less than total freedom.

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<sup>97</sup> Lucie Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p.16.

### i.ii. The Microcosm of Literature

‘Will the literature of the fantastic be possible in the twenty-first century, with the growing inflation of prefabricated images?’ - Italo Calvino<sup>98</sup>

When Calvino famously addresses the future of literature in his *Lezioni americane* his conflation of the fantastic and literature in general is significant. What emerges from an analysis of the fantastic is a genre that concerns the space of literature itself. Todorov wrote that: ‘What the fantastic speaks of is not qualitatively different from what literature speaks of, but in doing so it proceeds at a different intensity’ (Todorov, p.93). For Secchieri hermeneutics and the reading experience are so central to the text of the fantastic that a more detailed analysis of it will tell us more about literature itself.<sup>99</sup> The relationship between the fantastic and literary signification is twofold: firstly it puts the reading process under the microscope and secondly it is always self-reflexive.

Schwenger argues persuasively that the reading experience itself, compelling the subject to surrender temporarily part of him/herself to another, is ‘the uncanny’s double’, an experience which occupies a threshold position:

The visionary worlds created in fiction do not have to succeed in taking us over completely; their liminal status (both here and not-here) is enough to remind us of language’s reality-making properties. As we abandon our world to become absorbed by the book’s world, we may vaguely sense that if words are capable of making a fictional reality appear, they are capable of making a real reality appear as well. To what degree, then, are both realities appearances? We hesitate, on this boundary line of language, between the natural and the supernatural. And if this is a disturbing state, it is also a familiar one: we have been there before, perhaps as infants, before the world became sorted out into subject and object, mind and matter. The fantastic nature of the reading act, then, is at the same time familiar and unfamiliar - that is, it is *uncanny*.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Vintage, 1996), p.95.

<sup>99</sup> Filippo Secchieri, ‘Come ogni altro ente finzionale, l’oggetto fantastico è un oggetto straniato, familiare e nel contempo inquietante: un coltello di Lichtenberg, un Odradek, un’esistenza linguistica. È questo carattere del fantastico, questo suo esplicitare virtualità normalmente insite nella significazione letteraria, che merita d’essere evidenziato e approfondito. La sua presunta eccezionalità non è che l’amplificata riproduzione di una comune matrice ontologica, l’effetto dunque di una modificazione non sostanziale ma qualitativa, di un’esperienza di limite. In ciò risiede l’interesse teorico del fantastico, invero non esiguo. Studiarne il manifestarsi può infatti contribuire ad un migliore apprezzamento del regime della finzione, delle sue logiche produttive, della sua realtà ulteriore.’ (in *Geografia, storia e poetiche*, ed. by Farnetti, pp.163-4)

<sup>100</sup> Peter Schwenger, *Fantasm and Fiction: On textual envisioning* (Stanford: Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp.17-18. He also writes that ‘The language of literature both is and is not supernatural. On the one hand, its effects, especially its visionary effects, call up fantasmatic presences

Interestingly he reinforces this relationship between reading and the fantastic by showing how often the fantastic text makes conspicuous this uncanny power of literature to take over the reader's life. Thus the fantastic becomes a means of dealing with the fears and joys of reading - of forcing the reader to consider the meaning of his/her own creation of a third space between self and text.<sup>101</sup> This use of the fantastic is one which we shall encounter in the work of all the authors here, particularly that of Francesca Duranti.<sup>102</sup>

For Jon Thiem such 'textualisation' techniques are not so much about the condition of reading, but in fact represent a way of dealing with the inherently 'readerly condition' of every postmodern writer. The reader's dangerous entry into the text in which s/he

ceases to be a reader, ceases to be invulnerable, comfortable in his or her armchair, and safely detached, and becomes instead an actor, an agent in the fictional world [...] poses a serious threat not only to the reader's pleasure and the integrity of the text read, but also to the reader himself.<sup>103</sup>

I have already suggested that for women writers the act of entering into the male-dominated world of writing is fraught with the danger that their reading may prove a handicap. The language of their reading articulates them as Other. The ability of the fantastic to literalize the writer's fear that she cannot free herself of the influence of

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from other realms; we participate in their existence, and in proportion our own becomes more pale and wan: what is by all reasonable standards absent becomes present. On the other hand, we are never totally taken over, never lost in a book to a point of no return.' (p.16)

<sup>101</sup> It is once again indicative of the considerable theoretical overlap between magical realism and the fantastic that Jon Thiem outlines a very similar technique with the term 'textualisation' describing it as 'a distinctive magical realist topos.' He too suggests that 'textualisations dramatize an interesting psychological puzzle arising from many readers' experience: the state of being in two worlds at once, in the book and outside of the book.' Jon Thiem in Parkinson Zamora and Faris (eds), pp.235-247 (pp.235-8).

<sup>102</sup> Francesca Duranti's novel *La casa sul lago della luna* is the best example and one used extensively by Thiem. It is worth mentioning the short story 'L'episodio del beretto sportivo' here however as a good brief example of 'textualisation'. Actually part of a novel which structures an italicized first person account (autofictional) of the writing process around a series of short stories: *Ultima stesura* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1991). The story recycles this popular fantastic theme of the fascination/ fear of the text, when the successful television presenter of a cultural programme, having flicked through the evening programme's text for analysis rather carelessly, discovers that he has read a text which appears totally different to that discussed by the programme's guests. The attempt to find those pages again later that night leads to a scene in his lounge, which he recognizes powerlessly as a coming-to-life of those missing pages - a tale of death under a falling bookcase in which he is the protagonist. (This illustrates a 'paradigm of possession' very similar to the one described by Schwenger in Julio Cortázar's short story 'Continuity of Parks'- Schwenger, p.11)

<sup>103</sup> Thiem, 'The Textualisation of the Reader in Magical Realist Fiction' in Parkinson Zamora and Faris

the text in her creation of her own textual space makes it an attractive genre for the expression of this gender-based anxiety. Here there is a suggestion of difference within general theories of postmodern angst. It is possible to distinguish between the postmodernist tendency of the fantastic to question the control of the narrator<sup>104</sup> and the more deeply ingrained female mistrust of what her Imaginary itself produces.

Pierre Machery's comment that 'the recognition of the area of *shadow* in or around the work is the initial moment of criticism'<sup>105</sup> (my italics) seems particularly pertinent to the literary notion of the fantastic. The heightened emphasis on the interpretative function triggered by the large area of shadow into which many fantastic texts descend, underlines, and at the same time, often frustrates, the reader's role as critic and interpreter of literature. In one sense this could be interpreted a re-valuation of the work of art itself. To this effect I feel that much fantastic narrative belongs to that category of work described by Sontag as being created as 'a flight from interpretation'.<sup>106</sup> It functions to return the reader's attention upon the indivisibility of meaning from the text itself. As Lichtenberg's knife and Kafka's Odradek suggest: perhaps those literary signifiers that remain with us are the most fantastic ones.

The hermeneutic process foregrounded by the fantastic can also be read in the light of Ragland-Sullivan's words on a Lacanian poetics which would 'claim that the purpose of reading and writing literary texts is to evoke a shadow meaning network whose structures, messages and effects control our lives, but whose truths are evasive.'<sup>107</sup> This double function of the fantastic to focus the reader on the literary text, only to bring him/her back to interrogate his/her relationship to reality is further heightened by the use of transtextuality and self-reflexivity. For women writers I intend to show how it serves the double function of retreat from their reading position as oversignified objects and tentative steps towards tracing the shadow of a reality always beyond their reach.

Marina Polacco emphasizes the close links between non-realist modes of

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(eds), p.239.

<sup>104</sup> See Deborah Harter, 'If [...] the literary text might be thought of as a recording of the "mastery and control" of its image content - of the sedimentary of its images and their transformation from the Imaginary into the Symbolic - fantastic narrative would seem to mark the misdirection of this process.' (p.69)

<sup>105</sup> Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Paul (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, first publ. 1966), p.82.

<sup>106</sup> Eponymous essay in *Against Interpretation*, written in 1964 (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 10.

<sup>107</sup> cit. by Schwenger, p.35.

representation and an emphasis on the intertextual, but this connection seems to be particularly acute in the case of the fantastic.<sup>108</sup> It is also obvious that the pull between the improbable material narrated and the narrator's attempts to 'enchant' the reader with the spell that s/he is casting already contains the essence of fiction itself. In fact, as Ceserani points out, many fantastic texts have a procedural tendency to foreground their own literarity that seems to pull against that emphasis on reader involvement:

La narrativa fantastica porta in sé questa ambiguità: c'è la volontà e il piacere di usare tutti gli strumenti narrativi per attirare e catturare il lettore dentro la storia, ma c'è anche il gusto e il compiacimento di ricordargli sempre che per l'appunto di una storia si tratta.<sup>109</sup>

Jackson is not alone in observing that 'by foregrounding its own signifying practice, the fantastic begins to betray its own version of the 'real' as a relative one.'<sup>110</sup> Neil Cornwell describes the twentieth century fantastic as a 'literary fantastic' that has developed those particular elements of its function to prove itself to be the postmodern mode par excellence. Cornwell's coinage allows the continued use of the 'fantastic *quality*' as a term, if not an exclusive one, of definition by suggesting that the 'pure fantastic', viewed by many to have reached its peak in the nineteenth century, has continued in some form in modern day fiction:

Rather than follow Todorov's explanation of the themes of the fantastic being largely taken over by psychoanalysis, it may be preferable, therefore, to see the historical prevalence of Pure Fantastic in particular rather as succumbing to, but at the same time having a continued existence within, the twentieth-century

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<sup>108</sup> Marina Polacco, *L'intertestualità* (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1998) 'la "letterarietà" dell'opera è spesso sentita in contrasto con la sua autenticità: qualsiasi progetto di presa diretta sul reale sembra contrapporsi alla filiazione letteraria - e infatti i periodi in cui predominano poetiche di tipo 'realistico' sono anche quelli in cui la coscienza dell'intertestualità si affievolisce o viene volutamente minimizzata. Il legame dell'opera con le altre opere letterarie appare come un ostacolo alla rappresentazione diretta e non mediata del reale. Anche in questo caso la percezione dell'intertestualità assume una forma dialettica: l'istanza realistica porta a minimizzare l'autocoscienza letteraria, ma non esiste possibilità di rappresentazione che non passi attraverso la mediazione letteraria.' (p.11)

<sup>109</sup> Ceserani, p.16.

<sup>110</sup> Rosemary Jackson. See also Michael McLoughlin in *The Racconto Fantastico in the Twentieth Century* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College, Dublin, 1994). He writes: 'What makes the fantastic so subversive in twentieth century literature is the reader's inability to distinguish it from the real. The non-dualistic fantastic destroys mimesis and returns the reader to the brute fact of literature. The literary fantastic of the twentieth century is no longer concerned with the nature of reality but with the nature of literature and its relationship with the real. The text which has for so long been considered a medium for representing things other than itself, is revealed to be a reality in its own right, an autonomous construct. Fantastic discourse provides the means by which the notion of the objectively real may be subverted.' (p.116)

trend towards genre-mixing and genre-breakdown.<sup>111</sup>

McLoughlin argues that such a tendency is a contemporary one in what he describes as 'negative non-dualist: postmodernist' giving as Italian examples Calvino, Benni, Capriolo and Manfredi in which:

real and unreal do not combine to create a surreality but they cancel each other out; the transcendent in this case is *neither* real *nor* unreal (nor a combination of the two). By refusing to represent anything beyond itself the text calls attention to its own artifice wherein lies the transcendent dimension that the text tries to express. The reader is required to experience the transcendent aesthetically rather than (as in the dualistic and positive non-dualistic forms) to know it conceptually. Extratextual representation is replaced by intertextual reference and the fantastic concept is reduced to the status of metaphor, which is in all three cases, undermined; the transcendent dimension that the postmodern fantastic tries to express can only be pointed to - even the fantastic concept is inadequate to describe it.<sup>112</sup>

Before getting lost in a labyrinth of potentially sterile postmodern game-playing it is worth considering the proximity of that double pull which is still present in the fantastic genre, between the reader's involvement and distance, to Linda Hutcheon's definition of the 'central paradox' of 'textually self-conscious metafiction':

that, while being made aware of the linguistic and fictive nature of what is being read, and thereby distanced from any unself-conscious identification on the level of character or plot, readers of metafiction are at the same time made mindful of their active role in reading, in participating in making the text mean.<sup>113</sup>

Much of the contemporary fantastic studied in this thesis shares this emphasis on the reader's role in connecting the text, however tentatively, to a new vision of the real. It makes the space of the text one of negotiation between author, reader and the definition of literature itself. Women writers have far more to lose and gain in this process - their writing is not merely able to point towards an unattainable 'transcendent dimension'. For women, who have first hand experience of the interdependence of their textual and 'real' objectification, infinitesimal shifts in

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<sup>111</sup> Neil Cornwell, p.143.

<sup>112</sup> Michael McLoughlin, in his conclusion.

<sup>113</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p.xii of Preface.

literary metaphor can mean the possible reconfiguration of their real experience. If 'poets and novelists lay bare the literariness of their predecessors' forms in order to explore the dissonance between fiction and reality,'<sup>114</sup> the pressure upon the woman writer to do so is more loaded. The microcosmic nature of the fantastic makes it an effective means for women to reveal this dissonance.

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<sup>114</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1979), p.46.

## ii. On the edge of a marginal genre

The fantastic presents Italian women writers with the ideal means with which to foreground their ex-centric relationship with the canon, in a language that conveys spatial anxiety *and* exploration. As I will show in this section the fantastic has always been a politically awkward genre in Italy and doubly so for the female writer, the effects of whose late arrival are still felt today. Until the post-war period the fantastic was regarded as having even fewer female practitioners than male ones. Writing within it allows contemporary women to stand as close to the edge of literary tradition as possible without disappearing, and thus question the boundaries of that territory.

### ii.i. The Fantastic in Italy

Cornwell's definition of the fantastic as intertextual is particularly pertinent to Italy where a new attention to the genre has been provoked by a 'singolare fioritura'<sup>115</sup> within the postmodern re-vitalizing of old forms. Thus although there exist few comprehensive studies of the nineteenth and twentieth century fantastic in Italy,<sup>116</sup> there are rather more recent articles concerning its postmodern flowering and the development of theories of the fantastic.<sup>117</sup> The whole is infused with the feeling that, having missed out on the nineteenth century fantastic, Italy has never really measured up to the genre's historic development in other European countries (namely England, France and Germany) and the United States until the present day. It is an issue that will never be completely clarified since the genre's history in Italy makes it difficult to distinguish between cause and effect, between an original real lack of

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<sup>115</sup> Ghidetti and Lattarulo, p.vii.

<sup>116</sup> See Neuro Bonifazi, *Teoria del 'fantastico' e il racconto 'fantastico' in Italia: Tarchetti-Pirandello-Buzzati* (Ravenna: Longo, 1982); Monica Farnetti, *Il giuoco del maligno. Il racconto fantastico nella letteratura italiana tra Otto e Novecento* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1988); Giovanna Desideri, 'Il fantastico' in *Letteratura Italiana. Storia e geografia. III* edited by Albert Asor Rosa (Torino: Einaudi, 1989), pp.969-998.

<sup>117</sup> In 'Percorsi del fantastico nella narrativa degli anni '80' Antonio Corsaro speaks of a 'la quasi totale assenza di fondamenti teorici' (p.57), which has only recently been partially compensated for in recent years by 'l'essenziale fioritura di studi teorico-critici che negli stessi anni di cui ci occupiamo ha visibilmente diminuito il deficit rispetto alla situazione d'Olttralpe', even tentatively suggesting 'se non una dipendenza, almeno un significativo collegamento tra la scrittura creativa dell'oggi e quella nuova disponibilità di supporti teorici' (p.58). This particular 'fioritura' includes: *La narrazione fantastica* ed. by Ceserani and others; *I piaceri dell'immaginazione* ed. by Pisapia; A. Scarsella, 'Profilo delle poetiche del Fantastico' in *Rassegna della letteratura italiana* ed. by V.Branca and C.Ossola (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1988); *Il punto su: la letteratura fantastica* ed. by Silvia Albertazzi (Rome: Editori Laterza, 1995); *Geografia, storia e poetica del fantastico* ed. by Farnetti; Stefano Lazzarin, *Il modo fantastico*

practitioners and a marginalization of later practitioners through a self-perpetuating myth. The fact is that there is a vein of the Italian fantastic to be uncovered which lies with individuals rather than movements. Women, who have a tendency to write outside movements, are the most deeply buried part of that vein.

The difficult origins of the fantastic in Italy are inevitably bound up with the difficult origins of a national space and literature. It is only regarded as getting any sort of practice in Italy around unification. Only at that point did the rational spirit of the Enlightenment, of which the fantastic is said to be the underside,<sup>118</sup> translate into any sort of meaningful national experience for Italy. Even then literary production was dogged by the language question and the fundamental first stage of 'realism' did not really flourish, giving the fantastic little to transgress. The delayed arrival of print culture gave literary Italy a sense of inferiority with regards to the rest of Europe which meant that the market was dominated by foreign literature in translation.<sup>119</sup> In the case of the fantastic, authors like Poe and Hoffmann were felt to have achieved mastery already. In this sense it could be said that the humbling sense of the 'already written' associated with the postmodern era arrived earlier in Italy - perhaps one reason for the Italian flowering of a postmodern fiction, understood as a fiction obsessed with its own end. It may also explain why it is easier for many critics to see the bulk of Italy's first successful forays into the fantastic in this epigonal fiction. The association between this form of postmodern fiction and the fantastic may also have held women writers on the boundary, as until recently they have rarely been associated with any kind of avant-garde literary practice in Italy.

The impact of Italy's first 'great novel', *I promessi sposi*, which appealed so forcefully to the nation in bud, was one of the reasons why Italy's identity was tied up with a predominantly realist project. It was felt that Manzoni had carved out both a space in which Italian writers could achieve and a belief in 'an educational mission' through which writers could contribute to the development of their nation.<sup>120</sup> His use

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(Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2000).

<sup>118</sup> See for example Silvia Albertazzi's comment in 'Il fantastico nelle letterature di lingua inglese' in *Geografia, storia e poetiche del fantastico* ed. by Farnetti, pp. 27-37: 'Non per caso la razionale Inghilterra diviene ben presto il terreno più fertile per la fioritura del racconto gotico e di fantasmi.' (p. 28)

<sup>119</sup> This has remained the case. As Bono and Kemp make clear: 'A voracious interest in foreign cultural production characterizes Italy, situated as it is at 'the periphery of Empire', to use Eco's metaphor of its marginal situation (Eco 1976). There is a wide circulation of foreign books and journals, as well as a habit of quick translation of most texts which have aroused discussion abroad.' (*Italian Feminist Thought*, p.8)

<sup>120</sup> As Ann Caesar explains, in Italy: 'the rise of the novel is associated with one book - Alessandro

of historical fact to reflect upon the contemporary and his Catholic sense of Providence stood in polar opposition to the spirit of the fantastic. Moreover, the subdued existence of Romanticism as a movement in Italy failed to provide its would-be practitioners with any foundational genealogy. Indeed Ghidetti and Lattarulo explain that the late arrival of the fantastic with respect to European literature is

imputabile a quell'opzione realistica e moderata dei primi romantici lombardi che, se consentì di fiaccare in breve volger di anni la resistenza opposta dai classicisti alla diffusione delle aborrite "tedescherie", costò tuttavia la rimozione degli aspetti 'notturni' dell'anima.<sup>121</sup>

A glance at anthologies of fantastic literature such as Calvino's *Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento* bears out the idea that it is without any worthwhile nineteenth century history in Italy.<sup>122</sup> He dismisses the forays of the scapigliatura into the territory and the odd fantastic work of other authors, usually known for a different kind of work as 'un'interessante documentazione sul piano del gusto'. Elsewhere, in his essays however, Calvino also encourages the reader to see the twentieth century fantastic as anything but a tradition:

Non vi parlerò di una sulfurea letteratura d'illuminazioni fantastiche nella letteratura italiana del nostro secolo, da Palazzeschi a Landolfi, né di esempi di una fantasia estremamente sorvegliata e razionale che possiamo trovare in opere diversissime come i primi gelidi racconti di Buzzati e i razionalmente appassionati romanzi di Elsa Morante. Qui si trova di fronte a scrittori troppi diversi per esser accomunati nello stesso discorso, e - se permettete - mi referirò soltanto all'esperienza che conosco meglio, cioè la mia.<sup>123</sup>

As Scarpa observes this does leave a lingering suspicion that he wishes to appear more of a pioneer than he is.<sup>124</sup> Finné's anthology of Italian fantastic tales

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Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* (1825-7) - a historical novel which, unsurprisingly in the light of its solitary position, has remained an authoritative work for much of the twentieth century. Although few writers have shared Manzoni's faith in the workings of Providence in human history, the novel has established a model of how to look at social events. The realists, writing in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and, after them, the neorealists, writing in the middle of the twentieth century, shared [...] with Manzoni the belief that writers of novels have an educational mission. 'Postwar Italian Narrative: An Alternative Account' in *Italian Cultural Studies: an introduction*, ed. by David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp.248-260 (p.249).

<sup>121</sup> Ghidetti and Lattarulo, p.vii.

<sup>122</sup> Italo Calvino, introduction to *Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento*: 'Ho lasciato da parte gli autori italiani perché non mi piaceva farli figurare solo per obbligo di presenza: il fantastico resta nella letteratura italiana dell'Ottocento un campo veramente "minore".' (p.14)

<sup>123</sup> 'Tre correnti del romanzo italiano d'oggi' in *Una pietra sopra* (Milano, Mondadori, 1995), p.66.

<sup>124</sup> Domenico Scarpa, *Italo Calvino*, pp.174-5

pessimistically announces that it will probably be the only one: 'L'anthologie se justifie, mais elle ne pourra se répéter.'<sup>125</sup> Ghidetti and Lattarulo's later anthology takes the more optimistic note that they are marking out an area which deserves more attention, like the words on ancient maps of Africa which marked out unexplored territory with the term: 'hic sunt leones.'<sup>126</sup>

Ghidetti and Lattarulo point towards the marginality of the fantastic in the twentieth century as resulting from a Crocean inspired

ostilità idealistica per il mistero, il rifiuto di considerare la realtà come enigmatica e, al contrario, la volontà di ricondurre ogni mistero e ogni enigma all'interno della storia, che non è considerata essa stessa come infondata ed enigmatica, ma appare invece come l'eterna risolutrice dei problemi sempre nuovi l'eterna rischiatrice dei misteri.<sup>127</sup>

The influence of Georg Lukács<sup>128</sup> in a post-war Italy dominated culturally by the left-wing may well be part of this same current and was no doubt a contributing factor (although I am not claiming that it exercised that influence to the same degree in Italy as it did - for example - in East Germany<sup>129</sup>). The disintegration of post-war impegno has without doubt favoured the recent breakaway towards the fantastic.<sup>130</sup>

Perhaps it is this flowering which has led to a search for predecessors and has occasioned the publication of more anthologies establishing a certain history, even if not in the pronounced form leading back to the nineteenth century that we find in the States and Europe. As Lazzarin writes:

La letteratura italiana è abbastanza povera di testi fantastici, e quelli che possediamo, salvo rare eccezioni, non figurano tra i capolavori dal genere. Forse, del resto, i due fenomeni sono collegati, e potremmo dire allora che tanto la letteratura fantastica che la riflessione teorica sul fantastico sono state, in Italia, soprattutto un fenomeno di importazione.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> *L'Italie Fantastique de Boccaccio à Landolfi*, p.16.

<sup>126</sup> Ghidetti and Lattarulo, p.xii.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*, pp. ix-x.

<sup>128</sup> Noted by Adam Sitney-Jones, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema: Iconography, Style, Politics* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995), p.122.

<sup>129</sup> See Alison Lewis, *Subverting Patriarchy: The Fantastic in the works of Irmtraud Morgner* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), 'In both the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany the influence of Lukács and his vehement attacks on romanticism, expressionism and the avant-garde has been powerful in perpetuating the marginalization of forms of modernist prose.' (footnote 3, p.2)

<sup>130</sup> See Gianfranco De Turris, '“Made in Italy” Il fantastico e l'editoria'. Speaking of its appearance in mainstream publishing De Turris suggests that 'Le ragioni di questo fenomeno non sono ancora state indagate in modo approfondito, ma volendo cercare una spiegazione si può legittimamente ipotizzare che si sia trattato di una specie di reazione alla trionfante narrativa realista e neorealista, non più adatta a una società inquieta e in transizione verso un nuovo millennio.' (p.226)

<sup>131</sup> Stefano Lazzarin, pp.7-8.

Indeed those twentieth century writers were led to look to outside sources for inspiration, as their few predecessors did.<sup>132</sup> Giuliana Cutore suggests that Pirandello's interest in the fantastic may have arisen from his stay in Germany and Landolfi certainly drew a great deal of inspiration from his translation of German and Russian texts.<sup>133</sup> Indeed it was not only inspiration they sought abroad - Buzzati is still more acclaimed in France than in Italy. In this respect it is regarded as a literature that looks outwards, which suggests why the Italian fantastic has lent itself so much more powerfully to a postmodern culture of fusion from its incipit. It is interesting that what was looked down upon for being derivative is now increasingly regarded as a promising genealogy. Ghidetti and Lattarulo also underline a notion of generic hybridity inherent in the twentieth century Italian fantastic tradition.<sup>134</sup> This concept of an Italian fantastic which is always on the margins of the real fantastic itself is reinforced by Finné who observes another aspect which points to the Italian twentieth century fantastic as fertile ground for the postmodern fantastic when he asks:

Fantastique et humour sont-ils compatibles? On prétend que cette union, à première vue paradoxale, marquerait l'avènement d'un nouveau fantastique, après épuisement du fantastique traditionnel.[...] Cet humour, les Italiens l'utilisent avec maîtrise. On peut s'en rendre compte en lisant le mini-récit de Enrico Morovich (né a Fiume, 1907) qui montre à quel point, à l'instar de Oscar Wilde, un écrivain peut ridiculiser un thématique fantastique - prendre ses distances d'avec un sujet classique.<sup>135</sup>

The dominance of a strand of postmodern humour in the Italian fantastic, through the

<sup>132</sup> 'Nella letteratura italiana spesso manifestazioni "nutrite" di fantastico devono la loro presenza ad influenze esterne, come per esempio negli Scapigliati la letteratura romantica tedesca ed Hoffmann', Neria De Giovanni, *Carta di donna: Narratrici italiane del '900* (Torino: SEI, 1996), p15.

<sup>133</sup> See Giuliana Cutore, presentation of *La Villa del Caos: Novelle fantastiche 1895-1936*, Luigi Pirandello with an introduction by Gianfranco De Turris (Chieti: Solfanelli, 1993), p.14.

Also Monique Baccelli, 'Hoffmann e il romanticismo tedesco' in *Le lunazioni del cuore: saggi su Tommaso Landolfi*, ed. by Idolina Landolfi (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1996), pp. 205-232.

<sup>134</sup> Ghidetti and Lattarulo, 'si comincia a sperimentare una ibridazione del genere ed è proprio alla luce di questo peccato d'origine che si dovranno leggere la maggior parte dei racconti fantastici del nostro secolo, con qualche rara eccezione declinanti verso l'allegoria, l'apologo, la fiaba, e sempre più distanti dal polo estremo del fantastico che è il 'visionario', là dove si manifestano gli archetipi dell'inconscio collettivo.' (p.viii)

<sup>135</sup> 'Or, cette importance de l'humour annonce, dans toute l'Europe, un tournant du fantastique, un courant que, peut-être, nos descendants appelleront néo-fantastique, fantastique du signifié et non du signifiant, un fantastique du form et non du fond. Ce n'est pas un moindre mérite de l'Italie d'être entrée de plain-pied dans le nouveau courant du fantastique, après avoir quasiment ignoré la période traditionnelle. Une voix nouvelle dans le fantastique. Si l'Italie poursuit sur sa lancée, les futurs historiens pourront voir en elle, non une attardée, mais un précurseur du nouveau fantastique.' (*L'Italie*

likes of Calvino, Stefano Benni and Laura Mancinelli, has certainly seen Finné partially vindicated in his predictions that this would constitute the Italian fantastic. Calvino himself sees that of the twentieth century generally as 'un uso intellettuale (e non più emozionale) del fantastico che s'impone: come gioco, ironia, ammicco, e anche come meditazione sugli incubi o i desideri nascosti dell'uomo contemporaneo' which again points to the self-conscious usage.<sup>136</sup> Indeed in the light of Cornwell's argument all these elements are already anticipated by the fantastic as a whole, however it is worth noting that Italy's marginality to the origins of the genre may well have occasioned their earlier appearance there. This aspect immediately puts women in Italy in a particular and new relationship to the fantastic - as part of a longer, underground tradition relating to postmodernity and parody.

Giovanna Desideri also puts an interesting slant on the history of its development in Italy, suggesting that Italy 'caught up' with the fantastic when modernism was already causing its diversification into more general non-realist genres:

Così la tendenza del nuovo secolo recupera certo alcuni elementi tipici dell'attrezzatura tradizionale del precedente periodo, ma li sottopone ad un intenso trattamento distillatorio dal quale riemergono ormai estenuati e asserviti a quella che sarà meglio definire non più letteratura fantastica, o almeno, tale voluta, nelle sue diverse linee, ma piuttosto opzione non realista del Novecento.<sup>137</sup>

Thus in the first half of the twentieth century it manifested itself in the magical realism of Bontempelli, the surrealism of Savinio, for example. She argues that more recently, however, writers have been able, through postmodernity, to pick up the strands of nineteenth century tradition never really established in Italy and rework them with confidence. This argument is also put forward by Antonio Corsaro:

Il fantastico più recente opera in effetti un recupero consapevole degli istituti canonici del genere, [...] normalmente associato ad una "attualizzazione" di quei canoni in contesti socio-culturali ed epocali pertinenti al presente. E laddove il risultato consegue agli intenti si può dire che la narrativa fantastica dell'oggi riesca davvero a dare un senso alla tradizione: riscattandone i temi portanti, rivitalizzandoli, confermandone il valore e la forza d'impatto.<sup>138</sup>

Arising from the history of the fantastic, then, we see two major strands feeding into

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*Fantastique de Boccaccio à Landolfi*, p.16)

<sup>136</sup> Italo Calvino, 'Definizioni di territori: il fantastico', *Una pietra sopra*, p.261.

<sup>137</sup> Giovanna Desideri in Asor Rosa (ed.) pp.997-998.

theory about the postmodern success of the genre. Although they initially appear to be in conflict, we can conclude that the 'return' to nineteenth century 'themes' in which non-Italian models are the point of departure is in fact a confirmation of the postmodern approach anticipated by the use of hybridity and parody in twentieth century Italian predecessors.

Another idea is worth mentioning here, less for its rather insubstantial account of the genre's failure to take root than for a consideration of the particular function of Italy's national space within the genre. Finné writes that 'l'Italie forme un centre thématique quasi perpétuel chez tous les écrivains fantastiques d'Europe et d'Amerique'<sup>139</sup> and uses an amusing conversation recorded by Dumas between himself and Rossini in which Dumas suggests that Italy presents a real challenge to creators of the fantastic as a result of its 'ciel pur' as opposed to the eminently suitable 'longues et froids nuits du Nord, il faut la Fôret-Noire, les brouillards de l'Angleterre, les vapeurs du Rhin.' In this respect, Dumas is supposed to have argued, Italy is a supreme challenge since all fantastic action must take place by night, so Finné concludes, 'L'auteur doit vaincre non seulement un obstacle logique, l'esprit rationnel de son lecteur, mais aussi un obstacle géographique, l'incompatibilité entre présence d'un fantôme et absence de lumière. Seuls les grands artistes parviendraient à ce degré de perfection.' My reason for including this argument is not to make a simplistic materialist point (which could easily be disputed) but to draw attention to the way in which Italy has been persistently used in European literature as a backdrop against which economically superior foreign nationals act out their anxieties, often casting the Italians into the role of Other. This objectification of Italy and the Italians casts any international forms of transtextuality in a new light. All postmodern fantastic journeys are journeys which also 'write back' to the equally romanticizing tendencies of the descendants of those Europeans. For women writers this becomes a moment of protest about a form of double objectification.

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<sup>138</sup> Antonio Corsaro, p. 58.

<sup>139</sup> Finné, *L'Italie Fantastique de Boccaccio à Landolfi*, p.8

## ii.ii Women and the fantastic in Italy

The primary concern for women writers of the fantastic in Italy, however, is their fragile ancestry. If the Italian fantastic as a whole presents an anomalous history when compared to that of many Western counterparts, women's role in that is correspondingly all the more marginalised. All the problems for Italian literature in the post-Enlightenment era were magnified in the case of women: 'Non siamo, insomma, in Inghilterra, né in Francia, né in Germania. Manca, come suol dirsi il "respiro", e manca la lingua.'<sup>140</sup> These words of Riccardo Reim on the issue define a territory of lack, in particular a linguistic lack, which for women was rarely compensated for by means of education. For women writers the after-effects of this delay make their position in Italy more precarious than that in France, Germany or the UK.

This relationship between the marginalisation of women and the lack of a female fantastic tradition is not self-evident however - in other cultures the realm of the fantastic was often considered a female territory, the place where women begin to write. Sigrid Weigel describes how with the arrival of Romantic aesthetics in Germany 'the harmony between the structure of reality and the narrative was broken and this opened doors through which women could enter into the sphere of high literature.'<sup>141</sup> We see a long-standing notion that female experience lies outside realist notions of literature and that women writers therefore have a natural affinity with anti-realist literature. The roots of the fantastic in the gothic and the fairytale, potentially transgressive genres in which women traditionally excel, with the example of literary foremothers of English literature, like Mary Shelley, are the key to the theory and development of a subversive fantastic.

This association between women and the fantastic was not always a positive one, as Christine Battersby points out when she shows how Percy Shelley's preface to

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<sup>140</sup> Riccardo Reim, *Controcanto: Novelle femminili dell'Ottocento italiano, storia e antologia*, (Roma: Armando editore, 1998), p.15.

<sup>141</sup> 'It is obvious why there was an increase in the number of women who took to the pen at the end of the eighteenth century, at the time when new possibilities in poetic expression were brought by the aesthetic of the Romantics. The principle of mimesis was abolished, the fragmentary was accepted, the closed text was dissolved. The harmony between the structure of reality and the narrative was broken and this opened doors through which women could enter into the sphere of high literature. For the *rhythm of female experience* is largely excluded from the temporal and spatial organisations sanctioned by society, from the recognised hierarchy of themes and feelings. [...] The real limitation of the female life can be overcome, a female protest unleashed, only where the contradictory experiences of women can be fashioned and need not be transferred to a plausible, realistic solution within the framework of a text/plot.' Sigrid Weigel, 'Double Focus: On the History of Women's Writing', in *Feminist Aesthetics*,

*Frankenstein* belittles Mary's work in the context of his and Byron's, by setting up a contrast between the limits of the home and the great wide world 'The men transcend the enclosed space - and the horrors of domesticity - which trap the woman in a world of shadows [...] Ghost stories are for women; Poetic Truth for men.'<sup>142</sup> What Percy Shelley perhaps did not realise and what the history of the female fantastic suggests to us is that in order to articulate the interior world one had to see the world outside it. It is no coincidence that the writing of *Frankenstein* is occasioned by a journey. The centrality of this dynamic between enclosure and movement which is so central to the gothic, paused as it is on the threshold of women's liberation (we can not forget who Mary Shelley's mother was), provides one key to our understanding of the late development of a female fantastic in Italy. The social circumstances in which women found themselves in 18th and 19th century Italy were those of a strongly Catholic country coming late to industrialization which did not allow women of the upper classes even those temporary sensations of freedom which in England contributed to the novels of Radcliffe and later Shelley and the Brontës. The territory of women in Italy was almost never public - withdrawal into the troubled interior of the fantastic had been occasioned by no real hint of freedom. If this distanced women writers from the gothic, then the absence of experience of the crowd and the carnival, such a popular trope of the fantastic (cf. Poe and Hoffmann), made any other forays into the fantastic even more unlikely. It is not surprising then if contemporary women writers wish to examine that dynamic between enclosure and exposure in their work today, in the Italian context. The choice of the term fantastic rather than gothic or 'neo-gothic', as I suggested in the introduction, allows us to engage with these contemporary texts which draw on the gothic tradition from a very different perspective to that of their English-speaking counterparts, for whom the tradition of a 'Female Gothic' is far more self-evident.

The physical restrictions experienced by Italian women worked in tandem with the dominance of the realist ethic, making the clearly defined territory of the writing woman the socially real - preferably a sentimental or rural tale - always in imitation of her betters.<sup>143</sup> Unable to disassociate themselves from their biological

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ed. by Gisela Ecker (London: The Women's Press, 1985), pp.59-80 (pp. 67-8).

<sup>142</sup> *Gender and Genius: Towards a feminist aesthetics* (The Women's Press, 1989), pp.51-52.

<sup>143</sup> In Giovanna Finocchiaro-Chimirri's analysis considering the relationship between Capuana and Verga and their female contemporaries an interesting pattern emerges which also has some bearing on the contemporary reception of women writers in Italy. She explains how those women who write in an

function as mothers women were caught up in literature as pedagogy, leaving little space for the imaginary. Reim defines women's 'prime prove narrative' as 'novelle a sfondo educativo e morale, o intricate e avventurose storie d'amore, o ancora, racconti campestri.'<sup>144</sup> The need for recognition from the male establishment led some women writers to become the most fervent opponents of the corruptive foreign influence presented by foreign (often fantastic) texts and the strongly moralizing tendency of Italian literature perhaps found its most intense expression in these writers struggling to gain approval."<sup>145</sup> The few early female writers who did stray into an early form of the fantastic took their moralizing with them and performed a sort of autocensorship. For Reim *Adelina* by Orintia Romagnoli Sacratì (Rimini, 1815) 'sembra stranamente risentire in qualche tratto, di certe atmosfere "gotiche"' but it is nonetheless 'a sfondo morale' as its moralising preface suggests: "la virtù che serve di compenso a se stessa, non è mai abbandonata dal cielo."<sup>146</sup> Traces of the fantastic can also be found in the later 'fosche trame di Luigia Emanuel Saredo (paragonata tra gli altri a Wilkie Collins), autrice di novelle e romanzi "a sorpresa" che hanno "tutte le attrattive di un processo criminale misterioso e complicato, e la rapidità d'azione di un dramma a forti emozioni", antesignana, per certi versi, della Invernizio più noire e nostrano equivalente dei fantasmi vittoriani.'<sup>147</sup> One of Saredo's short stories included in the anthology, however, is an excellent example of the way in which the potential for the fantastic is undercut by this virtually omnipresent moral imperative. In 'La locanda dell'orso' (1877) the male narrator is a sceptical traveller who volunteers to stay in a reputedly haunted house. The ghost which appears there is portrayed with such conviction, that when the events are explained away as a tale of female greed and depravity (a stepmother has shut up her unwanted stepchildren in the cellar for several years) this realistic ending seems improbable. The state of doubt engendered in the

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imitative fashion and display traditionally female virtues: 'quel senso di gentilezza, di compassione, di tenerezza e di entusiasmo che è speciale caratteristica dell'intelligenza, e, più, del cuore della donna' command both writers' support and patronage. However whilst Capuana may concede, 'Dove non occorrono la grande riflessione e l'intelletto immaginativo la donna può riuscire benissimo' those women who really do make a significant contribution to the literature of their time are often classed as unfeminine - Serao is described as 'virile' (Capuana) and 'hermaphrodite' (Verga), 'La donna scrittrice fra Capuana e Verga' in Rubat du Merac (ed.), pp.25-38.

<sup>144</sup> Riccardo Reim, p.13.

<sup>145</sup> Luisa Amalia Paladini emerges as one of the most vehement, 'Io sono quell'una che credo fermamente che gl'Italiani non dovrebbero dettare romanzi se non per valersene come di antidoto al veleno di quelli che ci vengono d'oltremare.' (ibid., p.18)

<sup>146</sup> ibid., p.14.

<sup>147</sup> ibid., p.19.

reader is a trace of a latent vocation for the fantastic.<sup>148</sup>

In the last decades of the nineteenth century women's writing became a means for more focussed social critique<sup>149</sup> and the condition of exploitation at all levels of society was in itself serious enough to prevent many flights of fancy. At the same time the form in which they articulated the rebellion over material conditions was still heavily influenced by the national drive towards realism. In keeping with the fact that the vigorous nature of this drive resulted from a sense of inferiority regarding other dominant European cultures, the fantastic elements in women's writing were ignored or dismissed as inferior. This was more pronounced than in the case of male writers who might just get away with being innovators or rebels.

Recovering traces of a female fantastic in Italy means therefore revising old categorisations of high and low literature. Although the late industrialization of Italy meant that the resources were lacking for a periodical press which was the main vehicle for the fantastic in other cultures, 'lower' forms of the novel did bear traces of the fantastic and continued to do so into the twentieth century. The graduation of the fantastic elsewhere from the periodical press to the realm of high literature was faster and smoother than the movement from the 'low' novel to the 'high' novel. In the postmodern era writers like Francesca Duranti attempt to break down this barrier bringing the fantastic into a sort of 'middlebrow' novel. In the popular novels of Carolina Invernizio we have anything but the frustration of women writers aiming to write high literature, as she gives free rein to the fantastic flights of fancy, absent from most writing by women pre-1900. It takes a reassessment of the literary canon to include her in any history of the female fantastic.<sup>150</sup>

Contemporary critics have begun to undertake a task of recovery, which cuts across both 'high' and 'low' literary forms.<sup>151</sup> The critical process has also had to re-

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<sup>148</sup> In fact Reim includes this story in a later anthology as an example of a darker strain in female writing, together with Serao's 'Leggenda di Capodimonte'. See *Da uno spiraglio. Racconti neri e fantastici dell'Ottocento italiano* ed. by Riccardo Reim (Roma: Newton Compton, 1992).

<sup>149</sup> Sharon Wood writes that: 'Women began to take stock of their condition, to subject it to a more rigorous intellectual analysis than many sentimental, rural novels had so far permitted', *Italian Women's Writing 1860-1994* (London: The Athlone Press, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>150</sup> See Claudio Milanesi, 'La doppia vita di Clara Rambaldi and Maria Costanzi (Le sepolte vive nei romanzi di Carolina Invernizio)' in Rubat du Merac (ed.), pp.115-135.

<sup>151</sup> As Patrizia Zamboni writes in her introduction to the anthology *Novelle d'autrice tra l'Otto e Novecento* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1998): 'È possibile, del resto, individuare un indubbio contributo di questo sistema d'autrici alla letteratura fantastica dell'Ottocento, come attestano recenti antologie del genere.' (footnote 22, p.24) The examples she gives show that this is nonetheless a relatively small contribution.

examine the realist tradition.<sup>152</sup> One example in this critical process is the work of Ursula Fanning who has uncovered the centrality of the gothic to the work of Matilde Serao.<sup>153</sup> Monica Farnetti has also brought to light the fantastic element in stories by Ada Negri, usually viewed as a stringent moralist, which suggests a less well known side to the writer associated with angry rebellion over material conditions.<sup>154</sup> The reception and treatment of those women writers who did stay within the designated boundaries also tells us a great deal about expectations of women's writing. Natalia Ginzburg's singular fame, although this comment is no reflection on her consummate skill, is undoubtedly tied up with the fact that she wrote within the acceptable sphere of domestic and social realism, looking back in fact to her predecessors of the same acceptable indigenous vein, like the Marchesa Colombi (1840-1920, in particular *Un matrimonio in provincia* of 1885). There is no denying that this vein of writing, at its best, had a lot to offer women, but it was only a fraction of the picture. It also seems to have been based on the assumption that women write for women. As the previous section would suggest its dominance was not only to do with the parameters constantly set and re-set to contain artistic women, but the shadow of the realist enterprise cast over Italy in general by Manzoni's historical novel.<sup>155</sup>

Since venturing into the fantastic constituted such a risk for women writers, it is interesting to see that so many in the post-war period undertook the journey. In fact neo-realism saw almost all the female writers go their own way outside its ranks, several towards the fantastic. This certainly indicates a growing confidence. Perhaps it was this mass exodus and the fact that Elsa Morante (1918-1985) seemed able to combine the qualities of the great European novel with a less rigid approach to notions of realism that began to shake up the strictures concerning women's writing. It would

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<sup>152</sup> As the title of Monica Farnetti's anthology suggests: *Racconti fantastici di scrittori veristi* (Milano: Mursia, 1990). Female writers are represented by Matilde Serao with 'Barchetta-fantasma' and 'Lu munaciello'.

<sup>153</sup> Ursula Fanning, 'Angel v. Monster: Serao's Use of the Female Double' in *Women and Italy: essays on gender, culture and history*, ed. by Zygmunt Baranski and Shirley W. Vinall (London: Macmillan, 1991) and 'Serao's Gothic Revisions: Old Tales Through New Eyes' in *The Italianist*, 12 (1992), pp.32-41. 'Serao's 'domestic Gothic' novels are interesting for their location of Gothic terrors in the outwardly normal, but inwardly, seething, family circle. It is, however, for their other characteristics that these novels have met with a reasonable degree of critical acclaim; their Gothic content has been largely ignored. This acclaim contrasts with the general critical acclaim meted out to Serao's later Gothic works. It is this negative critical judgement with which I wish to take issue here, as it seems to me that Serao uses the Gothic to deal effectively with issues of specific significance to her as a woman writer.' (p.32)

<sup>154</sup> Monica Farnetti, *Il giuoco del maligno*

<sup>155</sup> Elisabetta Rasy's definition of women's writing as having a 'predelizione per i temi della conflittualità, dello scontro sociale e individuale' in *Le donne e la letteratura* (Roma: Editori Riuniti,

also be possible to see this quiet resistance as one of the causes of the changes witnessed in Italian fiction after the breakdown of neorealism, despite the commonly held view that women are not writers of the avant-garde.<sup>156</sup> In addition to the research conducted on the nineteenth century there has been new interest in this fantastic work of twentieth century women writers. Not only have two of the leading lights of twentieth century Italian women's writing, Elsa Morante and Anna Maria Ortese, begun to shine more brightly for critics as authors of the fantastic, but new light has been shed on writers in the shadows, like Paola Masino (1908-1989).<sup>157</sup> This has even been reflected in an increased awareness of a genealogy of women writers. Fabrizia Ramondino, for example, in *Taccuino tedesco* declares that her own inspiration as a writer has its roots in the 'fantasma amoroso' of Anna Maria Ortese.<sup>158</sup>

Nonetheless the continued dominance of the realist mode resurfaced and drew more attention in the feminist novels of the 1970's.<sup>159</sup> To some extent I think that this is evident in the extensive promotion of Dacia Maraini as a writer firmly rooted in that realist tradition, although some of her work, her plays in particular, draws on the fantastic.<sup>160</sup> Even more so than its male-authored counterpart the female fantastic in Italy is a tradition without well-established indigenous roots. As such the recent emergence of female-authored fantastic texts seem to arrive in a critical vacuum. Overall Italian theoreticians of the fantastic genre take but little account of its female practitioners. Moreover they rarely raise the issue about how women may impact upon

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1984) seems to echo the themes of Manzoni's text.

<sup>156</sup> See Claudio Marabini, 'Gli ultimi cinquant'anni di narrativa femminile in Italia' in *Scrittrici d'Italia* ed. by Francesco De Nicola and Pier Antonio Zannoni (Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1995), pp.22-27. 'Rischando la battuta paradossale, diciamo che la letteratura femminile non avrà mai un Gadda. La forza della verità impone d'altro canto, un preciso rapporto col reale, un'oggettività che abbia anche il valore di documento davanti al lettore e allo stesso autore. La ricerca linguistica e formale persegue un'altra verità, o la stessa, ma per strade ben diverse. L'incompiutezza esasperata e disperata di Gadda non può appartenere a chi chiede alla compiutezza, appunto, il peso definitivo della verità.' (pp.23-4)

<sup>157</sup> Her most famous work is *Nascita e morte della massaia* (1939) is analysed by Paola Belloch in 'From Trunk to Grave: The Hallucinated Story of a Housewife' in *Nemla Italian Studies* 13-14 (1989-1990) 89-103. Masino, in particular, is an archetypal example of the eclipsed female writer, as Neria de Giovanna points out in *Carta di Donna*: 'Spesso la critica più paludata ed accademica, come lamentava di sovente la Masino, si occupò di lei in quanto compagna di Bontempelli e non come scrittrice.' (p. 16)

<sup>158</sup> *Taccuino tedesco* (Milano: La tartaruga, 1987)

<sup>159</sup> Ann Caesar shows how, despite the quiet, even neglected presence, of high quality women's writing throughout fascism and the postwar years in a wide range of approaches, the advent of feminism put women's writing back in touch with its educative, realist roots: 'narrative, an important medium for the communication of ideas in feminist practice, slipped comfortably into the educative function that I have already signaled as a principal thread in the Italian novel since Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*.' (Forgacs and Lumley (eds), p.256)

<sup>160</sup> This suggests that the success of a woman writer depends on a rather inflexible pre-established taxonomy.

the genre. There are few academics like Carol Lazzaro-Weis who has tried to show how Italian women have adapted to and adapted genre itself in her book, *From Margins to mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing, 1968-1990*. It is unfortunate that her book nonetheless remains on the margins when it comes to discussion about those genres across gender boundaries. In this comprehensive study of contemporary women's writing in Italy Lazzaro-Weis argues most persuasively that genre provides the feminist reader with a very adequate means of tracking the integration of female writers into the mainstream in Italy. Through her demonstrations of how a wide variety of writers more or less successfully use and abuse the structures and stereotypes of individual genres, i.e. detective, historical, romance, *Bildungsroman*, she charts an increasing confidence with traditional literary structures amongst women writers which in her final chapter she implies may have led to the confident and flexible attitude of writers for whom generic structures become 'the means by which these authors include the fruits of feminism in both the political and literary realms.'<sup>161</sup> Frustratingly she does not draw many concrete conclusions about the present and future relationship between women writers and genre itself in Italy, despite the mention of 'multiple genres' and the eclectic approach hinted at in her comment on Francesca Duranti's *Effetti personali*: 'Duranti's use of a variety of literary structures and genres has caused some confusion as to how to categorise the text: one critic calls the novel a mixture of Bildungsroman, Kafkaesque metanovel, spy novel, and finally both 'un romanzo ottocentesco e post-femminista.' One is forced to ask how many times genres can be mixed before they evaporate completely, yet the very end of her book expresses a belief in the vague 'power of genre' which contradicts previous hints at the disintegration of genre.

However this is clearly the shifting sand upon which any study of women's relation to genre must take place. Every critic must tread a fine line between asphyxiating a text in traditional structures, whilst giving the potential reader a place in which to locate it, and preserving its difference. The case seems to be all the more acute for female writers, who have not played a large part in the creation of those categories. In the face of this balancing act it is not surprising that Lazzaro-Weis avoids an analysis of the 'fantastic' which, as already illustrated is much disputed as a genre to begin with, although she does allude to it in her final chapter centred on the

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<sup>161</sup> Lazzaro-Weis, p. 196.

Pygmalion theme in relation to Francesca Duranti's *La casa sul lago della luna*.<sup>162</sup> This omission is however as likely to be once again a result of the marginality of the fantastic in Italy as its controversial status as a genre.

Monica Farnetti is one Italian critic who has begun to make forays into this field. She has not only been party to the discovery of female fantastic writers in Italy, such as Ada Negri but she has also considered the female fantastic as a whole in an Italian context and outlined some of its special characteristics. Looking at the work of writers as diverse as Deledda and Jaeggy she has traced common elements in their writing which link it to the fairy-tale.<sup>163</sup> As we have already seen she has cited the dream as a form close to the female fantastic emphasizing the tendency for women's writing not to make clear distinctions between the real and the marvellous. Most importantly she has put forward the notion of the female fantastic in general constituting an eruption of the semiotic in the symbolic. Whilst I may not subscribe to all aspects of Farnetti's approach I consider it important to strike a similar balance between considering what might be particular to the Italian female fantastic and the female fantastic in general. With this purpose in mind I will consider briefly the relevance of French and Anglo-American theories of the female fantastic to the Italian case, thereby developing a flexible framework within which to situate the fictional works examined here.

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<sup>162</sup> Francesca Duranti, *La casa sul lago della luna* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1984); reprinted (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000 edition cited). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text and indicated CI.

<sup>163</sup> Monica Farnetti, 'Irruzioni del semiotico nel simbolico' in Galletti (ed.): 'Quanto alla letteratura italiana (e va da sé, trattandosi di scrittura femminile, la dizione di "contemporanea"), vi si registrano numerose narratrici che, per vario tramite e diverso grado di fedeltà rispetto alla loro principale poetica, giungono a misurarsi con la prova della fiaba. Che si tratti di scrittrici in grado di farne un programma (come un'Ortese o una Bompiani), o di sporadiche sperimentatrici del genere (una Sanvitale, ad esempio, o una Jaeggy), o ancora di amene novellatrici collocabili tra verismo e folclore (come la Deledda, o la Serao).' (p.224)

### III. Women writing in the space of the fantastic

Inevitably Italy's lack of critical interest in a native female fantastic contrasts with Anglo-American and French cultures, which have recently witnessed a substantial amount of literature concerning the relationship between women writers and the fantastic.<sup>164</sup> This relationship is generally regarded as one which stems from the particularly close historical roots between women as story-tellers and the boundary genres of the fantastic: the gothic and the fairy-tale. Most see the basis for a contemporary female use of the fantastic in the transgression of norms permitted by those two more established genres. The vision of the female fantastic as particularly transgressive has not always been explored in detail. Rosemary Jackson, for example, expresses the link between transgression and women writers as a tentative hope rather than an empirical conclusion.<sup>165</sup> Even when this transgression is explored more thoroughly its significance obviously varies between theorists: its evaluation inevitably situates the female writers in the critics' own framework of ideas about the female subject.

The lack of a critical tradition regarding women's writing in the fantastic in Italian occasionally drives otherwise rigorous critics to inappropriate theories. Rubat du Merac, for example, collapses her promising analysis of Ortese's *L'Iguana* into a frustratingly vague essentialism by referring to the theory of Anne Richter.<sup>166</sup> Richter argues that the fantastic allows 'woman' to plumb the depths of her ancestral power - an ancient matriarchal power the authenticity of which is now in doubt. According to Richter she thus shows her potential to overturn the male domain of reason, through her innate ability to commune with nature, *as nature*.<sup>167</sup> Rubat du Merac colours the

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<sup>164</sup> See Lucie Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic and Pushing Back the Limits: the Fantastic as Transgression in Contemporary Women's Fiction*; Anne Richter, *Le fantastique féminin: un art sauvage* (Bruxelles: Editions Jacques Antoine, 1984); T. J. Shinn, *Worlds within Women: Myth and Mythmaking in Fantasy literature by Women* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1986). This attention is not limited to feminist texts, Neil Cornwell, for example includes Toni Morrison in his *The Literary Fantastic*.

<sup>165</sup> Contemporary women writers are relegated to a footnote in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*: 'It is surely no coincidence that so many writers and theorists of fantasy as a countercultural form are women - Julia Kristeva, Irène Bessière, Hélène Cixous, Angela Carter. Non-realist narrative forms are increasingly important in feminist writing: no breakthrough of cultural structure seems possible until linear narrative (realism, illusionism, transparent representation) is broken or resolved.' (Footnote 10 to Chapter 4, p.186)

<sup>166</sup> Marie-Anne Rubat du Merac, 'L'iguana d'Anna Maria Ortese: un exemple de fantastique féminin' in Rubat du Merac (ed.).

<sup>167</sup> 'Par le biais de ses rêves, sa nature la plus authentique se révèle. L'imagination féminine, étouffée

end of her analysis with references to the ill-defined masculine and feminine approaches to nature proposed in Richter's theory.

A very different approach to the notion of a female fantastic however posits a form of transgression that is determined less by essentialism than an appreciation of woman's bio-historical subject position. This transgression is theorized as a spatial one. Inevitably this kind of analysis sees the roots of the female fantastic in the traumatic spatial enclosures of the female gothic. I will draw upon the work of Lucie Armitt, who focuses on the spatial qualities of female transgression in the fantastic, particularly in relation to the domestic sphere. Her approach allows her to describe the particular use women make of the fantastic to transgress the limits prescribed for them by patriarchy without the utopian essentialism of Richter's viewpoint. Armitt has traced a clear potential in the fantastic for defining the position of women, even in the work of male authors, like Lewis Carroll,<sup>168</sup> which has been picked up and exploited more consciously by women writers.

Some theories derived from Anglo-American literature concerning this notion of transgression present one difficulty, particularly when applied to Italian women writers. This lies in their vision of the contemporary fantastic as an unproblematic vehicle for a new female subject, with a clear parodic distance from its gothic origins, in which the heroine was eventually delivered to the patriarchal status quo. The Italian critic, Mirella Billi, writing on the Anglo-American female fantastic gives a good example of this:

L'orrore gotico, il sensazionalismo, gli aspetti angosciosamente onirici e "surreali" rivelano, nella Gaskell, come del resto, in Charlotte Brontë, una rivolta contro il sistema culturale, denunciano una condizione tormentosa del soggetto femminile nei confronti del mondo circostante, che è avvertita, ma non risolta. Nel romanzo fantastico del presente prevale, al contrario, una gioiosa

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pendant des siècles, étranglée par le carcan des lois religieuses, morales, sociales, suit enfin aujourd'hui son libre cours. Remontant le cours du temps, le cours de l'être, elle retourne à ses sources primordiales; dans les arts fantastiques, et spécialement dans la littérature fantastique, le moi sauvage féminin, sa force et sa originalité longtemps réprimées, jaillissent dans toute l'étrangeté et la splendeur de ses souvenirs déployées. Souvenirs d'autres mondes, d'autres règnes, où la femme était roc, plante et sol fertile, exerçant encore ses talents de démon ou de thaumaturge. Image à les fois neuves et très anciennes, surgissant des profondeurs psychiques. Littérature moderne et mythes du passé s'y accordent de façon singulière.' (Richter, p.15)

<sup>168</sup> 'The fictional adaptation of enclosure symbolism as a means of communicating the position of women under patriarchy is no new literary phenomenon [...] However unconsciously, Carroll has provided us here with a perfect example of the manner in which fantasy can function to articulate that tension between women's desire to overcome limits and the patriarchal insistence upon a frustration and denial of such an impulse.' (Lucie Armitt, *Pushing back the limits*, pp.13-14)

trasgressività e soprattutto, il rapporto della donna con il sistema culturale risulta rovesciato.<sup>169</sup>

Lucie Armitt's analyses of the more complex links between past and present genres refuses to make such black and white distinctions between past and present and contrasts with Billi's more celebratory approach:

Le fanciulle perseguitate della Radcliffe tornavano - identiche a come ne erano uscite - alla stanza chiusa, a una prigione dalla quale già tendevano a fuggire, ma che restava ancora l'unico spazio disponibile: l'eroina di *Nights at the Circus* di Angela Carter ha le ali, vola, si libera in spazi aperti.<sup>170</sup>

Billi is, of course, referring to Anglo-American writers, and the inimitable Angela Carter to boot, but her argument oversimplifies the spatial relation between women writers and the fantastic, whatever the national boundaries. Armitt's analysis of the intertextual elements in contemporary texts by French and Anglo-American women writers muddies Billi's deceptively clear waters. Her study leads towards an understanding of women's relationship to various forms of 'territory' which concludes that much of women's writing is seeking liberation from the spatial enclosure, in particular the ambiguity of women's relationship to the maternal, whether their own mothers or motherhood.<sup>171</sup>

Armitt's problematization of fantastic space and textual space bears the unmistakable imprint of the work of Gilbert and Gubar. In their seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they define the relationship between the nineteenth-century woman writer and her space as fundamental to understanding her writing. They make a direct link between the physical imprisonment of women writers and their mental imprisonment in the male text, both of which translate into a spatial anxiety in their writing. They trace the failure to break away from the tyranny of the male text as part of the spatial anxiety evident in texts by women writers in the twentieth century.<sup>172</sup> In

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<sup>169</sup> Mirella Billi, 'L'avventura proibita: Percorsi del fantastico femminile' in *Percorsi: Studi dedicati ad Angela Giannitrapani*, ed. by Mirella Billi and Massimo Ferrari Zumbini (Viterbo: BetaGamma, 1990), pp. 21-46 (p. 43).

<sup>170</sup> Mirella Billi, p.41

<sup>171</sup> 'But underlying all of that territory, it seems, is that first other-place and space, one which we alternately shun and desire: the maternal.' (Lucie Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic*, p.223)

<sup>172</sup> 'Literally, women like Dickenson, Brontë, and Rossetti were imprisoned in their house, their fathers' houses; indeed, almost all nineteenth century women were in some sense imprisoned in men's houses. Figuratively, such women were, as we have seen, locked into male texts, texts from which they could escape only through ingenuity and indirection. It is not surprising, then, that spatial imagery of

their later work Gilbert and Gubar link this anxiety of the female writer to a 'female affiliation complex' <sup>173</sup> according to which the female writer does not know with which predecessor to align herself - a silent mother or dominant father.

We must ask whether Italian women writers of the fantastic, whose roots are less secure, whose trajectory of development is so much shorter, really experience the liberty described by Billi in relation to Anglo-American women writers (if indeed it does apply to them). Italian women's writing does not even have this history of gradual rejuvenation of the gothic behind it, nor obviously a same-language relation to the literary foremothers of the Anglo-American tradition. The roots of new developments in the Italian female fantastic are not a given. They have to be sought out, frequently as female responses to male texts, and therefore recourse to Gilbert and Gubar's theories concerning nineteenth century and some twentieth century women writers are all the more relevant to the Italian situation.

Although Monica Farnetti does not present this primarily intertextual argument in her rare analysis of the Italian fantastic, it is pertinent that she decides to situate her argument in a re-reading of what, for many feminists, constitutes the most ambiguous heart of psychoanalysis:

L'interpretazione penalizzante del femminile data dalla psicoanalisi in alcune sue posizioni avanzate, là dove si colloca il soggetto-donna sui due *côtés* della castrazione - psicosi e misticismo - non appare, se proiettata sul piano della scrittura e dell'organizzazione testuale, priva di possibilità operative. Proprio nella prospettiva di una indagine sul fantastico [...] le due categorie della "mistica" e dell' "isterica" possono convertirsi, a qualche condizione, nelle chiavi di accesso a un campo di definizioni relative alla materiale in oggetto, nelle marche stesse, dunque, di un possibile fantastico femminile.<sup>174</sup>

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enclosure and escape, elaborated with what becomes obsessive intensity, characterizes much of their writing. In fact anxieties about space sometimes seem to dominate the literature of nineteenth century women and their 20th century descendants. In the genre E. Moers has recently called 'female Gothic' for instance, heroines who characteristically inhabit mysteriously intricate or uncomfortably stifling houses are often seen as captured, fettered, trapped, even buried alive. But other kinds of works by women show the same concern with spatial constrictions, imagery of enclosure reflects the woman writers's own discomfort, her sense of powerlessness, her fear that she inhabits alien and incomprehensible places.' (p. 83)

<sup>173</sup> Sandra. M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The War of the Words: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1 of *No Man's Land*, 3 vols (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1988). They describe the anxiety a female writer feels about her literary alignment, using the Freudian model of the family romance, outlined in 'Female Sexuality', concluding that they need to develop a paradigm of 'of ambivalent affiliation, a construct which dramatizes women's intertwined attitudes of anxiety and exuberance about creativity.' (p.170)

<sup>174</sup> Monica Farnetti, 'Irruzione del semiotico nel simbolico' in Galletti (ed.), p.223

Such a theory proposes that women writers use the fantastic to make the most of those stereotypical categories into which they are often thrown, as a form of transgressive recuperation, as a way of entering 'nel linguaggio per porlo, dall'interno, in discussione con se stesso.'<sup>175</sup>

Papini defines four 'threshold' areas with which Italian women writers of the fantastic appear to have an especially close relation: dreams, childhood, fairy tale, madness.<sup>176</sup> All four of these contexts are also associated with different, often suspect, views of reality outside the framework of dominant ideology, contemporaneously held in awe and at an arm's length for their power of insight. As such their function in the process of re-telling echoes that of women who stand in a marginal position in relation to the dominant cultural voice. Farnetti has suggested that the association between women and these modes can be reappropriated to overcome its negative connotations.

The conflict involved in crossing the bridge between the undeveloped language of female dreams or visions and a narrative accessible to men and women that does not betray that vision is demanding. The complex interaction of social and psychological forces which weave the web of that vision further complicate writers' treatment of it. Both these aspects make the female fantastic a challenge that is often overlooked by critics. It is not too optimistic to suggest that the slow-moving after effects of women's liberation will eventually force the critic to face up to an aspect of literary activity which it would be easier to ignore. As Goffredo Fofi suggests, taking on board this kind of writer would involve a cognitive shift on the part of the reader.<sup>177</sup> The fantastic, which traditionally demands that the reader think outside

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<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*, p.230.

<sup>176</sup> Mavina Papini, 'Si evince dunque il sottile intrecciarsi degli ideali legami tra i diversi luoghi della soglia; come si è cercato di dimostrare, ciascuno spazio di passaggio, sia esso l'infanzia, la fiaba, il sogno o la follia, intrattiene con tutti gli altri arcaiche corrispondenze inevitabili, che tendono a consolidare una pervasiva sospensione e a offrire l'opportunità di nuove esperienze mentali e di scrittura, grazie all'impetoso sgretolamento delle certezze.' p.68. She explains this choice in the introduction: 'alcuni elementi che costituiscono l'ossatura di una ipotetica sintassi fantastica: il sogno, la cui trascrizione è sintomatica di un'esperienza di ambiguità grazie alla quale si assiste all'abbattimento della linea di confine tra visibile e invisibile; la follia, intesa come affermazione della libertà della coscienza ed esperienza conoscitiva autentica, che consente di fortificare l'ipotesi di una realtà polimorfa nella quale dimorano e coesistono linguaggi e mondi diversi; il racconto fiabesco, concepito come luogo dell'irrealtà e dell'assurdo per antonomasia; la memoria d'infanzia, infine, viaggio perturbante alle sorgenti dell'esperienza esistenziale e della soggettività.' (p.1)

<sup>177</sup> Laura Fortini raises this in discussion with Goffredo Fofi in: 'Una nuova civiltà letteraria: Intervista a Goffredo Fofi':

Fofi: C'è un terzo livello rispetto al quale io avverto oggi una fortissima superiorità delle donne ed è il discorso simbolico. Gli scrittori filosofici oggi sono rarissimi, e non è un caso che la critica non sappia interpretare Morante e Ortese, per citare due scrittrici sulle quali la critica è così povera: questo accade

his/her normal framework of thought is a particularly good juncture at which to attempt this.

Nonetheless it is easy to see that the advantages of the 'marginal voice' which the fantastic offers women represents a crucial paradox for a female use of the fantastic. The exploration of female inner worlds of fantasy can be dismissed as a kind of visionary ecstasy or madness and be feared/revered as such, but like those of the prophetic Cassandra ultimately ignored and dismissed. As I suggested in my introduction the male-authored fantastic of the nineteenth and twentieth century offers some of the most extreme female 'stereotypes' of all literary language. The reasons for this may be manifold, but I would suggest a last ditch attempt on the part of male writers to resist the total evaporation of accepted notions of reality. The only channel available to them within the very genre which underlines that evaporation is the female body and they force it into a series of conventional straitjackets. As Deborah Harter points out 'in some sense fantastic discourse is a terrifying working out of all that is phallogentric'.<sup>178</sup> Yet it is this language, as Luigi Punzo points out, which also expresses 'il tentativo di comprendere ciò che non è direttamente catalogabile come razionale e che, proprio per questo, si tende ad escludere dalla possibilità stessa di conoscenza.'<sup>179</sup>

As marginalised voices - outside the rational defined as male - women writers are inevitably attracted to this search for an understanding of the boundaries of received knowledge. Ironically they must plunge into the heart of patriarchal culture, where their very marginalisation seems most intense, in order to re-tell these apparently patriarchal terrors from a female viewpoint. Thus women's difficult position within postmodern culture, described by Linda Hutcheon as being simultaneously inside and outside appears particularly acute in the fantastic.<sup>180</sup>

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perché la critica non è all'altezza del loro lavoro. La critica può arrivare all'altezza di Gadda, ma non riesce ad arrivare all'altezza di Morante e Ortese. Esse pongono dei problemi che la critica ancora non riesce a contemplare: la circolarità che c'è tra il soggetto, la morale, la metafisica nei libri della Morante e dell'Ortese gli uomini non la colgono. Vi è un problema di limiti.'

<sup>178</sup> Deborah Harter draws her conclusion about the phallogentric nature of this fantastic from the insistent focus on the site of the female body as a dismembered one: 'Most often the body dismembered belongs to a single female individual, and she or her part is typically silent - indeed, often dead - erotically valued, and dangerous in some positive or negative way.' (p. 77)

<sup>179</sup> Luigi Punzo in Pisapia (ed.), p.17.

<sup>180</sup> Linda Hutcheon, 'Feminism and Postmodernism', in *Donna: Women in Italian Culture*, ed. by Ada Testaferri (Ottawa: University of Toronto Press, 1989). Hutcheon writes that: 'The language of margins and borders marks a position of paradox, being both inside and outside. Given this position, it is not surprising that the form that heterogeneity and difference often take in postmodern art is that of parody - the intertextual form that is paradoxically authorised transgression: its ironic difference is set at the

Seeing the potential for the fantastic to achieve this paradoxical position in spatial terms could revitalize otherwise weary criticisms of the female fantastic. In her consideration of the persistently fantastic treatment of love stories in Italian women's writing, Blelloch ponders the very few examples of love stories by Italian women writers at the time of her writing (looking at Morante, Deledda and Corti).<sup>181</sup> She suggests that they choose the fantastic mode in order to distance themselves from the negative connotations love has for a female writer and reader:

Queste storie fantastiche d'amore hanno una funzione catartica, perché sublimano sentimenti e desideri profondi e nascosti. Sebbene oggi giorno sia difficile identificarsi con i personaggi femminili vittime dell'amore e glorificati dal sacrificio, proviamo nondimeno un sentimento di ammirazione e nostalgia per qualcosa di prezioso e di definitivamente perduto che essi incarnano. Queste scrittrici, come abbiamo visto, sono riuscite ad affrontare l'argomento dell'amore a prezzo di mitizzarlo.<sup>182</sup>

She regards their use of the love story as nostalgic and wary, and we shall see that this theory certainly applies to some of Capriolo's texts. However in its threat to the identity of the Self, the love story has always been a key theme of the fantastic and, as we shall see in the texts considered here, it continues to be so. I would suggest with Farnetti that the fantastic can allow for a transgressive use of those themes, providing much more than provide a nebulous backdrop for the traditional playing out of weary gender roles. In fact through spatial disruption it can shake up and shatter them.

Although Farnetti does not draw attention to it, what nonetheless emerges from her argument is the inevitably *intertextual* nature of this "trasgressione" dell'ordine psichico vigente', so dominant in the Italian female fantastic. In fact her critical use of psychoanalysis sets a useful precedent. In the case of these writers I argue that the intertextual space is their primary concern, which inevitably brings with it a range of spatial themes. Most critics would like to see these themes neatly categorized as a distanced parody of the gothic. However the different history of the Italian female fantastic, less of a direct descendent of the gothic, gives a new slant on

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very heart of similarity.' (p.29)

<sup>181</sup> 'Se prendiamo in considerazione le poche storie d'amore che la letteratura femminile ci offre ci accorgiamo che hanno una caratteristica in comune: l'irrealtà e la lontananza. Sembra quasi che, per raccontare una vera storia d'amore, sia necessario ambientarlo in un mondo favoloso, mitico, o per lo meno, molto lontano.' (p.76) 'La Deledda, la Morante, la Corti riescono a creare delle storie d'amore soltanto quando lo allontanano e lo avvolgono in atmosfere irreali, perché così possono nascondere la propria vulnerabilità riguardo al sentimento.' (p.78) Paola Blelloch, *Quel mondo di guanti e delle stoffe. Profili di scrittrici italiane del '900* (Verona: Essedue edizioni, 1987)

<sup>182</sup> *ibid*, p.80.

the connection between spatial configurations and literary tradition.<sup>183</sup> By drawing together and developing the arguments of Gilbert and Gubar, Armit and Farnetti in the next two chapters I emphasize the *textual* space of the female fantastic text. Firstly, however, I would like to consider in more detail how psychoanalysis gives an extra insight into understanding this space.

### iii.i The Uncanny Likeness: Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Fantastic

Freud famously established the short circuit between the probing of the human unconscious and the fantastic in his essay of 1919, 'The "Uncanny"'. The close, sometimes stifling,<sup>184</sup> relationship which found its roots in Freud's essay culminated in Todorov's famous declaration that the fantastic had exhausted itself as a genre because it had served its purpose as a prophet of psychoanalysis.<sup>185</sup> Strange then is the persistence of the fantastic in contemporary literature and film over twenty-five years later. Stranger still is Todorov's ability to overlook the debates that raged within the field of psychoanalysis and to work with an outmoded notion of the objectivity of science, which psychoanalysis itself had so largely undermined. The description of literature in general as the 'uncanny double'<sup>186</sup> of psychoanalytical theory is an apt and important one since it underlines the relationship of similarity and difference which Todorov here attempts to quash. Science, even when it is simplistically assumed to be an empirically-based knowledge, obviously does not have a straightforward *ersatz*-function in relation to myth, narrative and literature - as even Freud was willing to admit in his analysis of the surmounted, which turns out not to be surmounted. Literature, particularly the fantastic, continues to act as the bad conscience of our conscious 'knowledge.' It reveals the limits of our scientific

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<sup>183</sup> Ursula Fanning underlines the open endings of Srao's reworking of the Gothic, suggesting that Italian women writers have always had a critical distance from the genre. See 'Srao's Gothic Revisions'.

<sup>184</sup> James MacGlathery is one of many critics to point out that Freud is not interested in Hoffmann's work as literature, since he is: 'more intent on finding support for his psychoanalytic theory than on understanding Hoffmann. Freud attributed Hoffmann's only half-conscious anticipation of psychoanalysis to personal experience and not at all to literary tradition.' *Mysticism and Sexuality: ETA Hoffmann, Part One: Hoffmann and his Sources* (Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1981), p.36.

<sup>185</sup> 'Psychoanalysis has replaced (and thereby made useless) the literature of the fantastic. There is no need today to resort to the devil in order to speak of an excessive sexual desire, and none to resort to vampires in order to designate the attraction asserted by corpses: psychoanalysis, and the literature which is directly or indirectly inspired by it, deal with these matters in undisguised terms. The themes of fantastic literature have become, literally, the very themes of the psychological investigations of the last fifty years.' (Todorov, chapter 10)

<sup>186</sup> See 'The Uncanny' in *A Concise Glossary of Feminist Theory*, ed. by Sonya Andermahr, Terry

understanding of the sexed and gendered human subject. At the same time it stimulates an interest in the mysterious workings of that subject.

One could certainly suggest that psychoanalytic thought has not been as widely accepted as was originally expected, which may account for the continued popularity of the fantastic in all forms of culture, according to Todorov's framework. However it is also becoming clear that psychoanalysis cannot be an 'exact' science. In contrast to Todorov's enthusiastic heralding of psychoanalytical explanation it appears as a series of voices (often in disagreement between themselves - a fact Todorov also fails to take into account) that have been, if not ignored, listened to intermittently and critically. In part feminist theory itself has been responsible for this, particularly in the deconstruction of Freudian and Lacanian thought. Increasingly psychoanalysis itself is being read as a narrative text, finding its own tools turned upon itself. It may be hasty to suggest that this is a reversal of what Todorov saw: the fantastic narrative is dominant and survives the science of psychoanalysis. However it is worth considering that whilst the fantastic and psychoanalysis exist in tandem and there is much between them that overlaps and enriches, both fields retain a degree of autonomy which guarantees their survival.

Where does this leave us in relation to how women write 'the uncanny', to which they are so closely linked in traditional representation?<sup>187</sup> The answer must lie in the notion of a literature, described by Farnetti, which is aware of psychoanalytical thought, but not in awe of it. Jacqueline Rose is one of several feminist critics to have defended psychoanalysis and its possibilities for feminism. It is worth reading traces of the overlap between the fantastic and psychoanalysis in this defence for they point towards common ground between all three realms. As a marginalized voice the fantastic shares something with feminism in the same way that psychoanalysis does, as Rose's words illustrate:

psychoanalysis, through its attention to symptoms, slips of the tongue and

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Lovell and Carol Wolkowitz (London: Arnold, 1997), p.230.

<sup>187</sup> Jane Marie Todd argues that this connection is overlooked in Freud's essay in 'The Veiled Woman in Freud's "Das Unheimliche"', *Signs*, 2 (1986), 519-528. Todd writes 'Hidden away and veiled, the strangely familiar woman threatens to appear again. That is the message of *Das Unheimliche*.' (p.528); 'It is women who are *unheimlich*, either because the sight of their genitals provokes the male's fear of castration, or because the desire to be female resurfaces as a fear of death. Freud did not draw this conclusion from his examples, perhaps because the simplicity, the coherence of the conclusion, is *blinding*.' (p.527) Hélène Cixous in 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny)' in *New Literary History*, 525-548, reads the essay as an attempt on Freud's part to tame what is really uncanny for him: death. Ironically 'The Uncanny' serves to highlight, unconsciously, the persistent male-authored equation of death and the female.

dreams (that is, to what *insists* on being spoken against what is *allowed* to be said) appears above all as a challenge to the self-evidence and banality of everyday life and language, which have also, importantly, constituted the specific targets of feminism [...] For feminism has always challenged the observable givens of women's presumed natural qualities and their present social position alike (especially when the second is justified in terms of the first.)<sup>188</sup>

Significantly this could be read as similar to the predominant idea which fantastic literature proposes: that the dichotomy between fantasy (the invisible) and reality (the visible) is closer to the institution of social norms of the accepted and the unaccepted than an accurate reflection of individual experience. Rose endorses this emphasis on vision: 'Freud's challenge to the visible, to the empirically self-evident, to the 'blindness of the seeing eye'[...] can give us the strongest sense of the force of the unconscious as a concept against a fully social classification relying on empirical evidence as its rationale.'<sup>189</sup> The unconscious as a tool which combats the superficial is ideally suited to feminist use, but women writers can use the fantastic to do something very similar.

By looking at one of these 'givens' which psychoanalysis questions in more detail: the self, we can further focus on how the links between the fantastic and psychoanalysis are what make it a potentially fertile ground for women writers to explore their relation to the text. The problematization of selfhood or 'the subversion of unities of self' has been described by Rosemary Jackson: as 'the most radical transgressive function of the fantastic.'<sup>190</sup> From the texts of this thesis this will in fact emerge clearly as a major preoccupation for the women writers using the fantastic. Once again Rose gives us good reason to see why:

What distinguishes psychoanalysis from sociological accounts of gender [...] is that whereas for the latter, the internalization of norms is assumed roughly to work, the basic premise and indeed starting point of psychoanalysis is that it does not. The unconscious constantly reveals the 'failure' of identity. Because there is no continuity of psychic life, so there is no stability of sexual identity, no position for women (or for men) which is simply achieved. [...] Feminism's affinity with psychoanalysis rests above all, I would argue, with this recognition that there is a resistance to identity which lies at the very heart of psychic life.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> 'Femininity and Its Discontents' in *British Feminist Thought: a reader* ed. by Terry Lovell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 227-243 (p.229).

<sup>189</sup> *ibid.*, p.236-7.

<sup>190</sup> Jackson, p. 83.

<sup>191</sup> Rose, *ibid.*, p.232

This resistance to identity, which only ever finds temporary and unsatisfactory resolutions, is much akin to the resistance to interpretation of the fantastic text, which I discussed in the first section. It is also about the failure to recognize an identity presented by the male text. Like psychoanalysis, the fantastic text encourages a temporary re-configuration of the self, by inviting re-interpretation as well as resisting it, becoming a process of negotiation between female writer and the male text. It dances a tightrope walk between total dissolution and impermanent resolution as the relationship between narrator and reader constantly runs the risk of alienation. This marks out a fundamental difference between a general postmodern deconstruction of selfhood and a genuine preoccupation with the diverse blocks encountered in the processes of psychic formation. It also means that contemporary female writers' use of the fantastic is one that, despite its concentration on literary function, does not frustrate itself as a redundant literary construct.

Rose concludes her outline of the importance of psychoanalysis for feminism as follows: 'the fact that psychoanalysis cannot be assimilated directly into a political programme as such does not mean, therefore, that it should be discarded, and thrown back into the outer reaches of a culture which has never yet been fully able to heed its voice.'<sup>192</sup> It is important to underline that this is not to be a vision of a female fantastic acting as the handmaiden of psychoanalysis until that voice is heeded, then discreetly withdrawing into the shadows. It is through this analysis of the close relationship between the two that I have aimed to draw out why the fantastic is still necessary to women writers, at the very least. The emphasis throughout this study will be on the fact that the fantastic, like psychoanalysis, having been the original domain of men is also fraught with dangers for women as practitioners. It compels a heightened attention to the act of textual re-vision. The recognition of their difficult position as object turned subject finds in the fantastic, in its foregrounding of the slips between fiction and life as modes of reality, the best means with which to articulate the *textual* nature of their experience, as reading women. Hence the preoccupation with the text that is also the space within which they write out this particular anxiety, revealing that it has certainly not been surmounted, if sometimes repressed. This is a literature that strives to differentiate itself from a fantastic that shows symptoms of a society ill at

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<sup>192</sup> Rose, *ibid.*, p.241

ease with woman through its self-conscious attention to the causes and symptoms of being women. It is a literature that offers the key to its own reading as a preoccupation with origins, literary and psychic.

The work of one particular theorist, Jessica Benjamin, lends itself to the theory that the fantastic can co-exist productively with recent developments in feminist and psychoanalytical thought. Benjamin's theory is unusual in turning its limitations into its strength. She accepts the idea of an unknown space of the human psyche. She suggests that the subject in formation will always *need* what she calls an intrapsychic space, a space of fantasy, in which the Other is objectified. Benjamin perceives the relation to the idea of the omnipotent mother as the dominant motif of this fantasy:

Modern disenchantment has no doubt worked to diminish the mystique surrounding procreation and motherhood. But the eclipse of this immediate sense of mystery has scarcely alleviated the dread of maternal power; it has only banished it to the darkness beyond the portals of enlightenment. There it remains alive, in the unconscious, if you will, where it still serves diverse [...] fantastic purposes.<sup>193</sup>

This theory lends itself to an understanding of the recurrence of extreme female figures in fantastic texts by men and women. The tendency in both men and women to make the maternal figure into a threatening, engulfing one sets gendered identities spinning in opposite directions. Although current parenting arrangements exacerbate that tendency she does not see them as the sole cause. However, she argues that unless the fantasy of that intrapsychic space is challenged, the arrangement of gender along the lines of dominant male/submissive female will not change. The subject also needs, according to Benjamin, a space outside that enclosure of fantasy – a space of intersubjectivity, 'a zone of experience or theory in which the other is not merely the object of the ego's need/drive or cognition/perception but has a separate and equivalent center of self.'<sup>194</sup> It is necessary to open up the subject to a recognition of the mother's subjectivity, even if the subject is always going to live with a degree of fantasy about the female:

Intersubjective theory postulates that the other must be recognized as another in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in the other's presence. This means that we have a need for recognition and that we have a

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<sup>193</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven, Conn., London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 81.

<sup>194</sup> *ibid.*, p.30.

capacity to recognize others in return, thus making mutual recognition possible.<sup>195</sup>

What potential is there in the fantastic text, associated with a descent into the dark realms of human fantasy and enclosure, for this opening up to the Other? The fantastic may be associated with undermining 'enlightened' ideas about knowing the self, but it also juxtaposes that self with the reality of experience. I would suggest that Benjamin's theory points towards the fantastic in its emphasis on a *dual* vision. With an acknowledgement of the real pull of the world of nightmares, of the dominance of those plays which persist in the individual theatre of the psyche the fantastic can also make a link with the Other. As Benjamin underlines, 'the restoration of balance between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective in the psychoanalytic process should not be construed as an adaptation that reduces fantasy to reality; rather, it is practice in the sustaining of contradiction.'<sup>196</sup> I would suggest that a contemporary form of the female fantastic offers to bridge the realm between the space of enclosure and the intersubjective space, without diminishing the power of that closed space of fantasy.<sup>197</sup> In the following chapters I will demonstrate how the female writer's choice to reject or sustain that contradiction arises from her ability to draw her relation to the male text into the intersubjective space.

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<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>196</sup> *ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>197</sup> Benjamin recognises that literature has, in some ways, a better chance of dramatizing this process than psychoanalysis itself. As a 'science' psychoanalysis is pushed not to allow contradiction or leave uncomfortable spaces intact. Interestingly Benjamin illustrates her desire to do just that with a reference to literature: 'No doubt our historical situation readily allows us to question the masculine form of authority - as Freud did not - but this in itself does not immediately resolve the problem of destructiveness or submission. It only starts us on a new approach to grasping the tension between the desire to be free and the desire not to be. To persevere in that approach, it seems to me, requires of theory some of that quality which Keats demanded for poetry - negative capability. The theoretic equivalent of that ability to face mystery and uncertainty "without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" would be the effort to understand the contradictions of fact and reason without any irritable reaching after one side at the expense of the other. As I have said elsewhere, a theory or a politics that cannot cope with contradiction, that denies the irrational, that tries to sanitize the erotic, fantastic components of human life cannot visualize an authentic end to domination but only vacate the field.' (*Like Subjects, Love Objects*, p.10) With this comment Benjamin seems to acknowledge that literature offers a field more conducive to this contradiction.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Mirror, mirror on the wall, is there space to write at all?:**

#### **The fantastic language of self-reflexivity and intertextuality in Paola Capriolo's early fiction**

The mirror is a fitting point of departure from which to follow those diverse prisms of the fantastic interrelated in the texts considered here: the body, the domestic space, the artistic subject and textual influence. It is the eternal cypher for self-discovery in autobiographical terms, whilst in psychoanalytical theory it can represent the step from undifferentiation to the symbolic order, as well as an inevitable state of selfalienation.<sup>1</sup> The mirror's very fragility may be one explanation for its strong attraction in this apparently paradoxical context - as the border realm between self-knowledge and loss of the self. In relation to this intimate link between the discovery of and/or escape from the self it is also one of the most recurrent symbols within the fantastic text, giving rise to both the theme of the double and the encounter with the Other. Coloured by an ancient association with magic, the mirror offers a new perspective and a liminal moment that embodies the pull between self and other, life and death, 'this' world and another. Above all it dramatizes the ambiguity of vision and perception, with its promise of truth and potential for deformation. The distancing effect of the different space established by the mirror, which suggests 'the instability of the 'real' on this side of the looking glass',<sup>2</sup> makes it an ideal model for the text itself and an obvious symbol for the self-reflexive text. In fact the mirror's multifarious nature as a symbol is almost commonplace, but it is the nature of universally recognised cultural symbols to offer such richness.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Jacques Lacan, 'Le stade du miroir', in *Écrits I* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966).

<sup>2</sup>Rosemary Jackson, p.87.

<sup>3</sup>In Calvino's words: 'Ogni tentativo di definire il significato di un simbolo non fa che impoverirne la ricchezza di suggestioni.' Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane: sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milano: Garzanti, 1988). This is a view reinforced by Capriolo herself who writes, 'Si può accostare il Castello del romanzo di Kafka all'assoluto, o alla Legge, o all'istanza paterna, ma ridurlo a uno di questi significati sarebbe disconoscere il fatto che il Castello è in primo luogo il Castello, e che la sua forza sta appunto nell'impossibilità di esaurirne le implicazioni con una definizione razionale', 'Spiriti persecutori dal filo del telefono', *Il corriere della sera*, 24 May 1991.

For many feminist literary critics the mirror was first and foremost a symbol of the male-authored text <sup>4</sup> in which 'women' saw themselves reflected as 'woman' and, even, for Gilbert and Gubar, symbol of 'the anxiety of authorship' which this chapter explores. Essentially this term sees the nineteenth-century female writer caught between the authority of predominantly male predecessors and the fact that this authority comes into conflict with her own experience of gender as a writer. This generates a 'radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her'.<sup>5</sup> Through the tale of 'Snow White', for example, they use the mirror to explore this relationship to the male-authored text, imagining it as speaking with the King's voice and ask:

If the Queen's looking glass speaks with the King's voice, how do its perpetual kingly admonitions affect the Queen's own voice? Since his is the chief voice she hears does the Queen try to sound like the king, imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view?'<sup>6</sup>

The mirror has not only been seen as a text offering women a (distorting) reflection, but also as a symbol of the positioning of women by patriarchal culture - 'as the negative term of sexual differentiation, spectacle-fetish or specular image, in any case, obscene, woman is constituted as the ground of representation, the looking-glass held up to man.'<sup>7</sup>

As well as exploiting the mirror to convey the split and secondary position of women within culture, in more recent theory, most often through the recurrent figure of Alice, feminist critics, philosophers and authors have used it as a convenient symbol or metaphor for the opportunity women have to step into another world,

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<sup>4</sup>See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*: 'Authored by a male God and by a godlike male, killed into a 'perfect' image of herself, the woman writer's self-contemplation may be said to have begun with a searching glance into the mirror of the male-inscribed literary text.' (p.14)

<sup>5</sup>Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.48.

<sup>6</sup>ibid., p.46.

<sup>7</sup>Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.15. Irigaray takes this idea one step further to argue that 'the rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) subject to reflect himself, to copy himself.' Luce Irigaray, in the eponymous essay of her collection: *This Sex which is not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 23-33 (p.30). First published in 1977 as *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*.

opening up new dimensions or spaces, both literal and figurative.<sup>8</sup> As the very figure of Alice implies, this latter development brings a potentially interesting dovetailing with its literal deployment in the fantastic text. It is that usage, together with that suggested by Sigrid Weigel, of the mirror symbol as a means of examining the neglected reflection of the male text within the female which will form the main focus in this chapter:

The metaphor of the 'mirror' - its reverse side and edges, its splintering and 'doubling' effect - is now commonly used to describe female self-awareness controlled by the male gaze [...] There are still very few precedents for an investigation of this mirror relationship in the actual writing by women - that "complicated process involving conquering and reclaiming, appropriating and formulating, as well as forgetting and subverting."<sup>9</sup>

The mirror and accompanying notions of watching and being watched constitute an important cypher in the work of Capriolo and she states, 'Lo specchio è anche un punto in cui si congiungono, diciamo, la realtà e la finzione.'<sup>10</sup> In fact her early work, consistently located in this interstitial realm, represents the ideal vehicle for a textual exploration of the implications of the fantastic for women writers in relation to the themes of space and intertextuality, with the symbol of the mirror as a point of departure and eventual return.

#### **i. Locked in Mann's text: 'Illacrimata sepoltura'?**

The amnesiac narrator of *Il doppio regno* remembers the line of Foscolo: 'A noi prescrisse/il fato illacrimata sepoltura', certain that it must contain 'un velato riferimento alla mia esistenza' (dr, p.65). In fact, two of Capriolo's early stories tell of the *desire* of her heroines, to which they offer little resistance, to enclose themselves in a claustrophobic space described by masculine culture: a state of literal 'sepoltura'.

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<sup>8</sup>Two of the most interesting uses of this theme are offered by Teresa De Lauretis in *Alice Doesn't*, particularly in her first chapter entitled: 'Through the Looking Glass: Women, Cinema and Language' and Luce Irigaray's opening essay in *This Sex which is not One*, entitled 'The Looking Glass from the Other Side', pp.9-22.

<sup>9</sup> Sigrid Weigel in Ecker (ed.) p. 61.

<sup>10</sup>See the section 'Lo specchio' in "'Un altro mondo": Interview with Paola Capriolo (Milan, November 1996)', Gillian Ania, *The Italianist*, 18 (1998), 305-341 (pp.328-330). Further references to this interview will be indicated after quotations in the text by (Ania). See also Rita Wilson's article 'The

By focusing on two of her first collection of short stories we can see how Capriolo foregrounds the representational nature of being female, less a creative act of representation than that of a self prescribed by culture. This is the *art* of being female as a poetics of submission to male domination. The emphasis on the female performer in both texts draws attention to the function of the female body as site/sight of artistic objectification. In both cases the female protagonists are overwhelmed by their own representations, by forces which symbolize fantastically the demands made on women in a patriarchal system. In this respect the fantastic impulse of the texts can be read as expressing obliquely the pressures of female experience, the origin of which cannot be traced to a single cause: the self, the body or society. That the heroines are drawn to the enclosed spaces in which they eventually enclose themselves echoes their own submission to the laws of a body gendered as female by the external world.

Overall these two spatial restrictions go hand in hand with the author's own incipient conflicts with her subjecthood as a female author, an example of what Gilbert and Gubar describe as the 'female affiliation complex'.<sup>11</sup> Her attempts to align herself with a literary foremother in the story, 'La grande Eulalia' falter in the subsequent 'Il gigante' when she tries to come to terms with a dominant literary forefather. That Capriolo intends neither story to reflect consciously upon the female condition is clear from her submission to the 'necessità della storia', mentioned earlier.<sup>12</sup> What the stories do highlight regardless is how crucial the use of space is to the female-authored fantastic in questioning the stereotypical representation of gender.

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Space(s) of Myth in Paola Capriolo's *Con i miei mille occhi*, *Studi d'italianistica nell'Africa Australe*, 12 (1999), 37- 57.

<sup>11</sup>Sandra. M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The War of the Words*

<sup>12</sup>In interview with me she suggested that 'evidentemente nel caso di Adele, in questa seduzione attraverso la musica sembra giusto che fosse una donna, non so, ma è difficile per me pensare al personaggio e anche al protagonista staccato della vicenda, dell'insieme.' She does not seem to wish to probe this 'natural' arrangement.

## ‘La grande Eulalia’

‘Je fermerai partout portières et volets/ Pour bâtir dans la nuit mes féeriques palais’  
‘I will close all doors and shutters/ And build my fairy palaces by night’ - Baudelaire<sup>13</sup>

This story shows how experiencing the self as ‘artistic image’ constitutes one crucially uncanny moment for the female reader and, therefore, writer of the fantastic. All the more reason why the issue of the *text* itself should become a primary motivation in women’s writing of the fantastic, as the moment of the uncanny, as a perception of the self as Other. It reinforces the significance of the male-authored text as a distorting mirror for women - a replay of the Lacanian mirror stage in which the self appears alien. The first and title story of ‘La grande Eulalia’ dramatizes in fantastic terms both this moment of alienation and the way in which the female attempts to overcome it by conforming to an acceptable version of femininity. The device it employs is an enchanted mirror. This mirror shows a young peasant girl what she wants to become and thus externalizes the mental world of the girl, showing its potency by giving it a physical presence and forcing her to take notice of it.

As we see in many subsequent texts of Capriolo’s the external world becomes for the main protagonist an extension, a mirror, of the internal world. Although Capriolo emphasizes the autonomy of these ‘luoghi chiusi’,<sup>14</sup> in this text there is enough to suggest that it is a concrete external world which moulds the internal. The story is narrated by the former leading actress of a group of travelling players. She tells the story of ‘La grande Eulalia’ to an implied readership who is assumed to be familiar with the great actress, if not her origins ‘Ricorderete, signori [...] Ricorderete quelle sere’ (LgE, p.30) - this in itself roots the story in a shared social experience.

The narrator, who remains nameless, recounts that many years ago she took a young peasant girl on as her handmaid. The girl had appeared by the fire around which

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<sup>13</sup>Baudelaire, ‘Paysage’, *Fleurs du Mal* cit. by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) Orig. *La poétique de l’espace*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958.

<sup>14</sup>‘Ho cominciato ad andare al teatro, con i miei genitori, a cinque anni, e per buona parte dell’adolescenza il teatro è stata una cosa importante. Ecco ho sempre avuto la sensazione che questa dimensione separata totalmente dalla quotidianità, dal rumore di fondo della vita, forse proprio per questo fosse qualcosa di più vero, una dimensione più reale, proprio perché più essenziale, più rigorosa; proprio perché costruita avesse in sé qualche cosa di più reale che non c’era di fuori. E credo che i miei libri siano teatrali in questo senso, cioè nel tentativo di creare degli spazi chiusi, all’interno dei quali avvengono le cose, all’interno dei quali i personaggi compiono questi loro processi di autoconsapevolezza progressiva che non potrebbe avvenire fuori del teatro.’ Daniele Marinoni, *‘Vissi*

the narrator and the group were seated after a performance, begging to join them, simply to be able to watch their plays every night. From the beginning we are aware of the girl's desire to become like the players, a desire that she suppresses in her humility: 'Non pretendo di salire anch'io là sopra, in mezzo a tutte quelle luci. Mi piacerebbe tanto, ma so che non è per me.' (LgE, p.9). For several years the girl, never attempting to go on stage herself, follows her mistress around and refuses even to wear any of the actress's cast-off clothes, retaining her peasant dress. The woman and girl form a friendly bond with a young musician, which is tested when their caravan burns down. To prevent the three splitting up the musician disappears to return with a grand and ornate caravan, about whose origin he is vague, in which the young peasant girl takes a splendid 'stanza degli specchi' as her bedroom.

Soon the narrator realises that the girl is spending more and more time in that room. By spying on her, she discovers to her astonishment that a young and extremely beautiful man in noble dress appears in the mirror as soon as Eulalia enters the room. Rapt, Eulalia cannot tear herself away from this infinitely desirable, inaccessible figure. His appearance is soon followed by that of a similarly nobly dressed girl, whose radiance throws the peasant girl into despair over her own insignificant appearance.<sup>15</sup> Gradually she undergoes a strange metamorphosis, watched in disbelief by the narrator. The girl's hair turns golden and her features acquire a new delicacy, which leads to her rapid promotion as an actress and at some point the title 'La grande Eulalia'. Soon she is the star, so acclaimed that no-one else will perform with her and the narrating actress becomes *her* handmaid. Eventually, tired of travelling, she constructs a palace on the three islands of a lake, facing the shoreline across a narrow mirror of water. The castle which spans these islands are 'un gioco di specchi', in which illusion and reality mingle to a point of indecipherability - a recreation of the world of mirrors within the caravan. The caravan is preserved in one of the courtyards, emphasizing the chinese-box construction of cause and effect in the tale. A consummate storyteller, from her balcony Eulalia performs each night to eager

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*d'amore*, l'ultimo romanzo di Paola Capriolo alla ricerca del senso della vita', *Il mattino di Padova*, October, 1992.

<sup>15</sup>The image of the narcissistic female, gazing upon her own reflection in the mirror is a recurrent theme of symbolist painting of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, echoing the Freudian ideas and fears of the time concerning women who exclude men from their own private introspection and underline their inaccessible difference. This is one of the many ways in which we see Capriolo's predilection for controversial images of womanhood which draw directly from a male-authored canon.

crowds, also singing sweetly (as her name implies). A sudden change comes over her however when she spies on the shore the figure of her prince. For nights she watches his distant figure draw nearer, anticipating the realisation of her dream of perfect union. Following a meeting with him, in which the narrator hints that she resembles totally the woman of her mirror, she returns to the castle, strangely silent. After one failed attempt at a performance, she tells her handmaid, 'non è lui'. Eulalia gives no further explanation: 'Non c'è niente da dire', and locks herself in the caravan. Its doors prove impervious to any locksmith, its windows impenetrable and there she remains forever, dead or alive.

The story is certainly about the 'siren call of aesthetic perfection',<sup>16</sup> but the definition of that perfection is the female body itself. The confusion between the artwork and the female body in the male-authored art-work is well documented,<sup>17</sup> but by foregrounding the female experience of that confusion this text reflects and reflects *upon* those textual models. The story concerns the uncanny encounter of the specifically female self with a prescribed model that it is at once necessary and futile to imitate. Like fiction itself, the mirror here serves less as a means of knowing the self than a process of inevitable alienation from the self, in which Eulalia comes to represent the commodification of woman described by Luce Irigaray:

just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own. Her value-invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter: that is, her body.<sup>18</sup>

This particular example moreover, works with the stereotypical image of the female as mediator.<sup>19</sup> Eulalia becomes a singer of songs whose words appear to be dictated to

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<sup>16</sup>Sharon Wood, *Italian Women Writing*, p.270.

<sup>17</sup>Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1988): 'Woman is a sign, not of woman but of the Other in whose mirror masculinity must define itself. The Other is not, however, simple, constant or fixed. It oscillates between signification of love/loss, and desire/death. The terrors can be negotiated by the cult of beauty imposed upon the sign of woman and the cult of art as compensatory, self-sufficient, formalised realm of aesthetic beauty in which the beauty of woman object and the beauty of the painting-object become conflated, fetishized.'(p.153)

<sup>18</sup>Luce Irigaray, 'Women on the Market' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, pp.170-191 (p.187).

<sup>19</sup>Explored by Sherry. B. Ortner in 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture' in *Women, Culture and Society* ed. by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp.65-87. Woman is 'seen to occupy an intermediate position between culture and nature.' One way to interpret this intermediate position is in 'the significance of "mediating", is performing some sort of synthesizing or coverting function between nature and culture, here seen (by culture) not as two ends of a continuum but as two radically different sorts of processes in the world. The domestic unit - and

her, in which the body also becomes the work of art. Capriolo's emphasis on Eulalia as singer is important, for, as Lucy Green has argued, women's singing largely reproduces and affirms patriarchal definitions of femininity and has therefore, been the best tolerated form of female musical expression. She gives four reasons for this, suggesting that the focus on the body that singing effects is in keeping with the construction of the female as matter: 'the singing woman is, literally and metaphorically, in tune with her body. At the same time she is prey to its vicissitudes, which are dangerously present in the ready susceptibility of the voice.' Her other three reasons also derive largely from this focus on the body:

the association with nature, the appearance of sexual availability and the symbolisation of maternal preoccupation. [She refers to the traditional image of mothers singing to children] The contradictions which they involve, far from representing logically alternative or mutually exclusive positions, actually go together, to articulate a space in which femininity is constructed as contrary, desirable, but dangerous, sexually available but maternally preoccupied.

'Women's singing,' she maintains, 'whether or not it crosses into the public sphere, largely reproduces and affirms patriarchal definitions of femininity.'<sup>20</sup> It is all the more significant then that Eulalia eventually decides to make her home her theatre, transgressing even less with this bridge between public and private the prescriptions of patriarchy, surrendering her right to travel.

This enclosure on all fronts is reinforced by the fantastic space of her bewitched caravan, in which the heroine's flight of the imagination is characterized by deep-seated psycho-sexual processes over which she seemingly has no control. Within the space of the caravan Eulalia's projection of the figures could equally be read as a form of introjection. As Nichola Diamond observes:

introjection (the way the subject in fantasy 'takes into itself' objects from the outside world and, henceforth, preserves them 'inside' the self) [...] can account for the way that projections of male fantasy on to the woman can be assimilated into the woman's ego or remain alien to it. Women can perceive themselves as

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hence woman, who in virtually every culture appears as its primary representative - is one of culture's crucial agencies.'(p. 84) Paradoxically this role of mediation based in biology leads to the type of femininity emerging from the Virgin Mary, and as Elizabeth Bronfen suggests 'From her derives the notion of the disembodied, ethereal, non-essential muse, mediatrix and angel as bridge to the beyond, supplying knowledge of the Unknowable, of Divinity.'(p.67)

<sup>20</sup> Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), pp. 27-29.

‘lacking’ in relation to the man, and can feel alien and objectified to themselves.’<sup>21</sup>

The ambiguity about inside and outside raised by the caravan itself, which is both alien to and increasingly identified with Eulalia herself, symbolizes the potent nature of this alienation. This pattern echoes throughout this study, in which heroines struggle to liberate themselves, not from an external oppressor, but from something which they suspect comes from within themselves. The use of the fantastic thus underlines the particular difficulty for the female subject of knowing the borderline between one’s own will and that of others’. Is the actress of a part making that part or is she made by it?

As a threshold realm between reality and fantasy the theatrical space is certainly a commonplace of the fantastic, but it is the first of many enclosed spaces we encounter in Capriolo’s fiction. In both ‘La grande Eulalia’ and, with more strength in her later *Vissi d’arte* (1992), it emerges as the exemplary intertextual space: giving an ambivalent freedom to the actress who must act a part already written for her, which does not preclude improvisation.<sup>22</sup> The theatre, and its accompanying disreputability for women, was the space in which women were perhaps first allowed to blur the boundaries between spaces for men and women. Together with its powerful potential for physical and intellectual creativity it could be a potent threshold area for the female fantastic. Through the trope of the theatre a female fantastic could emerge which draws upon the traditional association of the fantastic with unknown worlds. As ‘La grande Eulalia’ illustrates, attempts on the part of women to explore the unknown, even the dangerous world of men, provide a never-ending source of curiosity and discovery.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Nichola Diamond, entry on ‘introjection’ in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* ed. by Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p177.

<sup>22</sup>Paola Capriolo, *Vissi d’arte* (Milano: Bompiani, 1992). Capriolo’s subtle retelling of Puccini’s opera, *Tosca*, foregrounds this potential for the female actress/singer to become a model for transgressive behaviour.

<sup>23</sup>Luigi Punzo writes: ‘È infatti l’ignoto, il diverso, tutto ciò che non appartiene all’universo regolato, a noi familiare, che suscita la paura, e che è tanto più violenta e duratura e quindi non razionalmente controllabile, quanto più è forte il distacco dalla realtà precedentemente nota, paura dell’ignoto che scaturisce sia nella relazione tra soggetto e oggetto, io e mondo, come pure nelle relazioni tra io e tu, investendo la dimensione sociale. Si potrebbe anche osservare che alla paura si accompagna, quasi sempre, come causa oppure come effetto, un’altra passione, la curiosità, che è sete di conoscenza, tensione a superare i limiti imposti dalla paura, appunto, quasi al ulteriore conferma di quella caratteristica fondamentale della dimensione fantastica che è stata precedentemente messa in evidenza.’ (Pisapia (ed.), pp.24-5)

Yet the theatre also holds the potential to fix women in the rigid gaze of their audience. In 'La grande Eulalia' the theatre crosses boundaries and dominates the public space and the private space in a potentially threatening fashion (a theme we see repeated in Capriolo's later *La spettatrice*).<sup>24</sup> The theatre echoes the alienating quality of the mirror by reflecting a vision of reality that blurs the line between fact and fiction. Its use within fiction becomes in turn a self-reflexive device by foregrounding the artifice and power of artistic creation. This story extends that artifice to femininity itself, underlining the idea that the display and performance of the feminine does not, whilst delighting the crowds, bring the performer any closer to understanding her own identity. As Diamond continues: 'the process of introjection forces one to consider that the changes feminists seek can not be brought about solely by a transformation in the external situation; it also requires an intra-psychic re-structuring and, in consequence, an alteration of the woman's self-image.'<sup>25</sup>

Reference to contemporary psychoanalytical theory further underlines the typically female difference which we can read in the space of this first character. According to Benjamin, as young girls attempt to separate their identity from that of their mother, they look to the father for a source of identification, the satisfaction of which is dependent on his (rare) recognition of her:

when identificatory love is not satisfied within this context of mutual recognition - as it frequently is not for girls - it later emerges as ideal love, the wish for a vicarious substitute for one's own agency. It takes the passive form of accepting the other's will and desire as one's own; from there it is just a step to surrender to the other's will. Thus we see in ideal love a "perversion" of identification, a deformation of identificatory love into submission.<sup>26</sup>

The ambiguity of Eulalia's desire for the man in the mirror and her willingness to annihilate herself with regard to him, by becoming his 'twin', in order to overcome her subjection to the mother (the actress) seems to express powerfully the thwarted identificatory nature of female ideal love Benjamin describes. Even more telling is her comment that in general: 'the denial of recognition leaves the omnipotent self imprisoned in his mind reflecting on the world from behind a wall of glass.'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>See this novel for a description of the male subject's very different relationship to the space of the theatre.

<sup>25</sup>Nichola Diamond in Wright (ed.), p.177.

<sup>26</sup>Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, p.122.

<sup>27</sup>*ibid.*, p.190.

The spatial restrictions set for female creativity and identity are raised by the enclosure of the enchanted caravan. The caravan appears a potent symbol for the fathomless depths of the human psyche, like all magical enclosures 'era come se all'interno lo spazio si dilatasse a dismisura' (LgE, p.16). However, like mirrors, like stage scenery, this is a 'come se', an illusion of depth. Its labyrinthine appearance is deceptive, since it lacks any centre. Apparently Eulalia's own special space - a chrysalis from which she emerges as a butterfly - its mirrors, nonetheless, make her performance dependent on her experience as audience. The figures who insinuate themselves into her mental space bear a strong relation to the theatrical world in which she has vested her desire - the emphasis on elaborate clothing provides a clear link. Thus the female body becomes the site of a negative performance for the Imaginary, in that Eulalia becomes the mirror image of what is prescribed for her - the mirror reflects and projects expectations of femininity rather than its experience. As the narrator observes: 'Si specchiava nel cristallo, e vedeva, accanto alla sua, quella bianca immagine. Confrontava tratto con tratto, gesto con gesto, bellezza con bellezza, e ogni volta si ritraeva avvilita' (LgE, p.24). By literalizing the mental image of the ideal self in this way Capriolo underlines the emphasis on physical appearance in the constitution of the female psyche.

The only creation in which Eulalia does engage beyond that performed by her body serves to reflect that body. Her fairy palaces do not take us beyond the body in flights of marvellous fancy, as in the Baudelairean quotation heading this section. They always return to the body on display as the site of reference:

Eulalia si fermò nel vestibolo, e mi mandò avanti perché la annunciassi presso gli ospiti. Le piaceva fare il suo ingresso da sola, come in scena. La si vedeva dapprima lontanissima, in una delle stanze più esterne, e la sua immagine, moltiplicata dai cristalli, si distingueva appena. Poi lentamente si avvicinava.' (LgE, p.31)

There is no better metaphor for the danger which the female writer faces of disappearing into 'the body' of the pre-written text. It also highlights the dangers and necessities of female interiority – necessary for creation, at the same time a space which appears to be already occupied.

Eulalia's eventual withdrawal from the world into the caravan leaves a question mark over the potential of this space, enabling the tale to regain some

mystery for the female subject from a perspective of female control. We do not know whether Eulalia condemns herself to a prison of her own fantasy of perfect union with the other, perhaps death itself, or establishes a new form of dialogue with the Other, stepping through the space of the mirror and reformulating her Self in the light of her experience. Capriolo herself draws attention to the open ending of the story.<sup>28</sup> With this ending the story points towards alternatives, casting a new light on the enclosure of the fantastic. The potential of the fantastic to create a cognitive block on the oversignification of the feminine, to which I alluded in the introduction, is what I think we see at work here.

In order to understand the way in which the space of Eulalia's fantasy is gendered, it is also important to look at how the triangle of her real interpersonal experience feeds the depiction of the internal space. The leading actress and her musician friend, off-stage, look shabby and pale in comparison with the figures of Eulalia's fantasy. Nonetheless they are both implicated in the production of those figures. The leading lady shows herself to be aware of the limited choices of the female condition from the opening of the tale: 'Se avessi taciuto, sarebbe tornata a casa dai suoi fratelli. Le avrebbero dato marito, certo un altro contadino, e da lui avrebbe avuto dei figli.' (LgE, p.9). That the character of Eulalia has gone into the theatrical world of the caravan as a means of escape from the drudgery of the only alternative female existence on offer to her, domesticity, is the first instance of the motif of movement from one form of enclosure to another that is a dominant in the female fantastic and to which I shall return in my analysis of later texts. The narrator also provides a background illustrating the shortlived nature of the female subject, whose subject *is* the performance of her body - her own career wanes as Eulalia's waxes.<sup>29</sup> Eulalia's initial adoration of her, which the narrator admits she finds

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<sup>28</sup>In response to the question "“La grande Eulalia” rimane intrappolata dalla propria immagine...?” Capriolo replies ‘Sì. Alla fine del libro sì. Poi non si sa. È un finale aperto.’ ‘Interview with Capriolo’, Tiziana Lo Porto, <http://www.pickwick.it>, 20 June 2001.

<sup>29</sup>Capriolo develops this theme later in the monologue ‘La bela madunina’, a play performed as part of the ‘Milan Marathon’ organised by the Piccolo Teatro, in 2000. She traces the passing of time through the nostalgic monologue of an elderly former actress whose one moment of glory was her appearance at the end of a popular show, in which her body was on display (and few acting skills) as ‘la bela Madunina’: ‘sulla scena io sfolgoravo, mandavo luce. Non è poi così difficile a vent’anni, direte voi, eppure sotto questo aspetto nessun’altra poteva starmi alla pari, era il mio speciale talento, la mia dote ineguagliabile. Una gran voce non l’avevo di certo, non ero una gran ballerina, anche se naturalmente me la cavavo sia nel canto che nella danza, ma nel risplendere ero davvero senza rivali. Stavo là in cima, sapete, con la mia veste d’oro, e tutte le sere immancabilmente veniva giù il teatro.’ Her career has gone downhill since the end of the show which in a telling simile she describes as follows: ‘sembrava che agli

flattering, no doubt lies behind her later rivalry with the woman in the mirror. Her inability to help Eulalia emphasizes a system of gender in which women are expected to adapt to a tradition established by men, not women. The bond of master-pupil, which dominates Capriolo's fiction, is a missing link here – the narrator spies on the girl but is unable to help her. Within the patriarchy men can guide men and women but women must remain on the sidelines watching as their 'daughters' are colonized. By choosing to make her narrator female Capriolo gives a sympathetic voice to the tale, through which the narrator feels for the girl. Her own failure to draw conclusions about Eulalia's tale and her failure to condemn the ideal figures who bewitch Eulalia encourages the reader to probe the parallels between them, to see Eulalia's attempt to step outside the norms of femininity as a parody of them.

Another subject on which this narrator remains strangely reticent is the shadowy figure of the musician. She regards his interest in Eulalia as kind and compassionate. However, it is he who procures the caravan, a strange smile playing around his lips. Whilst he presents it proudly, the narrator thinks she may have felt uneasy about its opulence then. The six black horses pulling the cart imply a funereal function. The idea that the musician may have undertaken some Faustian pact is implied by the narrator's initial suspicions that the princely figure is a demon. The musician's link to the transformation of Eulalia is reinforced by his music - her only contact with the outside world when she is in her caravan with the window open, although this eventually closes forever. It is with him that she practices her singing and it is he, at the end, who tells the narrator that she is inside the caravan as he calmly plays his flute. What part he has to play in Eulalia's story is never clear, but he does belong to that ambiguous fantastic force exercised on the girl, his gender increasing its potency as a symbol of patriarchal social conditioning.

I suggested in the introduction that textual influence is an important factor in making 'La grande Eulalia' an example of a female fantastic. The *difference* of female experience, which dominates this text, emerges more clearly when we regard it as establishing a line of descent between Capriolo and a female predecessor. Much has been made of Capriolo's passion for a mainly male-authored canon of texts, with good

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occhi del pubblico lo spettacolo fosse invecchiato di colpo, come certe donne sfortunate il cui fascino svanisce dall'oggi al domani, persino l'apparizione della bela madunina non suscitava più lo stesso entusiasmo, e avevo già perso di vista anche l'ultimo dei miei commendatori.' (<http://www.trax.it/olivieropdp/maratona/Capriolo.htm>, p.3)

reason, but very little has been made of one of the few female influences she has declared: Elsa Morante.<sup>30</sup> She expresses a distinct preference for the first two works of this author, *L'isola di Arturo* (1957) and *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948). With the first novel 'La grande Eulalia' shares the disappointments of the ideal loves of childhood, but unlike its hero Arturo, whom the future promises liberation from the island of illusion, Eulalia seems to share the fate of Elisa, the heroine of *Menzogna e sortilegio*, who withdraws into enclosure to live with the phantom illusions of her childhood. The choice of a female narrator, captivated less by male figures than that of a woman (in Elisa's case her mother) provides another parallel. The enchanted atmosphere of *Menzogna e sortilegio*, suspended as it is in a bygone era of magnificent carriages and sumptuous clothes of the rich, juxtaposed with a shabby poverty shares a great deal with the rags-to-riches motif of Capriolo's story. 'La grande Eulalia' bears the traces of one particular episode in this story which illuminates the way Capriolo's story builds on Morante's themes, developing the insights into gender of Morante's own work.<sup>31</sup>

A central episode in Morante's novel involves the narrator, Elisa's mother, Anna, and her beloved cousin, Eduardo. The love Anna feels for Eduardo is at this time reciprocated, if not equally, and the two lovers decide to exchange clothes, admiring the physical similarities arising from their blood ties. This game of illusion echoes Eulalia's attempts to mirror the appearance of the man in the mirror (he resembles Eduardo with his blonde curls, pallor and fine features). It also conveys some of the envy involved in the process of acquiring a gendered identity. Typically, assuming a gendered identity involves renouncing the qualities of the opposite gender, which the gendered subject then seeks to re-gain through a relationship with the Other. However, there is a gender difference in the way these suppressed qualities are sought.

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<sup>30</sup>See Paolo Di Stefano, 'Un maestro sotto processo: Italo Calvino'. In interview Capriolo says: 'Amo Calvino, ma amo anche Gadda e la Morante dei primi due libri', *Il corriere della sera*, 2 December 1995, p.31.

<sup>31</sup>Morante herself was notoriously ambiguous about women and feminism and Capriolo demonstrates extremely similar sentiments, both authors being willing to dismiss their own sex with a blanket statement, but disparaging of positive assessments of 'women' as a category. Literary criticism has highlighted the manner in which Morante's texts do foreground the differences of gendered experience which are rooted in the socialized theory of gender, despite her rejection of any 'isms'. See Sharon Wood 'The Deforming Mirror: Histories and Fictions in Elsa Morante' in *Italian Women Writing*, pp. 152-168. She writes that: 'Strict social divisions are echoed in an unquestioned hierarchy of the sexes. Edoardo's hold over Anna is rooted in an almost parodistic male supremacy [...] But this is not a novel of social manners, and cannot easily be co-opted by either the Socialist or the feminist camp.' (p. 157)

The male, in renouncing the feminine and the maternal, puts them onto a different scale of experience, as an object to be idealized or denigrated, but always objectified (often as an artwork). He moves into a position of power regarding the feminine, a position of domination. This is echoed in both stories. Although Eduardo begins by worshipping Anna, this love is a worship of the reflection of his own beauty and (as the scene of clothes exchange suggests) he eventually cruelly rejects her femininity. Her place within society, as a poor relation, exacerbates her objectified position as a female, which deprives her of any agency with which to act.

The female reaction to exclusion from masculinity is not to objectify the male, but to subscribe to male designs in order to gain recognition from the male:

Une femme qui aime et qui est aimée se précipite avec passion sur cet autre soi-même qu'on lui propose. Obstinément attachée à poursuivre cette ombre - qui comprend quelques variantes imitatrices de liberté - elle élimine ce qui, en elle-même, pourrait lui être étranger. Habitée à limiter, à rogner ses propres manifestations, elle va maintenant découper sa silhouette sur un patron.<sup>32</sup>

The disappointment of this lack of recognition from the male, the recognition Anna craves and finally invents, Eulalia eventually achieves, only to find that she has also constructed an Other who does not exist. This ending is often read as an expression of the universal disappointment of the subject that invests its meaning in the Other. However, Capriolo's stories illuminate the difference between the male and the female experience, in that for Eulalia and Anna the subjection of the self to the desires imagined to be those of the Other are total and self-annihilating.

This difference is reinforced by the following story of Capriolo's collection, 'La donna di pietra'. This tale is one of a young artist, Mur, engaged in a mission to achieve perfection in his creation of sculptures in an underworld for the dead. Leaving his master temporarily to carry out an errand in town Mur spies the arm of a real woman closing a shutter and falls under the spell of an idealized femininity. Abandoning his master and the underworld he dedicates himself to a sculpture of the woman in front of her house, which she acknowledges with flowers laid on her own altar. The virtual relationship appears to be developing well until he sculpts himself next to the woman hand in hand only to find that that same night she violently severs the bond physically and metaphorically by smashing their joined hands. The hero

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<sup>32</sup>Claudine Herrmann, *Les voleuses de langue* (Artigues-près-Bordeaux: des femmes du M.L. éditent, 1976), pp.93-4.

returns to his cavern underground where he takes over his master's task of sculpting in marble a more perfect replica of the outside world for the dead.

The violent disruption of the desired perfect union could be interpreted in several ways. It could be a statement of the woman's refusal to be objectified, in which her body as artwork is confused with and privileged over her real self – a common theme in the male-authored fantastic text.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps she has watched Mur with suspicion and intuited that she cannot live up to the image he has made of her: 'E la sua arte era lo specchio che raddrizzava le immagini, che le restituiva alla loro forma autentica.' (Ldp, p.47) In this line alone the difference between Mur and Eulalia is clarified: for Eulalia the body must attempt to mirror the ideal male, for Mur art must conquer and improve upon the female. In fact his idealized vision of her almost takes precedence over her own self: 'Nella mente di Mur la donna si confondeva sempre più con la sua immagine scolpita, faceva tutt'uno con essa e gli pareva che come questa anche l'altra fosse ormai cosa sua.' (Ldp, p.62)

Mur's attempts to carve his relationship in stone symbolize a masculine desire to gain re-admittance to the sphere of female mystery, whilst being in some way repelled by its subjectivity. This is viewed in predictable spatial metaphor:

Continuando a scolpire la figura avrebbe forse ottenuto altri premi, altri compensi. Le gelosie si sarebbero nuovamente dischiuse, e forse un giorno anche la porta. Ripensò alla scala ripida, agli stretti gradini che conducevano nel buio, e immaginò che lassù, in quell'oscurità lo attendesse una gioia indicibile. (Ldp, p.54)

Apart from the one gesture of rebellion, which is quite in keeping with the capricious behaviour of a *femme fatale* anyway, the story is peculiarly one-sided. The reader is regaled with the typical characteristics of the *femme fatale* of male fantasy: dark, impenetrable eyes holding a steady gaze, red lips, dark shiny hair, pure white skin, clothed in a veil and silent as the tomb. Above all, she is never seen outside that site of domesticity that is so easily confused in Mur's mind with her body itself. Capriolo's tale seems to endorse unquestioningly the inevitability of 'the oedipal experience of

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Camillo Boito, 'Un corpo' in *Racconti neri della scapigliatura* ed. by Gilberto Finzi (Milano: Mondadori, 1980), pp.36-69. Here the painter-narrator explains: 'Carlotta m'innamorava anche più nel mio quadro che in sé stessa: la mia vanità m'aveva tanto ubriacato che in qualche istante quella donna mi sembrava la copia viva dell'opera delle mie mani' pp.47-8. In fact he only realises the error of his ways when he sees Carlotta's corpse on the table of an anatomist, making his own deadening designs on her body a reality. This enactment of the deadening male gaze on the female body

losing the inner continuity with women and encountering instead the idealised, acutely desirable object outside' from which 'the image of woman as the dangerous, regressive siren is born.'<sup>34</sup>

Capriolo underlines the futility of relying upon art to resolve such tensions of gender, but the conclusion precludes the potential for a fantastic which could point beyond the enclosure of man and woman in a gendered binary. The cognitive truncation of Eulalia's mysterious withdrawal has been lost. By using the fantastic uncritically to reinforce the shadowy nature of the female figure as unfathomable *femme fatale* and showing the perspective of the male's retreat to the sacred world of art, Capriolo universalizes the male experience of disillusionment with the Other, which takes refuge in the isolation of art. Nonetheless a juxtaposition of the two stories shows that if Mur must retreat sadly to the underworld of artistic creation, Eulalia's only form of artistic expression, her body, becomes in isolation meaningless.<sup>35</sup>

In 'La grande Eulalia' the relationship between women and space shifts the impetus of the male-authored fantastic considerably. The female narrator who tells the story of 'La grande Eulalia' points towards a reading of Capriolo which establishes a line of female artistic descent, particularly through the textual traces of her literary foremother, Elsa Morante. The emphasis on the bewitched and bewitching mirror and the choice of the singer as performer, focuses our attention on the limitations of the female body in particular as a set of pre-established codes from which death or enclosure is the only escape. This form of staged suicide is, however, a strategy that Bronfen defines as potentially positive.<sup>36</sup> The suicide at the end of this short story is particularly significant because it is a physical withdrawal from the public eye: an active desire to become truly unrepresentable and thus maintain some autonomy.

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is also evident in the short story by Roberto Bracco, entitled 'Il braccio troncato' (1920) in Ghidetti and Lattarulo, in which a sculptor steals a woman's arm to pass it off as his own perfect sculpture.

<sup>34</sup>Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, p.163.

<sup>35</sup>After her failed performance, the narrator tries to help Eulalia: 'Lei lasciava fare, inerte, quasi che il suo stesso corpo le fosse divenuto estraneo' (LgE, p.38).

<sup>36</sup>'The choice of death emerges as a feminine strategy within which writing with the body is a way of getting rid of the oppression connected with the female body. Staging disembodiment as a form of escaping personal and social complaints serves to criticize those cultural attitudes that reduce the feminine body to the position of dependency and passivity, to the vulnerable object of sexual incursions. Feminine suicide can serve as a trope, self-defeating as it seems, for a feminine writing strategy within the constraints of patriarchal culture.'(p.142)

## ‘Il gigante’

As Eulalia’s case illustrates it is not always necessary to think of the female enclosure in solely domestic terms, but this is the dominant motif. Graziella Parati has coined the useful term *matroneum* in order to describe a series of distinct places carved out for women, within both domestic, private and public spheres.<sup>37</sup> As she makes clear it has never been women’s by choice so much as forced upon them. She does point out that at times this distance from the male world ‘in the *matroneum* of the private sphere [...] can transform itself in to a marginal kind of independence.’<sup>38</sup> This ‘marginal independence’ can also involve a rejection of the limited powers allowed within the *matroneum*. In ‘Il gigante’, that Adele’s only power is over furniture arrangements underlines the restriction of her world. Her rejection of confinement to the domestic side of the prison (she is must stay in one half whilst her husband may go between the two) becomes evident when she refuses to issue orders to the domestic servant, responding instead to the overtures of a prisoner from the other side. The ‘marginal independence’ that her piano playing allows her eventually provides the means of transgressing the boundaries of her allocated space, but her new space also proves to be another form of limitation, still part of the *matroneum*.

In ‘Il gigante’ Capriolo depicts the imprisoning space of the *matroneum* with another powerful spatial concept. The narrator, a government official, who tells this tale in his diary, takes his wife and young son to his new posting. This is a prison in the middle of a deserted heath, far from civilization, built especially for a single male prisoner, whose crimes against humanity are too terrible to articulate or even, it appears, to remember. The prison building’s only windows face inwards onto a courtyard. One wing with frosted glass windows, in which only the lunettes can be opened, houses the prisoner who is enclosed in a sealed apartment with a vent in the door for food, approached through a series of locked chambers. The opposite wing is

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<sup>37</sup>Graziella Parati, *Public History: Private Stories - Italian Women’s Autobiographies*, (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). She writes that the ‘*matroneum*, that “sphere within a sphere” is a term which allows me to ignore the physical boundaries of the “home” in order to privilege the investigation of the limiting discourses of female spaces and feminine roles. This *matroneum* can also be visualized by imagining it mirrored in architectural spaces in churches, usually located above the lateral aisles, called “women’s galleries”, places where women were kept separate from men but were still the object of male gazes and supervision. (In this discussion on spaces, I borrow and adapt the term *matroneum* because it allows me to talk about the private as a space at the same time connected to and separated from the public sphere).’ (p. 7)

the home of the new governor's family who can see the prisoner's quarters from each window, but cannot look to the outside world.

Like many institutions, the place seems to exercise a spell on some of those who reside there, providing insulation from the demands of social existence with its absolute regularity and isolation. The phrase: 'C'è ancora un mondo là fuori?' - the prisoner's reply to the new governor's note of introduction - becomes a refrain of the story. Like the prisoner, the governor too will come to doubt the existence of the outside world, and their common doubt is echoed in the story of Gaspere, the soldier struck with horror when told of his move to a new posting who eventually attempts to return to the prison. The three men seem to find satisfaction in a place that can be totally contained by thought, in which their own mental omnipotence reigns supreme. All three experience difficulty in their relations with women, perhaps because of their unreal expectations of them, and find shelter from inevitable disappointments in the walls of the prison. This sets them apart from the other person who shows an even more passionate attachment to the prison - the governor's wife. If the three men find in the prison a reflection of their existential loneliness, for Adele it becomes the 'bewitching mirror' of another kind of prison she has not chosen: domesticity.

The spatial symmetry of the building's wings seems to show that her space as the young wife of a successful government official and as a mother is as suffocating as that of the prisoner himself, which even her husband recognises: 'Stamane, attraversando il cortile, ho guardato le finestre dei due quartieri e non ho potuto fare a meno di pensare a mia moglie come alla seconda prigioniera di questo carcere.' (Ig, p.73) However the symmetry is deceptive. Adele's case is even worse than the prisoner's. The building, constructed for a man, by men and run by men, typifies that female relationship to architectural space described by Herrmann:

Notre monde est ainsi hérissé d'un ensemble phallique de constructions bizarres [...], toutes sont issues de l'esprit masculin, comment s'étonner que les femmes enfermées dans ces demeures qui ne sont conçues ni par elles ni pour elles, vivent des vies d'étrangères, confinées dans les ghettos de l'esprit, n'osant pas s'exprimer selon leurs propres concepts et obligées de nourrir tous leurs élans créateurs d'un aliment préfabriqué qui n'est pas fait pour elles?<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Parati, *ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>39</sup> Claudine Herrmann, p.64.

In fact Adele finds herself occupying a space made for a man, her husband, and a woman made in his image, and in her attempts to evade that space, it seems that there is no other space for her alone to occupy. Eugenio attempts to deal with his incipient awareness of this absurdity by attributing the qualities of a domestic goddess to Adele, trying to make the domestic space appear her natural habitat:

La seguì mentre passava in rassegna le stanze. A me parevano perfettamente identiche, ma Adele, basandosi forse su segni reconditi che a lei sola era dato ravvisare, stabiliva con assoluta sicurezza quale sarebbe stata il mio studio, quale la camera da letto [...] e quel luogo spoglio ed estraneo si mutava a poco a poco nel più accogliente dei paesaggi domestici.' (Ig, p.67)

However much the domestic space may carry overtones of Eden and the safety of childhood, this essentially nostalgic vision is surely based upon the premise of expulsion and is, therefore, a male sensation. The literalization of Adele's home as prison reflects Armitt's observation that:

there is some sort of contradiction between the lived experience of many women and the particular physical patterns that our built surroundings make. For instance, a chain of symbolic associations, "private, home, warmth, stability, comfort", are literally built into a physical setting [...] in a way that does not accurately describe the realities for women.'<sup>40</sup>

One way of explaining this is to return to Parati's theory of the *matroneum* according to which there are divisions *within* the domestic for men and women, therefore different perceptions of that experience.

This distinction can be related to the fear of the domestic space as being synonymous with a return to the myth of the omnipotent mother, an entropic pull which must be resisted. Men can and do build up a productive world of binaries around this fear, past and present, home and work, mother and wife, perhaps even wife and lover. By contrast the domestic space (which we must read as the dominant area of the *matroneum*) is continually threatening to the woman as an exterior threat - of non-differentiation from the mother. It is the containment perceived by her and others as the inevitable result of her own biology. Thus while Freud's suggestion that the domestic space's potential to become uncanny implies a far deeper anxiety about unfamiliarity with ourselves, the causes of this unfamiliarity and the ways open to deal

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<sup>40</sup>Lucie Armitt, *Pushing Back the Limits*, p.9.

with it may differ radically between the sexes.<sup>41</sup> Women find themselves in a doubly ambiguous position in relation to enclosure - one which may threaten them with entropy and simultaneously a danger for others for which they themselves are responsible. She is encouraged to split herself off from her own body (and the mother's) in order to escape this threat and to identify with the male Symbolic, in order to remain a success within the *matroneum*. Since she is still defined by the female space however this is an effort always on the verge of failure in its excessive demands. In fact we will see that Adele turns upon her own body in turning against the domestic space in which she is imprisoned.

As Adele drifts further and further away from civilization her supposedly innate domestic abilities drop from her as effortlessly as the shawl Eugenio puts round her shoulders at the piano. The niceties of this former 'civilization' reveal themselves to be empty rituals. The construct of loving wife and motherhood also crumbles, as she begins to neglect her husband and son. Eugenio soon notes in some awe, 'Si va via via liberando degli aspetti esteriori e contingenti, per rivelare il nucleo autentico della sua personalità.' (Ig, p.87) However as this first husk of social imprisonment is cast aside and Adele becomes absorbed in her passion for music the domestic space, the interior, is not subverted and tapped as a source of female creativity. This makes us question how accessible that 'authentic nucleus' of the female subject really is.

As summer approaches and the windows are left open into the evening the shadow seen on the windows in front of their wing, which the child, Ottaviano, had been convinced was a giant with a monkey on his shoulders, reveals itself to be that of the prisoner playing a violin, as the narrator had suspected. Adele listens enchanted to his expert playing drifting across the courtyard and eventually shifts her own taste for artless, light pieces of the after-dinner entertainment variety to darker and more passionate sonatas, entering through her piano playing into a dialogue with the man she clearly identifies with as a fellow prisoner. However this evolution of her domestic imprisonment is equally limiting. Previously shadowing male social desire with her presence and actions as wife and mother, she now provides a mirror surface

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<sup>41</sup> Monica Farnetti writes in *Anna Maria Ortese* that 'Incontrando così lo "straniero" o l'"altro" nel focus semantico dell'intimità domestica, della "casa", nel cuore stesso del "proprio", Freud comincia ad accorciare sensibilmente quella distanza fra i grandi generi platonici del Medesimo e dell'Altro postulata come irriducibile (cfr. Ricouer, 1993), e viene a dirci infine che ciò che ci turba come altro è in realtà parte dello stesso, che lo straniero, cosa o persona, è dentro di noi.' (pp.55-6)

for a male desire to weave metaphysical meaning out of his own existence, as ever through the actions of her body rather than her mind.

The subtle ramifications of women's difference in relation to the positions of both physical and textual interior/exterior most often articulate themselves around this obvious site of her difference: the body. Since the primary signifier of that difference is the biological function, perception of the female body rotates around the process of forming, nurturing and giving birth, expelling and separating. Just as the creative element of this function has been played down - patriarchal thought long overwrote that biologically creative role with a 'fantastic' account of impregnation in which the woman acted merely as an incubator for man's seed - so too has woman's purchase on the artistic realm. Sergio Sacchi describes a common nineteenth century theory which proposed that the first man to sleep with a woman passed on to her all his ideas, personality and tastes.<sup>42</sup>

Eugenio makes much of the language of music unifying the two characters in a fantastic dialogue without words. To return to Lucy Green's study of the gendering of musical performance she suggests that the female instrumentalist can constitute a greater disruption to patriarchally defined notions of femininity:

The necessity to control an instrument on the part of the woman player detracts from the affirmation of the association between woman and nature, for the woman player is clearly capable of at least attempting to control an alienated man-made object. [...] The display she enacts, rather than that of a playful or alluring singing bird is that of a more controlled and rational being.

Nonetheless Green suggests that this is not always the case, in fact why else would women have been allowed to play instruments? Indeed, the example she cites of the least disruptive of female instrumentalists almost describes Adele's situation exactly: 'in an early nineteenth century domestic setting, from the perspective of most

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<sup>42</sup>Sergio Sacchi, *Al di là della lettera: femminile fantastico esotico da Carmen allo "Horla" e al buon selvaggio* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1994), p.122. It is worth looking at the way this manifests itself musically in a novel Capriolo later translates, *Elective Affinities*, in the love of Ottilie (whose character will be more thoroughly analysed in the following section) for her benefactress' husband Edward. When she first accompanies him on the piano: 'The others listened, and were sufficiently surprised to hear how perfectly Ottilie had taught herself the piece - but far more surprised were they at the way in which she contrived to adapt herself to Edward's style of playing. Adapt herself is not the right expression [...] She had so completely made his defects her own, that a kind of living whole resulted from it which did not move indeed according to exact rule, but the effect of which was in the highest degree pleasant and

observers, a woman pianist would give rise to display-delineations just as affirmative [of a patriarchal model of femininity] as those of a woman singer.<sup>43</sup> In fact the dialogue which develops between Adele and the prisoner is the archetypal master-pupil relationship between man and woman, in which the man must always lead the way, imposing his desire upon his pupil. The mental and physical exhaustion and the chill autumn air to which the prisoner's demanding playing subjects his pupil eventually kills her. Without her, he too is destined to die a few days later, after a flowering of memories and hopes of union with an 'other half', revealed to us in the following short story 'Lettere a Luisa' - a journal of his side of the same story.

This follow-up story reinforces the notion that the tale is about male domination, making Adele's death appear the prisoner's last and most accomplished crime, whilst revealing his own motives for violent domination to be based on his sense of loneliness as a subject, unable to make contact with any Other, without hope in a redemptive God: 'Ti prego, dimmi qualcosa con quella tua voce liquida, una frase d'amore sui tuoi tasti bianchi e neri. Voglio continuare a specchiarmi in te.' (LL, p.123) 'Lettere a Luisa' underlines the male perspective of 'Il gigante'. The prisoner and prison governor have more in common than they might have expected, harking back to the fantastic theme of the double as an expression of male schizophrenia. Both cast the figure of Adele as representative of their own lack, making the husband an unwitting accomplice of the criminal. The prisoner sees her as his 'angel' whose innocent and naivety offers a complementary face to his own abyss of cynicism and evil, entwining in the perfection of the sonata form they perform together. For Eugenio, the figure of dutiful wife and mother is replaced with another fantasy figure, the female medium. He reads his wife at the piano as the female priestess of some arcane religion, embodying the irrationality which his own rational self has had to reject in order to conform with gender construction: 'guardando Adele che suona provo un sentimento di venerazione, come un profano dinanzi a una sacerdotessa' (Ig, p.90).<sup>44</sup> Again the issue of female performance is raised by this angle, the female body is used as a mere *vehicle* of meaning, as his own words reflect:

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delightful.' Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. by James Anthony Froude and R. Dillon Boylan (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1962), chapter 8, pp.60-61.

<sup>43</sup> Green, pp.52-54.

<sup>44</sup> Paola Capriolo expresses her own sense of nostalgia for this view of her sex: 'In fondo sarebbe bello se i misogini, nella loro involontaria esaltazione della donna avessero ragione, e noi esseri umani di

Adele, quando siede al pianoforte, non s'interroga certo sull'essenza della musica: ella stessa la incarna, tale essenza, nell'istante in cui poggia le dita sullo strumento, e credo che allora la sua mente si vuoti di ogni pensiero, che tutto ciò che la circonda sprofondi nell'oblio e nell'indifferenza. (Ig, p.93)

That the narrator should envisage this idea of possession in sexual terms as well is no surprise. His wife's cousin, Teresa, has interpreted his wife's changed mood as a sign that she is pregnant. Pregnant with meaning for the narrator and the prisoner certainly, but little else. Eugenio later dreams that the same Teresa leads him into a room where it seems that Adele has given birth to a violin. This dream suggests that he watches the prisoner's penetration of his wife's psyche with a voyeuristic satisfaction to compensate for the dearth of passion implied her relationship with him. His mystification of the music and what is going on is in part a result of his own love of the enclosure in which they find themselves, but more importantly a fascination with the *femme fatale* that he and the prisoner have made of his wife. The governor-narrator looks on in confusion however and he tries to 'read' his wife according to pre-established gender patterns as priestess or mother. His dream of her giving birth to a violin suggests the difficulty artistic women have of escaping associations with any artistic apprenticeship as a form of impregnation. This notion of the body as *the* female text is reinforced by Gubar's suggestion that the body and the female mode of expression within patriarchal society become conflated: 'unable to obtain the space or income to become sculptors, gifted women in these areas have had to work in private, using the only materials at hand - their bodies.[...] The woman who cannot become an artist can nevertheless turn herself into an artistic object.'<sup>45</sup>

It is in this story that Capriolo's use of space becomes associated with a gendered pattern which is to dominate her later fiction, and which links her use of the fantastic very closely to a male-authored model. She chooses to juxtapose a *femme fatale* figure and/or a fantastic female who appears to transcend the earthly and represent a metaphysical yearning for a 'world beyond' this one with a woman of the 'outside world'. In 'Il gigante' this woman is Teresa, a 'donna mondana', garrulous,

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Sesso femminile fossimo davvero quelle terribili sacerdotesse della vita che non pensano semplicemente perché non hanno bisogno di pensare, perché a loro tutto è già rivelato in anticipo grazie alla complicità della natura, non per niente femmina anch'essa e madre' in 'Misoginia, involontaria omaggio al sesso femminile', *Il corriere della sera*, 10 November 1991.

<sup>45</sup> Susan Gubar, ' "The Blank Page" and the Issues of Female Creativity' in *New Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 292-313 (pp.296-7).

empty-headed and trivial. Adele's rejection of her former companion pleases the disapproving narrator, confirming our suspicion that he is only too willing to give his wife an 'other worldly' status. This splitting of Capriolo's female characters echoes the observed male tendency at once to denigrate and idealize femininity and is the consequence of a close identification with the male viewpoint. The pairing of stereotypes replicates in secular terms the madonna/whore dichotomy so entrenched in the male vision of femininity. This specular arrangement is underlined by a spatial symmetry. The 'donna mondana' represents the outside world, a pale reflection of the intensity of interiorized desire, and the 'femme fatale' becomes associated with the dark spaces of the interior, which masquerade as an expression of metaphysical yearning, whilst in fact embodying a barely concealed discomfort with physical desire.

In interview, asked to give advice to would-be writers, Capriolo stresses the need to identify with the writer, rather than the characters.<sup>46</sup> Since Morante is one of the few female authors ever mentioned by Capriolo it is probable that for the most part she is identifying with men. In fact, regardless of whether or not she wishes to become a writer, it has been suggested that it is usually by reading as a man that a woman *can* look into the distorting mirror of the male-authored fiction.<sup>47</sup> This reflects the predicament of both Eulalia and Adele, whose creativity is controlled by the male viewpoint, but whilst 'La grande Eulalia' gave us some room to question the totality of this viewpoint, in 'Il gigante' the male viewpoint is dominant.

Once again I believe the reason for this is rooted in the question of literary influence. One of Capriolo's most cited influences is Thomas Mann and one does not have to look far to find his influence in this text. In his novella of 1903, *Tristan*, Mann explores the clash between the myths of Wagnerian romanticism, nostalgic aesthetic intellectualism and the new business ethos, highlighting the dangers of indulging exclusively in one or the other and illustrating the difficulties in synthesizing the opposing impulses of 'Geist' and 'Leben'. He does this through the clash between the

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<sup>46</sup> 'Più che con i personaggi bisognerebbe cercare di identificarsi con l'autore' in Giuseppe Granieri, 'Giovani scrittori raccontano. Intervista a Paola Capriolo', *Bookcafe: virtual editions*, <http://www.bookcafe.net/teoria/capriolo.htm>.

<sup>47</sup> Carol Lazzaro-Weis observes that 'to learn culture from an anthropomorphic point of view does not, as Judith Fetterly has pointed out, increase women's power, but rather doubles her oppression. She suffers: "not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified and legitimized in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male - to be universal ... is to be not female."' (Judith Fetterly cit. by Lazzaro-Weis, p.106)

robust businessman, Klöterjahn, and the emaciated aesthete, Detlev Spinell, who meet in the sanatorium where Klöterjahn has taken his delicate wife, Gabriele. This wife bears more than a passing resemblance to Adele with her pallour and her ability to play the piano. She has been recommended not to do so to preserve her health, but egged on by fellow Wagnerian Spinell she plays the 'Sehnsuchtsmotiv' and the 'Liebestod' from *Tristan und Isolde*, famously verbalized in Mann's prose, only to die shortly after. It is irony which provides the melodramatic material with its tension as Mann mocks Wagnerian excess whilst paying homage to a composer he revered. He satirizes the philistine ebullience of the businessman, only to show that it is his blood that will triumph. It seems that the only stereotype preserved untouched is the pale and passionate pianist, Gabriele, destined for another world. This is necessary to the economy of Mann's balancing act - to preserve some sublime Wagnerian mystery.<sup>48</sup>

Capriolo re-elaborates this triangle considerably, shifting the balance away from the ironic social commentary towards the metaphysical, juxtaposing passion and rationality on more abstract planes. Her own work shows a distinct preference for the Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian inheritance of Mann's early work, elevating the supremacy of music and promoting a 'sympathy with death' which Mann himself moved away from in later work.<sup>49</sup> In her admiration for the German Romantic aspect of Mann's work Capriolo preserves the objectification of the female body, keeping it locked in the deadly enclosure of the sanatorium. By identifying with the author, Capriolo inherits a blindspot that sits uncomfortably with her otherwise sensitive perception of the relation between gender and space.

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<sup>48</sup> Doris Runge has recently pointed out in *Welch ein Weib! Mädchen und Frauengestalten bei Thomas Mann* (What a Woman!: Figures of Girls and Women in Thomas Mann's Work) (Stuttgart: Deutsche-Verlags-Anstalt, 1998) that the 'death-bringing' *femme fatale* recurs frequently in his early work, the period just proceeding *Tristan* (and often in a musical connection, see *The Little Herr Friedemann*). Although it is Gabriele who dies here, her connection with death through music underlines the function Lucy Green suggests women and music share: 'a dangerous and marginalised existence on the outskirts of Man's world-sense. Both perfections carry with them a *volte-face* with which women and music are definitively marked: of licentiousness, error, decadence and temptation.' (p.2) Capriolo's re-write of *Tristan* seems to bear the mark of Mann's earlier work, when he was more firmly under the influence of Schopenhauerian thought (not known for its high regard for women).

<sup>49</sup> See Paolo Isotta, *Il ventriloquo di Dio, Thomas Mann: la musica nell'opera letteraria* (Rizzoli: Milano, 1983). In interview Capriolo speaks of the impact this book had upon her own interpretation of Mann. Stressing the influence of Schopenhauer on the younger Mann Isotta states that for the philosopher: 'Solo attraverso il linguaggio della musica il mistero dell'universo può comunicarsi', p.27. This same sentiment is expressed by the narrator of 'Il gigante': 'se l'essenza del mondo ha una lingua, essa non è fatta di parole, ma di silenzio e di note.' (Ig, p.90) Isotta explains that the later Mann (*The Magic Mountain*, 1923) is at pains to stress the pernicious influence of German Romantic music,

One might argue that whilst the enclosure of Adele is realised on the architectural and corporeal level, as for Eulalia, the freedom of her mind is left in doubt. However here Capriolo's fantastic space provides no hermetically sealed magic caravan to suggest this. Capriolo's shift to a male perspective in this short story interacts with her use of the fantastic space of the prison, in which demonic powers seize Adele, to elevate the heroine to the mindless position of mediating goddess, leaving her no interior space. It is this false aura of feminine mystique that colours our final vision of her. Whilst Eugenio may see Adele's corpse as a symbol of existential solitude, for the reader Adele in death remains a sadly empty character, bereft of all the meanings attributed to her, not so much a cognitive block as a dead end.

It is very important that Capriolo's first female artists perform musically, mediating the languages of others to which they eventually succumb or elude. For Monica Lanfranco, a distinguishing feature of the female fantastic is its ability to 'dare voce, con l'uso di metafore, a quanto di atemporale e senza spazio esiste all'interno del limitato scafo che è il corpo che ci appartiene.'<sup>50</sup> The imprisonment Capriolo's characters feel in their own bodies mirrors an unacknowledged introjective anxiety about the particular danger for women of a male literary language which makes the female gendered body the limit of the female-authored text. The lure of music is as a language that might also lead female characters beyond. Eulalia also speaks through her silences, suggesting the determined search for a form of self-expression beyond the limits imposed. Music becomes one of those metaphors Lanfranco is talking about, but if its condition is the performing female body, it is a treacherous fantastic metaphor, as in Adele's case, keeping the female subject lingering on the threshold of the labyrinthine male text.

All the stories in Capriolo's debut collection demonstrate a troubling awareness of the different limitations of gender. They have been read however, in 'post-feminist' fashion, as showing this gender trouble to be a single universal experience. Whilst it is universal, it is clearly not the same. This first text by Capriolo shows clearly how difficult it is to articulate the difference of female experience within the fantastic without resorting to images typical of a male-authored perspective.

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associating it with his own previous sympathy for fascism and an elevation of life over death, pp.119-139.

<sup>50</sup>Monica Lanfranco in the introduction to *Dimensione cosmica* (dedicated to female writers of fantasy) 11 (1987).

*La grande Eulalia* puts a cognitive stop with its fantastic doubt as to what has really happened to the protagonist, opening up an interior female space within the caravan and curtailing public display of her body. Adele also withdraws her body from manipulation as an artistic and sexual object. However as the perspective shifts in the remaining three stories from a female viewpoint to a male viewpoint the possibility of representing the difference of woman recedes. From the male perspective she becomes what must be contained within art, but exceeds its grasp and becomes threatening.

This shift in perspective leads to a reduction in the originality of Capriolo's work, by bringing it too close to an imitation of modernist male anxiety about the mystery of woman. Just as the narrator of *La grande Eulalia* is unable to help or explain the power which takes hold of Eulalia as she 'becomes a woman', Morante's more perturbing analysis of gender is not well-established enough to maintain a clear solo voice in a choir of male voices. As we will see in the later text *Il doppio regno* the voluntary withdrawal into an enigmatic closure can become a form of surrender to the male-authored text.

## ii. The female paradox of 'il falso originale': *Il doppio regno*

'Lo sforzo continuo di non ripetere quanto altri hanno già detto è un' idiosincrasia della cultura moderna' - Paola Capriolo<sup>51</sup>

With hindsight it is evident that Capriolo's earliest work points towards a crisis in the definition of a space of female authorship, articulated through the fantastic treatment of both physical and cultural space. Her second work, *Il nocchiero*,<sup>52</sup> continues the disappointing theme of 'La donna di pietra' in its male protagonist's desire to discover truth through his relationship with a woman, split as in 'Il gigante' between 'donna mondana' and *femme fatale*. This first novel elicited reviews with an emphasis on its intertextual nature, as usual paying little attention to gender. It was her third work, *Il doppio regno*, which returned to the theme of the female subject. Criticisms of it fall into two groups: the idea that it is simply 'un testo sui testi',<sup>53</sup> symptomatic of a general trend towards 'la serializzazione della letteratura, anche di quella colta',<sup>54</sup> and, in a couple of rare gender oriented considerations of the work, a text which represses the female body.<sup>55</sup> Positive receptions of the book are based upon assessments from the opposing pole of these same areas: that its intertextuality is used richly in a postmodern context and that it is a post-feminist text.<sup>56</sup> I will explore both sides of these arguments by highlighting the ways in which the themes of intertextuality and gender intertwine in the work giving another angle on its interpretation.

*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 having witnessed the approach of a

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<sup>51</sup> Paola Capriolo, 'Se il falso è originale', *Il corriere della sera*, 3 April 1991.

<sup>52</sup> *Il nocchiero* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1989)

<sup>53</sup> Adriana Cavarero in conversation at University of Warwick, November 1996.

<sup>54</sup> Roberto Cotroneo, 'Effetto Capriolo', *L'Espresso*, 21 April 1991, p.127.

<sup>55</sup> Sonia Basili writes that the protagonist of Capriolo's *Il doppio regno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1991) inspires in her: 'Fastidio per la mancanza di una benché minima forma di rapporto umano: fastidio per la totale esclusione dell'altro, tanto più che al mondo e agli uomini si rinuncia in maniera irreversibile; fastidio per la negazione della sua femminilità e fisicità' in 'Punti di confine e alibi di fuga nei personaggi di Paola Capriolo e Alessandro Baricco', *Narrativa: nuove tendenze della letteratura italiana*, 10 (1996), 185-206 (p.198). See also Gabriella Ziani's review 'Metamorfosi alberghiera' in *L'Indice*, 6 (1991): 'La negazione del mondo rifatta su modelli 'antichi', la discesa succube in un albergo-utero sono indicative di un'insofferenza stanca e rassegnata, e forse del rifiuto di una femminilità avvertita come colpa.' (p.14) The fact that only female critics even mention this element is significant.

<sup>56</sup> See Gillian Ania, 'At Capriolo's Hotel: Heaven, Hell and Other Worlds in *Il doppio regno*', *Italian Studies*, 14 (1999), 132-156: 'Capriolo appears to be looking back to a more traditional view of gender, or at least revealing the confusion in modern feminism and the gradual fusion of gender roles.' (p.155)

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 director cannot direct her to the exit, nor seems 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, as are the poems and quotes she claims to have written. 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, like the hotel itself, she feels a strange mixture of attraction and repulsion.

In the second half her passive 'decision' to 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 'albergo' and the lure of the outside world. Viewing himself as something of a Pygmalion figure, he attempts to prepare the narrator for her departure. However in their own way each guest undermines the attempt to persuade the narrator to leave: Bruno himself raises memories of gender conflict, Guido is more than sympathetic towards her desire for immutability and Laura attempts to reintroduce her to a horribly 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 realises that she has to follow them, only to conclude a few minutes later that for her there is no outside world into which to follow them. This conclusion is provoked by the appearance in the hotel garden of the cause of the mysterious rustling - a cat that up to that point she had remembered as belonging to her previous life.

From the very title - a quotation of Rilke<sup>57</sup> - the novel is replete with allusions to a canon of 'classical' literary and philosophical works, ranging from the similar detail or echoes in overall form to passages imitated, self-consciously acknowledged and unacknowledged. I will explore the various manifestations of intertextual reference, attempting to place their more complex emergence here into the context of the hypertextual forms of her earlier stories, making the link between the notion of a palimpsestic text, the ambiguity surrounding the representation of gender and the fantastic treatment of space in the novel. Clearly the originality of the text is at stake in both sides of the critical assessments mentioned earlier, but originality is a notion which Capriolo has confronted directly in another form of writing. In a 'terza pagina' comment she herself explains that the Borges character Pierre Menard<sup>58</sup> is able to reproduce word for word a chapter of *Don Quixote* and remain original, writing that:

È forse l'estrema conseguenza del soggettivismo implicito nelle categoria dell'originalità che essa non abbia più bisogno di riflettersi nel dato esteriore dell'opera, svelando così il suo carattere di condizione psicologica dell'individuo, di processo il cui valore può idealmente prescindere da qualsiasi risultato, poichè ha il suo luogo naturale non nelle cose, ma nell'anima.<sup>59</sup>

Genette writes of Borges that 'il a pu montrer sur l'exemple imaginaire de Pierre Ménard que la plus littérale des récritures est déjà una création par déplacement du context.'<sup>60</sup> What Genette's words add to Capriolo's sense of extreme subjectivity is a sense of a social/physical external impact. This additional 'personal' dimension,

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<sup>57</sup>The 'doppio regno' is a direct translation of Rilke's notion of the 'Doppelbereich' in the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. This will be discussed in ii.iv of this chapter.

<sup>58</sup>In the now legendary story of 'Pierre Menard' in J.L.Borges, *Fictions*, trans. by Anthony Bonner, (London: John Calder, 1985) the narrator tells us that Menard 'undertook a task that was complex in the extreme and futile from the outset. He dedicated his conscience and nightly studies to the repetition of a pre-existing book in a foreign tongue.' (p.50)

<sup>59</sup>'Se il falso è originale', *Il corriere della sera*, 3 April 1991.

<sup>60</sup>Gérard Genette, p.24.

whether regarded as social or subjective in origin - if the two can be separated - is evident in Capriolo's encounter with a traditionally male-dominated canon. Indeed it is her experience of culture *as a female* which makes this book a unique opportunity to understand how the late twentieth century *scrittrice* encounters what is still a predominantly male intellectual culture.<sup>61</sup> To take advantage of this I will principally draw upon the evidence of Capriolo's experience as a female which are evident in her text and relevant essay writing: as translator, as reader, as cultural critic<sup>62</sup> and as author.<sup>63</sup> This analysis will eventually lead to an understanding of the text as a form of particular form of cultural autobiography, which I will outline as a starting point and which is partly responsible for the fantastic treatment of spatiality. The argument will also highlight the ways in which this text is both self-reflexive and highly intertextual, looking in detail at the ways in which these forms of intertextuality impact upon gender representation, attempting to make out the faint lines on the map of the author's journeys between experience as reader and writer. Finally I will draw these discoveries together to give a new reading of the text in the light of feminist theory which shows its importance as a portrait of the tenuous position women occupy in the realm of 'pure thought' and its position in the author's artistic development.

## ii.i The fantasmatic autobiography

'Le sujet profond de l'autobiographie, c'est le nom propre [...] Imagine-t-on aujourd'hui la possibilité d'une littérature anonyme? Valéry y rêvait déjà il y a cinquante ans mais il ne semble pas qu'il ait lui-même songé à la pratiquer, puisqu'il a fini à l'Académie. Il s'est donné la gloire de rêver à l'anonymat.'<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Ziani is the one critic who observes both the intensely autobiographical nature of the novel (and our reading of it) 'Tuttavia ciò che di lei sappiamo (vita ritiratissima, letture forsennate, studi filosofici) si insinua fra le righe del romanzo ed entra a far parte della storia' and the denial of her female nature, but she fails, or more probably is unwilling, to explore the link between the two in any depth.

<sup>62</sup> I will draw upon her degree thesis: *L'assoluto artificiale. Nichilismo e mondo dell'espressione nell'opera saggistica di Gottfried Benn* (Milano: Bompiani, 1996) and her other cultural commentary and reviews, usually written for the 'terza pagina' of *Il corriere della sera*, over the course of the whole study.

<sup>63</sup> Keeping these boundaries distinct is neither possible nor desirable, since one major aim of this autobiographical reading will be to emphasize the overlap between them, culminating in a feminist reading of the novel. The boundaries, for example, between media persona and cultural commentator inevitably blur on occasions. I would cite Capriolo's understandable anger when one of her ironic comments on the length of Wagnerian operas is misconstrued as serious, as a fear that her persona of someone conversant in high culture, particularly German, could be damaged: 'Sì, sul Parsifal ho commesso un peccato imperdonabile: l'ironia', *Il corriere della sera*, 30 November 1991.

<sup>64</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), p.33.

The marked autobiographical content of *Il doppio regno*, evident from the first line of the novel: 'Credo di avere una trentina di anni' (dr, p.9), is admitted by the author herself and recognised by several critics.<sup>65</sup> The little memory which the narrator can still dredge up from her past suggests to her that she was once a writer, although a poet (dr, p.39). The tenuous links between past and present selves serve to underline the fictional nature of any autobiographical form, but this is even self-consciously acknowledged through the narratorial voice:

La mia grafia va modificandosi, va regredendo a una forma infantile, e i caratteri si sono fatti più grandi. Se ciò nonostante sarò in grado di riconoscerla, riterò probabilmente di aver tentato di narrare una vicenda romanzesca, la cui protagonista è un personaggio fittizio di nome "Io".  
(dr, p.43)

It is the same self-conscious narrator who later foregrounds the inevitable process of dislocation between experience and word when she writes: 'forse sarei più onesta se anziché con la prima indicassi sempre me stessa con la terza persona. "Io" che inizia questa frase sarà già "lei" alla fine di essa.' (dr, p.67). The author herself has described the novel as 'quello in cui mi riconosco di più come essere umano, in questa figura' and her statement that it constitutes 'l'unica volta in cui ho sentito, neanche ho sentito - ho *dovuto* usare come protagonista una donna, perché non sarebbe stato possibile per me fare diversamente è stato nel caso de *Il doppio regno*'<sup>66</sup> seems to point to reading this text above all others as a working out of her own experience of gender.

This pronounced autobiographical element of the book has also led to negative criticism: 'ci lascia spettatori di un'autoanalisi con poche sorprese, forse più appassionanti per chi le ascolta, proprio come quando si è resi partecipi di un sogno altrui.'<sup>67</sup> It is striking how perceptive this comment of Ziani's is in one way - Capriolo has emphasized the importance of dreams in her creative process and has said that this book 'è nato proprio da un incubo' - yet this alone does not seem to provide evidence of its tediousness. Maria Corti, in fact, suggests that Capriolo's ability to 'ben modellare la materia assillante e vertiginosa di cui sono fatti i sogni' makes her 'una

<sup>65</sup> In my interview (Milan, July, 1997) with her Capriolo comments that 'Il doppio regno è, in un senso simbolico, in un senso molto lato, il più autobiografico dei miei libri.'

<sup>66</sup> from my interview with Capriolo in Milan, July, 1997.

<sup>67</sup> Gabriella Ziani.

vera scrittrice'.<sup>68</sup> Shoshana 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.'<sup>69</sup> In this respect they may be helpful in overcoming that notorious difficulty for women of writing their own story.<sup>70</sup> Thus while Ziani complains of the predictability of the autobiographical content, we might consider on the contrary that *Il doppio regno* tells a story about this female writer which could not be told any other way.

Ziani is the one critic who observes both the intensely autobiographical nature of the novel (and our reading of it) 'Tuttavia ciò che di lei sappiamo (vita ritiratissima, letture forsennate, studi filosofici) si insinua fra le righe del romanzo ed entra a far parte della storia' and the denial of a female sexuality, but she fails, or more probably is unwilling, to explore the link between the interest in culture and the suppression of female sexuality to become a subject of that same culture. Whilst the causal link may appear obvious to the feminist critic, it is hardly one to which the Italian literary scene has been overexposed. Many critics overlook the dialectical relationship between the moulding of the raw material by the author and the inevitable traces of the unconscious still available to the reader, which gives the novel its force of tension as fiction.

Traditionally the conflicting status of autobiography as a sub-genre of fiction to which women are more 'susceptible' and a genre which is unavailable to them has lead them to some creative ways of integrating life into fiction. The writer Natalia Ginzburg's 'sacro orrore' of autobiography leads to the complex symphony of *Lessico familiare*, a story of her family's life which she enjoins the reader to read as fiction.<sup>71</sup> Recent analyses of women's autobiography in Italy argue that discomfort with the

<sup>68</sup> Maria Corti, 'Sogno dunque penso', *Panorama*, 28 April 1991, p.21.

<sup>69</sup> Shoshana Felman, p.122.

<sup>70</sup> See Felman: 'My argument is that *our own autobiography is not available to us*, not simply because we have no models and because, inhabiting male plots, we are enjoined not to transgress convention and to leave the realm of accomplishment to men (to live around a male center) but because we cannot simply *substitute ourselves as center* without regard to the decentering effect of language and the unconscious, without acute awareness of the fact that our own relation to a linguistic frame of reference is never self-transparent. We can neither simply write our stories nor decide to write "new" stories, because we do not know our stories, and because the decision to "rewrite" them is not simply external to the language that unwittingly writes us.' (p.156)

<sup>71</sup> It is persuasively described by Nicoletta Simborowski as a subtle game with the reader in 'Music and Memory in Natalia Ginzburg's *Lessico familiare*', *MLR*, 94:3 (1999), 680-90.

representation of the self such as that described by Felman is evaporating. For Graziella Parati this comes down to attempts to resolve the split between public and private spheres that move towards the creation of individual identities, of 'floating selves.'<sup>72</sup> Her conclusion that these women draw on both 'male' and 'female' spheres forms a helpful reference point throughout this analysis. One can see immediately that Capriolo's text raises the two main issues she identifies in these autobiographies: an intermediate space and the juxtaposition of male and female worlds. These are both given a new twist by the fact that what is created is not the positive kind of alternative Parati has discovered, but a phantom self in negative. The obvious point of difference between the two lies in the choice of fantastic fiction as the grounds for this exploration over a traditionally realist oriented autobiography. Contrasting Capriolo's uneasy resolution of the themes in fiction suggests that the new 'floating self' presented by some examples of female autobiography may not yet be accessible to all, particularly not the writer of fiction.

It seems important to establish therefore where we could locate this text in the theoretical quicksand which lies between the notions of fiction and autobiography and to what extent the fantastic bears upon this framework. If the narrator is aware of the fictitious nature of her own autobiography she reflects the contemporary erosion of belief in the possibility of an objective narration of the self.<sup>73</sup> In protest at this erosion of the demarcation between the genres of autobiography and novel Lejeune famously outlines the notion of the 'autobiographical pact'. His emphasis on the importance of the writer's declarations offer some interesting angles on our positioning of *Il doppio regno* in this debate. In fact they leave us in no doubt that Capriolo can and has

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<sup>72</sup>By reinterpreting history and inventing independent selves, Fausta Cialente, Rita Levi Montalcini, and Luisa Passerini succeed in displacing the privileged position of the public sphere within modernity. They create new definitions of female selves that are not trapped within a "space" in that sphere within a sphere, which I have named the *matroneum*. These women writers construct an intermediate space that partakes of both and becomes a new female realm created through a *métissage* of traces borrowed from the two oppositional, and traditional, "male" and "female" worlds. They also attempt to go beyond modernity by creating a fictional "floating" self, a hybrid creation that partakes of both paternal and maternal heritages in order to construct an alternative to oppositions.' (Graziella Parati, p.25) 'Foucault stresses that movement within modernity that brings the private into the public. In such a shift, the public realm is privileged as the dominant realm in the oppositional structure of the two spheres. This one-way movement described is problematized in many women's texts where they either perform the opposite operation or attempt to create alternative models that go beyond the stereotypes and, drawing from both, construct individual identities based on the opposite of separatism.' (pp. 5-6)

<sup>73</sup>I consider autobiography as fiction, as a narrative in which the author carefully selects and constructs the characters, events and aspects of the self that she or he wants to make public in order to convey a specific message about her or his past and present identity.' (Graziella Parati, p.4)

situated her novel in an autobiographical space, but for Lejeune this is something quite distinct from autobiography itself. He stresses the fact that a novel can usually only exploit this space when it follows other publications by the same author<sup>74</sup> and also highlights the fact that the reader somewhat perversely draws more concrete biographical conclusions about an author from an autobiographical novel than he/she might from a self-declared autobiography.<sup>75</sup> According to Lejeune's schema, the desire to trace Capriolo's self in the text stems from the 'novelistic pact'<sup>76</sup> lying on the first page of the text, which stimulates the detective in every reader confronted by a novel hinting at the possibility of autobiography.

From Lejeune's perspective claims that the novel is 'truer' than autobiography only really reveal that the authors of such claims attempt to site that fiction in the said autobiographical space, without leaving the sphere of fiction itself. The degree to which he believes the notion of a reader-determined truth dominates this autobiographical space becomes clear as he continues: 'le lecteur est invité à lire les romans non seulement comme des *fictions* renvoyant à une vérité de la 'nature humaine', mais aussi comme des *fantasmes* révélateurs d'un individu. J'appellerai cette forme indirecte du pacte autobiographique *le pacte fantasmatique*.'<sup>77</sup> Suggesting that the blurring of the boundaries between autobiography and fiction has stimulated new reading habits, he writes that 'les lecteurs ont pris le goût de deviner la présence de l'auteur (de son inconscient) même derrière des productions qui n'ont pas l'air autobiographiques, tant les pactes fantasmatiques ont créé de nouvelles habitudes de lecture.'<sup>78</sup> Perhaps those critics who make a fleeting reference to the autobiographical

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<sup>74</sup>Philippe Lejeune, 'Peut-être n'est-on véritablement auteur qu'à partir d'un second livre, quand le nom propre inscrit en couverture devient le 'facteur commun' d'au moins deux textes différents et donne donc l'idée d'une personne qui n'est pas réductible à aucun de ses textes en particulier, et qui, susceptible d'en produire d'autres, les dépasse tous. Ceci, nous le verrons, est très important pour la lecture des autobiographies: si l'autobiographie est un premier livre, son auteur est donc un inconnu, même s'il se raconte lui-même dans le livre: il lui manque, aux yeux du lecteur, ce signe de réalité qu'est la production antérieure d'autres textes (non autobiographiques), indispensable à ce que nous appellerons 'l'espace autobiographique.''(p.23)

<sup>75</sup>Lejeune, 'En face d'un récit d'aspect autobiographique, le lecteur a souvent tendance à se prendre par un limier, c'est-à-dire à chercher les ruptures du contrat (quel que soit le contrat). C'est de là qu'est né le mythe du roman «plus vrai» que l'autobiographie: on trouve toujours le plus vrai et plus profond ce qu'on a cru découvrir à travers le texte, malgré l'auteur.'(p.26)

<sup>76</sup>Lejeune writes 'Symétriquement au pacte autobiographique, on pourrait poser *le pacte romanesque*, qui aurait lui-même deux aspects: *pratique patente de la non-identité* (l'auteur et le personnage ne portent pas le même nom), *attestation de fictivité* (c'est en général le sous titre roman qui remplit aujourd'hui cette fonction.' (p.27)

<sup>77</sup>Lejeune, pp.41-42.

<sup>78</sup>Lejeune, p.45.

possibilities of the novel are attempting to avoid making a similar *faux pas*, or even *faux pacte*. Nonetheless, despite Lejeune's evident disdain, the fact that an author might manipulate such a pact seems a particularly persuasive idea within an area of fiction like the fantastic, which already incarnates the fictional premiss of shedding light on our empirical dimension through the shift to an imaginative one.

The deep ambiguity of *Il doppio regno* emerges when Lejeune, striving to re-establish the boundary lines between the two genres, posits the guarantee of the 'pure' autobiographical pact. It revolves around the notion of the explicit or implicit connection between the name of the author on the cover of the book and the protagonist-narrator. This is problematic for *Il doppio regno* because the narrating 'I' never really acquires a name, although she allows the visitors to call her 'Cara', leaving that possibility of explicit/implicit connection completely free-floating. Lejeune's tight schema attempts to contain this anomaly, by admitting that of all the possible combinations of the name of character and its link to the author the situation in which the character does not have a name is the most complex,

parce-qu'indeterminé. Tout dépend alors du pacte conclu par l'auteur. Trois cas sont possibles:

a) pacte romanesque - la nature de la 'fiction' du livre est indiquée sur la page de couverture. Le récit autodiégétique est alors attribuée à un narrateur fictif. Le cas doit être peu fréquent - *aucun exemple n'en vient tout de suite à l'esprit*.<sup>79</sup>  
(my italics)

*Il doppio regno* can only fit into this first category, but it is interesting that Lejeune cannot think of any examples of this kind of text, begging the question as to whether this rare kind of text could not indeed constitute the very bridge between the fictional and autobiographical which Lejeune is trying to detonate. Could it even be an opportunity for the *pacte fantasmatique* to continue to haunt us?

The German theorist, Mattias Hattemer, also strives to create a third category between Lejeune's either/or of the autobiography or autobiographical novel: that of the *fictitious autobiography*, thus making another argument for the positive potential of a fantasmatic autobiographical pact. This notion of the fictitious autobiography

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<sup>79</sup>Lejeune, pp.28-29. The other two cases are: 'b) pacte = 0: non seulement le personnage n'a pas de nom, mais l'auteur ne conclut aucun pacte - ni autobiographique, ni romanesque - indéterminée.  
c) pacte autobiographique - l'auteur s'est déclarée explicitement identique au narrateur (et donc au personnage, puisque le récit est autodiégétique), dans un pacte initial.'

seems to offer a way of understanding Capriolo's complex relationship to her narrator figure in *Il doppio regno*. Like Lejeune Hattemer recognizes the fundamental feature of traditional autobiography as the shared identity between author and narrator. In *fictitious autobiography*: 'in the reconstruction of his self the author represents himself through a narrator who bears a different name and has a completely different life story to that of his author.'<sup>80</sup> Again Capriolo's text does not quite conform here either, the narrator may have a completely different life story but the name is still a problem. The reason for this emerges with the possibility of a strand of female fictitious autobiography.

Hattemer's argument is suggestive: as he says, Lejeune's autobiographical category excludes too many books which, although intentionally autobiographies, are designated as fictions.<sup>81</sup> The crux of Hattemer's problem with Lejeune's theory however is that the strict categorization of pact robs the reader of power to decide for him/herself, regardless of what is proposed by the author on the title-page.<sup>82</sup> 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>83</sup> The second is that, rather than constituting an exploration of what the self *could become*- a

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<sup>80</sup>Mattias Hattemer, *Das Erdichtete Ich: Zur Gattungspoetik der fiktiven Autobiographie bei Grimmelshausen, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Thomas Mann und Rainer Maria Rilke* (Frankfurt, Bern, NY, Paris: Peter Lang, 1989), p.17. Translations my own.

<sup>81</sup>Mattias Hattemer: 'Many outstanding autobiographies of the twentieth century are presented as novels. Within a consistent application of Lejeune's theoretical guidelines this attribution would be enough to exclude the work from an interpretation with an autobiographical perspective. In that way the reader loses the leverage with which to break up a contradictory pact; he (sic. ) is robbed of the opportunity to dissolve the pact made on the basis of form and to conclude a new one on the foundations of thematic design.' (p.16)

<sup>82</sup> 'In fictitious autobiography title-pages and sub-headings do not dictate the form of the text, but rather the other way round, in that it is the text which makes a certain structure visible. This structure then takes hold of the formal framework and works through that. This dynamic, which reaches from the described I to the writing I and over to the whole work gives the reader the means and the justification with which to cancel the novelistic pact on the final page, after the breakdown of what one might term the described reality. This would be as a result of his (sic.) regarding the internal textual clues as opposed to the personal identification as significant. The fictitious autobiographical pact is in this way not a *condition* of autobiography, rather a *conclusion* of the novel.' (Hattemer, p.16)

<sup>83</sup> 'The thematic plan of a fictitious autobiography consists of the description of a unstable or problematic self, where the term self is for the time being understood as the relationship between the writing self and the described self internal to the text only. This self portrayed in the text appears as a preliminary or to be more precise, a biographical explanation for the problematic identity represented through the text. That means that when the writing self is unable to carry out the draft which it has to give a narrative form, the biography delivers an explanation for that. So the writer is not the writing authority in the poetic sense, but acquires through the narrated material almost personal qualities.' (Hattemer, p.17)

traditional pattern of the autobiographical novel, the fictitious autobiography is a process of liberation of the self from what it has become:

the author tries, *behind* all first person sentences and not through all first person sentences to describe the path of his (sic.) identity. His goal is prescribed only as negation: to free the writing self from his biography, by reclaiming its inner independence from the trodden lifepath.<sup>84</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>85</sup> implicating both the narrator's experience and her own. It also reminds of those words quoted at the beginning of this section concerning the idea of looking back upon the writer of the diary as 'un io fittizio'. Here we witnessed a deliberate destruction of that 'natural' link between the first person pronoun and a name described by Lejeune: 'chacun, utilisant le «je», ne se perd pas dans l'anonymat, et est toujours capable d'énoncer ce qu'il a d'irréductible en se nommant'.<sup>86</sup> The nameless narrator describes how it becomes increasingly difficult to use the pronoun I, 'la parola "io"', now that she has no name with which to connect it: 'È una parola che adopero malvolentieri, tanto mi è divenuta estranea, evanescente.' (dr, p.10).<sup>87</sup> In interview Capriolo states that she finds the usual narratorial distance of her texts hard to achieve in first person narrations, particularly this novel:

dato che il personaggio che raccontava, che era anche l'unico personaggio, era il protagonista, era lì, non c'era questa possibilità di filtrare, di prendere le distanze. Poi il libro è scritto in gran parte sotto forma di diario. Però io credo che qui, nonostante l'assoluta diversità data da questo, quest'opacità sia dentro la mente stessa del personaggio che narra - questo fatto della perdita della memoria, del distacco dal proprio io - per cui è lei stessa, a poco a poco, a creare questa separatezza. (Ania, p.311-312)

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<sup>84</sup>Hattemer, p.20.

<sup>85</sup> Marisa Rusconi, 'Le neo-romanze', *L'Espresso*, 24 February 1991

<sup>86</sup>Lejeune, p.22

<sup>87</sup>The echoes of the words of one of Capriolo's less cited influences, Hugo von Hoffmannthal, 'and that my own self [mein eigenes Ich], unhindered, glided across to me out of a small child as dumb and strange to me as a dog' ('On Transitoriness, in *Terza Rima*', *The Penguin Book of German Verse*, ed. by Leonard Foster, London: Penguin, 1959, p.395) suggest another angle on the possibility on the presence of the cat - as a fairytale familiar.

Using the idea of the fictitious autobiography's self-distancing it would be possible to see this 'opacità' as an aspect of the author's attitude towards her own narrator - as her other self, making sense of the 'noi' of the Foscolo quote: 'A noi prescrisse/il fato illacrimata sepoltura'.<sup>88</sup> Through the narrator, certain that it must contain 'un velato riferimento alla mia esistenza' (dr, p.65), Capriolo alludes to this link between the story she is writing and her own life.

The texts Hattemer chooses to illustrate his theory constitute an all male cast, but Capriolo's text presents a female fictitious autobiography. Capriolo's early fiction shows how the ghosts of a submissive female identity continue to haunt contemporary thought. The lack of a name on the part of the fictitious protagonist can be seen as that unstable, nameless self from which Capriolo is writing to free herself. In this sense she performs a negative parabola of the female autobiography as a creation of identity, similar to that proposed by Felman: 'the female speaker speaks from an autobiographical position that is defined as what cannot be simply named, or what can be named as, precisely, nameless, missing.'<sup>89</sup> Hattemer suggests the negation of a past self in a fictitious autobiography is liberating, but one must ask how a woman can negate a self which is already beyond language?

The positive resolution of identity envisioned in female autobiography by Parati does not then find its counterpart in Capriolo's fiction, at least. Nor do Splendore's words that: 'L'identità non è né una maschera pubblica, né la parte più segreta di noi stessi, né semplicemente una narrazione. Si tratta piuttosto di *quella soglia* tra interni privati, i nostri mondi fantastici, e la sfera pubblica in cui diventiamo attori'<sup>90</sup> (my italics) describe exactly the kind of relationship between female writer and self articulated by Capriolo. These words do however shed the useful light of contrast on the novel. By implying that autobiography concerns the exploration of identity through the creation of a particularly positive liminal space in the form of the text they show how the narrator of *Il doppio regno* undertakes this exploration in the negative. She vaguely remembers having been a writer and now finds herself writing an autobiographical journal of her *forgetting* that identity. This reflects the fact that Capriolo's novel is about the author's attempt to leave the 'liminal identity' of a

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<sup>88</sup> "'Noi'" presuppone una pluralità, o almeno una dualità: significa io e qualcun altro' (dr, p.65).

<sup>89</sup> Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?*, p.142.

<sup>90</sup> E. Wilson cit. by Splendore in *Il racconto delle donne: voci, autobiografie, figurazioni*, a cura di A. Arru e M.T. Chialant (Napoli: Liguori, 1990), p.87.

previous self behind through writing. It is a refusal to negotiate a space between the public and private sphere, a process traditional in autobiography, which leads her to write a 'fictitious autobiography' for herself.

I would suggest that what Capriolo wants to distance in *Il doppio regno* is a self in conflict. A 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 to her cultural autobiography. It is a relationship that is conflictual and fragmented, full of unconscious resistance. As Felman writes: 'Unlike men, who write autobiographies from memory, women's autobiography is what their memory cannot contain - or hold together as a whole - although their writing inscribes it.'<sup>91</sup> The fantastic space provides Capriolo's amnesiac narrator with a language to articulate her author's otherwise inexpressible relationship to the 'biblioteca paterna'.

### ii.ii. The Anxiety of Translation

'Da qualche giorno ho sulla mia scrivania alcune copie di 'La morte a Venezia' di Thomas Mann nella traduzione di Paola Capriolo. Seguendo l'impostazione grafica della collana, il mio nome, al pari del titolo, spicca bianco sull'indaco della copertina, mentre quello dell'autore, stampato discretamente in nero tende a confondersi con lo sfondo, sicché guardando il libro da una certa distanza si legge soltanto "La morte a Venezia" e "Paola Capriolo"' - Paola Capriolo<sup>92</sup>

The complex articulation of the self in *Il doppio regno*, caught between the anonymity of the narrator and the author's name on the front cover of the novel can be traced through various layers of meaning in the text and the knowledge we have about Capriolo the writer. Capriolo's sense, as an avid reader, of the polar fixed points of the male writer and female reader, which are still evident in contemporary literature,<sup>93</sup> is no doubt one of the catalysts of the 'anxiety of authorship' which emerges in the novel. As I suggested in the first part of this chapter this sensation is more constrictive for a woman than Bloom's off-the-peg male anxiety of influence.<sup>94</sup> What is interesting

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<sup>91</sup>Shoshana Felman, p.15.

<sup>92</sup>Paola Capriolo, 'Ho scelto Mann', *Il corriere della sera*, 7 April 1991, p.5.

<sup>93</sup>See, for example Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (Torino: Einaudi, 1979).

<sup>94</sup>JoAnn Canon in *Italian Women Writers from the Renaissance to the Present* draws attention to the fact that this difference has not yet been sufficiently explored in an Italian context: 'It remains important that we read women writers not only in the context of the male-dominated canon but also in the company of other women writers. It is not enough simply to assimilate women's writing into the list of

is that it is rendered all the more acute by Capriolo's position as a translator, leading one, even, to the supposition that part of the identity crisis articulated in this novel is a direct result of the anxiety of translating as a female.<sup>95</sup> In the following section I will be looking at the notions of the female reader and writer in the novel, but it is worth pointing out that there are strong links between the passivity associated with the reader and that associated with translator - both are traditionally female or feminised as opposed to the author who is male or masculinised.

For Capriolo, in one sense, the act of translation feeds into a humanist tradition of learning, the recurrent theme of *imitatio* we have already seen in her work, a more positive cast on self-knowledge than that presented by the media: 'Il fatto di dover percorrere un cammino obbligato, fissato da una mente e da una sensibilità estranea, induce anzi a una consapevolezza delle proprie simpatie e antipatie linguistiche che non è dato di raggiungere quando si scrive un libro "in proprio."' <sup>96</sup> The idea of imitation, and its sibling, translation,<sup>97</sup> once an accepted method of literary apprenticeship, has long been associated with a position of passivity: 'Longinus argues that one route to the sublime is imitation and emulation of great historians and poets of the past, representing that relationship variously as catching fire from inspiration, breathing in or impregnation (like the Pythian priestesses). The poet as receiver, as in today's ideology, a feminised figure.'<sup>98</sup> Culturally equivalent to imitation, translation too becomes a feminised, passive act. As Christine Battersby points out in her study of the male dominated notion of genius, it is acceptable for a male artist to be feminised - he simply acquires the positive notions of femininity, in conjunction with his own male values. A woman who undertakes this runs the risk of being swamped by it. If she decides to remain '*feminine* and *female*, and hence to fail to count as a genius' she is relegated to the traditionally low-ranking female cultural

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great Italian works. A more interesting approach would also study the anxiety of influence subtending the male-dominated Italian literary canon and contrast this to the dynamic that subtends the emerging female literary tradition.' (p.20)

<sup>95</sup>I am grateful to Loredana Polezzi for pointing out the vampiric notion of translation several female authors have articulated in fantastic texts, including Francesca Duranti in *La casa sul lago della luna*.

<sup>96</sup>Paola Capriolo, 'Ho scelto Mann', *Il corriere della sera*, 7 April 1991.

<sup>97</sup>Judith Still and Michael Worton show to what extent the two are regarded as synonymous: 'Imitation is thus not repetition, but the completion of an act of interpretation which is, as Gadamer says, a highlighting in which the reading and writing translator declares her/himself, while also engaging in a process of self-alienation' in the introduction to *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* ed. by Judith Still and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p.6.

<sup>98</sup>Still and Worton, p.13

role of imitator and translator unless she surrenders 'her sexuality, (becoming not *masculine*, but a surrogate *male*)'.<sup>99</sup>

In this light it is important to explore in detail Capriolo's relation to her translation work and the way it impacts upon her novel. All the books Capriolo has translated from the German are books that have been translated into Italian already.<sup>100</sup> Of course one translation never precludes its re-translation, but what emerges here once again is Capriolo's paradox of repetition with a slight difference - on two levels. Firstly, the 'original fake' which is a translation, and secondly, the repetition which is a re-translation of a text already translated. The publication of Paola Capriolo's *Il doppio regno* coincides with that of her translation: Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), a translation that she also commented upon on the 'terza pagina' of *Il corriere della sera*.<sup>101</sup> Whilst it is possible to trace in *Il doppio regno* some of the influences of texts which she later decides to translate, these are inevitably based upon her experience as reader rather than translator. The traces of Mann in *Il doppio regno* however gain significance for emerging out of her positioning as translator of *Death in Venice*.

What is clear is that Capriolo herself found the intense relationship of the translator to the text a challenging one, as she acknowledges in the article 'Ho scelto Mann.' The importance of her *choosing* Mann is evident - she was given this prerogative, rarely bestowed upon the translator, of being allowed to decide which text to translate for the Einaudi 'Scrittori tradotti da scrittori' series. Although she herself questions the difference between this kind of translation and a normal translation: 'non esiste traduzione che non sia una traduzione "d'autore"',<sup>102</sup> she acknowledges the opportunity for the 'espressione di un legame, di una speciale affinità'. In this light any parallels only increase in significance. She herself specifies the major common interests for the reader:

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<sup>99</sup>See Christine Battersby, p.5.

<sup>100</sup>Thomas Mann, *La morte a Venezia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1991), Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *I dolori del giovane Werther* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1993), Gottfried Keller, *Romeo e Giulietta al villaggio* (Torino: Einaudi, 1994), Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Le affinità elettive* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1995). She has also translated the essays: Kurt Hübner, *La verità del mito* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1990); Alasdair Macintyre, *Dopo la virtù: Saggio di teoria morale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1988); Victor Turner, *Dal rito al teatro* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986) and written an introductory essay to Thomas Mann's *Altezza reale* (Bari: Laterza, 1996).

<sup>101</sup>See 'Troppi nasi a Venezia', 19 February 1990 and 'Ho scelto Mann', *Il corriere della sera*, 7 April 1991.

<sup>102</sup>'Ho scelto Mann'.

un racconto dove il tema a me vicino dell'effetto perturbatore e distruttivo esercitato dal contatto con la 'vita' su chi abbia consacrato all' 'arte' la propria esistenza trova una delle sue espressioni più perfetti ed esemplari. Il groviglio di problemi, antitesi e antinomie nel quale si muove l'opera di Mann mi appare simile a quello cui io stessa, senza poter districarlo, tento di dare forma nei miei scritti.<sup>103</sup>

The hotel of *Il doppio regno* can certainly be associated with the distanced, Apolline notion of Art against which life works its corrosive force, but this is also a theme prevalent in her earlier writing. As Capriolo is at pains to express, this is a *shared* thematic interest.

In attempting to understand the specificity of the relationship between *Death in Venice* and *Il doppio regno* it is important to dwell a moment on Capriolo's decision to re-translate such a well-established text.<sup>104</sup> I am interested in the fear Capriolo clearly feels regarding the so-called 'death of literature'.<sup>105</sup> The importance of literary memory is evident in work as recent as her latest text *Il sogno dell'agnello* (1999) in whose futuristic society devoid of any artistic heritage or vision an outsider character known as the 'Principe' writes down classical texts by Plato, Goethe and Shakespeare in order to hand them down to posterity and his young friend, Sara. Capriolo does not readily acknowledge the issues of conflict present in this process, which emerge nonetheless within *Il doppio regno*, suggesting merely that she, like Lavinia, finds the distinctive note of her own voice when listening to Mann's.<sup>106</sup> Although she acknowledges the inevitable subjectivity of translation her emphasis is

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<sup>103</sup> 'Ho scelto Mann'.

<sup>104</sup> I do not know whether the text's translation has provoked as much controversy in Italian as it has in English, as that may be one reason. See Jeffrey Berlin's 'Materials' in *Approaches to Teaching Mann's 'Death in Venice' and Other Short Fiction*, ed. by Jeffrey. B. Berlin (MLA, 1992), pp. 4-5 for an account of this controversy.

<sup>105</sup> Paola Capriolo, 'Postero dove sei?', *Il corriere della sera*, 9 July 1990. In one consideration of the notion of posterity and the possible demise of literature she discusses Giampaolo Rugarli's novel *Andromeda e la notte*: 'dove l'annoso conflitto fra vita e letteratura, il chiedersi se abbia davvero un senso sacrificare la prima alla seconda, trae una nuova drammaticità dal presagio di un imminente tramonto della letteratura stessa come 'memoria', capace di durare nel tempo di tramandare. Forse le stelle di Ovidio sono già spente, sebbene ci giunga ancora la loro luce, e di fronte all'importuna domanda: 'perché scrive?' è sempre più arduo e penoso levare lo sguardo verso queste galassie offuscate'

<sup>106</sup> 'Predelizioni diverse in fatto di aggettivi scavano abissi più invalicabili di quelli creati da una diversa fede politica e religiosa.' ('Ho scelto Mann')

very much upon the traditional notion of 'fedeltà', as she assumes the role of preserver of a vital tradition which she regards as subjected to a miserable debunking.<sup>107</sup>

It is possible to chart some of the traces of Mann's text in *Il doppio regno* and naturally some of the traces of Capriolo in her translation. To some extent this illustrates the breakdown between production and reproduction which has been at the heart of much translation theory recently.<sup>108</sup> The close but stifling relationship Capriolo has with Mann, which already emerged in the analysis of *Il gigante* is the focus here, with again particular emphasis on how the poetics of Mann's text and the process of translation combine to create a female 'anxiety of authorship.'

Recently Nadia Fusini, translator of Virginia Woolf *and* novelist, spoke of translating as 'making a space'<sup>109</sup> - this metaphor points once again towards the crucial role of space in the process of negotiation which is both translation and the writing of fiction. Indeed it is in this light which I would like to examine the relationship between Mann's novella and *Il doppio regno* - in terms of the space Capriolo makes for herself out of Mann's. The close overlap between both authors' literal and metaphorical use of space will emerge here once again. Capriolo herself uses it in relation to this particular translation: 'La fedeltà richiede sempre una rinuncia che conduce in *una terra di nessuno* dove non si è più se stessi senza poter essere l'altro'<sup>110</sup>(my italics). Jean Starr Untermeyer insists that 'the translator really has to identify with the work he is translating in the same way that he identifies with his own creative work. He must become it. The first and final axiom for a translator might as well be this: the translator should himself be translated.' Translation, she maintains, must be an "adventure in empathy."<sup>111</sup> This entails a journey into a new territory in which the self is at risk and therefore all the more dangerous for women whose

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<sup>107</sup> Asked to discuss a word she would like to see eliminated from contemporary usage Capriolo chose 'dissacrazione.' See Paola Capriolo, 'Quella "dissacrazione" che nasconde miserie', *Il corriere della sera*, 12 January 1999: 'Non c'era scampo, per essere moderni bisognava essere "dissacranti", obbedire a quel conformismo imperativo dell'anticonformismo il cui bersaglio principale era costituito dalle grandi opere d'arte del passato e secondo il quale non plus ultra, ad esempio, in una rappresentazione della Tetralogia wagneriana, consisteva nel far comparire sulla scena Wotan in vestaglia e pantofole.'

<sup>108</sup> The long overdue recognition of translation as a subjective art is something which Einaudi have perhaps recognised in their chain 'Scrittori tradotti da scrittori', presumably successful in Capriolo's case as Keller's *Romeo e Giulietta al villaggio* was also published in this chain three years later.

<sup>109</sup> Presentation given at round table discussion on the reception of Virginia Woolf in Italy, participants: Nadia Fusini, Ann Caesar and Hermione Lee, The Italian Cultural Institute, 3 September 1999.

<sup>110</sup> 'Ho scelto Mann'

<sup>111</sup> Jean Starr Untermeyer cit. by Sherry Simon in *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), p.75.

cultural identity is particularly unstable. We have already noted Capriolo's tendency to identify with predominantly male authors.

Mann's use of the hotel in *Death in Venice* is central in a discussion of the space of no-man's land. As a *strange* place, in the sense of both the new and unfamiliar it is not unlike the sanatorium of the earlier *Tristan* and the later *The Magic Mountain*.<sup>112</sup> All three places represent an attempt to withdraw from 'real life' and cocoon oneself in an impersonal, servile environment.<sup>113</sup> The trope of the hotel/sanatorium as a place for meditation is a familiar literary one and their very overlap is significant in that they are almost interchangeable - the hotel traditionally being associated with refreshment or convalescence and the sanatorium with breakdown and potential renewal. The withdrawal of the solitary thinker into this trope is persistent in Mann's work. A consideration of the fantastic element in Capriolo's text is crucial here. However artificial the atmosphere of the hotel von Aschenbach chooses for his holiday, it is in a highly recognisable location. The fact that in *Il doppio regno*, this fantastic space is the only place in which one of Capriolo's heroines undertakes a creation suggests that there is no room for a female subject even to attempt to think and explore philosophically in the 'real world'. As we shall see even though this opportunity for philosophical exploration is realised the female must acquire a new sexual identity to do so.

Having acknowledged the overall influence of Mann's oeuvre here it is important to note that even in this choice of the fantastic Capriolo may well have been influenced by the novella she was translating. In fact her very words may tell us so: 'Nella visione di Aschenbach', she tells us in her translator's note 'la realtà appare completamente avvolta da una rete di citazioni, e i suoi stessi sentimenti si modellano su di esse, in una trasfigurazione insieme grottesca e sublime.'<sup>114</sup> The high degree of intertextuality, well-noted in Mann's text, is linked by Capriolo to its manipulation of reality - a link which emerges very clearly in her own novel. A fantastic alteration of Aschenbach's surroundings is something Capriolo brings out in her translation by

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<sup>112</sup>Along with *Dr. Faustus* Capriolo claims that this is the text of Mann's which has had the greatest influence upon her. (my interview with Capriolo, Milan, July, 1997)

<sup>113</sup> This motif was also present in Capriolo's earlier text in the shape of the protagonist Walter's attraction to the Excelsior hotel in *Il nocchiero*, where he can escape from the unpleasant reality of his gruesome night job. A similar theme returns in her latest work, *Una di loro* (Milano: Bompiani, 2001), albeit in a much more critical fashion.

<sup>114</sup>Paola Capriolo, 'Nota del traduttore', in *La morte a Venezia*, p.109.

emphasizing the oneiric in particular - as we can see in the comparison of Capriolo's translation and Anita Rho's earlier one: Rho's 'Gli sembrava che tutto incominciasse in modo alquanto inconsueto, che avesse inizio un trasognato allontanamento, una strana deformazione del mondo'<sup>115</sup> compares with Capriolo's 'Gli pareva che le cose prendessero una piega non del tutto abituale, che incominciasse a guadagnar terreno uno straniamento onirico, una singolare deformazione del mondo'<sup>116</sup>

This sensitivity to the leitmotifs of Mann's work even becomes an oversensitivity to his preoccupation with boundaries, particularly in relation to the god-like figure of young Tadzio: Capriolo's 'prima di varcare la soglia' (p.38) is Rho's 'prima di oltrepassare la soglia' (p.35) (Mann: 'bevor er die Schwelle überschritt', p.53). Later Capriolo's 'Giunse varcando la porta a vetri', (p.40) is Rho's 'Egli entrò dalla porta a vetri' (p. 37) (Mann: 'Er kam durch die Glastür', p.56). A comparison of the two translations of the text suggest that Rho chooses to reflect the two different verbs used by Mann, whilst Capriolo strives to create a connection which is not so immediate in the German. Any reader of Capriolo's fiction will also be aware of her extensive use of the verb 'varcare' - a leitmotif throughout *her* work for the desire to step outside the self. It occurs in *Il doppio regno* too in the context of the inside/outside dichotomy of the hotel and 'il mondo fuori'. Capriolo emphasizes this point in Mann's work colouring it with her own particular flavour. I shall return to this notion of the boundary as a particularly female place to question the meaning of the thought that: 'the female territory might well be envisaged as one long border, and independence for women.'<sup>117</sup>

Another preoccupation of Capriolo's emerges in a similar comparison - a philosophical interest in the absolute, she uses this word where the German allows it, but does not demand it, as Rho's translation makes clear. Capriolo writes: 'Con stupore Aschenbach notò che il ragazzo era di una bellezza assoluta'(p.35), whilst Rho chooses: 'Con meraviglia von Aschenbach vide che il ragazzo era di una bellezza

<sup>115</sup>Thomas Mann, *La morte a Venezia*, trans. by Anita Rho (Torino: Einaudi, 1954, 1990), p. 22. The name of *this* translator does not appear on the cover, nor is there a translator's note. For discussion of the deeply entrenched cultural notion of the 'translator's invisibility', see Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>116</sup>Thomas Mann, *La morte a Venezia* trans. by Paola Capriolo (Torino: Einaudi, 1991), p. 24. The original reads: 'Ihm war, als lasse nicht alles sich ganz gewöhnlich an, als beginne eine träumerische Entfremdung, eine Entstellung der Welt ins Sonderbare um sich zu greifen.' from *Der Tod in Venedig*, first published in 1912 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993), p. 35.

<sup>117</sup>Myra Jehlen, 'Archimedes and the paradox of feminist criticism', *Signs* 6 (1981), 575 -601.

perfetta'(p.33); (Mann: Mit Erstaunen bemerkte Aschenbach, daß der Knabe vollkommen schön war, p.50). This interest is one which takes us very clearly to Plato's cave when Rho does not see it, giving the following lines of Mann's text a Platonic resonance, which other frequent references to Platonic thought in the novella would suggest *is* intended here:

Capriolo: Ma nello spazio vuoto, inarticolato, manca al nostro spirito anche la misura del tempo, e ci assopiamo nell'infinità. *Strane figure*, il vecchio zerbinotto, l'uomo dalla barba caprina all'interno della nave, *attraversavano come ombre* lo spirito dell'immobile von Aschenbach con gesti confusi, con indistinte parole di sogno, e egli si addormentò (p.25, my italics).

Rho: Ma nello spazio vuoto, disarticolato, manca ai nostri sensi anche la misura del tempo e noi sonnecchiamo nell'immensità. *Strane figure spettrali*, il vecchio bellimbusto, il bigliettinaio dalla barba caprina, *passavano* con gesti trasognati, con parole vaghe attraverso la mente del passeggero, ed egli si addormentò (p.23, my italics).

Mann: Aber im leeren, ungegliederten Raume fehlt unserem Sinn auch das Maß der Zeit, und wir dämmern in Ungemessenen. *Schattenhaft sonderbare Gestalten*, der greise Geck, der Ziegenbart aus dem Schiffsinnern, *gingen* mit unbestimmten Gebärden, mit verwirrten Traumworten durch den Geist des Ruhenden, und er schlief ein. (p.37, my italics)

Despite the shared interest in the notion of the Platonic cave which makes Capriolo alert to these references, difference also emerges in the articulation of space. Mann's novella, once Aschenbach has escaped from Munich and his disappointment in Croatia, is centred around the interplay between the landscape of the Lido, the hotel interior and the city of Venice in a sort of ebb and flow between the three poles, like the omnipresent sea, eroding Aschenbach's Apolline complacency. Capriolo's text opens in a scenery very similar to that of the Lido: she is also staying in a seaside resort hotel towards the end of the season, yet this feel of being 'ai margini dell'elemento'<sup>118</sup> is short-lived. At the approach of the tidal wave she flees to a new, and very different hotel. Of course Mann's novella, convincingly described as psychohistory,<sup>119</sup> deals with the subject's relationship to history, through his use of the mythical and the intertextual. It is after all still a geographically 'real' place and time (circa 1911) in which the novella is set. In Capriolo's text we once again encounter the

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<sup>118</sup>Thomas Mann, *La morte a Venezia* trans. by Paola Capriolo, p.41.

<sup>119</sup>See in Edward Timms, 'Death in Venice as Psychohistory' in Berlin (ed.), pp.134 -140.

suspension of historical-geographical reality. Considering exactly where Mann's novella is famously set one must ask how an Italian, however European her cultural orientation, encounters Mann's Italy - site of so many encounters with Dionysus in the German imaginary - and, more specifically, Mann's Venice?

In Robert Martin's discussion of 'the absent female' in the text the feminine emerges as 'the body of disease itself' in the symbolical links between the decaying Venice, the sea and cholera. Indeed he shows how 'Mann's German text plays on the ambiguity [between the incarnate beauty of Tadzio and the absolute beauty of idealist philosophy], through references to "das Schöne", or ideal beauty, and "der Schöne", the beautiful man or boy, applied to Tadzio, while Venice, the corrupt and corrupting city, is "die Schöne", the beautiful woman.'<sup>120</sup> *Death in Venice* appears to present considerable difficulties, if one is to achieve the closeness of translator and author, even translation of the self, for both an Italian and a woman simultaneously. It concerns an economy of existence (homosexual), from which women are excluded, but which needs the feminine, represented by Italy, in order to emerge. Capriolo dismisses this masquerade as an entertaining idiosyncrasy: 'Thomas Mann mostra scarsissimo interesse per l'abbigliamento femminile, mentre ci informa implacabilmente su quello del personaggio maschile, per quanto secondario.'<sup>121</sup> The feature of the wave - the initiating catastrophe of Capriolo's novel allows us to explore the way this anxiety seeps into her text. It could be a synthesis of those three corrupting elements in Mann's text: the presence of the sea, and the cholera and the female city of Venice. We see how these elements which ultimately overwhelm the protagonist at the end of the novella in the form of the cholera, threaten to overwhelm our protagonist at the beginning. I would argue that the rejection of the female in Mann's novella is transferred to the protagonist's rejection of her own femininity. When questioned about the element of the Dionysian in her work Capriolo specified:

nel senso del dionisiaco, allora non come desiderio della dissoluzione, ma come prorompere della volontà, nel senso Schopenhaueriano come nel giardino, senz'altro, anche nell'onda de *Il doppio regno* di una natura dionisiaca, di una potenza, la massima potenza, qualcosa che è minacciosa e nello stesso tempo seducente, come qualcosa che è esterna e nello stesso tempo anche *interiore*.'(my italics).

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<sup>120</sup>Robert. K. Martin 'Gender, Sexuality and Identity in Mann's Short Fiction' in Berlin (ed.), pp. 65-66.

<sup>121</sup>Paola Capriolo, 'Troppi nasi a Venezia'

I will return in the final section to this notion of the wave as representative of a fear of the female in oneself. For the moment I simply wish to point out its close links with Mann's text and to suggest that *Il doppio regno* provides evidence that the introjective anxiety detected in the previous works by Capriolo has a grounding in the author's reading experience.

Many other features of Mann's novella occur in Capriolo's *Il doppio regno*, suggesting the impression left in Capriolo's mind. The garden, enclosed in the centre of the hotel, wherein lurks the 'gatto tigrato' seems reminiscent of the dreamlike image which triggers Aschenbach's fatal trip to Venice. In Capriolo's translation it is described as follows:

Vide, vide un paesaggio, una regione di paludi **tropicali** sotto un cielo greve di vapori, umida, lussureggiante e sterminata, una sorte di selvaggio mondo primordiale di isole, pantani e affluenti che trascinavano limo, vide chiomati palmizi protendersi da ogni parte verso il cielo emergendo da **rigogliosi** grovigli di felci, da sfondi di **vegetazione** grassa e **gonfia** di umori che generava **bizzarre** fioriture, vide alberi stranamente deformi affondare le radici aeree nel **terreno**, o in **acque** stagnanti ombreggiate di riflessi verdi dove, tra fiori che galleggiavano lattei e grandi come scodelle ..... vide scintillare tra le canne nodellate della macchia di bambù gli occhi di una tigre acquattata.'(pp.6-7, my emphasis)

La **vegetazione** aveva il **rigoglio** inquietante di una giungla **tropicale**. Le foglie degli alberi e dei cespugli, pur esibendo una varietà di forme spesso **bizzarre**, erano accomunate dalla tinta, un verde lucido e cupo, e dall'impressione di eccessivo turpore che suscitavano. Parevano **gonfie** di linfa, quasi sul punto di traboccare, come se le piante crescessero da un **terreno** straordinariamente ricco d'**acqua** e di nutrimento.' (dr, p.63, my emphasis)

It is no surprise that it is her visit here at the end of the novel which persuades the narrator to *stay*, when the 'gatto tigrato' she believed to be part of her memories of the outside world emerges from the bushes, convincing her that there is no outside world. The idea of the external world's corruption springing from within the self is central to Mann's novella, but it never quite assumes the fantastic form of Capriolo's novel. Of course what von Aschenbach is seeing are the roots of his own (and his world's) downfall, the repressed source of the symbolical cholera. This scenario is connected via that cholera to the foreign and to the corrupting female. In Capriolo's text this

disturbing element appears in domesticated form, literally, in the shape of the hothouse and a pet cat. This certainly represents an attempt to find a space, wherein to control this eruption of nature, and the themes of Mann's text would suggest that this can only be achieved after the eschewal of the feminine.

Many of von Aschenbach's states of mind mirror those of the protagonist. He fails to warn others of the imminent approach of the cholera, because he cannot bear to be parted from his beloved, giving him a sense of complicity with the spread of corruption. The narrator of *Il doppio regno* fails to warn anyone about the approach of the tidal wave, reinforcing the idea that it comes from within herself.<sup>122</sup> Her prevarication about leaving the hotel parallels von Aschenbach's famous failure to depart. However these allusions are woven into a complex framework in which the working out of mythic symbols is layered to the point of indecipherability, making Mann's text almost seem a much clearer moral fable by comparison. I believe this is neither mystification nor postmodern game-playing - these are threads from the rich tapestry of the cultural autobiography Capriolo tells her readers she is confidently weaving and unweaving around them that remain stuck in the loom. They point towards both the narrator's admiration for and dissatisfaction with the texts she is studying - sentiments that seep through the weave of the book. In the following section we shall see that, despite her declarations of fidelity and preservation of tradition as a translator Capriolo's novel betrays another inevitable spin-off effect of translation, described by Homi Bhaba as 'a way of imitating, but in a mischievous, displacing sense.'<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup>This mirrors the guilt of the solipsistic protagonist illustrated in Landolfi's short story entitled 'Il gigante' in which the protagonist asks himself whether he is not indeed responsible for the apocalyptic arrival of the monstrous gigante: 'Rimorso: in verità, non poteva darsi che io stesso la avessi evocata dagli spazi, codesta creatura mostruosa, colla mia intolleranza, col mio odio per i miei compagni di prigionia e di dolore?' from 'Il gigante' in Tommaso Landolfi, *Del meno* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1978), p. 71.

<sup>123</sup>H.K. Bhaba, 'The Third Space' in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* ed. by J.Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p.210. He refers us back to Capriolo's notions of the original imitation: 'Translation is also imitating an original in such a way that the priority of the original is not reinforced but by the very fact that it *can* be simulated, copied, transferred, transformed, made into a simulacrum and so on: the 'original' is never finished or complete in itself. The 'originary' is always open to translation so that it can never be said to have a totalised prior moment of being or meaning - an essence.'

### ii.iii Reader, I copied him - the logic of the one

‘Leggere è dunque, fra altre cose, la celebrazione di uno speciale culto dei morti, un atto di pietas per le ombre magnifiche che ci sovrastano.’ Paola Capriolo<sup>124</sup>

‘A woman who reads a lot has to learn a process of not noticing sexual difference’ Christine Battersby<sup>125</sup>

In the previous section what we witnessed were principally unacknowledged, even unconscious parallels, references and allusions. Capriolo also identifies a self-conscious ‘intertextuality’ in *Il doppio regno* - a technique she distinguishes as unique in this text:

Le citazioni hanno un ruolo proprio importante nel tessuto della narrazione e forse più che in ogni altro libro è ne *Il doppio regno* perché lì c’è questo scambio tra ciò che la protagonista ricorda e ciò che crede di ricordare, quindi ciò che le è accaduto e ciò che invece lei ha letto magari, tutta questa poesia che crede di aver scritta e invece sono di Rilke [...] Allora in questo caso appunto c’è quest’intreccio tra la sua scrittura e questa reminiscenza letteraria. Negli altri casi non credo che abbia questa grande importanza.<sup>126</sup>

I have already drawn attention to the inevitably, but nonetheless markedly, male tradition of Capriolo’s accepted influences. This tradition is reflected in those influences that have clearly been part of the narrator’s cultural formation in *Il doppio regno*, in her ‘false’ memories and plagiarized quotations. The examination of Capriolo’s role as a translator suggests that they may be one of the factors linking the narrator’s confusion about her own identity to Capriolo herself. What I would like to examine here are further examples of this culturally inspired trauma, in particular the way in which the narrator’s memories of her past are confused with some male-authored female characters. In the light of the ‘fictitious autobiography’ and the blurring of author and narrator I suggest that the distinction between conscious and unconscious quotation is not necessarily very clear. Finally I will explore how these literary allusions, together with the traces of the author’s experience of translation, are linked to the fantastic space of the hotel. I suggest that the dominance of male-

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<sup>124</sup>Paola Capriolo, ‘Il Bene contro il Male: e quello fu l’ultimo duello’, *Il corriere della sera*, 8 October 1989.

<sup>125</sup>Christine Battersby, p.9.

<sup>126</sup>From my interview with Capriolo in Milan, July, 1997

authored models make the hotel the site of an absorption into a male literary system rather than a confident postmodern construction.

In Goethe's novel of 1809, *Elective Affinities*, the character of Otilie expresses her doomed love for Edward (husband of her aunt and guardian, Charlotte) by imitating his handwriting.<sup>127</sup> The dangers of this kind of 'literary' immersion in the Other are central to the character of Otilie. When she forgets the time sitting by the lake, which leads to the death of Edward and Charlotte's baby - the climax of the novel - it is because she is absorbed in a book: 'Il libro era di quelli che avvincono un cuore tenero e non lo lasciano più.'<sup>128</sup> Otilie's general passivity in the face of the harsh fate reserved for her by the author is expressly linked by Goethe to her role as a subordinate female reader and *copier*. It is this passivity which leads the contemporary female writers, A.S. Byatt and Jenny Uglow, to voice a vehement repulsion for the character of Otilie.<sup>129</sup> However, in a review of Capriolo's more recent work *Un uomo di carattere*, the critic Pietro Citati<sup>130</sup> imaginatively describes the character of Otilie as the guiding light of Capriolo's fiction. He does not question the unusual choice for a contemporary female author of a character whose self-annihilating spirit is often regarded as a prototype for the female as complementary Other within the male text.<sup>131</sup> Otilie's influence, however, emerges as early as *Il doppio regno*, showing that

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<sup>127</sup> 'He looked at her – he looked at the transcript. The first few sheets were written in the greatest carefulness in a delicate woman's hand – then the strokes appeared to alter, to become more light and free – but who can describe his surprise as he ran his eyes over the concluding page? "For heaven's sake," he cried, "what is this? This is my hand!" He looked at Otilie, and again at the paper; the conclusion, especially, was exactly as if he had written it himself. Otilie said nothing, but she looked at him with her eyes full of the warmest delight. Edward stretched out his arms. "You love me!" he cried: "Otilie, you love me!"' (*Elective Affinities*, chapter XII, pp.89-90)

<sup>128</sup> From Goethe, *Le affinità elettive*, trans. by Paola Capriolo (Marsilio, 1995). Originally published as *Die Wahlverwandschaften* in 1809. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text and indicated AE.

<sup>129</sup> In a discussion about *Elective Affinities* on R3, October, 1999 as part of the Goethe bicentenary celebrations.

<sup>130</sup> Pietro Citati, 'Capriolo e la fabbrica di automi', *La repubblica*, 17 April 1996, p.32. 'Paola Capriolo [...] vive sotto il segno di Otilie, la protagonista delle *Affinità elettive* di Goethe, Otilie è un orologio cosmico: un automa sacro; più che una persona, un anello della grande catena analogica, che tiene insieme il macrocosmo e il microcosmo, le stelle e le piante, le pietre e gli uomini. Nutre affinità segrete con la natura inorganica e gli altri esseri umani: dispone di un codice di gesti; vive coi vivi come se fossero ritratti silenziosi. Vincendo tutte le inclinazioni superficiali, la sua natura profonda trionfa negli ultimi giorni della sua vita: non parla, non guarda, non mangia, forse non sente e non pensa; e viene attratta da una misteriosa forza magnetica verso l'amato. Come Otilie, i libri della Capriolo sono degli automi, costruiti da una mente lucidissima e quieta.'

<sup>131</sup> Citati's world of literature is still clearly, as Calvino described it in 1959, 'privo di tensione storica'. In his essay 'Il mare dell'oggettività' Calvino argued that 'tenendo così accuratamente scostato da sé ogni criterio storico o classificatorio o ideologico o comunque di propria scelta e proposta e pressione

although Capriolo had not translated Goethe's text at this point she was at least very familiar with it.

The narrator experiences a series of flashbacks that she believes may belong to her previous life. Many of these involve moments of particular trauma - one is the loss of a child through drowning. The fear of water is a leitmotif of both Goethe's and Capriolo's text, but this particular feature almost seems a direct transposition of the scene when Ottilie loses the baby. Goethe's scene continues from the earlier quote above: 'Ottilie dimenticò il tempo e l'ora e non pensò che per via di terra un lungo tragitto la separava ancora dal nuovo edificio; sedeva assorta nel libro'(AE, p.244). Capriolo's narrator remembers a garden like the famous landscaped one of *Elective Affinities* in which, 'sono così assorta nella lettura da non accorgermi del trascorrere delle ore. Infine la luce si attenua, un vapore si leva dal lago. Cerco con gli occhi il disco del sole, ma è già tramontata dietro alle colline' (dr, p.64). In fact a little later in Goethe's account we are told that, 'Il sole era tramontato, e già imbruniva, e umidi vapori salivano dal lago'(AE, p.246). The two descriptions of the fatal boarding of the boat are very similar: 'Salta nella barca, afferra il remo e spinge per scostarsi dalla riva. Deve impiegare molta forza' (AE, p.247) and 'salgo in fretta sulla barca. Devo far forza con il remo per staccarmi dalla riva' (dr, p.64). Even the dead baby is described using similar terms: 'tira fuori dell'acqua il bambino, ma i suoi occhi sono chiusi, ha cessato di respirare'(AE, p.247) and 'Sono sola con quel bambino che tiene gli occhi chiusi e che ha cessato di respirare'(dr, p.64). Almost copied, but not 'quoted' these similarities underline the importance of a close, almost plagiaristic use of male-authored texts in the novel, which go beyond the more ironically acknowledged quotations of the male poets, for example that of Leopardi:

Sono convinta.....di essere io l'autrice dei versi.....Ricordo il giorno in cui, contemplando il cielo attraverso l'intelaiatura di ferro della cupola pensai le parole:

“ interminati spazi di là da quella, e sovrumano silenzio, e profondissima quiete”, e appena le ebbi pensate tornai in camera per scriverle. (dr, p.121)

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etica o poetica, l'operazione conoscitiva di Citati si trasforma in operazione mistica, di rivelazione, di comunione cosmica.' *Una pietra sopra*, (Milano: Mondadori, 1995), p.52.

The overlap between these two forms of quotation reflects the overlap in Capriolo's work between the authorial anxiety - the fear of being unable to write, and the introjective anxiety - the fear of the Other finding its way into the self via the text.

Another of these introjected 'flashbacks' takes us to chapters XXVIII-XXIX of *Anna Karenina* when the eponymous heroine's lover Vronsky falls off his horse and she shows publically an emotion for which her husband later reprimands her. As in the case of *Elective Affinities* the reference to this specific moment is clear.<sup>132</sup> The narrator herself attempts to speculate about the possible 'truth' of these experiences and even defines their evident common denominator:

Una figura di adultera mi si affaccia spesso alla mente: ha tratti sfumati, talora contraddittori, ma nel suo destino vi è sempre un'impronta di tragedia. A volte ricordo distintamente di aver abbandonato figlio e marito per un frivolo ufficiale appassionato di cavalli, tuttavia non riesco a convincermi di aver compiuto davvero un'azione simile. Inoltre, ciò che rammento del mondo mi induce a escludere l'esistenza in esso di frivoli ufficiali appassionati di cavalli. Quella vicenda mi fa pensare ad altri tempi, i tempi di una nonna o di una prozia che un giorno può avermi narrato tristi casi della sua giovinezza. Casi ambigui, in verità, nei quali ora ella compare come moglie di un alto funzionario, ora subisce un brusco declassamento e si riduce a condividere la vita opaca di un medico di provincia. (dr, p 49).

Here the different tragedies of Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina are, as is frequently the case, linked and merged, and the narrator's strong identification with them connects her to a genealogy of women whose lives point towards the ultimate form of withdrawal - suicide - because their double existences tear them apart. The deployment of these scenes is extremely complex: are they *real* traumatic memories

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<sup>132</sup>See dr, pp. 92-3. Although not all the details tally exactly there is absolutely no doubt that it is a reference to this scene from *Anna Karenina* - even the horse is named as Frou-Frou and her husband's voice can be heard droning on in the background to the scene. Where Capriolo remembers: 'Vedo il cavaliere a terra e il cavallo che si dibatte; allora dalle mie labbra esce una forte esclamazione. Mi alzo, incapace di dominare lo sgomento.' (p.93) Tolstoy writes: 'so that when Vronsky fell and Anna gave a loud exclamation, there was nothing remarkable about it. But afterwards a change came over Anna's face which was positively improper. She quite lost self-control.' (Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1995, p. 207). The transposition of the scene, which of course like that of Goethe's undergoes the shift from third to first person, suggesting the identification with these characters above and beyond their authors', is however much more summative and much less direct than that of *Elective Affinities*. This is clearly because the episode in Tolstoy's original extends over a much longer section of the narration, but also suggests that linguistic closeness which Capriolo feels to the Goethe of *Elective Affinities*, expressed in a translator's note at the end of her translation. Moreover Capriolo claims that it is 'una sorta di sovrapposizione tra *Madame Bovary* e *Anna Karenina*, appunto il tema dell'adulterio' (Ania, p. 333). Gillian Ania has suggested that the scene she has in mind may be that of Emma riding with Rudolphe, Part Two, chapter 9.

which are notoriously able to survive all kinds of memory loss? If that is the case, why are they so clearly literary in origin? Do the references to these traumatic moments of high drama in famous nineteenth century texts *simply* represent the narrator's loss of boundaries between self and Other, life and Art, perhaps as a result of a similar trauma?<sup>133</sup> Is the mirror offered by these texts confused with the narrator's experience because they do in fact reflect its torment?

Whatever the answer, this male-authored literature evidently does not offer a solution to or a relief from that reality but show that the experience of being female is to be always already alienated from oneself. The anxiety and subsequent repression after seeing oneself reflected in the male text in all these three important figures - who are both ultimately punished for their transgressions, not only by themselves but also within the economy of the text and/or within the unjust social economy - has led to their resurgence as ghosts of the neurotic. As we shall see Bloom's words that 'Every forgotten precursor becomes a giant of the imagination'<sup>134</sup> applies for the female writer, not just to the literary creators themselves, but to their female creations. The narrator cannot remember her own name and those that come to her mind in her search for it are often literary: 'Anna, Ottilia, Maria' is the trio mentioned at one point (dr, p.88). Her rejection of the cultural division of woman into whore/virgin (mother) is made evident by her memory of two further names: 'Così "Emma" mi suscita rancore, violenta ostilità. Una nemica? Una rivale? O io stessa resa a me stessa odiosa da una colpa che ignoro? In tal caso però dovrei avere due nomi; infatti gli stessi sentimenti si risvegliano in me di fronte a "Maria"' (dr, p.59). The narrator's memory of herself on holiday that 'in mano avevo un libro di cui non ricordo nulla, e così non ricordo i miei pensieri di allora' (dr, p.11) hints at the causal link between literature and imagining of the self which the author consciously explores. It is possible that the failure of society and literature to accommodate female existence leads to the narrator's attempt to find a new realm for the expression of her duality: writing.

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<sup>133</sup>A character in Pat Barker's latest novel *Another World* (London: Penguin, 1998) whose grandfather's deeply traumatic war memories surface in his sleep, makes a connection between the nature of such memories and the distance we feel from art: 'There's quite a lot of evidence that traumatic memories are stored in a different part of the brain from normal memories and that's what makes them so incredibly persistent. And so ... almost hallucinatory. They're not accessible to language in the same way. It's like watching a film ... or even worse it's like acting in a film.' (p.85)

<sup>134</sup>Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: OUP, 1973) cit. in Still and Worton (eds), footnote 22, p.9.

The narrator's writing provides the clue to a desire to connect thought with life through memory. When she wonders about her amnesia she suggests: 'Può darsi che io sia rimasta qui dentro per perdere la memoria' but this is contrasted with 'il desiderio di ricordare, fortissimo, inconfutabile, che giorno dopo giorno mi induce a scrivere queste pagine' (dr, p.34). What is interesting is that even her final denial of the existence of an external reality is addressed to someone who is supposedly in that reality - a letter to Guido, the only one of the three visitors she felt could understand her. This tension between silence and writing, the hotel and the outside world expresses the tension between memory and forgetfulness which could ultimately lead to the kind of knowledge Adrienne Rich suggests a woman should have of the literary past: 'We need to know the writing of the past, and to know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.'<sup>135</sup>

Indeed the theme of forgetfulness in relation to creative knowledge is one well-established within the area of intertextual theory.<sup>136</sup> It is however more usual to find it as the background of the book than consciously depicted between the covers. In the context of female anxiety about writing, however, Gilbert and Gubar discuss two illnesses, 'aphasia and amnesia' which:

symbolically represent (and parody) the sort of intellectual capacity patriarchal culture has traditionally required of women - appear and reappear in women's writings in frankly stated or disguised forms [...] At the same time, many women writers manage to imply that the reason for such ignorance of language as well as the reason for their deep sense of alienation and inescapable feelings of anomie - is that they have *forgotten* something. Deprived of the power that even their pens don't seem to confer, these women resemble Doris Lessing's heroines, who have to fight the internalization of patriarchal structures for even a faint trace memory of what they might have become.<sup>137</sup>

If we are to read Capriolo's work as dramatising this experience of nineteenth-century and some twentieth-century women writers, the narrator's *remembering* lines by

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<sup>135</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision' in *Adrienne Rich's Selected Poetry and Prose*, selected and ed. by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (London: Norton, 1993), pp. 166-177 (pp.167-8).

<sup>136</sup> Montaigne [...] believes that the 'self' is to be found in a distancing of the reading and writing subject from the anterior 'other', reading enables an act of interpretation which is also an activity of idiosyncratic creation in that the displacement inherent in imitation engenders a valorisation of the self as writer because one reads agonistically. However, the physical alienation from books leads to the textual amnesia which all writers experience.' (Still and Worton (eds), p. 9)

<sup>137</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.58.

famous male authors (Foscolo, Rilke, Shakespeare, Leopardi) but *forgetting* that they were authored by them becomes a vital piece of the puzzle. The fragmentary episodes mentioned above and the discussion of her experience as a translator<sup>138</sup> make it clear that there is a crisis of identity as a woman behind this crisis of literary ownership. The need to re-establish space for the female writer, despite her male predecessors, is incarnated in her belief that 'The Cherry Orchard' could be a place of her own 'memory'. When Bruno tells her that it cannot exist she sees this as an 'affermazione gratuita', what is important is that she does not know what it is. The synchronised rejection of the male's domineering physical contact and a black-and-white conception of space and literary ownership signifies the interrelation of all the patriarchal structures the narrator is attempting to escape:

Bruno mi ha afferrato una mano e l'ha trattenuto tra le sue "Vuole sapere che cos'è il giardino dei ciliegi?"

In quel momento mi sono sentita in pericolo, come se nelle parole di Bruno si celasse un'insopportabile violenza.

"No," ho risposto liberando la mano dalla stretta. "Non voglio saperlo." (dr, p.123)

The notion of fantastic spaces opening up where men would like to close them down emerges in the clash between Bruno's insistence that it can't be a real place, just as, for him the hotel is a normal hotel one can leave. Such a refusal of hermeneutic closure has led to descriptions of Capriolo's work as postmodern, or alternatively as decadent - both readings which stem from a perception of the ironic treatment of her material. As we have already seen in relation to 'Il gigante' this irony is moderate and even in *Il doppio regno* the ironic distance is undermined by the fantasmatic autobiographical pact that points towards a degree of authorial anxiety. The entire web of acknowledged and unacknowledged, obvious and less obvious citations form both

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<sup>138</sup> It is also worth remembering that several of these quotations involve translation as well as imitation underlining the strong link between these activities. The plagiarism forces us to ask questions about what constitutes the difference between imitation and translation, particularly since Capriolo is well-known as a translator. Sherry Simon points out why some authors draw attention to the act of translation within their text: 'How can translation act as an arbiter of culture, confidently recomposing the boundaries of the text, when the text itself challenges these limits? By placing translation *within* the borders of their books, writers like Nicole Brossard and Christine Brooke-Rose smudge the distinction between original and secondary forms of writing, troubling but not yet toppling the entire edifice of conceptual complicities which maintain the power of author over translator, creation over reproduction, male over female' (p.166). Paola Capriolo is using the idea of literary influence in a similarly deliberate way with similar results.

the unconscious and conscious illustrations of the autobiographical nature of this text. In the detective work Capriolo encourages us to practice we are forced to wonder whether the duplicity being practiced upon the hotel guests, when the narrator insists that she wrote the lines by Rilke or Leopardi is being practiced upon us at some other less obvious point in the text.

The narrator's memory of herself as a writer is as a poet. Her only memory without roots in some literary source is of herself at a writing desk - a man on the threshold suggesting interruption and the immediate limits her gender imposed upon her writing (dr, p.57). In order to become this poet completely she enters into the realm of the hotel, a realm of male poetry made universal, where she finds that she could now write 'male-authored' poetry outside the boundaries of literary ownership. All the direct quotations are of these poets, with whom she is trying to become one. I would argue that Capriolo uses the idea of a poet in this way because of its association with the purest form of literature, hence one from which women have most often been excluded. It is also a fictional screen between herself - as novelist - and the narrator. The writing of a journal provides the overflow for traces of discontent, of her female identity struggling against this subsumption. The journal becomes a commentary on the narrator's writing as she finds herself struggling with the language which should be her tool: a no-man's land of negotiation.

The narrator's struggle with a male-owned language, beyond which she sees no alternatives, emerges in a subtler and more insidious channel through her attitude towards the waiters of the hotel. She claims that to become like them she must lose her gendered identity, but it soon becomes clear that she only has to lose this gendered identity because it is a female one. Most of those critics who discuss the role of the waiters in *Il doppio regno* share the view that the male waiters represent a convincingly androgynous being. This suspension of disbelief is an acceptance of the male as androgynous that only serves to highlight the conflation of male with universal-neutral - a conflation that lies at the root of Western philosophy's non-thinking of sexual difference. 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 a universal neutral of the masculine gender and of the feminine one.' (teoria, p. 190). The faultline of Capriolo's understanding of universality appears in this linguistic betrayal of women, as the following comment demonstrates:

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. (dr, p. 133, my italics).

There is in fact 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'unica che io sappia eseguire" (dr, 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*, forse lo stesso che la sera prima aveva montato la guardia davanti alla mia porta'(dr, p.25, my italics), the waiters are always referred to as *men*. This idea of becoming an "honorary man" is one long associated with women attempting to enter the public realm, but anticipated less in late twentieth century works.<sup>139</sup>

The assumption that men represent the neutral-universal, the opportunity to separate the body from mind, persists and this 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.' (teoria, 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:

però *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, sembra di stare tra le pagine di un romanzo di Lovecraft, suscitava solo orrore e desiderio di risvegliarsi.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup>Explored by Carolyn Heilbrun in 'Non-Autobiographies of 'Privileged' Women: England and America' in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp.62-76.

<sup>140</sup>Marisa Rusconi, 'Paola Capriolo: il rifiuto del giorno,' p.8.

The desire to return to oneself, to 'risvegliarsi' is something the narrator continually fights, but the negative valency which a return to the self as female would indicate motors the opposing force in this struggle. Cavarero explains this negative valency as follows:

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. (teoria, p.193)

It is therefore hard for the narrator to forget the female's negative extra 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 era 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. (dr, p.72, my italics)

With the appearance of the outsider, Laura, not only is the narrator's former *femininity*, presented as very much a negative cultural construct, but also her having been *female*. It is not only on the shedding of this cultural construct of gender and the assumption of another that the attainment of pure thought is based. The 'liberazione' (dr, p.43) of which the narrator dreams is not one of freedom from the sexed self, but from the suppression of the sexed self as *female*. The premise for access to universal thought is clearly portrayed as a tacit compliance with the masculine construction of universality. Adriana Cavarero argues that this is based upon the exclusion of the live body, associated with the female, from thought defined as a male territory.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup>'By trivialising the bodily dimension of living, it now inhibits the symbolic translation of sexual difference. In other words, a separated and dematerialised embodiedness can more easily conceal its sexual connotation, always marked by difference. Hence the male gender can easily claim to be neutral and universal', Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995), p.26. The book was first published in Italy as *Nonostante Platone: Figure femminili nella filosofia antica* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1990).

The narrator's rejection of her gender in relation to her analysis of Laura's physical appearance goes beyond her own inability to wear a dress anymore. Her refusal to be a 'donna' is undercut by an awareness of her own body in spite of herself:

Eppure ho lineamenti più regolari dei suoi, più delicati. Non lo dico per vanità né per rivaltà 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.  
(dr, p.90)

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 masquerades behind its idea of 'woman'. Her real woman's body and mind remain in the double kingdom somewhere between these two constructions - a kingdom which cannot be conceived of as complete, even in the imaginary. Thus the struggle between the 'albergo' and the 'mondo fuori' centre on the issues of sexuality and gender as experienced by a woman.

The question of unconscious moulding of the self according to a projection of male desire is raised in *La grande Eulalia*. A reading of Eulalia's attempts to mould herself according to the demands of the Symbolic order shows her to be fatally disappointed by reality's inability to meet her own superhuman efforts and expectations. Conversely the protagonist of *Il doppio regno*'s outright rejection of her socially constructed 'feminine' cannot find a satisfactory new reality to replace this construct and therefore also proves unsatisfactory. Neither the hotel nor Bruno's world offer the narrator a chance to realise herself - no wonder the creation of her own transcendental myth becomes her only way forward.

What Capriolo's narrator is trapped in is, in Cavarero's terms: 'the entire conceptual castle of that 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 instead to be suspicious of the purported neutrality of language, of its scientific objectivity, and also of its beauty. (teoria, p.219)

It would be possible to argue that the hotel itself represents the limits of this language. When the narrator arrives there she wants to communicate the vision of the wave but

finds herself confronted by a wall: 'l'apparizione dell'onda mi aveva eretto un muro invisibile, e le parole non erano in grado di valicarlo' (dr, p.19). In one way the hotel itself becomes the physical manifestation of this metaphorical wall. For the female narrator however it also becomes the site of alienation from language, in that it reflects the isolating properties of language. Its incomprehensible *preconstruction* is 'langue' itself, isolating the narrator from her real experience. Nonetheless the narrator of *Il doppio regno* finds herself succumbing to the siren call of the male dominated language of artistic form, whether as poetry, music or ultimately the structure of the hotel itself.<sup>142</sup> In the following section I will examine how despite this progressive seduction the palimpsestic nature of Capriolo's text allows us to detect further traces of discontent with the 'logic of the one', above all in the narrator's contradictory relationship to the space of the hotel.

#### **i.iv Managing monsters: towards a new space for the self?**

Up to this point I have highlighted the complex space between the autobiographical and intertextual in the novel. By underlining the porous wall between the female writer and the female reader, I have begun to explore the kind of relationship between canonical texts and the narrator's amnesia that exists for the author and the reader. I will now complete my analysis of how the contested relationship between the body and the fantastic space in the novel interact with these to betray a distinct unease with the positioning of women within literary culture. I will do this by examining and moving towards a new understanding of that space defined in the novel's title: the dual realm.

The idea of a double space within feminist theory is one that leads us back to and beyond the original image of the mirror:

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<sup>142</sup> The difficulty of resisting this seduction is something which Capriolo also describes in her thesis on Benn: Vivere, scrisse una volta in una poesia, è gettare ponti su fiumi che dileguano, e leggendo questi versi ho sempre immaginato i lunghi ponti costruiti dai popoli precolombiani. Anche l'arte è un ponte del genere, gettato sopra l'abisso, fragile, pericolosamente ondeggiante quando soffia il vento, ma intessuto da fili d'oro. [...] Alcuni però sosterranno a metà del ponte, ne ammireranno la costruzione, così minacciata, eppure così stranamente tenace, e quando saranno giunti dall'altra parte li coglierà forse il dubbio che in quelli assi sospese sul vuoto vi fosse più verità che nel saldo terreno dove ora poggiano il piede.' (*L'assoluto artificiale*, p.97)

Let us return to the mirror image. If the projections, the images, are wiped off the mirror then at first it is blank. The mirror can be painted with new concepts but these are equally images; even the shattering of the mirror leads to nothing. What the liberated woman will look like cannot be imagined with any certainty or in any detail at the moment, let alone how she will be experienced. In order to live through this transitional space between the no longer and the not yet without going mad, it is necessary for woman to learn to look in two diverging directions simultaneously.<sup>143</sup>

Weigel's words are the most suggestive for reading Capriolo's double space as a specifically female realm - a mirrorless world, looking in two directions. Whilst 'double consciousness has, in fact, become a paradigm for the discussion of women's writing within feminist criticism'<sup>144</sup> it should be evident from the ambiguity of Capriolo's earlier work regarding gender and the analysis of *Il doppio regno* to date that even this book of such a resonant title may be far from an unconscious echo of current feminist thought. Indeed the origin of Capriolo's title stems from her passion for Rilke, one of those poets whose words the narrator claims to have written. She repeats the words: 'Solo nel doppio regno/ le voci si fanno/ eterne e dolci' (dr, p.120),<sup>145</sup> claiming to be unaware of their origin in one of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, a poem which meditates on that classical poet, who draws inspiration from his visit to the underworld.

<sup>143</sup>Sigrid Weigel in Ecker (ed.), p.73.

<sup>144</sup>Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.95.

<sup>145</sup>Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Die Sonette von Orpheus' in Foster (ed.), p. 403:

Nur wer die Leier schon hob  
auch unter Schatten,  
darf das unendliche Lob  
ahnend erstatten.

*Only he who has raised the  
lyre even among the  
shades may sense and  
dispense the infinite praise.*

Nur wer mit Toten vom Mohn  
aß, von dem ihren,  
wird nicht den leisesten Ton  
wieder verlieren.

*Only he who ate of their  
poppy with the dead will  
never lose even the softest note.*

Mag auch die Spiegelung im Teich  
oft uns verschwimmen:  
Wisse das Bild.

*Though the reflection in  
the pond may often  
dissolve before us -  
Know the symbol !*

Erst in dem Doppelbereich  
werden die Stimmen  
ewig und mild.

*Only in the double realm  
will the voices be lasting  
and gentle.*

The endorsement of a third invisible realm, suspended between life and death, is typical of Rilke's preoccupation with space. Although this liminal realm is important in this novel, a related notion of space, central to Rilke's thought, 'Weltinnenraum' (world-innerspace), has as great an impact on Capriolo. This idea is constituted by a collapsing of boundaries between the external and the internal. Capriolo has seen 'questa subordinazione dell'esterno all'interno' (Ania, p.317) as a recurrent theme in her work, indeed as a waiter of the hotel tells the narrator, 'i termini "interno" e "esterno" sono puramente convenzionali' (dr, p.29). Rilke himself is regarded as a poet attempting to articulate 'the inner spaces no-one thought existed.'<sup>146</sup> In *Il doppio regno* we see the longing for impossible spaces, even from within the fantastic space of the hotel, when the narrator hears the music played by the staff: 'e la nostalgia che mi ispira è quella senza rimedio di una *patria inesistente* dalla quale continui a giungermi un richiamo cui non è possibile rispondere.' Yet it is a collapsing of spatial limits between the subject and the object which we witness the narrator of *Il doppio regno* undergoing until by the final line the hotel and self are one: 'Non sono nulla, o se sono qualcosa sono l'albergo' (dr, p.168). For Rilke the supreme symbol of this magical process is the rose, as Capriolo writes in a review of his work:

La rosa è completa e insieme trascendente, totalmente racchiusa in se stessa e totalmente compenetrata da quanto la circonda: costituisce l'incarnazione di quel ritmo che lega indissolubilmente l'uno all'altro l'io e il mondo, come la sistole alla diastole. Completezza e trascendenza, plasticità dei contorni e loro 'musicale' dissoluzione: è la duplice legge che governa quell' 'aperto' dove infine si placa ogni tensione di dominio e l'interiorità, non più separata dal tutto, riconosce di non essere altro se non 'cielo più intenso'<sup>147</sup>

This leads us to ask whether the labyrinthine structure of the hotel, with its elegantly overlapping layers holding the narrator firmly at its centre (we are told that room 208, hers, is the central point of the hotel, p.29) is not also a rose in this Rilkean sense? The linguistic tension, verging on disorder, suggested in the previous section, however gives the lie to any Rilkean sense of harmony in the novel, as the following quote illustrates:

<sup>146</sup>B. D. Barnacle, *Space, Essence and Angels in the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Kidderminster: Crescent Moon, 1993), p.5.

<sup>147</sup>Paola Capriolo, 'E il divino Rilke ordinò: da oggi esista l'universo', *Il corriere della sera*, 28 December 1995, p.20.

l'albergo sembrava essersi sviluppato a poco a poco da un nucleo originario con l'anarchia di un organismo dai geni impazziti. Vi erano sale raccolte *come petali* intorno ad anticamere esagonali, altre disposte a grappoli, in modo che la prima immettesse in due, queste in quattro, e così via, finché la progressione si interrompeva o si scostava capricciosamente dal suo andamento geometrico; vi erano serie lunghissime di stanze vuote, destituite di qualsiasi funzione, e altre dove mobili e suppellettili si contendevano il poco spazio in una strenua lotta per la sopravvivenza; vi erano corridoi senza porte che terminavano all'improvviso davanti a un muro, oppure descrivevano una "u" e riconducevano al punto dal quale erano partiti. Dall'interno non si riusciva a farsi idea dell'aspetto che l'edificio avrebbe avuto visto da fuori: certo non quello di una figura regolare, e nessun'altra forma definibile. (dr, p.28, *my italics*)

The uneasy pull between the two notions of space, the harmonious and the threatening arises from the fundamental discomfort on the part of the divided self in Capriolo's text.

Of all the male influences on Capriolo Rilke appears less problematic regarding his relationship with the female sex since the general view is that his repudiation of the body did not express itself as a form of misogyny but rather a straining towards androgyny - his famous angels being sexless beings. It is that same androgyny after which Capriolo's characters who 'hate flesh and blood' strive, but, as I have shown, fail to reach. Nonetheless Barnacle writes that 'Rilke is one of the most feminized of major poets', but, 'at the same time he was deeply ambivalent in his attitudes towards women. He feared and desired them, wishing to come close yet also to remain at a safer, controllable distance.'<sup>148</sup> He chose women as his muses, keeping their physicality, and his, at this distance through his passionate, but bodiless, written correspondences. It is worth noting that Rilke's ambiguity towards flesh and blood expresses itself in one particular poem which has had a clear influence on Capriolo's conception of her narrator: 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes'. The following extract demonstrates to what extent Rilke's own dissatisfaction with flesh and blood and his love-affair with death is displaced onto the female body, confounding notions of

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<sup>148</sup>Barnacle, p.2.

female life-giving powers. However 'feminized' a poet, Rilke falls into the old trap of treating woman as the embodiment of *the* sexed being:<sup>149</sup>

Wrapt in herself she wandered. *And her deadness  
was filling her like fullness.*

*Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness  
was she with her great death,* which was so new  
that for the time she could take nothing in.

She had attained a new virginity  
and was intangible; her sex had closed  
like a young flower at the approach of evening,  
and her pale hands had grown so disaccustomed  
to being a wife, that even the slim god's  
endlessly gentle contact as he led her  
disturbed her as too great an intimacy<sup>150</sup> (my italics)

This is evidence of what Adriana Cavarero considers the dominant theme in Western male thought: an obsession with death, as a negation of female reproduction. Even more so it takes us back to Elizabeth Bronfen's persuasive thesis that the male artist displaces a fear of death onto the female figure. The strong link between the narrator figure of *Il doppio regno* who feels a distance from what it means to be female and her vision of herself as a Eurydice in love with death suggest that she may be modelled on this kind of figure.<sup>151</sup> The clear preoccupation with death that Capriolo draws from Rilke is difficult to reconcile with the feminist appropriation of the double space, particularly when we reflect further on the shadowy presence of the mother in the text.

At the beginning of the narrator's stay in the hotel Capriolo teases her reader with her dreams and half-submerged memories of a previous existence, satirizing the human pattern of selective and inventive memory and, self-consciously, her own semi-autobiographical writing. This hotch-potch of possible memories haunts the narrator, but, whether fictional or not, their presence in her imaginary is itself of great importance. Elsewhere in Capriolo's work the power of female stereotypes over our and her imagination has been evident. When the truisms of these stereotypes are so

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<sup>149</sup> See Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*: 'Throughout the history of Western culture, moreover, male-engendered female figures [...] have incarnated men's ambivalence not only toward female sexuality but toward their own (male) physicality.' (p.12)

<sup>150</sup> from 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.' *Selected Poems: Rilke*, trans. and introduced by J.B. Leishman (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p.41.

closely and damagingly linked to a construction of the female body as oppressive enclosure, as we have seen, it is not surprising that the narrator rejects her female sexuality completely. I have suggested that we witness a struggle in casting them off because all that the narrator has to replace them is a male 'universal'. The following quotation refers to two of these contentious thoughts or memories that part way into the novel the narrator claims to have forgotten,

Rileggendo queste pagine trovo riferimenti a immagini delle quali ho smarrito ogni memoria: una mano femminile, per esempio, "tesa verso di me" (cito testualmente) "dal finestrino di un treno". Non la rammento affatto, e neppure il volto d'uomo cui altrove ho accennato. La stessa distinzione tra uomini e donne mi risulta ormai oscura, sebbene io non abbia dimenticato di essere una donna, o di esserlo stata. (dr, p.72)

The second figure refers to the shadowy figure of a male who has already been described as suggesting a certain suffocating anxiety. The first memory may be her mother and overall her 'memories' are dominated by the notion of motherhood in a way that suggests a great deal about the narrator's attempts to lose her sexuality. This predominance also underlines the autobiographical form of the fiction. As Sidonie Smith explains:

The woman who chooses to write her life story must negotiate the figures of "man" and the figures of "woman" promoted by the cultural discourses around her. This framework posits certain dynamics that structure women's life writing, including the way in which the autobiographer who is a woman must suspend herself between paternal and maternal narratives, those fictions of male and female selfhood that permeate her historical moment.<sup>152</sup>

Thanks to the double distancing technique of fantastic fiction the paternal and maternal figures gain in symbolic significance. As the first collection of short stories suggested we can read her relationship with the paternal principally through her response to laws, culture, and institutions, the figure of the mother is accessed most frequently through the body and any maternal literary precedents only emerge from a subtler subtext. In the quote given above the maternal metonym is the 'mano

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<sup>151</sup> 'Eurydice' is one of the names which she tries to link to her past self. She also dreams that she is following Bruno out of the hotel, only to turn back herself.

<sup>152</sup> Sidonie Smith cit. by Parati, p.11.

femminile', which she has speculated earlier may be a moment of traumatic separation from her own mother, even her death:

Rosa o Maddalena potrebbe essere mia madre, potrebbe essere la donna che un giorno mi tese la mano attraverso il finestrino del treno e che, forse a torto, suppongo sia mia madre. Il rimpianto legato a quei nomi e a quell'immagine frammentaria è così intenso di farmi dubitare che, se per un miracolo dovessi uscire di qui, potrei ancora toccare la mano dalle vene in rilievo, stringerne tra le mie le dita scarne. (dr, p.60)<sup>153</sup>

This fear of loss and death also translates itself into a fear of the female body, through her association of this image, Laura and a sense of mortality:

Ma più di ogni altra cosa, a divulgare il segreto del tempo così gelosamente custodita erano le vene gonfie e azzurrognole che percorrevano il dorso delle mani [di Laura]. Quel segno di decadenza occultata mi fece risonare un eco profonda nella memoria, costringendomi per un attimo a considerare Laura con sentimenti diversi. (dr, p.106)<sup>154</sup>

This chain of links between the mother, giver of life, and mother-nature, bringer of death is deeply inscribed upon our culture, as Rilke's poetry indicates. Such a fear of her own female nature as symbol of mortality would suggest the narrator's absorption of these very cultural mores. It also gives another explanation of why, in the hotel, the masculine becomes synonymous with the eternal.

The idea that the narrator experiences a specific spiritual gap and physical fear *as a female* is reinforced because it is through the female body that she makes her connection with, and reawakens her fear of, the transience of life. If this fear of the body constitutes a central element of the novel's spatial liminality, it is the narrator's own experience of motherhood which suggests to us that this aspect is specifically female. The recurrent theme of the fear of physical dissolution of self in other, associated in particular with mothers and daughters, is nowhere expressed so clearly as in the following passage, through the transgenerational motif of the hand:

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<sup>153</sup>Rosa and Maria Maddalena are the names of Capriolo's grandmother and mother respectively, see Gillian Ania's introduction to *The Dual Realm*, footnote 14. p.xxxi.

<sup>154</sup>See also: 'Mi domando perché da fuori, dalla vita, mi sia giunta quell'allusione a un distacco irrimediabile, a un sonno senza risveglio, e perché l'associ alle vene in rilievo sulle mani di Laura?' (dr, p.138).

Su una spalla della bambina, in parte nascosta dai capelli, è appoggiata una mano femminile. Seguo con lo sguardo la linea dell'avambraccio, poi l'immagine si interrompe.

Anch'io ho occhi chiari, indecisi fra il verde e l'azzurro, e il ricordo di gonne ampie che mi divertivo a far ruotare, ma ciò non basta a darmi la certezza di essere stata la bambina della fotografia. Potrebbe trattarsi di mia figlia, e mia potrebbe essere la mano appoggiata sulla spalla. L'incapacità di rammentare altro di lei mi appare più terribile di tutte le colpe che sono andata congetturando finora, mi appare il segno di una separazione irrevocabile.(dr, p.68)

The narrator's strong sense of guilt (reinforced by the strong identification with two archetypally guilty 'mothers' Otilie and Anna Karenina) suggests that her denial of her sex involves yet another separation - one involving leaving the body. It also makes it appear the most necessary of all and thus woman's most debilitating handicap when it comes to entry into the realm of thought. The strong sense of trauma associated with this suggests that her rejection of femininity and femaleness may require more than the casting-off of a pure 'construct', that the roots of female experience are virtually impossible to destroy completely.

Another recurring memory and dream of guilt which contributes towards the association between the body and destruction is the mysterious symbol which has in fact driven her into the hotel: 'l'onda gigante'. This has been interpreted, amongst other things, as a symbol of 'il nichilismo moderno'.<sup>155</sup> It could equally be a memory of female experience. For a wide variety of men and women, even feminist critics of many backgrounds, the image of water is associated with the female body.<sup>156</sup> In defining the wave variously as the Dionysian, life itself and reality, Capriolo says she was particularly struck by a response of Pietro Citati's, which she believes referred to this wave, 'di non aver mai incontrato, in un libro di questi anni, un terrore così angoscioso della realtà.'<sup>157</sup> The strength of this anguish could well be evidence of Paglia's view of the modern woman: 'the more she develops her imagination, the

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<sup>155</sup> Adriana Cavarero, in conversation at the University of Warwick, 1996.

<sup>156</sup> Camille Paglia has somewhat controversially made out an essentialist argument that woman has been excluded from culture because 'nature's burden falls more heavily on one sex'. Despite the overtly polemical nature of her argument her statement that 'woman's body is a sea acted upon by the month's lunar wave motion' taps into a lasting association of water with the female and the threat of the female. (*Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London and New Haven: Yale University, 1990), pp.9-11)

<sup>157</sup> Pietro Citati, 'Il giorno delle locuste', *La repubblica*, 1 June 1991, cit. in Ania, p.340.

fiercer will be her struggle with nature - that is, the intractable physical laws of her own body.<sup>158</sup>

The power of Capriolo's symbol however forces us to ask whether this force really comes from within women or from outside them. Is this mythical, stereotypical image of woman a reflection of a real experience or one constructed? Capriolo not only mentions Karenina but Otilie, whose auto-destruction, when her passion cannot reach its fulfilment, is connected to the threatening power of water by her responsibility for the baby's death by water. Water's destructive powers not only punish them in this case but become one with the woman as the following quote suggests:

Ma l'io che si nasconde sotto queste maschere è un'entità sconosciuta, uscendo dai propri confini si è dilatato al punto di non consentirmi più di capirlo né di dominarlo. È una voragine che inghiotte tutto, che comprende tutto, anche l'albergo, questo mio corpo immenso nel quale mi smarrisco. E a volte, nella lucida avidità con cui la mia mente divora man mano ogni cosa, mi pare persino di essere l'onda dalla quale un giorno sono fuggita. (dr, p.154)

Neither Capriolo's words, however, nor the narrative structure of the novel convince us that the water image is an unequivocally internal surge. Herrmann's ideas about the manipulation of the female imaginary by a male system suggest that the narrator's fear of the invasive flooding could be linked to a terror of annihilation through a heterosexual romance, an invasion from *without*:

La «rêverie» de la femme est fonction d'un monde où rien ne se réalise comme elle l'entend.

Cependant l'état de rêverie peut être merveilleusement exploité: le choc du réel dans l'imaginaire ou le subjectif est si violent, déclenche un tel *train d'ondes*, se répercute dans toutes les parties de l'être avec une force si aiguë, qu'il possède une valeur érotique troublante. Un homme qui pénètre dans l'imaginaire d'une femme, possède beaucoup plus que son corps: il est entré dans son être.<sup>159</sup> (my italics)

Jehlen's words that: 'the female territory might well be envisaged as one long border, and independence for women, not as a separate country, but as open access to the

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<sup>158</sup>Camille Paglia, pp.9-11.

<sup>159</sup>Herrmann, p.79.

sea'<sup>160</sup> take us back to the opening scene of the book and hint at the narrator's fear of female space. The initial image of the great wave rushing towards the fragile civilisation of the seaside resort may be as much symptomatic of society's inability to cope with the 'female' as a textual idea they have made out of it - thus generating fear and rejection not only in men, but also in women themselves. The association of the female with death entails not only a terror of death itself but also a terror of the fact that oneself, as a woman, is associated with death and the unfathomable.

Irigaray, in her essay 'Plato's *Hystera*',<sup>161</sup> observes that the famed cave represents the womb and therefore that the feminine is rejected by Plato's seminal work of Western philosophy in favour of the father - the sun. The narrator of this novel, however, explicitly rejects the 'sun' and returns to the 'womb' offered by the hotel in order to seek, and more importantly find, at least in part, the 'ideals'. In this way she conflates spiritual discovery and the security of the maternal in spite of herself. In this sense she does attempt to conflate public and private realms and in doing so echoes the writers of Parati's study who 'rewrite the private and public [...] to construct an autobiographical space as an "in-between" realm.' This is exactly what a fictitious autobiography attempts to do through its very form. However where, in Parati's writers, that realm is 'a marginal space where public and private spheres and roles can be represented and stripped of the traditional connotations of superiority and inferiority'<sup>162</sup> it is on this count that overall Capriolo's fails, despite its subtext of discontent, to break out of conventional pre-packaged definitions of the two realms. This ambiguity may well be the key to the choice of fiction as a medium and its success as a novel.

Memories of a possible mother figure surface elsewhere. We witness a loss of the complete mother figure: footsteps and a hand are all that remain to begin with and

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<sup>160</sup>Myra Jehlen, 'Archimedes and the paradox of feminist criticism', *Signs* 6 (1981), 575-601 (p.582). Appropriately Jehlen uses this simile to express the impossibility of looking at women's writing as an autonomous territory and the necessity of recognizing the impact of the male-authored text: 'The trouble is that the map of an enclosed space describes only the territory inside the enclosure. Without knowing the surrounding geography, how are we to evaluate this woman's estate, whose bordering peaks we have measured anyway, not by any internal geography, but according to those of Mount St. Dickens and craggy Hardy?'

<sup>161</sup>Luce Irigaray, *The Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C.Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp.243-364. Originally published as *Speculum de l'autre femme*, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1974)

<sup>162</sup>Parati, p.11.

they are allowed to fade - or are suppressed. The narrator shows a marked sensitivity to this theme in particular, once again provoked by Laura:

“Può darsi che io sia sola al mondo.”

“Così giovane? Avrà almeno una madre.”

“Perché proprio una madre?”

“O un padre, o un fratello,” ha aggiunto lei, sconcertata dal tono brusco della mia domanda. “Ho detto una madre perché è la prima cosa che mi è venuta in mente.”

“Sembra turbata, cara” ha osservato Guido. “Laura deve avere toccato un tasto sbagliato.” (dr, p.155)

The ghost of a mother figure reminds us of the palimpsestic form of the novel, in which the sexed experience for the female remains just below the surface of articulation, ‘the sexual difference which we carry is empirically an immediacy which has not risen to the symbolic, it is a presence which presents itself on the threshold of the word’ (teoria, p. 214). In a certain sense the mother remains in the private sphere which underlies the public sphere of the text, in ‘the protective shell of unspeakable words’.<sup>163</sup> This evasive presence takes us back to the general absence of mothers in the nineteenth-century woman writer’s work, observed by Marianne Hirsch, in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, who suggests that:

Women writers’ attempts to imagine lives for their heroines which will be different from their mothers make it imperative that mothers be silent or absent in their texts, that they remain in the prehistory of plot, fixed both as objects of desire and as examples not to be emulated<sup>164</sup>

The *literary* nature of this suppression of the female body is underlined by a sublimation of the trauma into the very physical images used to talk about books:

Con uno strazio forse eccessivo, quale non riuscivo a provare pensando alle vittime umane della catastrofe, immaginavo i volumi squadernati di colpo, le copertine distrutte, le pagine, strappate dalle rilegature, che a poco a poco si imbevevano d’acqua fino a decomorsi in una poltiglia biancastra.(dr, p.45)

Nei quaderni più antichi l’inchiostro ormai scolorito rende i caratteri indistinguibili, e non si può neppure dire che le pagine siano coperte. Illividite,

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<sup>163</sup>Parati, p.6.

<sup>164</sup>Hirsch, p.34.

piuttosto, come dal trasparire di *un intrico di vene* sotto la pelle sottile dei fogli.  
(dr, p.56, my italics)

The motif of the veins lead us back to the female body. This suppression of the mother and the female body fits in with an overall need to align herself with a masculine culture and hints that the trauma is caused by the failure of the fathers and brothers' worlds to accommodate her. Her indecision between the worlds of the mother (whose world is in fact also constructed by patriarchy as a sphere within his own private sphere<sup>165</sup>) and the father (note that the only 'paternal' figure actually mentioned in the book is the hotel manager, thus making the whole paternal) would also explain the underworld resonance of the Demeter/Persephone myth. If 'Persephone literally enacts the bi-sexual oscillation of the Freudian female plot'<sup>166</sup> then this heroine's experience is a literary expression of that dilemma of alignment, already alluded to in the opening section of this chapter.

The very theme of the lost mother suggests a secret alignment with at least one literary mother: Morante. We have already seen the strong links between Capriolo's work and Morante's two early novels and once again it is impossible to look at this story of a traumatic withdrawal from the world without considering Elisa, queen of self-imposed isolation, for whom: 'Il mio tempo e il mio spazio, e la sola realtà che m'apparteneva, eran confinati nella mia piccola camera'.<sup>167</sup> As this quote indicates this anti-heroine also creates her own world, showing a particular predilection for confusing the real, the fictional and the imaginary in her reconstruction of the past. It is suggested by this narrator that this process may also have its roots in her reading material almost all of which belong 'al genere fantastico' (*Menzogna*, p.21). Elisa's confinement becomes an extension of her entrapment in the 'presente eterno'<sup>168</sup> of her past 'questa camera non è molto mutata dal giorno in che vi entrai per la prima

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<sup>165</sup>Parati, 'The private sphere as inhabited by woman as wife, daughter, mother or sister represents only a component, what I would call the *matroneum*, of the realm that is completed by the privileged spaces of privacy inhabited by Man.' (p.6) '*Matroneum*, that "sphere within a sphere", is a term which allows me to ignore the physical boundaries of the home in order to privilege the investigation of the limiting discourses of female "spaces" and feminine roles.'(p.7)

<sup>166</sup>Hirsch, p.103.

<sup>167</sup> *Menzogna e sortilegio* (Torino: Einaudi, 1948, reprinted in 1994, edition cited), p.20. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text and marked *Menzogna*.

<sup>168</sup>See dr: 'È come se invece di risalire all'indietro, verso un passato che ha cessato di esistere, mi affacciassi a guardare un presente eterno la cui permanenza fosse del tutto indipendente dalla mia attenzione.'(p.13)

volta.’ (*Menzogna*, p.21). She too therefore is a person for whom ‘il rapporto fra realtà interiore e mondo esterno perde ogni nettezza di confini stabiliti.’<sup>169</sup>

Although Morante has pointed to the inevitably autobiographical nature of fiction, her more generally acknowledged ironic distance from the heroine’s failure to control the ghosts of the past is not present in Capriolo’s novel. The narrator of *Il doppio regno* does not even want to organise them into a narrative, or to sort fact from fiction, but to escape them completely, particularly the idea of motherhood, endorsing her similarity with the nineteenth-century writer defined by Hirsch. If ‘few of us ever get to know the real mother, her real power, or the limits of her power. Instead she survives as specter alternately overwhelming and confusing’<sup>170</sup> certainly Elisa and Capriolo’s narrator represent the majority, but the difference in tone between the two novels situates them on different sides of the shifting fantastic/realist boundary which has important implications for their effect.

Both novels end with the vital, supernatural significance of a cat.<sup>171</sup> The fantastic nature of Elisa’s relationship to the world is one grounded in her own fantasy; for her the cat is something onto which she projects her own desires for reciprocated love. With the narrator of *Il doppio regno* the truly fantastic nature of her world, which may be a projection of her inner mind, never allows us to make such a clear decision about what or where the cat is. We are returned to the issue of the fantastic providing a cover for the intimately autobiographical nature of the novel, which both invites interpretation (Capriolo’s love for her cat being one of the distinguishing features as a public persona, she is often photographed with it) and evades it.

This subtle distinction lies most clearly in the authors’ relationship to space. In order to move themselves into a new world, where they can escape the emotion of everyday life, both the narrator’s and Elisa’s trauma is expressed in spatial terms. Elisa makes a new world out of the world of her flat, in her womb-like study, but she chooses to go there and presumably can choose to leave. Throughout *Menzogna e*

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<sup>169</sup>Giovanna Rosa, *Cattedrali di carte: Elsa Morante Romanziere* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1995), p.61.

<sup>170</sup>Evelyn Fox Keller cit. by Hirsch, p.167.

<sup>171</sup>Given the striking similarity of use, this would seem to be a more probable source for the origin of Capriolo’s ‘gatto tigrato’ than *Alice in Wonderland*, one of Capriolo’s favourite childhood texts. (See Ania, p.334) There is however no reason why there should not be more than one source for such a symbolical animal. Capriolo has commented that the cat is ‘il simbolo stesso della casa, del focolare

*sortilegio* there lies a hope that Elisa can release herself from the cycle of 'lies' and 'spells' of her family romance and literature itself - when she fails there is a sense that the author maintains an ironical, if sympathetic distance. The narrator of *Il doppio regno* claims that she is forced into the hotel by catastrophe and is then held there by some power beyond her. This difference lies in the notion of the fantastic space. A psychological explanation for Elisa's room can be found, even a psychoanalytical source.<sup>172</sup> However, in *Il doppio regno* the uncertainty typical of the fantastic keeps us guessing as to whether something supernatural is at play, something stronger than the narrator. In leaving this hesitation unresolved for the reader Capriolo has taken the theme of spatial enclosure present in Morante and moved it into a new dimension, shattering its last vestiges of realist content.<sup>173</sup>

The narrator asks towards the end of the novel whether 'Vi sono dunque relazioni segreti tra i due mondi? (dr, p.158). Indeed it would seem that the one somehow mirrors the other - if we consider her memory of the first hotel: 'tornando avrei forse ritrovato ogni cosa come l'avevo lasciata, il lungomare, la sala dalle grandi vetrate, la mia camera con i bagagli e la serratura con la chiave.' (dr, p.26) we can see that the second hotel on the other hand offers closure, no windows, no possessions, no lock or key. Yet this exact reversal suggest that in fact no real gain has been made in her move. The outside world was characterized by impossible choices. The first of these is represented by the dizzying, open spaces of the sea.

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domestico' (Ania, p.341). The presence of this familiar in the hotel suggests the sometimes stifling overlap between the space of the female interior and the private domestic interior.

<sup>172</sup>See M. Bardini 'Dei "fantastici doppi" ovvero la mimesi narrativa dello spostamento psichico' in *Per Elisa: Studi su 'Menzogna e Sortilegio'* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi Editori, 1990), pp.173-300. 'La descrizione della camera di Elisa nel capitolo secondo dell' 'Introduzione' ci offre un altro esempio di contaminazione: come si dimostra un altro contributo di questo volume, la topografia della stanza è modellata in base alla "rappresentazione spaziale" che Freud dà del concetto di rimozione nella lezione XIX della Introduzione allo studio della psicoanalisi.' (p.188). Her contention that Morante was heavily influenced by, mainly second-hand, readings of Freud is brought to the convincing conclusion that the cat Alvaro represents, 'il totem dell'irrisolto e irriducibile complesso edipico di Elisa, la quale, senza avvedersene minimamente, si è ingannata da sola: amare devotamente Alvaro e costruire meticolosamente una cronaca gigantesca che legittimi questa adorazione sarà soltanto il suo ultimo, terapeuticamente inutile spostamento.' (p.193)

<sup>173</sup>This relationship with Morante's text could be read as a surprising link with the thought of the 'Diotima' which Renate Holub summarizes as follows, 'it is a relation of difference between symbolic mothers and daughters which powerfully creates the condition of new and liberatory possibilities. By positing herself not as the same but as different from the other woman, who is in any event "the other" of male discourse, by positing, that is, herself as similar but not the same woman creates the condition for exploiting the double alterity inscribed in woman's condition. She is at once "the other" of male discourse, but also the "similar other" of a feminine discourse.' Renate Holub, 'Weak Thought and Strong Ethics: The "Postmodern" and Feminist Theory in Italy', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 9 (1991), p.136-7.

Mi pare ormai [...] incredibile di essere la medesima persona che un tempo viveva senza stupore in quella luminosità, la medesima che contemplava quello spazio sterminato e poteva distogliere gli occhi da un simile spettacolo *per tornare alla lettura*. (dr, p.12, my italics)

The challenge of the 'open access to the sea', an unpredictable element, is overwhelming for the narrator and she turns her back on it, turns to the male-dominated world of art. The second instance of the outside world, from which she seeks refuge, was the grid of streets and barriers - a world conceived by man:

Eppure vedo ancora una porta che si apre, e fuori una strada fiancheggiata da due file di edifici. Niente di particolarmente bello, ma pur sempre una strada, un luogo aperto; una strada che incrocia altre strade che a loro volta incrociano altre strade, in una rete sterminata di alternative, per consentire di andare dovunque si voglia. Questo pensiero mi dà le vertigini. Se mai trovassi l'uscita, mi fermerei sgomentata sulla soglia e tornerei indietro. (dr, p.43)

This world offers choices, which she wants to avoid because they are either dizzying in their infinitude or have a grid-like format. Similar inflexibility occurs at the beginning of the book as she attempts to flee the wave, 'forse la lunga curva della costa è interamente circondata da questa barriera che mi impedisce di allontanarmi dal mare.' (dr, p.15). Eventually she makes out 'un vicolo insinuarsi strettissimo tra due case' which leads to the hotel. The hotel world is not, however, a solution, associated as it is initially with suffocation ('nella sua atmosfera protettiva era però qualcosa di soffocante', dr, p.22) and a frightening surrender to a male prescription of dissolution. Its laws, however, are more inaccessible and perhaps therefore more desirable. Indeed the hotel seems constructed by obscure external forces constricting her against her will at every turn. Its dominance reigns supreme, penetrating her mind, as well as her body:

A lungo ho creduto di ricordare sognando, ora ho il sospetto di sognare quando ricordo; e ho il sospetto, tanto poco mi sembra di esistere dinanzi alla *schacciante realtà di questo luogo*, che i sogni non siano miei, ma passino attraverso la mia mente come per un tramite, per un mezzo, come la corrente elettrica passa attraverso un filo. (dr, p.124, my italics)

If the narrator will not face up to the open space of the sea, there is little difference between the two remaining spaces offered by the two hotels. For Bruno the second hotel constitutes 'una certa irrazionalità di architettura' (dr, p.104) suggesting it may have the singular oddness of art, but it is still acceptable as part of his world. The narrator takes refuge from an alien world in the world of art whose spaces are almost as alien. For her it is all one: 'tutto il mondo è un labirinto' (dr, p.159). If she chooses to go back to the world as a woman she will continue to experience alienation.<sup>174</sup> By staying in the hotel she may overcome that sense of separation but at the cost of the erasure of the specificity of her female gender.

How is it possible then to reconcile the apparently divergent subtext of the struggle for female identity as a writer with the declared inspiration for the novel of the Rilkean 'Doppelbereich', if at all? Its possibility may lie in the the novel form itself, as Kristeva observes: 'the novel is not possible unless the disjunction between two terms can be denied while all the time being there, confirmed, and approved. It is presented, now, as *double* rather than as *two irreducible elements*.'<sup>175</sup> The notion of 'fictitious autobiography' and the fantastic manipulation of space in the novel are two ways we have of gaining access to the site of this disjunction.

It is often suggested that the dual realm is the hotel, a limbo, where the author is neither dead nor alive, male nor female. However, I would argue that the duality traced in this chapter finds its point of origin and return in the only remaining mirror of the narrator - in her journal writing.<sup>176</sup> The hotel has no mirrors because the fictional mirror exists in the shape of the journal as reflection of the narrator, as

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<sup>174</sup> Adriana Cavarero foregrounds the linguistic nature of this alienation: 'What she [the female subject] experiences as a *subject* in the language which is external to her, in spite of or rather in force of its being an external language which does not contemplate her, is separateness itself.' 'Per una teoria della differenza sessuale' in *The Lonely Mirror: Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory*, ed. by Sandra Kemp and Paola Bono (London: Routledge, 1993), p.201.

<sup>175</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: a semiotic approach to literature and art* ed. by Leon. S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon. S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p.84.

<sup>176</sup> Nash highlights the possible links between mirror and text: 'Unlike the window and *perhaps* like a book, as a source of knowledge [a mirror] is only and totally "reflective". Astonishingly, mirrors and mirror-like objects are the sole means by which we can directly "know" our image [...]. The mirror is the instrument of self-regard. Yet in the very act of 'seeing directly' ourselves, we see not our self but our double; someone outside this someone we are. And someone who is the reverse of ourself; a negative double whom we shall never see "positively" unless we once again double our mirror, looking through mirror to mirror, ever distancing ourselves from ourselves. Thus the mirror brings both replication and contradiction, in infinite multiplication and an unremitting displacement and alienation, estrangement.' Cris Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide* (London and New York: Longman, 1987), p.184.

reflection of the author. The narrator is a disembodied reflection, distanced through the telling. The subtle hall of mirrors is in fact taking shape between author and text, narrator and journal:

È come se osservassi la mia vita interiore in uno specchio che la scompone e la ricompone secondo leggi proprie alterandone l'insieme, distorcendone ogni singolo particolare, e io stessa sono l'immagine illusoria e quella vera, e sono l'occhio che guarda, e sono lo specchio. (dr, p.162)

The writing of a journal is a dual realm which precludes closure. Closure in this novel would be the acceptance of a (limited) female identity by leaving the hotel or a definitive denial of female subjectivity by staying in the hotel. Although she seems to have taken the latter decision by the end it is difficult to decide to what extent the end of a novel constitutes a closure. Neither option for closure being satisfactory the narrator can contemplate both options through her writing. In the same way the author can contemplate her own experience and distance it twice over through the model of a fictitious autobiography. She uses the fantastic genre to render it stranger, to keep the reader outside, intrigued, trying to fathom the 'illogical'.

The hotel itself, then, is not the locus of journal writing - the latter belongs to the narrator's internal dual realm. It is, rather, the locus of pure Art, of language, of music, of style, of the Apolline, all associated with the male. Here "“preservare” is the concept which helps the narrator to 'penetrare in parte le regole dell'albergo'(dr, p.42), suggesting it is a stronghold of traditional culture. It is for this reason that woman can only enter fully on certain conditions, the loss of her womanhood. This would explain the convoluted feelings towards the hotel that emerge through the narrator's relationship to its space. She alternately perceives it as comforting and threatening. Entertaining the possibility of having created this space herself she suggests the degree of her complicity with its oppressive hierarchy: 'Forse l'albergo stesso è soltanto la gabbia che mi sono fabbricata, il farsi spazio di un'ignota ossessione'(dr, p.153). She dramatizes her own participation in the 'artificial absolute': 'talora mi immagino che se me ne andassi senza più volgermi indietro l'intero albergo si sgretolerebbe istantaneamente, riducendosi a un nulla di polvere, come i palazzi incantati delle fiabe.'(dr, p.101). Green's suggestion that both collusion and resistance go into upholding patriarchal artistic systems is confirmed in this

novel.<sup>177</sup> Such remarks also serve to heighten the self-reflexive nature of the text encouraging us to reflect on the breakdown between narrator and author, journal and text. In the light of the fictitious autobiography we can detect the author's voice slipping into the text: 'Forse il passato ha assunto per me tanta importanza da quando è diventato un immenso spazio quasi deserto e inaccessibile'(dr, p.89). The author's intense involvement in the text is made clear by words suggesting her need for the text as a distant space in which to see her past reflected: time transformed into space.

This pattern of repulsion towards and acceptance of the hotel reflects the duality kept alive as long as she writes the journal in her attitude towards the realm of male-dominated art and the outside world. The symbolism of her acceptance of the flute, offered to her by the director of the hotel, and which she ultimately flees, only to take it up again later, enacts this drama quite clearly and destroys any notion that this is a step away from the law of the Father. We saw the evidence of this threatening paternal side to the hotel emerging in Capriolo's description of the dream which inspired the novel. It would not be too much to suggest that the monsters she attempts to manage in her writing could well be the cultural images which haunt her, and still, ultimately, govern the hotel. Weigel writes that

when writing down her unconscious, her fears and desires - even the totally regressive dreams of dependence - woman discovers a mass of images in herself, a terrible confusion of misleading images and rebellion caused by desire. By traversing these images in writing (and also by living them to get them out of her system) woman can free herself from them and come to an independent consideration of herself, her culture, her society<sup>178</sup>

The 'writing out' of this experience should constitute a liberation. Capriolo's case is clearly more ambiguous, leaving a large questionmark over the potential for 'liberation' for the female writer aligning herself with a male-authored tradition within contemporary society. However if the hotel has the upper hand by the end of the novel, there is still a possibility that the doubting narrator might escape. Whilst the hotel may suggest that she is only ever a guest in the realm of male thought, the guest may in theory always leave. The letter is never an absolute end, but it is sent out rather hopelessly into a non-existent space. If the narrator stops her journal and cannot find

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<sup>177</sup> Green, p.57.

<sup>178</sup> Weigel in Ecker (ed.) pp.79-80.

this non-existent space beyond gender outside her own head, or on the page, then she finally has to choose to side with one of her two worlds. Capriolo distances this 'split' female figure from herself through the fictitious autobiography. This alone however only indicates a negative - Capriolo no longer wishes to be divided. She clearly must decide to follow one route or the other - incorporating female experience into literature or pursuing excellence within male-defined parameters.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Until recently she seems to have followed the latter path. Only her most recent novel *Una di loro* transforms the fantastic in such a way as to do justice to her powers as a storyteller, by making her approach genuinely 'post-feminist'.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The space of textual (s)exchange

In this chapter I show how the fantastic represents a challenge and an opportunity for the female writer. It is one she may rise to in a variety of ways, bringing into that meeting a host of different generic sediments, as we find in the works of Duranti, Ombres and Mancinelli. This may be an autobiographical background, as is the case with Duranti, a poetical one, as in Ombres' case or a historical one, as for Mancinelli. Despite their diverse uses of the fantastic, what unites the authors with Capriolo however is that attraction to the ambiguous space of enclosure. This is an enclosure that may offer both a site for creativity and a closure on creativity, heavily associated with the shadow of the male-authored text. In the work of the authors analysed in this chapter this attraction to enclosure is set up against a powerful impulse towards the motif of travel, giving rise to a 'fantastic in movement.' This tension between the static and the motion is something they have in common with many contemporary Italian female writers of the fantastic. However the selection of writers examined here, as I suggested in the introduction, offer the greatest diversity and several windows onto the rich panorama of Italian women's writing of the fantastic.

#### i. Inventing the foreign(Oth)er and finding her: Francesca Duranti

"Books are powerful things. They can fetter one more than the walls of a prison."<sup>1</sup>

It was *La casa sul lago della luna* which really put Duranti in the public eye and gave her literary career a new infusion of life. Its eclectic origins range from the popular wisdom of higher quality women's magazines, to popular gothic fiction to more illustrious literary predecessors like Mary Shelley, Eugenio Montale and Mozart, but all these elements are fused in the work to give it the flavour of 'freshly-minted myth'.<sup>2</sup> The story of Fabrizio Garrone, impoverished, alienated and ineffectual translator with pretensions to the title of 'Germanist' could well be read as a modern moral fable about the perils of literary critical ambition. It is also the first of many of

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Jacobi, "Revelations in Black", *Penguin Book of Vampire Stories*. ed. Alan Ryan (London: Penguin, 1988), 282-300, p.11.

Duranti's portraits of modern men seeking refuge in art, as a result of their inability to manage human relationships. At vital moments in his pursuit of success Garrone eschews the confidence of the only two people who care about him: his practical girlfriend Fulvia and his childhood friend Mario.

On discovering the existence of a previously unknown text by a famous fin-de-siècle Austrian writer, Fritz Oberhofer, Fabrizio sets about tracing one of the few copies ever made. After tracking down a copy of the book entitled, with the German version of the metatextual title, *Das Haus am Mondsee*, on a trip to Austria, Fabrizio translates and, with the help of Mario, publishes it. Mario encourages Fabrizio to write a biography of the author, in part to compensate Fabrizio for discarding his clumsy introduction in favour of the market-driven choice of a renowned Germanist. The crucial years of Oberhofer's life, however - those of an affair by the said Moonlake which was supposed to have inspired the novel - seem to have evaporated without a trace, in particular any details of the writer's lover. Pushed to extremes, confiding in no-one, Fabrizio invents Maria, his ideal woman, to fill the missing pages. The biography is an even bigger success than the novel and, ironically, Maria is the principal focus of that success. Fabrizio begins to feel that he is losing hold of his creation as public interest soars and a 'Maria Lettner look' catches on. One critic even goes so far as to claim that *Das Haus am Mondsee* was itself written by Maria.

Duranti's novel steps into the realm of the fantastic as her hero receives a letter from someone claiming to be the grand-daughter of the invented lover. She is an Austrian woman called Petra Ebner, who claims to have the correspondence between her grandmother and Fritz Oberhofer. With this carrot she tempts Fabrizio to her 'house by Moonlake' - what she claims is the eponymous house. There Fabrizio, cut off from his familiar world, succumbs to a mysterious malady of inertia. He allows Petra to make love to him, and in her omnipresence his little energy ebbs away, rendering him incapable of asking for help even when he can see Fulvia outside, come to look for him. The novel ends as death approaches.

Many have seen the novel's obviously postmodern play with the literary theme as the secret of its success. Some responses to it have variously canonised it as an

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<sup>2</sup>J. O'Faolain, 'Happy Ending', *TLS*, 1991, No 4610, p.25. A review of Francesca Duranti's *Lieto Fine* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1987).

archetypal example and more rarely dismissed it as trend-following.<sup>3</sup> The best analyses using feminist theory have focused on its deconstruction of contemporary gender relations through its intertextual web.<sup>4</sup> Its female slant on the fantastic, in which literary self-consciousness and gender interest overlap, further illuminates our understanding of the relation between writing space and gender in the fantastic. Duranti seems an unlikely writer of the fantastic. Acclaimed for an interest in the logico-mathematical possibilities of the text, she regards writing as the difficult task of making literature with all its necessary mystification into an 'engine of revelation'. In relation to her literary development *La casa sul lago della luna* is usually regarded as a single and unique parodic venture into an uncharacteristic generic territory. What is less often noted however, is that even after this novel, she continues to incorporate a shadow of the fantastic into her subsequent fiction with varying degrees of success. The coincidence of this experimental approach with the themes of space, in particular the journey and the dialogic space, make her an interesting point of departure for the study of other examples of the intertextual and the female fantastic which I will undertake in this chapter. I will therefore look at *La casa sul lago della luna* together with Duranti's much later work *Sogni mancini* in order to tease out the knot surrounding the issues of gender, the fantastic and intertextual space in her work.

The novels between these two works constitute a series of increasingly direct approaches to the prickly theme that Duranti had approached only obliquely in *La casa sul lago della luna*: how can a woman write? Traces of the fantastic remain in Duranti's work after *La casa sul lago della luna*, constituting a vital underlay to her apparently common-sense carpet of realism. In this way the introjective aspect of intertextual anxiety forms a subtle cerebral subtext to Duranti's predominantly materialist analysis of women's experience of culture. The two counter-currents of realism and the fantastic persist in her work and at their most successful give it a

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<sup>3</sup> See John Thiem, 'The Textualisation of the Reader in Magical Realist Fiction' in Parkinson Zamora and Faris (eds). for an example of its canonisation and Gunde Kurtz, *Die Literatur im Spiegel ihrer selbst* (Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1991) for its dismissal: '[In *La casa sul lago della luna*] the thematization of literature affords no reflection on literature, still less on the book itself - it has become pure content.' (my translation, p.35)

<sup>4</sup> See De Ferra's introduction to *La casa sul lago della luna*; Shirley Vinall, 'Francesca Duranti: Reflections and Inventions' in *The New Italian Novel* ed. by Z. Baranski and L. Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp.99-120; Carol Lazzaro-Weis, pp.80-189 and Sharon Wood, 'Seductions and Brazen Duplications: Two Recent Novels from Italy', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 28 (1992), 349-362.

complexity, depth and female specificity which readings focussing on her archetypal postmodernity often overlook.

Comparing the plot outlines of Duranti's first three works might cause any reader to think that with *La casa sul lago della luna* she makes a clean break with autobiographical concerns. *La Bambina*<sup>5</sup> tells the story of her war time childhood in Tuscany and a difficult relationship with her authoritarian, cold mother and *Piazza mia bella piazza*<sup>6</sup> is a loosely disguised autobiographical account of the break-up of her first marriage over her writing. One might reasonably conclude that her evident dissatisfaction with the feminist 'anger' of *Piazza, mia bella piazza*<sup>7</sup> led her to step out of this rather sticky autobiographical territory into a different skin: a male one. As an extra distancing device what genre appears more antithetical to the project of autobiography than the fantastic? This increased caution surrounding the autobiographical in her work is part of an evolution in her treatment of autobiographical material. Duranti stresses that she is not someone always 'uguale a se stessa' and the inevitably autobiographical themes of gendered experience and intertextuality/ writing space undergo different permutations throughout her work. The fantastic thread offers one clear way in which to trace their development.

The notion of literary form as a means of coming to understanding of the self underpins much of Duranti's approach as a writer, as she makes clear in the later novel *Ultima stesura*, a complex autobiographical fiction. If at the stage of *La casa sul lago della luna* Duranti found it easier to deal with her experience of reality by treating it in a very different key, in relation to gender and genre, she would not be the first writer to do so. This speculation does not legitimate the tracing the underlying impulse in the text back to the author's life, but what the text tells us may do. As De Ferra points out: the novel 'is a third person narrative which has some points of contact with the autobiographical genre: in the first place because the action is driven by one character only, and in the second place on account of the use of the indirect free style.'<sup>8</sup> I would argue that Duranti's text provides us with much material to suggest that the intertextual anxiety which grips the protagonist is not only Fabrizio's.

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<sup>5</sup>*La Bambina* (Milano: La tartaruga, 1976); reprinted (Milano: Rizzoli, 1985, edition cited). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text and indicated by LB.

<sup>6</sup>*Piazza mia bella piazza* (Milano: La tartaruga, 1978)

<sup>7</sup>See Sharon Wood, 'Writing in a Changing World: An Interview with Francesca Duranti', *The Italianist*, 12 (1992), 186-195 (p.190).

The text operates a process of identification with the protagonist with which it must eventually break - the fantastic provides the means to do so. What Duranti shares with Fabrizio is a threat to her identity as a writer, arising from her autobiography, and by exorcising these ghosts she can produce in both *Lieto fine* and *Effetti personali* less autobiographical female characters. As I have suggested her relationship with intertextuality and the fantastic does not end here, indeed it continues to cast a shadow over areas which concern the question of intertextual anxiety. However I will begin by examining the trajectory in *La casa sul lago della luna* from the authorial identification to its severance and the central role the fantastic and the fantastic treatment of space in particular plays in this.

### **i.i Francesca and Fabrizio - sharing the paternal library**

Much has been written about the rich potential of the names given to characters in *La casa sul lago della luna*. Most analyses have focussed on the seemingly infinite configurations of couples and overlap of names which all play around the binary opposition of Male and Female: Fabrizio/Mario; Fabrizio/Fulvia; Fabrizio/Fritz; Fritz/Maria; Fabrizio/Maria; Fabrizio/Petra; Mario/Fulvia - a chain from which Fabrizio is ultimately eliminated. The novel itself encourages this reading, split into sections named after the three women in Fabrizio's trajectory: Fulvia, Maria, Petra. It charts a paradoxical emotional journey from a risky, potentially happy reality to a safe, nightmarish fantasy. Of course the 'silent' name and link is Francesca, whose initialled link with Fabrizio interestingly parallels the relationship between the two author-protagonists past and present, Fabrizio and Fritz and between the potentially happy lovers, Fabrizio and Fulvia, thus spanning the spiritual and physical. Whilst this has frequently been mentioned it deserves more analysis in order to determine how Duranti allows her character to reach the end he does, weaving into the text her own story of Self and Other, of a temporary identity constructed for the author by the text.

The opening scene finds Fabrizio at his work as a translator of German texts - an activity in which Duranti herself has also been involved.<sup>9</sup> He does not open the

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<sup>8</sup>De Ferra, introduction to *La casa sul lago della luna*, pp.ixv-xv.

<sup>9</sup>She has translated P.Härtling, *Risentimento* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1989) from the German *Nachgetragene Liebe*.

window of his flat until he has finished his translation, as if living off his own self-pity 'come in un esercizio respiratorio dell'anima'. This is the first of many parallels Duranti draws between an enclosed spatial arrangement, textual involvement and Fabrizio's emotional state - here a symbol of the stifling isolation this work brings with it and Fabrizio's destructive need to close himself in it. The symbolic protective shelter of another language and another's words for the emotionally inept Fabrizio also seems to forestall engagement with reality.

Eventually his love/hate relationship with this work transmutes into a sinister, all consuming encounter with another culture, which in fantastic tradition represents the unknowable Other. This is a point Duranti introduces from the beginning by choosing Austria as the country he must visit to retrieve the book. His childhood studies always took him to Germany, so on his arrival in Austria he is suddenly shocked by the Otherness of the German he hears spoken there - familiar and radically different. Although this uncanniness is parodic of Fabrizio's ineptitude as a traveller, Duranti's own negative feelings about the German language experienced as emotional alienation are something deeply rooted in her childhood. Like Fabrizio, Duranti comes from a privileged aristocratic background and has learnt German from a series of German nannies:

La cultura tedesca è arrivata a me attraverso la prima serie di 'nannies' che ho avuto e siccome la presenza di queste 'nannies' io la sentivo come il motivo, il simbolo della mia continua separazione dalla mia mamma, mi mettevo ad odiarle, e ho odiato anche il tedesco. Quindi il tedesco è la lingua che so meglio, una lingua nella quale sono in grado di leggere o capire qualsiasi cosa, ma non la pratico mai.<sup>10</sup>

She also shows little love of the translation work she has carried out.<sup>11</sup> This sinister invasion of Fabrizio in the form of the German language may in itself be linked to Duranti's own fears about her lost 'mother' tongue.<sup>12</sup> The more usual notion that the

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<sup>10</sup>my interview with Francesca Duranti, 24 July 1997, 11:15 a.m, Lucca.

<sup>11</sup> 'C'era da un lato una grande disinvoltura con questa lingua che conoscevo bene e dall'altro una grande antipatia. Per esempio, io adesso raramente scelgo di leggere un libro in tedesco: ho fatto qualche traduzione, ma non ho nessunissimo piacere nel leggere tedesco.' (In interview with Donatella De Ferra, bulletin for SIS, 2000)

<sup>12</sup>Interestingly Duranti's own negative feelings about the language are reversed in the character as De Ferra observes: 'Fabrizio's very attachment to German, the language of his Fraulein, rather than to his mother tongue can be read as symptomatic of this early lack of affection.' (introduction to *La casa sul lago della luna*, p.xx)

Other tongue may take over the tongue of the person translating is therefore intensified by the autobiographical detail of this childhood grief and forms the first of several significant bonds between Francesca and Fabrizio centred around the enclosing, potentially engulfing experience of the text.

The reasons Duranti herself gives for the choice of Austria as site of the fantastic is also illuminating: 'L'Austria è 'un paese che sembra una casa tenuta pronta per i proprietari che non ci sono, ma che potrebbero ritornare.'<sup>13</sup> I shall return to her use of symbolical language which focuses on the home, but this deserves special attention in the light of Duranti's own autobiography. Her parents were so absent from her childhood that in *La Bambina* her first striking introduction of them is as 'visitors'.<sup>14</sup> When Fabrizio meets death in Austria, in a house which, like the country, seems to be waiting for the return of its true owners, Fritz and Maria, he feels that

quel luogo facesse parte di una regione profonda della memoria, dove vivevano le cose viste o immaginate nell'infanzia. Se non era una fiaba potevano essere le Sacre Scritture o la casa di Socrate o il convento dove c'era il prozio abate, a Casamari, un edificio di cui aveva avuto una sola visione, ma indimenticabile, quando lui e Teodora, erano stati condotti laggiù per fare la prima comunione. E non era neppure sicuro che il termine di paragone remoto cui quella casa lo riportava fosse necessariamente un'altra casa; poteva essere un pensiero, una persona, un sogno. (CI, p.149)

This uncanny return to a childhood sensation may well also be that of Francesca, who was often waiting for her parents to return to complete her home, and her psychical well-being. Like Fabrizio, Duranti allows herself to confound fact and fiction, privileging the latter, but within the boundary lines of *her* text - the very boundary lines which Fabrizio violates by inviting the text into *his* life. The text creates a theatrical space for the performance of Duranti's desire. This intertextual (s)exchange can be played out against the spatial locations shared by Francesca and Fabrizio, but held at the requisite theatrical distance through fantastic dislocation.

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<sup>13</sup> Stefania Lucamante, 'Intervista a Francesca Duranti', *Quaderni d'Italianistica* 15 (1994), 247-255 (p. 252).

<sup>14</sup> 'Molti dei grandi venivano solo raramente [...] i più assidui di tutti erano un signore e una signora che frequentavano anche il piano superiore, dove a volte la Bambina andava a visitarli in una camera da letto preceduta da un immenso spogliatoio foderato di specchi. Questi signori erano il Papà e la Mamma, e a Francesca piacevano moltissimo.' (LB, p.14)

The fact that the novel opens on Fabrizio's activity as a translator may be important, but equally significant is his location: his reconstructed family library. The last remnants of his aristocratic background lie around him in the form of a portrait of Saint Jerome (patron saint of the translator) and the ruins of the 'biblioteca di famiglia' and within him as a disdain for modernity and a background of erudition and bilingualism. In creating a home around the fragments and traces of a lost history he clings to what he has salvaged from it for dear life. In his study of the reverberative quality of spatial images, *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard brings out the 'felicitous' function the image of the home has to protect the day-dreamer, which links it to his childhood:

Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of our former days. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are. We live by fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images.<sup>15</sup>

This precious access to the solitude of the past, however, is not limited to Fabrizio's occasional dreams or day dreams - it is tied up in his way of making a living. Bachelard's comment that 'We still have books, and they give our day-dreams countless dwelling-places'<sup>16</sup> reminds us of the sheltering function the library and his cultural education has in Fabrizio's life. Thus Bachelard's vision of the comforting aspects of the image of the shelter are turned into a critical nightmare in Duranti's text by assuming totality in Fabrizio's life. Using his library of books as a space from which to access the past, Fabrizio can only refer back to a past which was also fictional in some way - he spent his childhood in the library too. It is the totalising nature of the day-dreaming space which possesses Fabrizio from the beginning of the novel and means that Bachelard's 'oneiric house' 'which exists for each one of us' 'a house of dream memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past'<sup>17</sup> is far from being lost - it eventually takes form as the only reality.

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<sup>15</sup>Bachelard, pp.5-6.

<sup>16</sup>Bachelard, p.25.

<sup>17</sup>Bachelard, p.15.

As in Capriolo's case the 'paternal library' features as a dominant influence in Duranti's own cultural biography, as she admits later in the preface to her novel: *Sogni mancini*.<sup>18</sup> She plays down its significance in her childhood, when in *La Bambina* she describes the house as a person and situates the library in its bottom (LB, p.13)! The potential *weight* of the literary tradition is also a possibility which she assiduously avoids confronting in interview.<sup>19</sup> Yet in many of her novels the possibility of this anxiety comes across through a subdued autobiographical thread. The surprising number of parallels between her childhood home and Fabrizio's inevitably raise questions about how the obvious critique of Fabrizio's over-attachment to books is related to her own background. The strong connection between Fabrizio's childhood and his love of literature is connected to the dangerous effect reading can have on us of obliterating differences between subject and object, returning us to a stage of undifferentiation. Duranti's plea for reading as adults, as critics, is related in this way to a critical reading of one's own life. In showing a protagonist lost in a world of daydreams, she moves towards the notion of 'the examined life.'

The shared weight of cultural privilege is played out most clearly in the cipher of the elegant childhood home, a seventeenth century Genoese villa. Her description of her first childhood home in *La Bambina*: 'La casa dove abitava Francesca era rosa con le persiane verdi, e sorgeva nella parte più alta di quel bel giardino a terrazze di cui abbiamo parlato' (LB, p.12) echoes the description of the home Fabrizio remembers with such nostalgia: 'La casa di Fabrizio era la secentesca villa padronale, e come una grande nuvola rosa era scesa dal cielo a posarsi sul piano più alto' (Lc, p.15). There is clearly a healthy dose of self-parody in the echo of this vision through the most rose-tinted spectacles. Although *La Bambina* never strays into the territory of the nostalgic, she is clearly aware of the dangers of the image of the home as

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<sup>18</sup> This influence as we shall see later is depicted as a foundation stone of her bipolar thought, describing how it aspires to the same intellectual loyalty as that of her father, of which she writes in a preface: 'Imparai a conoscerla meglio in seguito: osservando che la sua amata biblioteca di ateo convinto custodiva la collezione completa del Migne. Tutta la patrologia greca e latina in quattrocento volumi amorosamente letti e annotati' (*Sogni mancini*, Milano: Rizzoli, 1996). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text and indicated by *Sogni*.

<sup>19</sup> 'A volte cioè l'input viene da cose non necessariamente d'arte, perché se io dovessi dire qual è lo scrittore che io venero più di tutti magari è Henry James, ma non mi sognerei mai di scrivere imitando lui.' (from my own interview with Francesca Duranti, 24 July 1997, Lucca)

something that does indeed create paralysing states of fixation. A temptation her own sharp refusal to idealise the past diffuses.

His inability to leave his past behind him keeps Fabrizio trapped, even when he leaves his flat, in a bubble of nostalgia that only seems to burst on his death-bed. The idea of being 'contro-corrente' is continual in his denigration of the society around him - the world of Milanese publishing, but also Italy more generally. Not only does Duranti admit to sympathizing with this aspect of Fabrizio's personality,<sup>20</sup> she also seems to have an uncomfortable relationship with national tradition - and refers again to her formative years as a cause. She does not see herself as belonging to an Italian tradition as a writer: 'Io sono cresciuta in questa casa molto distaccata dai miei genitori, i quali erano presi da altri problemi e sono stata allevata da una serie di governanti. Quelle che io ho avuto nel momento in cui ho cominciato a leggere i libri 'adulti', diciamo, erano inglesi e quindi in realtà ho maggior connessione con, non so, Austen, di quanto io abbia con qualsiasi scrittore italiano.'<sup>21</sup>

The notion of seclusion or self-exclusion has had a great impact on the way that she depicts national space in her novels. Characters uncomfortable with their social identity constantly seek sanctuary in a home or its simulacra and her writing has frequent recourse to metaphors of spatial limitations to define states of mind. They crave a safe enclosed space in which to cocoon themselves, in which the public and national identity is an Imaginary construct that cannot be threatened by the Real. This safe space has many different connotations of which art is frequently the most tempting. The potential danger of this closed space forms the central theme of *La casa sul lago della luna*, bringing it closer to Capriolo's work. By looking at this novel in the light of autobiography one can see that for all its parody and lightness, it contains an atom of fear which orbits around the nucleus of enclosure, the significance of which will increase as we trace its re-appearance in later work.

Whilst Duranti's characters fear open spaces, foreign travel and the unexpected which is the encounter with the Other or the foreigner, they also crave it. As Giorgio Rimondi reminds us in his Lacanian analysis of the fantastic, the search

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<sup>20</sup>Martha Witt, 'Incidentalmente femminista: Intervista a Francesca Duranti', *Leggeredonna*, 34 (1991). She says 'Io amo molto Fabrizio. Lo amo molto e mi identifico in Fabrizio, non in Valentina. Assomiglio più a Fabrizio che a Valentina nel senso che anch'io sono un po' blasé, che considero questa nuova cultura improvvisata un po' troppo sbrigativa rispetto alla cultura come l'hanno data a noi.'

for the desired object is like the search for a home, continually in the Other, always beyond reach: 'L'uomo "trova la sua casa in un punto situato nell'Altro, al di là dell'immagine di cui siamo fatti, e questo luogo rappresenta l'assenza in cui siamo."'<sup>22</sup> To find the ideal enclosure, which does not exist, one must constantly move. By setting up these two polarities Duranti's work leads to a preoccupation with boundaries. In Fabrizio's case this becomes a refusal to decide, the desire to remain in a state of ghostly liminality beyond choice. The importance of place and space which emerges from her fiction finds its resolution in the more flexible internationality which she attributes to her female characters - making them convincing 'nomadic subjects.' Ultimately they reject Fabrizio's fragile liminality in favour of a risky compromise, the real value of which lies in its ability to metamorphosize into something new.

The close parallels between Duranti and Fabrizio in all of these matters allow us to speculate about the two forms of the intertextual anxiety which we saw constantly overlap in Capriolo's writing: the authorial anxiety - the fear of being unable to write, and the introjective anxiety - the fear of the Other finding its way into the self via the text. We shall see Fabrizio suffers from both. He seems to find it difficult to start writing because his cultural past weighs down upon him (Duranti only started writing in her forties) and he feels himself to be on the margins of the literary world. He also lives in terror of his readership, wondering how they will 'take' Maria away from him. One might suggest that ultimately even Petra is little other than an extremely over-enthusiastic reader. This power of the readership is something Duranti herself may be wary of, particularly after the publication of such an autobiographical novel as *Piazza mia bella piazza*. The authorial aspect of Fabrizio's anxiety, however, is not the major theme of the book.

Introjective anxiety is. Duranti takes this anxiety and distances it firmly, making Fabrizio the co-author of his own uncanny end. By choosing a male protagonist Duranti is able to make latent concerns about the weight of the past as literature, about writers and readers, the boundaries of the text, enclosure and exclusion, palpable and mould them. The novel is, however, far more accomplished

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<sup>21</sup>from my own interview with Francesca Duranti, 24 July 1997, Lucca.

<sup>22</sup>J. Lacan cit. by Rimondi in 'Dall'Unheimlich all'oggetto a' in *Geografia, storia e poetiche del fantastico* ed. by Farnetti, p.175.

than some kind of therapeutic working out of an alter ego. In taking a male character Duranti realises that she has taken on board a very different set of co-ordinates from her own, which despite the similarity in background, set her protagonist up in direct opposition to herself. Her ambiguous relationship to her protagonist emerges most obviously in her positioning of him on the margins of culture - as an aspiring literary critic. This allows her to express an evident suspicion of the potentially parasitic role of the literary critic and biographer feeding off the artist in their creation of what turns out to be a secondary form of fiction. At the same time the perspective is from the position of the marginalized, which underlines a shared background. Turning the tables on a male protagonist who invents a female to 'get in on' the scene, Duranti makes a bold debut on the real literary scene by inventing the story of that male's failure. The mirror image is clearly reversed.

Traces of autobiographical *connection* with Fabrizio and the spatial nature of his intertextual anxiety are too strong to be overlooked. Nor can they be jettisoned completely because they are treated with a self-conscious irony. Clearly Duranti, after the experience of *Piazza mia bella piazza* - a book which must have left her feeling exposed, has off-loaded what she regards as many of her less savoury fears regarding the origins of literary ambition and intertextual anxiety onto the character of Fabrizio. Appropriately the fantastic is often portrayed as a mode which allays fear as well as giving rise to it. Through the prioritization of the fantastic *disconnection* from Fabrizio she can give much freer rein to her primary interest: the introjective form of the intertextual. This is then not so much an anxiety about whether one can write in the face of the 'biblioteca paterna' but how women live (and write) in a world written by men.

Before going on in detail to examine how the fantastic enables Duranti to treat both types of intertextuality it is worth probing the difference between them by returning to *La Bambina*. In keeping with recent feminist accounts of psychoanalysis, Duranti's first novel deals less with the impact of the paternal authority which shapes the young Francesca's psyche, than with the conflict/ identification process with the mother figure.<sup>23</sup> A crucial point about the impact of this on Duranti's intertextual make-up emerges not through the shelves of the library, but through the young

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<sup>23</sup>Shirley Vinall in Baranski and Pertile (eds) suggests that this is 'a central theme in modern women's writing, both fictional and autobiographical.' (p.106)

Francesca's discovery of a stray book in the living room. It is a book in which the large group of adults living in the wartime household has been playing a game. Part of this game involves each adult writing the answer to the same question, to what purpose is never clear - perhaps guessing who has written what? Stumbling upon this book by chance Francesca opens it on the page: 'Chi avresti voluto essere?'. She immediately scans it for her mother's writing, to find the answer: 'una donna bellissima' (LB, p.104). The question disturbs Francesca and leads her further along the path to maturity with the necessary recognition of her mother's own insecurities and the possible thought that these, in turn, may have given rise to her endless expectations of her daughter. This episode illustrates symbolically the degree to which the two kinds of intertextuality insist on overlapping. The mother's notion of a script for female performance impacts in turn on what she can write. From her very first novel she leads us on a trajectory in which writing and female experience increasingly blur boundaries. The recurrence of the fantastic in her later fiction is one key to understanding how that link is rooted in her autobiographical input.

### **i.ii Double Agent: The means of exchange**

'Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode.' – Julia Kristeva<sup>24</sup>

I propose that *La casa sul lago della luna* is the result of a skilful balancing act performed at an equal distance from the creation of the Self and the creation of a total Other. The tightrope for that balancing act is constituted by the fantastic. In interview Duranti suggests that her fiction is based on a synthesis of bipolar opposites which forces the subject to walk along this 'linea di mezzo', knowing that he/she must fall off eventually.<sup>25</sup> This text provides the space for her to perform this temporary virtuoso feat. This fantastic space within whose boundaries opposites can find temporary union also forges links between the two forms of intertextual anxiety I have proposed, making in Duranti's text a form of positive intertextual pleasure out of the

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<sup>24</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by Leon. S. Roudiez (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p.1.

<sup>25</sup>See Sharon Wood, 'Writing in a Changing World: An Interview with Francesca Duranti'. Duranti says, 'Tu sai che la terza via non esiste, e ti comporti come se esistesse, e come se tu potessi raggiungerla e mantenerla sapendo ogni volta che cascherai dall'altra parte però tiri avanti fino ad un'altra volta, poi ti fermi un minuto, poi ricaschi. Però ogni volta sarai più vicina.' (p.192)

two negatives. Like a double agent the fantastic effects a means of exchange beneficial to both Self and Other without sacrificing its own autonomy.

Duranti walks a fine line between condemning her hero's ineptitude (Other) and depicting it as the inevitable consequence of his upbringing (Self). Where she shares the inheritance in the German language, portrayed as a bourgeois privilege, rather than a skill, in Fabrizio's literary taste and some of his intellectual values, Duranti's tone is softer. Where she has little sympathy is in his attitudes towards women. Duranti has condemned bourgeois women (understood as women who do not work, professionally or as mothers) as the most useless beings in existence, but their existence forms part of Fabrizio's psyche.<sup>26</sup> That Fabrizio cannot really love modern women, like Fulvia, who act and demand action, is what divides Duranti from her protagonist. I will begin by looking at the ways in which she uses the fantastic to articulate this distaste, then move on to point to the ways in which this distance is simultaneously softened by the fantastic.

In my introductory chapter I outlined primary and secondary forms of the fantastic. The articulation of her distance from the protagonist roughly corresponds to the secondary form of the fantastic: the use of the vast gamut of traditional tropes of the fantastic available to the postmodern writer. Her refusal to cut the authorial umbilical cord, on the other hand, is a result of the primary property of the fantastic: the instigation of the gnoseological doubt. Whilst her use of the secondary category may on the whole be a less than respectful parody of the tropes, the additional use of the primary category locates the novel more firmly in the fantastic than has been recognised to date.<sup>27</sup>

## **1. Forms of Fantastic Distance:**

### **- The deadly quest**

Even the most cursory of comparisons between Fabrizio and the later character of Valentina of *Effetti personali* highlights a fundamental difference in their relation to

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Donatella de Ferra, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Hutcheon emphasizes the wide-ranging nature of parody in *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen, 1985): 'Its range of intent is from respectful admiration to biting ridicule' (pp.15-16). If in Capriolo's work we see such respect, in Duranti's there is certainly an element of ridicule alongside it.

space.<sup>28</sup> While both travel, the former does so prepared to discover something particular, already named, pre-written, solely to gain recognition for himself, the latter to discover something new, something unknown to share with others, which may bring her some credit.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately both characters get something of what they wanted, if not what they expected. The results of their respective quests speak about discoveries made within themselves, as on the traditional initiatic quest. Although Valentina's quest may be frustrated she does return home enriched by the lessons she has taken on board. Fabrizio's discovery, by contrast, instead swallows him up, even though he has seen the possibility of attempting 'un ritorno tra i vivi portandosi dietro qualcosa che aveva imparata' (CI, p.180). The parodic portrayal of Fabrizio's quest becomes a means for Duranti of distancing herself from her protagonist.

It is typical of the fantastic and the gothic tradition in particular, for the journey to be hijacked in some way by mysterious forces which drag the hero(ine) off-course towards enclosure. Donatella de Ferra has pointed out how usually it is the female heroine of the gothic novel who must suffer this transportation.<sup>30</sup> Duranti carries out a clever twist in her text by parodying this pattern, giving the reader a male protagonist, with these stereotypically feminine traits, who is just waiting to be dragged off course. At the same time she retains the model of the traditional quest hero who wishes to achieve his goal at all costs. By bringing this particularly female form of the fantastic into the male quest model she unsettles the notion of the literary quest and parodies the notion of the helpless gothic heroine. She also sums up her view of the modern male identity caught between outdated models of behaviour and the refusal to take on board new ones.

A man who exercises his human relations with a deadly caution and likes to keep himself and others in allotted spaces, to imitate the rigid structures and rules of

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<sup>28</sup>*Effetti personali* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1988) could, on many accounts, be described as a mirror image of *La casa sul lago della luna*. This suggests unsurprisingly that the possibilities of alternative existences and *personalità latenti* which pervade all of Duranti's work also govern the writer's own professional development. If the first book tells the story of a male would-be Germanist who invents the ideal female character only to find himself at the mercy of her apparent incarnation, the second is the tale of a would-be journalist who goes in search of the everyday details about a famous author, only to find that he has been invented. In this outline alone we can see the pattern which dominates Duranti's work, in which male characters construct and female characters deconstruct the all-consuming human need for Fantasy.

<sup>29</sup>The jettisoning of the literary discovery in favour of the journalistic scoop suggests a democratic opposition to cultural elitism which drives Duranti's search for an accessible literary language.

his childhood, is never going to make a heroic traveller. Fabrizio, in fact makes a neurotic one, convinced of his imminent failure at every turn, from changing his money to taking the train. Rather than it being the historical position of his sex which weakens him in this way it is his lack of *savoir-faire* in practical matters, the result of his aristocratic upbringing, which invites the very 'imbrogli' he dreads. The narrator also parodies Fabrizio's Kafka-inspired expectations by producing inscrutable bureaucrats at every turn, to incite the reader's complicity in her mockery.<sup>31</sup> This lighter view of the inadequacies of an aristocratic model of existence when its pecuniary foundations disappear does not speed the reader unawares with Fabrizio towards the horrible end of a life without risks. There are plenty of warning signs that the quest, once turned upon its head in this way, cannot end happily.

These warnings centre around his refusal to take risks in his personal life, with women in particular - this man is clearly no Odysseus. He refuses, for example, to declare his mission to Fulvia, for fear that failure would damage his ego. His journey towards his fictional world is marked by a harmonious correspondence between the women in his life and the co-ordinates of place and space. His incapacity to deal with women as anything other than fiction is the magnet around which his move from the real world to another dimension revolves. This is typical of the way in which each secondary form of the fantastic in the novel is directed towards a critique of the treatment of woman as a fiction and in fiction. It is an expression of an introjective anxiety which Duranti refuses to let get the better of her by turning its would be perpetrator into its victim: enclosing him in his own oppressive spaces.

Duranti has a fine sense of the spatial organisation of the human psyche and its dangers. As long as Fabrizio allows Fulvia to be his guiding star he can keep his head above water in contemporary Milan, a city which demands a healthy dose of her family tradition of pragmatism and practicality. In this initial attraction Mario envisages him as a fairy tale prince who 'aveva seguito la fanciulla forestiera fino alla

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<sup>30</sup> 'Francesca Duranti e l'intertestualità al femminile', a paper originally given at the *Gruppo 62* conference, 9 December 1998.

<sup>31</sup> His failure to spend the night on his pre-booked couchette to Vienna illustrates this amply. Convinced that he will fail before he sets out, he takes the conductor's customary scepticism about the nightly attachment of the couchette car from Rome seriously and allows himself be tricked into booking another bed, at four times the price he originally paid. A dead pan narrator tells us: 'A Mestre, come ogni notte, vennero agganciate le carrozze provenienti da Roma, ma in quel momento Fabrizio, fulminato da due sonniferi, dormiva già in triplice strato tra uno studente italiano e un turista tedesco.' (CL, p.56)

dimora paterna e là sopra l'alto portale, aveva trovato il motto inciso sullo stemma, la conferma del lignaggio.' (Cl, p.36) In fact it emerges that the fairy tale analogy of their relation is more complex - Fabrizio also casts Fulvia in the role of rescuing knight. The ambiguously patronising words 'angiolino guerriero' Fabrizio uses show his inability really to accept this shift in a gendered status quo. In two ways then he would prefer to remain on that threshold Mario envisages, neither accepting nor rejecting Fulvia's protection, which would threaten his masculinity, or her companionship, which would bring him out of solitude:

Fabrizio, al contrario non riusciva ad abbandonarsi, ad ammettere un'altra persona in quel recinto segreto, precluso ad amici e fratelli, che è il luogo dell'amore, e tuttavia dell'amore non si ritraeva. Desiderava fermarsi sulla soglia senza andare avanti né indietro; ma per mantenere le cose come stavano sentiva di dover attenuare il loro grado di realtà, combattendo la loro attitudine ad essere espresse in parole, a concatenarsi nel tempo.(Cl, p.38)

Fulvia is not a woman who lives on thresholds. This difference is reflected in their attitude towards reading. Duranti describes Fulvia carefully as a woman who is 'senza essere un topo di biblioteca, [...] una donna di buone e approfondite letture' (Cl, p.41). That is, she keeps literature in its place. This contrasts her with Fabrizio, whose natural habitat is the library where he reads obsessively. Reading, as Schwenger points out, causes us "to inhabit two states at the same time, to inhabit the threshold between them without being able to demarcate clearly where one leaves off and the other begins."<sup>32</sup> Fabrizio's emotional spatiality becomes more and more closely related to this role which literature plays in his life, as he shuns the real woman, Fulvia, in his quest for the imaginary, fictional woman, Maria.

Maria appears to have little to do with Austria as a geographical and political state. It is more Austria as an imaginary site of the Other that makes it her suitable origin. For Fabrizio woman is the foreigner, the Other he refuses to recognize in himself, which means he feels the need to recreate it at a distance to mitigate its threat. He finds her only when he is back in Milan and thus digs her up out of an imaginary Austria, moreover an imaginary 'Mother Earth',<sup>33</sup> already giving us a sign that it is to

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<sup>32</sup>Schwenger, p.23.

<sup>33</sup>Much has already been written about his creation of the ideal woman and its negativity. He decides that he will construct her through the process of 'scavare' that is taking away all that he doesn't like

this symbolic origin that he wishes to return. In fact Fabrizio does not really see Austria at all, which is why his quest is a false one. His lack of confidence in others, Austrians in particular, means that he only just finds the missing book. It becomes increasingly clear that he already has one foot in a fantasy Other world, exclusive to him, which can only mean death. Instead of seeing what is around him he projects his own vision on to the world around him. On his return to the lake in summer for example he is horrified by the mushrooming of a holiday camp world in his idyll and imagines himself *out* of it.

Maria accordingly exists on an island of Fabrizio's own making - she becomes the only woman who can fit on that tiny liminal space with him and only temporarily at that: 'Ora che il lavoro era finito, l'onda lo aveva ripreso ma lo aveva adagiato per un po' sopra un minuscolo isolotto sabbioso prima di scagliarlo in nuove e più profonde oscurità.' (Cl, p.91). Whilst Fabrizio invents Maria he shuts himself away completely. The remote island space of his flat, no longer open to the surprise visits of Fulvia, prefigures the absolute enclosure of Petra's home. The precarious nature of this temporary respite is emphasized as being the last remaining place before the abyss:

Sembravano remote e futili le sue collere impotenti contro il mondo intero; e quel desolato sentimento di esclusione aveva cambiato di segno, poiché ora egli non desiderava altro che abissi di vuoto attorno all'isola in cui si era rifugiato con il suo fantasma (p.122)

The tension between the controlled spaces of Fabrizio's Imaginary and the Real of the text is foreshadowed by the symbolic presence of the lake itself - water being the ultimate abject presence, the unreckonable quantity able to break across boundaries and wash away a brittle subjecthood. The fantastic takes this pattern to an extreme when the house Fabrizio had only been able to see in his imagination breaks the boundaries of fiction and appears. This final and fatal enclosure is represented as the realisation of the pure spatiality of the perfect fiction Fabrizio has fatally craved:

Quello che gli sembrava di vedere era che il punto, la linea, il piano, lo spazio - quei concetti che, avendo come uniche misure possibili zero e infinito, sono messi al riparo da ogni rappresentazione materiale e persino posti fuori dalla

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about women. Unsurprisingly this leaves him with nothing. So he resorts to the qualities of plants and flowers.

portata della mente umana, se non attraverso goffe approssimazioni - regnavano in quel luogo nella loro essenza più pura. (Cl, p.143)

As a fantastic experience of death-in-life, in this world closure is the key: 'Lo spazio attorno a lui sembrava contenere solo cose già concluse, mentre erano assenti tutti quei traguardi - grandi e piccoli - che si debbono raggiungere durante la vita.' (Cl, p.172) In this third phase of the novel the space and place take precedence over the woman.<sup>34</sup> Petra seems to be merely a priestess dedicated to the notion of perfect union between Fritz and Maria which the temple or tomb-like house embodies. Fabrizio's desire for a woman is bluntly exposed as a masquerade, behind which lies the desire to return to the womb. In the home of Petra his lack of interest in a relationship with another flesh and blood person is realised in that this woman herself resists all definition:

Gli abiti, il portamento, l'acconciatura non incoraggiavano chi la incontrava a domandarsi se quella donna fosse bella e giovane. Tutto il suo atteggiamento imponeva quasi di rispingere, come fossero sconvenienti, valutazioni di questo genere.

Essa stessa aveva tagliato corto con la questione; e poiché da lei emanava la medesima severa, pacata autorità che Fabrizio aveva avvertito nella casa, la sua decisione si imponeva a chi la guardava, vietandogli un'intera categoria di giudizi.(Cl, p.142)

She also functions, however, as a symbolic undoing of the woman of literature Fabrizio and his forefathers have described: Petra is a fantastic void or absence of meaning. Clearly, by overdefining woman and refusing to see women, Fabrizio has lead himself into a world from which the real woman, Fulvia, can now only be seen, as a vision, through 'a glass darkly' and the unreal woman, Petra, has taken control as an enclosure which resists all escape. The death drive which lies latent in male sexual desire is presented without ceremony in Duranti's commingling of the quest motif and the gothic theme of the journey into darkness.

This relation forces us to re-consider the afore-mentioned typology of plot and its single mythological invariant "life-death-resurrection (renewal)" or, on a more

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<sup>34</sup> 'Fabrizio lasciava perdere le domande attorno alle quali aveva girato fino a quel momento la sua curiosità: se l'amante di Fritz Oberhofer era stata davvero la nonna di Petra, se aveva avuto nome Maria Lettner, se era come lui l'aveva descritta; chi aveva preceduto, chi seguito; se il passato aveva modificato il presente o viceversa; chi aveva mentito, chi aveva indovinato. Gli sembravano

abstract level “entry into enclosed space - emergence from it”<sup>35</sup> as defined by Jurij Lotman and the notion of the *Bildungsroman* which could be described as the current archetypal manifestation. One feminist critic has defined a female version ‘the novel of awakening’ whose significant feature for this argument lies in the marginality of external movement in the development of plot.<sup>36</sup> The story may all take place within closed walls - or the movement from one closed space may precipitate the female character into another. In Duranti’s text, however, in the hero’s movement (from the closed spaces of his hierarchically ordered childhood, to his Milanese library to the enclosure of Petra’s house) the trajectory of the unfortunate gothic heroine is parodied, and shown to be the true deserts of this literary Pygmalion. This use of the secondary fantastic trope becomes a means of displacing the text’s treatment of women.

In many ways Duranti’s quest parody would appear archetypally postmodern in that it denies the existence of the last modernist island: ‘the pursuit of the perfected artwork as the sole prize to be salvaged from the shipwreck of life.’<sup>37</sup> Indeed Paul Gifford’s words seem to have much to say about Fabrizio’s quest:

The post-modernist quest-journey speaks in retrospect, from the same excluded and impotent Beyond. It has nowhere to go and no reason for going. It is, typically, an anti-voyage; that is, a circular journey that proceeds with labyrinthine difficulty, progressively undoes its own dynamic *chemin faisant* and collapses back upon itself, richer mainly in disillusion.<sup>38</sup>

However I would suggest that Duranti’s use of postmodern techniques to deconstruct the traditional literary quest does not spring from a void of meaning. By contrast her demystification of the hero focuses on telling us much about where he may have gone

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pettegolezzi che non toccavano il vero mistero, il mistero di quella casa, dell’incantesimo che essa esercitava su di lui.’ (Cl, p.153)

<sup>35</sup>Jurij Lotman, ‘The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology’ in *Poetics Today*, 1(1979), 161-184, (p.170). He writes that: ‘The elementary sequence of events in myth can be reduced to a chain: entry into closed space - emergence from it (this chain is open at both ends and can be interpreted as a “cave”, “the grave”, “a house”, “woman” (and, correspondingly, be allotted the features of darkness, warmth, dampness) (Ivanov and Toparov, 1965), entry into it is interpreted on various levels as “death”, “conception”, “return home” and so on; moreover all these acts are thought of as mutually identical.’ (p.168)

<sup>36</sup>Susan. J. Rosowski, ‘The Novel of Awakening’ in Abel (ed.), (p.49).

<sup>37</sup>Philip.R. Wood, ‘The Transformation of the Quest from Modernity to Postmodernity’ in *Literature and Quest*, ed. by Christine Arkinstall (Rodopi Perspectives on Modern Literature, Amsterdam, Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, 1993), pp. 145-155 (p.146).

wrong. In interview she comments that men, as opposed to contemporary women, 'si annegano nei fantasmi, si annegano così, non perché anneghino nel fantastico, attualmente si annegano nella vita, nelle relazioni, hanno molta difficoltà ad entrare in un rapporto col prossimo.'<sup>39</sup> In showing us that Fabrizio's use of literature, as an attempt to avoid drowning in his personal relationships, is doomed, she does not condemn literature itself as a system of signification.

### - The double and the *hom(m)osexual* economy

If the quest is the pattern initiated by Fabrizio, it is a mercantile one. This is of course one reason why Fabrizio the diminished aristocrat finds himself so completely at sea. Coming from the antithesis of mercantile stock, his quest is to be his initiation into the world of mercantile exchange, the publishing world of Milan, in which his friend Mario is so competent. The need to get some kind of advantage over Mario, by having something he does not, lies rooted in his childhood. Again this is something Durante expresses in spatially symbolic terms: 'Quello di Mario era l'alloggio del custode e sorgeva sul ripiano più basso del giardino [...] La casa di Fabrizio era [...] sul piano più alto.' If, as Herrmann suggests, space is organised by men around the key issues of hierarchy and dominance, then Fabrizio's is organised around both.<sup>40</sup> The tongue in cheek description of the villa - seen through Fabrizio's rose-tinted spectacles - illustrates the shock of his move to Milan, where Mario is now his 'dirimpettaio' and now more than his equal, his employer. Thus Fabrizio's desire to join Mario's world is based upon a desire to re-establish a system of dominance. His desire with regards to Mario is the mechanism by which Fabrizio brings his privileged past with him wholesale rather than being able to select the useful values, as Durante herself seems to have done. The friendship between herself and the daughter of her parents' friends, Paula, of *La Bambina*, based upon a sympathetic, self-regulating rivalry is transformed into the first of a sinister series of male doubles in her work in the bond

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<sup>38</sup>Paul Gifford, 'Getting There or Not: the Fortunes of the Initiatic Journey', pp. 17-27 in Arkinstall (ed.), p.24.

<sup>39</sup>from my own interview with Francesca Durante, 24 July 1997, Lucca.

<sup>40</sup>'Dans notre monde, l'espace matériel est lié à différentes fonctions: l'une est la domination et la servitude (on «occupe» une région, un pays est «occupé», on administre, on est administré), une autre est la hiérarchie: on est assis plus ou moins loin d'un souverain ou d'un maître de maison, un professeur

between Fabrizio and Mario. In each of these pairs in her work the fortunes of the two men seem to be calibrated in such a way that the success of one must mean the failure of the other. More often than not, as here, it is set with an 'uncanny' precision. Duranti's creation of Mario as a double for Fabrizio becomes another one of the fantastic distancing mechanisms. Mario is the first in a line of *male* doubles in Duranti's fiction in which the two mens' fates seem to be intertwined by their place on the opposite spokes of fortune's wheel, so that as one goes up, the other must come down.<sup>41</sup>

This emerges as the primary relationship for Fabrizio only at the end, almost as if it had been the subtext of his entire story, when he envisages the passing of his most precious goods, including Fulvia, to Mario: 'Re di questa terra sarà Fortebraccio' (CI, p.187). Duranti shows how the male characters perceive themselves as the only subjects in a system which supposes everything else to be a means of exchange - what Luce Irigaray describes as the *hom(m)osexual* economy. In her reading of Marx, Irigaray suggests that men stand in an exploitative relationship to their environment and that all material goods, which include women and the text, exist as a means of communication between men.<sup>42</sup> Women provide both the material continuity and the means of exchange:

The use of and traffic in women subtend and uphold the reign of masculine hom(m)o-sexuality, even while they maintain that hom(m)o-sexuality in speculations, mirror games, identifications, and more or less rivalrous appropriations, which defer its real practice.<sup>43</sup>

Thus the relations between Mario and Fabrizio are determined by the exchange of text and women, by the wrangling over the lost book and the no less important wrangling over Fulvia. The homosexual, or what is better described as the homosocial,<sup>44</sup> tone of their relation in which the woman and the text becomes the objective correlative for their desire is alluded to in Mario's vision of his friend as 'un San Sebastiano con

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trône sur une chaire et ses élèves sont assis sur des bancs, un avocat se voit assigner dans les chambres un lieu qui le distingue de son client.' (Herrmann, p.137)

<sup>41</sup>See also: *Effetti personali* and 'La porta di mezzo' in *Ultima stesura* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1991)

<sup>42</sup>Luce Irigaray, 'Women on the Market' in *This Sex which is not One: The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men.* (p.171)

<sup>43</sup>Irigaray, *ibid.*, p.172.

<sup>44</sup>See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Between Men' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp.696-712, p.696.

l'umido sguardo rivolto al cielo e una sofferenza senza ribellione che tremava sul bel volto delicato: il suo amico più caro' (CI, p.103). This is not the only hint of homosexual desire. Fritz and Fabrizio form another pair of male doubles whose fortunes are intertwined across time through the existence of a woman both use to their advantage: Maria's real life counterpart - who she really is we never know since she only ever reaches us through the distorting lens of fiction. The language Durante uses to describe Fabrizio's state as he writes the biography is not incidentally fused with homoerotic undertones: 'Sedeva in quella stanza pulita e anonima, così inadatta all'alleggiare di misteriose presenze, lasciandosi docilmente penetrare e possedere dall'Altro.' (CI, p.111). The passive luxuriance of this mental communion is far from Fabrizio's fantasies of heterosexual activity which revolve around sadomasochistic subjugation of another. They point towards the notion that whilst men form part of some organic system, the real excluded Other is woman.

Feisty Fulvia seems far from willing to go along with this status as object of exchange, to give up her 'right to speech and even to animality'<sup>45</sup> as the economy would require. This may explain in part why Fabrizio has to create Maria. Irigaray's comment that: '*Woman has value on the market by virtue of one single quality: that of being a product of man's "labor."*' On this basis, each one looks exactly like every other. They all have the same phantom-like reality'<sup>46</sup> seems to have a particular resonance in relation to this creation. Maria, the phantom-creation of a man, becomes a more valuable commodity than any real woman. Irigaray suggests that women are subject to a split between their natural value and their value as a sign of exchange between men, in which latter condition they are endowed with a *super* natural value.<sup>47</sup> The fantastic of the novel performs a material literalization of the language of that commodification so that it overwhelms the man in whom it originated. In *La casa sul lago della luna* the *super* natural value a man attributes as a general standard to women takes on a life of its own.

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<sup>45</sup>Irigaray, *ibid.*, p.189.

<sup>46</sup>Irigaray, *ibid.*, p.175.

<sup>47</sup>Irigaray, *ibid.*, '*A commodity - a woman - is divided into two irreconcilable "bodies"; her "natural" body and her socially-valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values. No doubt these values also express "nature", that is, the expenditure of physical force. But this latter - essentially masculine moreover - serves for the fabrication, the transformation, the technicization of productions. And it is this super-natural property that comes to constitute the value of the product. Analyzing value in this way, Marx exposes the meta-physical character of social operations.*' (p. 180)

The fact that the text comes to life is closely tied to the idea that women might also come to life - that is, refuse their role as commodity. For Duranti's hero his idealised character comes to life as an avenging angel, after the blood of a man who has punished his flesh and blood girlfriend for not conforming to his Pygmalion-like efforts. What Duranti's text then does however is to take this system and mete out a sort of rough justice to its most fervent upholder: a literary eye for a literary eye.

### - Textualisation

The third and final use of a secondary fantastic trope which I would like to examine as a technique Duranti uses to put some space between herself and her protagonist is that of 'textualisation'. I have already suggested that the practice of 'textualisation' has a particular intensity in the female fantastic, in so far as it underlines the claustrophobic relationship between women's lives and textual stereotypes, how one can spill over the boundaries of the other in what I have described as the struggle with 'introjective anxiety.' This is very much tied up with the previous notion of the subversion of the hom(m)sexual economy, in which a kind of *contrapasso* is carried out: Fabrizio writes his own fate without being aware that he is doing so.<sup>48</sup> I would like to look at the way in which a notion of literature emerges from this textualisation process that is clearly gendered and will have an impact on Duranti's later fiction.

Jon Thiem, from whom I have taken this notion of the 'textualisation of the reader' has cited this novel as a good example of this technique. He has suggested many reasons for its practice which I would agree form part of Duranti's own anxiety as a postmodern writer. He suggests that it is about the desire of the reader to 'transcend the readerly condition' and become a writer, a comment on the dangers of too strong an identification in the reading process and the fear the writer may have of

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<sup>48</sup> There is more than a passing resemblance between the function of 'textualisation' in *La casa sul lago della luna* and that in *L'Iguana* by Anna Maria Ortese (1965, reprinted Milano: Adelphi, 1986, edition cited), which also takes the form of a journey abroad in search of virgin territory (both literal and literary). The protagonist Count Daddo, offering to look for a novel for his publishing friend thinks up a scenario, 'le confessioni di un qualche pazzo magari innamorato di un'iguana' (p.17), which then becomes the very narrative of his own journey towards the Other, although told in the third person. Ortese is, however, gentler with her male protagonist Count Daddo, perhaps because his relation to the world of literary ambition is less direct, and certainly because he has the capacity, developed however late, to recognize the Other.

her own readership and their potential misreadings of her work.<sup>49</sup> Yet some of these aspects, particularly the first, also feed into the notion of authorial anxiety which I suggest Duranti is attempting to hold at a distance.

The vital factor, which Thiem strangely ignores, is the way the textualisation of the reader so directly interacts with the notions of gender in this work. In particular the way in which from the beginning Fabrizio comes to use literature as a shield. As a young man his direct route from his sister's birthday party full of girls with whom he felt ill at ease was to the library: 'Presto pose fine alla propria sofferenza correndo a nascondersi in biblioteca' (Cl, p.20). As he grows older he not only reads in order to avoid interaction with the female sex, but to fantasize a relation with them. Inevitably this takes the form of mis-reading. One of the books Fabrizio is supposed to have translated is by Theodor Fontane - possibly the most famous, *Effi Briest* (1895). Effi, like all of Fontane's female characters, does not fit into the rigid structures of nineteenth century Germany, into its binary view of female sexuality. What is interesting is that Fabrizio too is 'out of joint' with his time, but because he clings to that archaic binary - a reverse image of Effi's situation. We know that he has failed to 'read' what *Effi Briest*, or any other of Fontane's novels depicted with conservative sensitivity, is about when he articulates his nostalgia for the nineteenth century as one devoid of 'femmine ribelli che discutevano le regole'. Either he forgets that he has just translated a novel concerning one of those very 'femmine ribelli' or perhaps he harks back to a time when 'femmine ribelli' like Effi were punished with social exclusion and death. There is very much an idea of the vengeful 'anima' to the story. Again Fabrizio is one of those male characters Duranti sees as unable to cope with female emancipation and thus a new and much less sympathetic kind of 'Effi', in that he is out of joint with his time not by being ahead of it but by being behind it.

The progress from (mis)reading as a form of fantasy to writing as a more involved form of escapist fantasy is mediated by the all-important attitude to language. That Fabrizio's is a language which fears dialogue should not surprise us. His conversations with Fulvia use language as a series of defensive blows which

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<sup>49</sup> 'The real task of the postmodern writer is to transcend the readerly condition, to transform his or her belatedness into something original and interesting. The magical realist textualisation of the reader is in fact a figuration and parody of this writerly process.' (John Thiem in Parkinson Zamora and Faris (eds), p.242.) He suggests that the 'disastrous' consequences of the reader's intrusion into the text shows a

disable her at every turn and becomes like the series of 'legacci' in which the women of his sexual fantasy are trapped. This vision of language as something which forms our reality may well be something Duranti subscribes to, but Fabrizio's mistake is clearly to believe that he is the only one with any purchase on it. It leads him to the fatal idea that with language he can control his own experience: 'Le cose accadute - tale era la convinzione di Fabrizio - entravano nel presente solo attraverso le parole; anzi era addirittura il presente che entrava nel passato - se uno ci sapeva fare - cancellendolo con il silenzio.' (CI, p.105) It is only one stage further to expect that language in narrative, literature, will determine reality. He can invent Maria to his own ends. This is the first of a long series of male writers in Duranti's fiction who try to pull the wool over their readers' eyes in a form of violation of the literary pact, in which the reader puts him/herself in the hands of the writer.<sup>50</sup> These writers fear response from their readers to such an extent that they make literature a dead-end, a self-fulfilling prophecy. In Duranti's text this desire for omnipotence naturally caves in on itself completely. The fantastic illustration of this lack of control over the text is equated with a lack of control over space itself, and to a lesser extent time, which breaks out through some kind of a crack in the wall they erect around themselves. The quest, which is about conquering space and the Other, becomes its own defeat at their hands through the very medium with which Fabrizio has thought to conquer them: literature. Fabrizio is an extreme consequence of a system which would like to believe itself impervious to outside influence. Duranti's text is a response to both a male literary and more importantly an emotional tradition of closure.

I have tried to suggest throughout that the deconstruction of the literary 'woman' lies behind the use of the secondary fantastic tropes in the novel. If Duranti holds authorial anxiety at arms' length by making her protagonist male it is because she sees women, her heroines hard at work trying to deal with the fictional reality men attempt to weave around them. This hardly leaves time to lose oneself in phantoms of one's own making. She suggests that men are more inclined to make these mistakes, women less so because they have more material concerns at heart. This is by no means

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critique of 'ludic' or 'escapist' reading. 'The strong emotional identifications that lie at the heart of escapist reading, bring about a false, warped understanding of the story', (p.243).

<sup>50</sup>See for example, *Effetti personali*, in which Riccardo's writings of religious biographies written to a coffee-table formula are paralleled by the deadening ideology of Milos Jarco's collective and *Ultima Stesura* in which the narrator-protagonist wrangles with Attilio Radi's empty sentimental bestsellers.

an essentialist point but a suggestion that women have a past that prevents such self-indulgence.

## 2. Alone in Wonderland?

‘Once the concept of otherness takes root, the unimaginable becomes possible. Not in some mythological country, but to ordinary urban citizens’ - Slavenka Drakulic,<sup>51</sup>

It would be highly questionable if Duranti were to deconstruct the model of a Self (Fabrizio) constructed in opposition to the Other (woman/ Austria), and the destruction which that brings with it, only to do the same herself in the construction and punishment of her lonely male hero. As I have shown, there is however more than a certain ambiguity regarding Francesca’s relationship to Fabrizio. Questioned, she admits to identifying with him most of all the characters in the novel.<sup>52</sup> Why she can identify more easily with Fabrizio rather than Fulvia is suggested by her answer to Donatella de Ferra’s pertinent question about the almost off-putting ‘concretezza’ of Fulvia: ‘Non lasciamo spazio alla debolezza anche perché l’abbiamo dovuto lasciare per tanti di quei secoli che non ne abbiamo più voglia, quindi siamo meno simpatiche.’<sup>53</sup> At this stage the idea that women cannot allow themselves to explore the weaker side of their character emerges in her early novel as a two-dimensional character. In *Sogni mancini* however we see an effort to restore the third dimension to the female character, by introducing a less pejorative notion of weakness.

In endorsement of Joyce Carol Oates’s observation that critics often ‘fail to see how the creative artist shares to varying degrees the personalities of all his characters, even those he appears to detest - perhaps, at times, it is these characters he is really closest to’ Gilbert and Gubar comment that

Perhaps this dis-ease, which we might almost call “schizophrenia of authorship” is one to which a woman writer is especially susceptible because she herself secretly realizes that her employment of (and participation in) patriarchal plots and genres inevitably involves her in duplicity and bad faith.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Balkan Express: Fragments from the Other Side of War*, (London: Hutchinson, 1993), p. 3

<sup>52</sup> See footnote 20.

<sup>53</sup> interview with Donatella De Ferra, SIS bulletin, 2000.

<sup>54</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 68

In attempting to strike a balance between her parody of Fabrizio and the notion that she herself must not be guilty of shoring her own authorial Self up against that of her Other character Duranti may *not* completely avoid participating in patriarchal plots and genres. The character of Petra cannot be presented as a complete invention of Fabrizio's lunatic mind, because he would then lose most of our sympathy. I will argue here that she maintains a fantastic doubt about this ending in order to preserve a modicum of concern for Fabrizio. It is this concern which avoids making the text into too obvious a punishment and preserves a sense of the awesome power of literature. This leaves us with the problematic character of Petra whose very vampiric makeup belongs to that group of female stereotypes Marina Warner reminds us cannot be recycled:

the mythology of ungovernable female appetite can't be made to work for women; ironies, subversion, inversion, pastiche, masquerade, appropriation - these postmodern strategies all buckle in the last resort under the weight of culpability the myth has entrenched.<sup>55</sup>

Thus Duranti can debunk the material manner in which men dictate women's lives, but she cannot completely do away with the intertextual female figure. In a certain sense this only feeds into her view of literature and she is certainly not the only successful female writer to make use of such figures (See Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*). I have already suggested that the main emphasis is on Petra's non-being, but it could be argued that this in itself aligns her with the classic female figure of death. I would argue that the character of Petra does, in the context of the whole novel, hold up as a successful inversion, but principally because Duranti focuses more on the house than on her as Fabrizio's final nemesis. This aspect reminds us that women writers, who do subscribe to a feminist vision, in the face of so many prohibitions, must transgress some to write at all. It is the resolution of this dilemma which often makes their work so interesting.

It is with consummate skill that Duranti uses the primary fantastic to keep her readership on the tightrope with her. I opened by suggesting that the fantastic is not a genre obviously germane to her but I think that the delicate balance between Fabrizio as Francesca and Fabrizio as a kind of Frankenstein's monster makes this novel a

fantastic one and explains a lingering element of the fantastic in later works by Duranti. It is in fact one of her beloved paradoxes that she can use the fantastic at all, when she sees literature as:

una macchina di mistificazione, che però nel suo essere qualcosa di formalizzato (e lo deve essere) scopre la mistificazione della vita, in qualche modo la denuncia, la rivela. È la fantasia usata come strumento del mestiere che nello stesso tempo scopre il trucco di quella che è la mistificazione della vita.<sup>56</sup>

Whilst clearly eschewing mystification she takes on board the notion that to show the uncanny power literature and destiny hold over us, she must use a powerful weapon - she must leave blanks which invite the reader's participation. The lack of this very flexibility is something for which she reproaches Fabrizio when she suggests, with reference to his missing biographical material that 'Se Fabrizio avesse avuto il talento per dominare letterariamente le cose impalpabili, elusive - i se, i forse - avrebbe potuto cavare un certo effetto da quei tre anni perduti' (CI, p.115). Ironically Fabrizio is too much of a reader to be a writer, he constructs *too* much. Duranti is not to make the same mistake of providing all the answers - she herself is a mistress of 'i se, i forse'.<sup>57</sup> Without sacrificing her work on the 'altar of the numinous' (Ian McEwan's succinct turn of phrase) she is able and willing to 'suscitare dubbi', something for which the fantastic is tailor-made.

This novel has often been described as gothic, and whilst it undeniably uses gothic themes, in one very important way it belongs to the broader genre I have outlined as fantastic: no careful reading of the novel can resolve its ending. No-one can claim to answer the questions Fabrizio poses himself at the end:

Poi cosa era accaduto? Era stato di nuovo Fabrizio Garrone, l'alchimista che - a quasi voler ristabilire l'equilibrio tra i due mondi, turbato dall'illecito solidificarsi dell'ombra di Maria Lettner - aveva trasformato una donna vera in un fantasma? O lui non era mai stato altro che un impotente spettatore, preso nel mezzo tra Maria e Petra che si scambiavano le parti, entravano l'una nell'altra? E chi guidava la quadriglia danzata da Fritz, Maria, Petra, Fabrizio, l'assurda

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<sup>55</sup> Marina Warner, p.11.

<sup>56</sup> from my own interview with Francesca Duranti, 24 July 1997, Lucca.

<sup>57</sup> Perhaps one reason why the later *Il progetto Burlamacchi* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1994) is generally considered her least successful book in that it appears to want to provide too many concrete answers. The attempt to offset this commitment with the presence of a ghost is clumsy, but the juxtaposition of political reality and the fantastic is refined in *Sogni mancini* (1996).

brigata eterogenea - un uomo vivo, un uomo morto, una donna mai esistita e un'immagine senza corpo? (Cl, p.179)

The choices cannot be reduced to a Todorovian hesitation between supernatural and natural. The conclusion is more unsettling, stretching back across the whole text retrospectively. It conveys the power of literature to influence our lives. Thus ultimately Fabrizio's disservice to the female sex does the reader the service of reminding her of the necessity for a critical reading process. The use of the fantastic also poses questions about whether destiny itself is a form of literature – a pre-written text - thus a question remains unanswered: Could Fabrizio have behaved otherwise?

On one level the self-reflexive nature of the novel reminds us that the protagonist, as Duranti's puppet, obviously has no freedom but it is this which makes the reverberative link between literature and destiny so powerful. Although Duranti frequently points out times when Fabrizio could have acted differently she also uses metaphors which erode a belief in free will. Duranti tells us in her opening description of Fabrizio that he belonged to 'quella categoria delle persone che sembravano destinate a ritornare alla polvere senza mai dover attraversare la fase in cui progressive convessità conferiscono l'aspetto solenne caratteristico dell'età matura.'(Cl, p.10) This is a technique of deliberate ambiguity, which with its apparently ironical reference to his mortality casts a skeletal shadow of imminent early death. Duranti's use of the title of her book within the book show her to be the ultimate puppet-master whose choice of language determines Fabrizio's fate.

Her repeated use of tidal metaphors in which Fabrizio is swept along increase this sense of powerlessness. The sense of his pre-written destiny is emphasized by the typically fantastic device of the shifts from figures of speech to their literalization. As Bachelard writes: 'The joy of reading appears to be the reflection of the joy of writing, as though the reader were the writer's ghost.'<sup>58</sup> In undergoing, rather than undertaking, the translation process, Fabrizio talks about his introjective experience as if he is some kind of reincarnation of Fritz Oberhofer:

Mentre vado avanti a tradurre è come se dentro di me ci fosse quella visione fluida, libera, non ancora schiacciata in alcuna parola: quello che c'è prima, capisci, il fantasma che non ha preso corpo in nessun linguaggio .... So come devo tradurre perché conosco queste immagini senza forma. Le ho dentro di me. (Cl, p.)

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<sup>58</sup>Bachelard, p.xxii.

What is at this stage a figurative possession becomes a physical reality when he is no longer able to resist Petra's advances. The fantastic serves to emphasize the power of literature over the body. As Schwenger reminds us: 'The immaterial haunting of the mind may also possess the body, taking over a different kind of function, a bodily function: pornographic novels cause sexual arousal, the plight of Clarissa causes tears to flow.'<sup>59</sup>

For the reader of *La casa sul lago della luna* books themselves become a symbol of a potentially inexorable destiny. Duranti invests the library of his childhood home with supernatural properties from the beginning, 'sembrava emanare un pulviscolo di dottrina così impalpabile e penetrante da essersi depositato in uno strato solido della coscienza di Fabrizio, [...] prima ancora che [avesse] imparato a leggere.' (Cl, p.16) This need drives him to the desperate measures he takes to belong - to find a place on the bookshelf alongside those writers, with whom he has a closer relationship than with any living being - 'gli parlavano attraverso i libri' (Cl, p.20). By entering into his own fiction he ultimately does exactly that, although not in the way he intended.

In making literature such a primary influence on Fabrizio's whole life, however, Duranti deliberately confuses the powers of reading, day-dreaming and destiny. Showing Fabrizio's difficulty in resisting literary influence she also shows the difficulty of resisting the destiny which childhood appears to set up for us. When he realises that he is falling in love with Fulvia he is described as 'atterrito, come di fronte a un destino per il quale non era preparato' (Cl, p.38). The third person narration, which frequently takes recourse to free indirect speech leaves it unclear as to whether this simile originates with Duranti or Fabrizio. Although she refutes 'Freudianism', Duranti emphasizes the enchantedly vicious circle of behavioural patterns in which childhood can leave us when Fabrizio's response to Fulvia's final 'no, grazie' is governed by a convoluted memory of his mother's emotional detachment which has clearly given rise to his own (see Cl, chapter 13). The subject of 'eredità' is frequently raised in the novel and, as the almost supernatural image of dust would suggest, part of Duranti's success is that the novel neither refutes nor prescribes a vision of the self-

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<sup>59</sup>Schwenger, p.19.

controlled destiny. The theme of destiny is one to which Duranti keeps returning in her fiction, as recently as 1996, and her doubts about our ability to control it are one of the reasons that the fantastic continues to surface in her work.

The links between literature and destiny, as the pre-written life, are constantly questioned, but in her earlier work they have a specific gender dye which seems to run slightly as the theme is rewashed in Duranti's subsequent fiction. The failed attempts to confront destiny through literature (male) and more successful attempts to confront destiny as literature (female) begin to commingle productively. This process shows clearly in the relation between the fantastic and the gender of her protagonists. A comparison of Fabrizio and the later Valentina, for example, will show her reluctance to allow women to do anything more than demystify the fantastic. The idea that the text (destiny) can get out of hand and dictate our lives is something which for the time being she leaves her male characters to experience.<sup>60</sup> In this juxtaposition of the real implications of literature for women readers and the fantastic implications of language and literature for the male writer Francesca negotiates a space for her own self as female writer between the polar energies of life and art. Another complex process of textual (s)exchange is completed. I will suggest in the following commentary on *Sogni mancini* that, having recognised this gap between male and female experience of literature, Duranti continues to close it, by allowing this female protagonist to incorporate the fantastic rather than being subsumed by it or rejecting it. In this sense the text offers a synthesis with writing and a temporary resolution of the spaces of past and present, Self and Other, life and art.

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, 'L'episodio del beretto sportivo' in *Ultima stesura*. The short story's similarity in theme with *La casa*, its lighter satirical note and its deliberate injunction to reflect encourages the reader to read the microcosm of the commented short story as a comment on the relationship between Duranti and *La casa sul lago della luna*. As in that novel, it seems that she uses the fantastic 'textualisation' to articulate the gap between male experience of the text and the female.

### i.iii *Sogni mancini*

Split identity, kaleidoscope of identities: can we be a saga for ourselves without being considered mad or fake? Without dying of the foreigner's hatred or of hatred for the foreigner? – Julia Kristeva<sup>61</sup>

In the character of Martina, the protagonist of *Sogni mancini*, Duranti presents an intellectual female protagonist. She is not her first, but she is the first for whom this intellectuality emerges as a positive endowment. She may not write fiction, but she is a writer all the same - of cultural history. Duranti has commented on the necessity of making this woman acceptable to her readership, by endowing her with traditionally 'female' attributes, like the ability to cook and her memories of her first love.<sup>62</sup> This confirms to what extent her fictional women result from a pragmatic recognition of and process of negotiation with dominant cultural mores. It is also indicative of Duranti's willingness to mingle her interest in the high literary models she draws upon with the influence of 'lower' categories of fiction, like romantic fiction, in order to put both in a new perspective.<sup>63</sup> To return to the dilemma of female literary alignment, the decision to draw upon these 'lower' categories - traditionally a territory more open to women writers - helps to bypass the male dominance of high literature. This attempt to reject literary and political dogma is the dominant theme of *Sogni mancini*.

Martina Satriano works as a successful lecturer in New York. After an unhappy early marriage and divorce, she left Italy finding that it was not a good place to pursue her career. She is also the first of Duranti's heroines of working class origin - her family had moved to Tuscany from Lucania. Her father died when she was a teenager and she helped her mother to support her family from an early age and later paid her way through university, by working as a cook. Her first person narrative,

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<sup>61</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p.13.

<sup>62</sup> 'Quando mi preparavo a scrivere *Sogni mancini*, in realtà io inizialmente stavo per fare un protagonista uomo, perché non avevo proprio il coraggio di mettere in movimento una protagonista donna spinta profondamente soltanto da questioni morali, etiche, teoriche, intellettuali, e non da questioni vitali. Dicevo: 'Quando mai si è vista un'eroina così? Il pubblico non l'accetterà.' Quando invece ho deciso di fare una protagonista donna, per evitare che venisse (tutto questo poi è stato inconsapevole) considerata una fantasia inesistente, l'ho caricata d'una serie di simboli femminili come nessun'altra donna nei miei libri ha mai avuto. Martina è una cuoca bravissima, si preoccupa della sua casa, è ordinatissima, pensa ai suoi vestiti, si ricorda sempre il suo primo amore. In fondo è una donna sentimentale, è tutto quello che le altre donne dei miei libri non sono, proprio per evitare che sembrasse un uomo travestito. È molto umana.' (from my own interview with Francesca Duranti, 24 July 1997, Lucca)

<sup>63</sup> Her latest novel is dedicated to writers of popular bestsellers, see *Il comune senso delle proporzioni* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2000).

addressed to her students, recounts a short period in her life when several key events coincide and interact with one another to shake up a very regulated existence. In keeping with her original profession and the 'feminine' signs which Duranti endows her with each of the eight days which she recounts is named after a dish she makes on that day, Saturday, for example is 'risotto alla milanese'. Over this period her mother, still living in Tuscany, dies as Martina is rushing to her bedside. On her return from this memory-evoking brief trip she is headhunted by the new right wing party in Italy to take on responsibility for the development of a cultural image - an offer she eventually can refuse. She also meets up with her childhood sweetheart, Costantino, also living in the States, and considers starting up a new relationship with him. These three key events are interwoven with one another and Martina's daily passion - her research.

This research introduces the fantastic element into the book. Martina wishes to prove the existence of an alternative self. She intends to do this with the means of her 'machine'. This machine, besides making her coffee and heating her croissant, wakes her gently and records her dream of the previous night before the day's concerns diffuse it. Martina believes that in this night-time dream world she lives out the life of an alternative self. What the hypothesis shares with Freudian theory is the sense of the invisible finding a language in dream. Duranti is clear to point out, however, that this is not derived from a Freudian notion of 'wish-fulfilment' in which the repressed seeps out of the unconscious through dreams. In fact Duranti creates a protagonist who has a comfortable memory of a natural youthful sexuality, something of which she hopes to regain in her renewed relation with Costantino. The invisible is not the *repressed* underside of human sexuality but rather the selves *not realised* as a result of social constrictions and chance.<sup>64</sup> The tape-recorded voice, played back and suspended in time becomes a kind of mirror in which an alien voice speaks of another self that

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<sup>64</sup>Her youthful relationship with Costantino exemplifies this idea. Rather than suggesting any Freudian narrative of displaced childhood desire, Martina looks back with clear hindsight at a social mystification of sex as being at fault. The social myth about preserving her virginity prevented her and Costantino from consciously consummating a healthy relationship before Constantino emigrated to America with his family: 'Il rispetto consisteva nel rinunciare a varcare un imene che nessuno dei due sapeva esattamente dove fosse. Entrambi lo cercammo spesso con il massimo scrupolo e delicatezza per non sciupare niente, per mettere il prezioso tesoro al riparo da ogni movimento incauto' (p.34). Although with a bathos typical of Duranti she adds: 'ma chissà che qualcosa non sia accaduto a nostra insaputa' (p.34).

cannot be grasped through the glass wall.<sup>65</sup> This idea is typified and, as the title suggests partially motivated, by Martina's suspicion that she was born left-handed but forced to use her right.

This 'mancina corretta' becomes a symbol for a potentially multiple existence, which would brook no exclusion or synthesize binaries. Martina's research is by no means a self-indulgent self-help therapy. She believes that by proving this multiplicity at the heart of every individual she would force the world to become more tolerant, to accept that the life each individual leads is only one of many possible paths. Although Martina shares the strongly idealistic motivation of characters in the earlier *Progetto Burlamacchi* (1994), Martina eventually accepts that the world is not, and may never be, ready for this knowledge. As a result the fantastic proposition that the nighttime life of the mind may present this multiplicity is never negated, but rather incorporated into Martina's idea of the future.

This incorporation represents a challenge to traditional notions of subjecthood, nationality and language. Marina Spunta has recently observed that a highly dialogic use of language informs the novel, drawing attention to its links with the self-reflexive and intertextual nature of the novel.<sup>66</sup> I would like to emphasize that in this move towards dialogue the protagonist's relation to the fantastic and space is crucial in reformulating her relation with literature. Duranti's text, dialogic in form, incorporates the 'language of tolerance,' the admission of alternative viewpoints that her fantastic search has sought. Reaching temporary resolutions in the face of fantastic uncertainty reflects her dialogic project to raise questions rather than provide answers. The eventual renunciation of her research plan is not the renunciation of meaning per se, but simply the acknowledgement that meaning may not always be made visible: 'Era come se fossi entrata in una stanza buia con le mani in avanti e avessi sfiorato per

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<sup>65</sup> Speaking of the Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* Steven Connor explains how the tape recording of his own voice which Krapp listens to in silence at the end of the play 'testifies to the strange power of technologies of the voice to habituate us to live our own familiar deaths.' 'Echo's Bones: Myth, Modernity and the Vocalic Uncanny' in *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth Century Literature*, ed. by Michael Bell and Peter Poellner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 213-235 (p.234).

<sup>66</sup> 'The dialogic character of Duranti's narrative is inextricably linked with the use of the narrator's voice, the paramount theme of writing, the common practice of intertextuality and autobiography.' (p.122). She describes Duranti's approach to Italian literary language as 'reproducing spoken interaction, filling the gap between reported speech and narrative parts, harmoniously blending spoken syntax and vocabulary in a medium, spoken educated language, thus contributing to shifting the

caso un oggetto di cui non riuscivo ancora a determinare la forma e le dimensioni.’(*Sogni*, p.92)

Initially Martina’s dream of an alternative life-space appears to find a real equivalent in her ‘hyphenated identity’ as an Italo-American. This is echoed in Duranti’s autobiography, in that she lives for half the year in New York and half in Italy, and even textually, in that an English version of the same novel has recently been published in England and the States.<sup>67</sup> However the pulse of the novel towards metamorphosis traces cracks in the identity that she has formed for herself as she is still in the process of forming it. In this respect a comparison with Julia Kristeva’s text *Strangers to Ourselves*, a best-selling book on its publication in France, is helpful. Kristeva’s ideas about what constitutes the foreigner or outsider in a society and the difficult universality of that state applies to Martina with a striking accuracy.

The first encounter with Martina describes her inability to land in Italy because of the bad weather, making her, in Kristeva’s terms the foreigner par excellence: ‘The space of a foreigner is a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping.’<sup>68</sup> This delay means that she cannot make it to her mother’s bedside before she dies, confirming her status as the archetypal outsider ‘As far back as his memory can reach, it is delightfully bruised: misunderstood by a loved and yet absent-minded, discreet and worried mother, the exile is stranger to his mother (..) the foreigner has lost his mother.’<sup>69</sup> Martina tells us that she loves shipwreck, ‘Quasi mi piace naufragare per essere costretta a costruirmi la mia capanna sull’isola deserta’ (*Sogni*, p.32), identifying herself as a female Robinson Crusoe. She relishes the repeated destruction of her world, but her attempts to reach more identities suggests that she wishes to store up a reserve for the disasters destiny visits upon her at regular intervals. Like Kristeva’s foreigner who ‘is able to tune into loves and aversions the superficial antennae of a basaltic heart’<sup>70</sup> Martina appears to have dealt with the storms by setting up an emotional cut-off point, sublimating passion into her work.

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language of fiction towards neo-standard Italian.’ Marina Spunta, ‘The Language of Tolerance: Dialogism and Orality in Francesca Duranti’s *Sogni Mancini*’, *MLN*, 115 (2000), 120-136.

<sup>67</sup> Francesca Duranti, *Left-handed Dreams*, edited and introduced by Nicoletta McGowan (Hull: Troubador, 2000). Also published in the States by Delphinium Books, a division of Harper Collins.

<sup>68</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers*, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p.8

Her apparent versatility hides an emotional brittleness that only begins to soften by the end of the novel when she takes in a stray dog and decides to try loving that.

The role of her second home in her identity construction is ambiguous. Spunta emphasizes her sense of dislocation in her use of language.<sup>71</sup> There is a strong sense that she is in the States because her own space has literally disappeared. When she returns home and wishes to revisit the site of her romance with Costantino: 'Attraversai il paese da un estremo all'altro, camminai fino al cimitero e tornai in dietro attraverso quello che era un tempo il Poggio di mezzo [...] Non avevo nessun punto di riferimento.' (*Sogni*, pp.14-15) Duranti herself has admitted a certain autobiographical link with Martina when she reads her own move to New York in a similar light, 'Forse quella metropoli non è tanto migliore della mia città. Almeno però in America sono un'ospite e perciò posso viverci con distacco.'<sup>72</sup> The notion of an emotional void lying at the root of travel is clear. At the same time Martina laughs at any notion of assumed regional or national identity which she sees in both her sister who has become more Tuscan than the Tuscans and fellow Italo-Americans like Costantino who americanize their names. She is aware of the fear of ostracism which lies behind these attempts at camouflage and refuses to give into it.<sup>73</sup> As Kristeva suggests, however, this acceptance of 'strangeness' is not for everyone, perhaps only for writers and artists.

Duranti too is aware that this finely tuned model of a literally 'nomadic' subjecthood, only ever planting its roots temporarily, is not for everyone. However the spatial arrangement of Martina's life suspended in a future somewhere between the States and Italy, becomes a powerful metaphor for her own notion of an identity in construction through the text. This echoes a model of thought and writing which crystalizes into a more relaxed approach to the fantastic than has hitherto been admitted into Duranti's texts. The fantastic doubt is allowed to cast its shadow, almost

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<sup>71</sup>Spunta, 'The Language of Tolerance: Dialogism and Orality in Francesca Duranti's *Sogni Mancini*', p.131, footnote 52. 'The extensive spatial deixis, while making the interaction and the narration more apparent to the readers' eyes, serves to highlight by contrast Martina's intrinsic sense of displacement, through linking the text to exophoric reference.'

<sup>72</sup>Cinzia Fiori, 'Fuggita da Berlusconi, torna per votare No', *Il corriere della sera*, 16 June 1995.

<sup>73</sup> On the thought of going to see the statue of liberty she says, 'In realtà il solo pensiero mi dava uno strano senso di panico. Sapevo che se fossi arrivata in America con due generazioni di anticipo, ci sarebbe stata l'angoscia del distacco, la paura dell'ignoto, l'umiliazione di Ellis Island, il salto nel vuoto di una lingua sconosciuta. Quella donna con la mano alzata mi avrebbe suggerito l'idea di una minaccia più che di un benvenuto.' (*Sogni*, p.132)

as though the loosening of spatial boundaries also relaxes the borders of realism and lifts off the weight of cultural mores.<sup>74</sup>

Martina is the first of Durante's female protagonists to encounter the fantastic directly. She is also the first woman who admits the need to write *after* male writers. As I suggested at the beginning of the chapter the fantastic now provides her with a way of dealing with this state of epigonality. This dialogue is a subtle one. The first question is whether Durante has been compromised by her desire to make Martina 'human'. She cooks, washes, cleans furiously, but does she read as much as one would expect a lecturer to? Although she doesn't appear to read over the course of the novel, she certainly has done. That is made evident by the presence on her walls of portraits of Campana, Leopardi and James, but Martina is an academic who seeks to escape and answer a male-authored culture. That she hopes to find this escape in the invention of the Macchina is made clear:

Scendo in biblioteca, leggo i giornali. Sfoglio qualche libro. Un tempo consultavo, prendevo appunti, ma in quel periodo avevo smesso. Non esisteva letteratura sul mio lavoro con la macchina.[.....] Guardavo i dorsi dei libri negli scaffali - gran parte del pensiero umano addossato a quelle pareti. "Ecco", mi dicevo "quello che io sto per tirare fuori dal mio cappello, lì non c'è ancora. Sarò io a mettercelo."

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter in this novel Durante reaches an important new stage in her reconciliation of the female writer and a sense of epigonality through the fantastic. Martina is keen to harness her research and throw a new light on the theories of her male predecessors, by venturing into uncharted territory. Her experience over the days of her narration, however, suggests that lived experience prevents the discovery of final answers. In a rather contrived ending her newly acquired puppy wipes out her several years' work by playing with the machine. More importantly, what Martina learns in her encounter with the fantastic is that it cannot be contained by language, literature or even a machine, but exists on their boundaries. In accepting this lesson she avoids the fatal end of hubris experienced by

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<sup>74</sup>This ties in with Kristeva's suggestion that art and scholarship provide one of the few ways of coping with existence as a foreigner: 'Analytic therapy, or, more exceptionally, an intense solitary exploration through memory and body might however bring forth the miracle of meditation that welds the original and the acquired into one of those mobile and innovative syntheses that great immigrant scholars or artists are capable of. For since he belongs to nothing the foreigner can feel as appertaining to everything, to the entire tradition, and that weightlessness in the infinity of cultures and legacies gives him the extravagant ease to innovate.' (Strangers, p.32)

previous male characters who failed to recognise it. In intertextual terms Duranti settles for, according to Spunta, rewriting and humanizing 'themes that are traditionally associated with men (the detective's investigation and travel writing) and fields such as scientific creation and psychoanalysis by inserting 'traditional' women's domains such as cooking.'<sup>75</sup> Like Martina, Duranti sensibly walks the narrow borderline between forms set up by patriarchy and the mirage of a female essence, which is the only space available to the contemporary innovative female subject.

Kristeva suggests that living with the other helps us to discover the other within ourself :

Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*. It is not simply - humanistically - a matter of our being able to accept that other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself [...] Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture. (p.13)

This is another way in which the foreign experience of Martina triggers a positive encounter with the fantastic. Unlike Fabrizio who constructs the foreign Other as a site of his own excess and then finds her a deadening weight, by tolerating the foreign around her Martina eventually learns to accept the foreigner within herself. Her answer to Kristeva's question 'Should one recognize that one becomes a foreigner in another country because one is already a foreigner from within?' is a resounding yes. When Martina admits that the Other is within herself - and must remain a stranger to herself - she can also let go of the desire to control it completely in her text, through her written research: 'Non può esistere, contro l'antico vizio dell'Assoluto, un rimedio assoluto.' (p.222)

Does this mean that she cannot write at all? On the contrary, Duranti has developed the idea that broke Fabrizio, that the self may metamorphose into a new one, that control is about release as well as retention. The eventual outcome of Martina's adventure in the fantastic is to bring the state of 'abjection' into her life by accepting the notion of an identity in construction, a 'nomadic' subjectivity. Far from silencing her it enables her to see that the story of her experiment, as a lesson in

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<sup>75</sup> Marina Spunta, 'The Food of Tolerance in Francesca Duranti's *Sogni mancini*', *The Italianist*, 19 (1999), 228-250 (p. 244).

possibilities, which could be of use to others. The notion of dialogue becomes crucial again here. As Spunta observes, this informs the linguistic register of the text: 'The plot is constituted of a great number of conversational exchanges, mostly in direct speech, but also free direct and indirect speech, as the protagonist/narrator repeatedly intermingles diegesis and mimesis, by directly addressing her narratees, that is her students, as well as herself, metanarratively bringing the reader into the story.'<sup>76</sup>

In this model of writing Duranti clarifies a notion of fiction that she has been practising and perfecting throughout her work, as exploration of the self and the space of the self, which invites a response. From *La casa*, which was a deconstruction of the use of literature as a means of creating the self based on distance from the Other, she has constructed a new model of how to write the self.<sup>77</sup> This self can be probed without a complete loss of a relation to the Real - what she is seeking is another reality not to negate the current one but rather to question it - 'una realtà di riserva'. In the progress from the first novel to the latest the fantastic has found its shadow become less menacing and more promising. It is a space from which the invisible can be acknowledged, if not made visible.<sup>78</sup> This is no facile conclusion. As Martina says of language and writing:

Se non conosci il nome, la nozione della cosa è fottuta. Non le ho trovate per voi le parole, e neppure per me. E, credetemi, senza il possesso del nome restare aggrappati a una parvenza di cognizione della cosa è una fatica senza sosta. (*Sogni*, p.222)

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<sup>76</sup>Spunta, 'The Language of Tolerance: Dialogism and Orality in Francesca Duranti's *Sogni Mancini*', p.126. Much of Martina's story is heard because of the surprisingly sympathetic attention of the right-wing headhunter. The presence of a male interlocutor or narratee as the sympathetic ear for a female narrator's fantastic tale is used by other contemporary female writers using the fantastic shadow in their work. Two examples lie in Fabrizia Ramondino's 'La signora di Son Batle' in *Storie di patio* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983) and Francesca Sanvitale's *L'uomo del parco* (Milano: Mondadori, 1984) which like Duranti's book suggest that female writers see the space of the fantastic tale as a useful model for a new dialogue between the sexes.

<sup>77</sup>Again Spunta's comments on language are of great interest here. She notes the contrast between *Sogni mancini* and *La casa sul lago della luna* 'where 'magic' and literary aura, suspended between reality and fantasy, is supported by a more literary register and embedded discourse, through Fabrizio's frequent free indirect speech.' (p.124) It is this move away from the literary register towards a freer dialogic register which we can also see in her dialogue with the fantastic.

<sup>78</sup>'It is not the object of an act of seeing that matters, then, but the way the subject does the seeing. And here, at the site of the subject, an irrevocable split sunders the purported unity of both seeing and subject. Phelan reminds us of Lacan's comment on the failure of self-seeing "I am unable to see myself from the place where the Other is looking at me" To compensate for this failure, the other is made to bear the weight of the gaze, affirming the power of the one who wields it; "Until one can accept one's internal other as lost, invisible, an unmarked blank to oneself and within the world, the external other

The fantastic itself, always attempting to go beyond language through language provides the ideal modality for undertaking this 'fatica senza sosta.'

If Kristeva describes psychoanalysis as 'a journey towards an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable'(Strangers, p.182), Duranti's use of fantastic finds itself on a similar flight path. By continuing to invite the numinous into her text, despite her suspicion of it, Duranti finds the best expression of her 'linea di mezzo'. I have cited the role of travel and boundary crossing as vital in this use of the fantastic shadow. It emerges not only as geographical but also a temporal boundary crossing in which the relation between present and past selves becomes an equally interesting point of uncertainty. At the same time it is a fantastic that roots itself in the senses - a controversial move, as we have seen in Duranti's case, in that the senses are a dangerous 'feminine' signifier, tying women to the bedroom, the kitchen or the madhouse. In Duranti's case, however, one that pays off, for within the context of the fantastic the senses, particularly of taste, are renewed with their own intrinsic magic and re-site the body as a vital locus of female subjecthood.<sup>79</sup>

In 'The Powers of Horror' Kristeva emphasizes the importance of the 'abject' as a threatening but potentially positive model for subjecthood in which boundaries are eroded.<sup>80</sup> It is a state associated with the fantastic and, I would suggest, with the dialogic form of the fantastic text that brooks no absolute conclusion. In *Sogni mancini* male characters are drawn into dialogue with women as part of the process of shifting the literary status quo, of reforming the boundaries of female literary space - what I call the need for textual (s)exchange.

In this general erosion of boundaries of the self and the crossing of national boundaries, however, temporary spaces of enclosure emerge which provide a transient form of protection. This reflects Claudine Herrmann's conclusion that women writers tend to fragment space, in order to resist being consumed by it:

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will always bear the marks and scars of the looker's deadening gaze." Not visibility alone, then, but the invisibility that is always part of the visible must become politicized.' (Schwenger, p.120)

<sup>79</sup>This use of the senses also forms an interesting point of comparison with Capriolo's work. She focusses almost exclusively on the senses of sight and sound. Her use of these senses, for example of hearing in the case of Adele in *Il gigante* and sight in *La grande Eulalia* seem to open her female figures up to compromise and exploitation.

<sup>80</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror* trans. by Leon. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

Il s'ensuit que pour retrouver la fonction perdue, indispensable et complémentaire, la femme est obligée d'apporter un autre découpage au temps et à l'espace, de refuser leur continuité, de les fragmenter en instants et en lieux qui ne se relient pas entre eux, de sorte que chacun soit une sorte d'innovation par rapport à ou contexte ou géographie.<sup>81</sup>

In Duranti's text the aeroplane in which Martina is physically found at the beginning of the text could symbolize her fantastic suspension between states. She imagines herself as always leaving one shipwreck behind and heading for another. The holding together of the self between reality and fantasy is frequently envisaged in the fantastic text as a mode of transport or temporary enclosure, such as a hotel room.<sup>82</sup> These spaces in turn reflect the fantastic text, as ideal space in which to hold tensions together temporarily.

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<sup>81</sup>Claudine Herrmann, p.161.

<sup>82</sup>Jessica Benjamin observes the recurrence of similar spaces is synonymous with the emergent subjectivity of her female patients: 'I have found that the spatial metaphor comes repeatedly into play when women try to attain a sense of their sexual subjectivity. For example, a woman who was beginning to detach herself from her enthrallment to a seductive father began to dream of rooms. She began to look forward to traveling alone, to the feeling of containment and freedom as she flew in an airplane, to being alone and anonymous in her hotel room. Here she imagined, she would find a kind of aloneness that would allow her to look into herself.' (*The Bonds of Love*, p.128)

## ii. Finding the Foreign at Home: Rossana Ombres

‘Ogni luogo è un nume pericoloso, se non gli si sacrifica’ - Ombres (*Serenata*, p.36)

Rossana Ombres began her career as a poet, publishing three volumes of poetry,<sup>83</sup> before moving into narrative prose.<sup>84</sup> Although she has had a good critical reception, been awarded several high profile prizes and published as recently as 1997 none of her work is in print in Italy at the time of writing. The dust jacket of her third volume of poetry describes how her work provokes the reader ‘a stabilire costanti riferimenti culturali, a giocare di rinvio con tutto un bagaglio erudito, tra il magico e religioso, almeno inconsueto nell’orizzonte della nostra giovane cultura’. Can the strange evaporation of her work from the Italian literary scene be attributed to this ‘unusual’ and demanding combination of elements in her work, which persists in her narrative? The failure of Ombres’ work to gain a lasting audience provides an interesting point of contrast with Capriolo’s work that seems to have been sold because of its cultural baggage. Taking up Carla Benedetti’s argument that the belief in the death of literature is something of a get out clause for bemused literary theorists,<sup>85</sup> I would argue that Capriolo’s work has been popular with critics because it appears to fit into this postmodern epigonal category. Ombres’ work, in line with that of many other women writers including Duranti’s, points to a literature beyond the claustrophobic space of epigonality. In fact she claims not to have any models at all, ‘Non posso dire di avere maestri o modelli, e neppure compagni di strada, scrittori che sento vicini. Sono una scrittrice solitaria.’<sup>86</sup>

One of the obvious differences between the two approaches undoubtedly lies in the use of language. Capriolo’s highly sophisticated ideas are conveyed in a language sometimes criticized as a readable and ‘medio-alto’ form of ‘translate’, an aspect which emphasizes the author’s predominant sense of the ‘già detto’. By

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<sup>83</sup>*Orrizzonte anche tu*, (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1956); *Le ciminiere di Casale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1962) - Premio Firenze and *L’ipotesi di Agar* (Torino: Einaudi, 1968) - Premio Tarquinia-Cardarelli. She later wrote *Bestiario d’amore* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1974) which won the Premio Viareggio per la poesia.

<sup>84</sup>Her narrative works to date are: *Principessa Giacinta* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1970), *Memorie di una dilettante* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1977), *Serenata* (Milano: Mondadori, 1980) - finalist for the Premio Campiello, *Un dio coperto di rose* (Milano: Mondadori, 1993) - awarded the Superpremio Grinzane Cavour and finalist for the Premio Strega, *Baiadera* (Milano: Mondadori, 1997).

<sup>85</sup>See Carla Benedetti, *L’ombra lunga dell’autore: indagini su una figura cancellata* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1999)

<sup>86</sup>Ombres in interview with Alessandro Baricco, ‘Punta al capolavoro altrimenti lascia perdere’, interview with Alessandro Baricco, *La Stampa: Tuttolibri*, 27 July 1993.

contrast Ombres' formation as a poet gives her a much more experimental attitude towards language - in her first novel, the well-received *Principessa Giacinta*, she exploits this control of language almost to the point of exasperation in its avant-garde style. Perhaps as a response to this her following novel, *Memorie di una dilettante*, moulds the exuberance of her language into a more clearly defined plot, which whilst rendering it more readable, consequently loses some of its power of expression. Her third novel, *Serenata*, strikes a delicate balance between the two. All of these first three works, however, remain doggedly hermetic in a unique, poetical use of the fantastic that draws on a rich lexicon of mysticism, the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, superstition and fable. Although she denies having literary models, I therefore regard her as engaging with the fabric of 'high' literary practice.

A further reason for Ombres' marginality may lie in her representation of the female subject as grotesque, her fascination with both the corporeal and visceral aspects of the body and the darkest elements of the female psyche, in short, with taboo.<sup>87</sup> Ombres' use of the fantastic leads into the most extreme forms of what is stereotypically regarded as female behavioural territory: madness, hysteria, mysticism and witchcraft. Ombres deploys these extreme models radically, to such a degree that her work comes much closer to the notion of 'écriture féminine' than any of the other works studied here.<sup>88</sup> Just as Luce Irigaray in *Speculum* revels in the power of female mimicry and excess to subvert the very discourses allowed her and thus break through the Symbolic, Ombres takes on a similarly Herculean task. It is another example of the female writer's use of the fantastic genre to break off the shackles of textual moulding.

Her first three works, all narrated in the first person, foreground the intensity of the invasion of the conscious by the unconscious to a much higher degree than the other novels studied here. This interest in the female psyche puts Ombres' work in line with a practice of fantastic writing largely overlooked in Italy which includes

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<sup>87</sup>Since the publication of these novels taboo infringement of every kind has become a popular publishing commodity, to which the enthusiastic reception of the 'gioventù cannibale' in the nineties testifies. It is no doubt Ombres' particular combination of taboo and the fantastic which differentiates her work from this more recent violent 'realism'.

<sup>88</sup>Marie Darrieusecq's recent *My Phantom Husband* trans. by Helen Stevenson (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) bears many striking resemblances to *Principessa Giacinta*.

works by Francesca Sanvitale, Alda Merini and Elisabetta Rasy.<sup>89</sup> The self-conscious emphasis on the centrality of the individual female consciousness colours the text to the extent that the reader's questions about where reality ends and psychical reality begins are constantly provoked and constantly thwarted. Terry Castle's suggestion that in the eighteenth century the mind itself became the site of the uncanny as it internalized phantoms previously considered external seems particularly resonant in these texts.<sup>90</sup> The interior space has therefore a correspondingly privileged position.

These novels all concern the development of a potentially creative middle-class female, with an insistence that would suggest an autobiographical origin. The novels make a direct link between female neurosis and the bourgeois environment.<sup>91</sup> In fact each novel charts the encounter with a world which does not accommodate the protagonist, as woman certainly, but more importantly as a creative woman - a factor which plays a key role in the use of the fantastic as an encounter with intertextuality. The first novel takes a diaristic form - of a journalist, suffering from some form of claustrophobia and an excessive concern about her virginity, her medicine, telephone communication with a certain male, E., and the disappearance of a manuscript she has written. She also regularly assumes an alternative identity as Caterina di Bora, the wife of Protestant reformer, Martin Luther. The second novel concerns a rich daughter of an industrialist who on her return from a kidnapping sees her past as dilettantish and seeks ways to realise her artistic nature and sexuality more fully. *Serenata's* heroine is a literary editor who falls in love when she goes down South to interview a potential writer, a journey which precipitates a crisis in her own psychical make-up. The role of the fantastic in the novels is crucial in drawing a distinction between the clinical description of a descent into neurosis and the search for a creative impulse that may offer a way back to a form of reality previously untouched. A grasp of the senses as potentially visionary gives the fantastic a power that may be used positively, as in *Sogni mancini*. I will look briefly at the role of the fantastic in the first two

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<sup>89</sup>See for example, Elisabetta Rasy, *La prima estasi* (Milano: Mondadori, 1985), Francesca Sanvitale *L'uomo del parco* (Milan: Mondadori, 1984), Alda Merini, *L'altra verità: diario di una diversa* (Milano: Scheiwiller, 1986).

<sup>90</sup>Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: OUP, 1995).

<sup>91</sup>Angelo Mario Ripellino for example locates Ombres' work under the title 'Nausea del quotidiano e crisi della donna borghese' in *Novecento: I contemporanei*, ed. by Gianni Grana (Milano: Marzorati editore, 1994), pp.10162 -10175 (p. 10171).

novels, particularly the roles of enclosure and travel, before focussing on *Serenata* as an example of the fantastic female subject in formation.

Interestingly Ombres' later work is often described as occupying the margins of the fantastic: 'La realtà, per Ombres, è sempre sul punto di crescere nel fantastico.'<sup>92</sup> Indeed her later works continue many of the themes raised here, but in relation to younger protagonists, subjects more evidently in formation, who have a chance to develop without having to undergo quite such drastic visionary transformations. It undergoes a gradual suppression of the fantastic as more and more 'stable' characters emerge, but the undercurrent remains as a means of dialogue with a past self.

### ii.i Leaving Home: *Principessa Giacinta* and *Memorie di una dilettante*

The first person narrative of *Principessa Giacinta* really falls outside the remit of this thesis because of its publication date (1970). Nonetheless it is useful to dwell briefly on its treatment of themes which are relevant to this thesis and compare their deployment here with the author's later works and the other novels of this thesis, particularly Capriolo's *Il doppio regno*. As the first person monologue of a woman who eschews the construction of a coherent narrative it is also useful for bringing into focus the elasticity of that elusive fantastic genre. Everything we are told by this protagonist is doubtful, as multiple beings and facts coexist, such that every reader must reconstruct his/her own account of what has happened from few firm reference points. In this way it is invested with a poetical system of signification, which tends to invite multiple interpretation. Nonetheless, as in poetry, internal repetition and the use of leitmotif gives the reader a sense of structure - a new world on which to found meaning. I have suggested that the primary function of the fantastic strives for this involvement of the reader and the *active* struggle with the ineffable as opposed to a passive absorption of events. This novel's presentation of excess pushes the reader to his/her interpretative limits in interaction with the fantastic modality.

Thematically *Principessa Giacinta* has much in common with Capriolo's *Il doppio regno* presenting the female subject's past as a series of possibilities or

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<sup>92</sup>See the book jacket of *Un dio coperto di rose*.

hallucinations from within a site of mysterious enclosure. Although both novels take on a diaristic format the narrators are in contrasting states of self-awareness, which echo the authors' contrasting backgrounds of philosophy and poetry and their attitudes to feminism. With a paradoxical clarity of reason the Capriolo protagonist invites the reader to speculate with her about what constitutes her past and present self and experience. In contrast the diarist of *Principessa Giacinta* provokes the reader to speculate about what is her present and what is her past, without appearing to care herself. The protagonist spends most of her life inside either an apartment or a Venetian hotel room - the two almost conflate to become the same, since there is no journey indicated between them. In fact the space of the novel has an Escher-like, dream structure in which one interior unfolds into another without us ever being aware of the point at which the narrator has crossed over. In the apartment's history is a robbery, whilst in the hotel traces of a wedding which has perhaps not happened. The loss of memory and the trauma associated with these two spaces draw a clear parallel with Capriolo's hotel in *Il doppio regno*, even down to the detail that in the hotel all the mirrors have been removed. The enclosed space becomes a space for intense introspection and the renegotiation of female identity, which question the line between sanity and its antithesis. The connections with *Il doppio regno* do not finish there. From this space the protagonist communicates with a man, named E., whose identity is unclear - he may be her lover who has jilted her, he may be her psychiatrist or even her journalist boss. Like Bruno, he is a paternal, advisory figure who tries in vain to lure her out of her enclosure towards the horizon: 'a guardare orizzonti, luminosi, quieti' (*Principessa*, p.65)

As for the protagonist of *Il doppio regno* the enclosure is both the positive space, the protective shell, a space which is threatened by the invasion of others, but it can also be a space wherein threats arise. Mario Lunetta describes its paradoxical nature as 'un carcere, tutt'altro che ferreo: ma anzi molliccio, gelatinoso, impastato da materiale organico in decomposizione, tra il marcio e l'escrementizio'.<sup>93</sup> Just as the Capriolo protagonist finds the waiters initially disturbing, the Ombres protagonist finds her flat invaded by mysterious creatures (which may of course be simply a by-product of damaged sight, as E. suggests). The neologism she adopts for these,

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<sup>93</sup>Mario Lunetta, 'Rossana Ombres' in Grana (ed.), pp.10162-10169 (p.10165).

'scarabangeli', whose mutations and migrations she watches with horror and fascination, conveys the mixture of religious awe for guardian angels and physical revulsion for insects. Here the abyss between Capriolo's cerebral-philosophical approach to her space of creation and Ombres' physical-mystical space emerges.

Nonetheless the created space for both is also a space of creativity in crisis. Just as the Capriolo-protagonist finds that she no longer has the will to write as an individual, the 'scarabangeli', or LORO as the Ombres protagonist calls them, stop her writing and reading, by crawling over her books and writing desk. Her manuscript has disappeared but we do not know whether it has been stolen, taken away from her or whether she has thrown it out. The mysterious figure of E. resembles the ambiguous figure of the husband in Charlotte Perkins Gillman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) through whose benevolent concern and authoritative manner a more sinister subplot is suggested, although here it is much less clearly marked.

The enchantment of enclosure is the essence of this text as it is for many of Capriolo's protagonists and eventually Duranti's Fabrizio. It is also intimately linked to the notion of creativity - a space from which worlds can be created. If the protagonist does not write she does at one point begin furiously to create huge, detailed maps. Again we see a certain fragmentation of space foregrounded which I have emphasized as central to the Italian female fantastic in its attempt to break across boundaries.<sup>94</sup> The notions of inside and outside are shaken up and the walls of enclosure become porous as imagination takes precedence over space, as the female imagination can transcend the boundaries set for it. As in Sanvitale's *L'uomo del parco* the protagonist undertakes numerous journeys which lift her out of her home space and her national space, as far afield as Tel Aviv. This boundary crossing from a 'room of one's own' emerges as a powerful model for women's writing.<sup>95</sup> In Ombres'

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<sup>94</sup>As Herrmann suggested the idea of the island is a powerful motif in the process of fragmentation. Ripellino, *ibid.*, describes an early collection of Ombres' poetry as based on an antithesis: 'l'antitesi della ripugnanza con la fiaba e con il desiderio di opporre al mondo scurrile e ibrido in cui si vive, questo mondo grondante di sessualità putrida, un ritorno a un'isola felice.' (p.10171). Certainly *Principessa Giacinta*, as he suggests, echoes this attempt at withdrawal. In the following novels however a movement of reconciliation is attempted, still via the fantastic, an attempt to patch the fragments together into a space across which the female subject can move.

<sup>95</sup>As Fabrizia Ramondino's comment about her collection of essays *In viaggio* implies: 'Lì attraverso strade, seguo percorsi con l'atteggiamento del *flâneur*, il vagabondo sensuale che coglie i sapori e gli odori lasciando al viaggiatore comune i brividi storici e le reminiscenze obbligate e non distinguo il viaggio nella mia stanza da quello in paesi stranieri e nelle metafore del linguaggio. Perché anche la

case however, as in Sanvitale's, the distinction between a deliberate 'arm-chair travel' and an involuntary, neurotic one is blurred.

The same ambiguity surrounds the representation of the body. It is an enclosure to be preserved at all costs, as the proliferation of lilies, the symbol of purity, and the obsessive rejection of sex underline alongside the excessive intake of medicine in order to combat its propensity towards decay. By contrast with Capriolo's claims to reject gender wholesale (and her failure) the Ombres protagonist is most clear about the fact that she is fleeing the specificity of the sexed body. This difference emerges as a fundamental difference in the work of the two writers, for Ombres' interest in the sexed body entails more complex attempts to reconcile the female subject with existence. This is evident in the fact that the Capriolo protagonist withdraws into a supposedly androgyne identity, which is in fact only another form of social conditioning. The Ombres protagonist on the other hand deliberately exceeds the demands made upon female identity by incarnating their contradictions. In assuming the identity of Caterina di Bora, mother of many children, she invites a mental possession that requires a different conception of the body to that of the virgin, but another stereotypically female one. This hysterical symptom invites a parodic comparison with mystics who often assume identities of religious figures, including Christ. Here paradoxically the virgin recipient becomes the wife of the man who presented the greatest challenge to the Catholic faith and an ex-nun, a fallen woman. The proliferation of religious symbolic language re-appropriated as self-expression turns the diary into a psychological-mystical tract with an irreverency for both religion and psychoanalysis that can only find its expression in the fantastic.

The similarities between the two novels lead one back to a crucial question at the heart of the female fantastic. If the female writer uses the fantastic as a way of layering the female self with prefabricated meaning does she do anything other than exacerbate the mystification surrounding the female subject or by revelling in its excess can she implode it? I believe that the use of enclosure in both Capriolo's and more so in Ombres' text enable them to exorcise to some degree that confusion about how the female subject can write through this language. By revelling in the notion of

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lingua si sposta, come me, di continuo e si apre a una pluralità di sensi che io da sempre inseguo.' (Rosaria Guacci, 'Intervista con Fabrizia Ramondino', *Tuttestorie*, 3/4 (1991), p.8)

the textual prison, in their very different forms of mimicry, both writers can find ways to move beyond it, but Ombres' move is much more deliberate.

Although *Principessa Giacinta* describes a state of psychosis it is not about the escape from or the return to a painful reality. It is rather the celebration of infinite female selves, which suffer loss and trauma, but draw on that suffering.<sup>96</sup> The meaning of *Giacinta* or hyacinth in the language of flowers means both separation and play, and reflects the strong ludic drive of Ombres' work. The creative limits of this play are in position, but no means as rigidly as for Capriolo's protagonist. For Capriolo's amnesiac diarist the vision of limitation lies within her mind, in the limits of this game of literature that will always-already be written. However for Ombres' protagonist they are betrayed in her title 'Principessa'.<sup>97</sup> Like a princess her powers (of creativity) are limited by her sexual identity, inscribed on her body, subject to a particular economy. The frequent mention of lilies calls our attention to the opposing preoccupations with virginity and fecundity which tears this particular female subject into a series of fragmented selves. The exuberant admission of the gendered nature of the enclosure leads towards a more decided exit from this enclosure.

Writing of the relationship between the woman writer and nature, Paola Blaloch suggests that the female writer feels nostalgic towards nature, but privileges the space of the city over the country.<sup>98</sup> In *Memorie di una dilettante* (1977) Ombres confronts the fantastic relationship traditionally ascribed to 'woman' and nature, thus transforming her protagonist's attitude towards the city. The occasion of this encounter with nature is a rather unusual trip into the country. The protagonist, amateur artist and 43 year-old daughter of a family of Torinese factory owners, is kidnapped.

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<sup>96</sup>This contrasts with Francesca Sanvitale's more sober agenda in *L'uomo del parco* which nonetheless holds this novel on a fantastic boundary: 'a me interessava indagare nella mente di una persona - una donna - che aveva perso questo rapporto con la realtà. Volevo capire come a poco a poco i fantasmi che arrivavano nella sua mente o le persone vere che arrivavano a lei in qualità di fantasmi si modificavano. Fino al momento in cui, lentamente, dolorosamente, il rapporto con la realtà torna ad affiorare.' (Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, 'Francesca Sanvitale: dialogo con la realtà' in *Tuttestorie*, 5 (1992))

<sup>97</sup>Her later album-book *Le belle statue* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975) presents her own collection of postcards, made from the age of twelve, with accompanying comments of young girls. These pictures date from the turn of the century to the beginning of the second world war and feature Mucha's Art Nouveau print 'Principessa Giacinta'. This link suggests that the irony permeating her presentation of that visual collection also informs this verbal portrayal of the female subject. This time however the creator-viewer relationship is turned upon its head.

What is surprising in this affair is the fact that she has not been very shocked by the treatment at the hands of her rough kidnappers - for this she has the detached interest of an independent observer. This indifference to her fate could be explained by her sense of objectification within her own society. The fact that this protagonist still lives in her family home - her husband has simply moved in and taken over her father's position - emphasizes the static nature of this position for women, particularly within the bourgeois capitalist economy, in which female choice threatens to bring down the whole social and economic structure. The emphasis on the unsatisfied sexuality of this heroine is central to the story. Her husband is impotent and refuses to do anything about it because in his words: 'lì possono farsi tagliare solo le femmine, che di quegli organo hanno assai meno bisogno.' The impotent husband has been chosen not by the protagonist, but the family as an economic necessity in his ability to continue to manage the family firm, echoing Gayle Rubin's words that: 'From the standpoint of the system, the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desire of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response.'<sup>99</sup> For the protagonist, the kidnapping proves to be simply one step further in an economy of exchange - by expropriating the woman, the kidnappers put themselves on a level with those they bargain with for her return, 'the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it'.<sup>100</sup> This is underlined when her husband asks whether she slept with her kidnapper, for him an almost inevitable consequence of her being in their 'possession.'

At the same time, however, the marginality of the kidnappers to the bourgeois system, in the sense that they constitute a grotesque imitation of it, gives the protagonist the chance for distance from that all-engulfing system represented by the house, and her hometown - both targets for her contempt. What is most important is the opportunity it gives her for memories to breathe and mentally observe her daily life and the psychical self moulded within the bourgeois family unit. She has been given enough distance to realise that this reality is not hers - it is a text prescribed by others. In a characteristic conflation of the sacred and the pagan Ombres couches her

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<sup>98</sup> 'Eppure, sia bella che brutta, la città rimane l'ambiente naturale dei personaggi femminili, il luogo dove amano vivere, e che preferiscono ritrarre. Alla città in senso anche masochistico, queste donne sono legate indissolubilmente. La natura, invece, è un rimpianto.' (Blelloch, p.131)

<sup>99</sup> Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes On the "Political Economy" of Sex', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, pp.533-560 (p.547).

protagonist's death and re-birth in terms of a religious revelation ('La mia vita di quei indimenticabili venti giorni [...] era in effetti monacale nel senso della clausura più mortificante', *Memorie*, p.46) referring at the same time to the uncanny powers of enforced enclosure.<sup>101</sup>

Ombres introduces a symbol which gains a fantastic valency in order to guide the protagonist out of this enclosure. The protagonist begins to attribute powers of primal, pagan force to the natural world around her and Ombres stubbornly refuses to allow these symbols to be absorbed into the grey reality of Turin. A mysterious trio of huntsmen make a repeated appearance in her life forcing an uncanny link between her past self and her present experience. She associates their repeated reappearance with an opera she has seen, possibly 'Der Freischutz' in which huntsmen represent both pagan good and evil. They spill over from the theatrical origin into her life and vision of her past, messengers from an underworld of the psyche, and act as a prompt to search and capture natural and possibly 'demonic' origins. The end of the novel culminates in the protagonist's realisation that her psychically real Self, outside the Law of the Father, can be grasped. The reader is left in a perpetual (infernally) circle questioning this as a utopian fantasy or a real possibility.

The blurring of contrasts between city and country, propriety and impropriety, is underlined by the protagonist's fascination with 'caterina' grass she claims to have seen in their hats once at an opera, a plant she then insists on bringing into her seaside house. Her childhood nurse attempts to prevent her, calling them the plant of the devil and incest itself. It is a plant which local lore fears makes women pregnant. The power of place and its effect upon the protagonist is emphasized by the relation with the plants and by her relationship with the land: 'Pensavo: è stata questa campagna a decidere la mia segragazione, voleva trattenermi un po' con lei. La terra è possessiva; vuol godersi i vivi, vuol inghiottirsi i morti' (*Memorie*, p.148). The hold she regards the land as having over her subverts the emphasis on social relations and restores to women a sensual link with the land, which could certainly be viewed as essentialist, were it not set within the parameters of the fantastic. This use of superstition and the hint of sexual communion with the devil and even witchcraft itself is typical of

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<sup>100</sup>ibid., p.542.

Ombres' refusal to make a psychoanalytical response the only possible interpretation of her text and to force a new encounter with female stereotypes.

By colouring her text with the intrusion of fairy tale figures she conflates the real and the fantasy ending with a solution which constantly provokes questions. Her use of cultural references in the context of taboo distorts their original signification. A series of dislocations of meaning parallel the overall re-contextualisation of the protagonist whose return home in the light of her kidnapping makes her world a new one. She refers to a vision of herself as a kind of 'new Eve' seducing her brother, seven years her younger, in a rediscovery of 'bad' sexual power.<sup>102</sup> Such intertextuality is a fundamental sign of her character's transformation in the following passage:

Sono ormai uscita della mia clausura, esercitata nella memoria e portata a rivedere l'interpretazione dei fatti, delle parole e perfino degli oggetti. Ho qui davanti a me in uno scaffale, la fiaba di Barbablù e quella del Gatto con gli stivali in una modesta edizione del dopoguerra: le porterò con me. C'è in queste due fiabe, il segno che il mio modo di vedere le situazioni, i simboli si sta modificando. Prima, per me, Barbablù era un losco tiranno e il Gatto un servitore furbo che combina il suo tornaconto con beffe e acrobazie. Ora Barbablù è un uomo disambientato che sfoga la sua mania di grandezza cercando di diventare un nume, creandosi un proibito sulla falsariga di Adamo e Eva, mentre la moglie se ne va per diventare una donna libera. E il Gatto, è il più disinteressato e affettuoso compagno di sogni che si possa trovare. (*Memorie*, p.157)

In this co-existence of real and imaginary transformations of her husband and brother the fantastic assumes the full force of its transgressive power as a re-visioning of socially approved texts.

The role of space in this novel and its relation to the development of the fantastic is crucial to this interpretation of the novel. The town which holds her is described in metaphors of violence to a female body<sup>103</sup> in artificial contrast with a

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<sup>101</sup> In fact so powerful an effect does this experience of violently enforced enclosure have on her that after her release she acts out a regular 'addomesticata ripetizione della prigionia' in which she lies on her bed, blindfolded with an expensive silk scarf, contemplating her mental enclosure.

<sup>102</sup> 'Ora, era come se Eva avesse sentito qualche altro essere del creato guardarla e ascoltarla mentre si congiungeva ad Adamo. Quintino, lo consideravo con serenità, come una volpe, una faina o una donnola che si era avvicinata all'albero sotto il quale il primo uomo e la prima donna del mondo gettavano via le loro titubanze.' (*Memorie*, p.170)

<sup>103</sup> 'Le sue chiese barocche con quelle tette magroline e il cappezolo in punta che respira con due soldini di oblò.' (*Memorie*, p.8) 'cupole e cupolette di quelle chiese del centro della mia città che sembrano meste chioce pietrificate coi loro pulcini.' (*Memorie*, p.22)

countryside it barely holds at bay with its 'periferie alte dove si coltivano i tendaggi con l'apprensione che quindici chilometri più in là hanno per le viti' (*Memorie*, p.7). This is echoed by its prudery regarding sexuality (the narrator was told that they found her brother under a fig-tree). It is also a city deeply suspicious of the artistic, when described by a local paper as having 'estro', she is shocked: 'Estro! Per una che viva nella mia città, parlare di estro è darle una patente da matta.' (*Memorie*, p.19) Her depiction of the family home and factory is also as sites of oppression.<sup>104</sup>

As for the protagonist of *Il doppio regno* the step into the unknown is fraught with anxiety. Once again the sea is a powerful symbol for the potential for annihilation which creation demands:

Avevo evitato di andare vicino al mare per quel mio desiderio di sfuggire ai panorami, a vedute spaziose, a un oltremarino che mi riproponeva i miei assilli: lo sconfinato, la libertà. Assilli che, lo capivo, avevano a che vedere con quel futuro, quel 'dopo' che mi sembrava tanto inquietante. (*Memorie*, p.117)

Rather than fleeing this challenge like the *Principessa Giacinta*, this heroine faces up to it. Her resolution finishes in a hotel that she describes as 'un luogo neutrale e tranquilla come si pensa sia il Limbo'<sup>105</sup> but this suggests that her first reconfiguration of the self may be one of many. This hotel is a space of freedom, from where she can view other spaces in a different light: 'Da questo balcone della mia libertà (direbbe un conferenziere) penso con tenerezza alla mia città. Ora che ho divorziato da lei, sono libera di pensare alle sue virtù.' (*Memorie*, p.174) This hotel is a stopping point on the way somewhere else. Here she will paint and love more freely she insists, in a new space: 'E se avrò bisogno di qualcosa, saprò cercarla e trovarla da sola. Magari inventandola.' (*Memorie*, p.175) The reconstruction of female sexuality is meant to point towards the unimaginable source of creativity. In her following novel the idea of this reconstruction is posited more delicately and less ambitiously. The power of territory itself in this renegotiation of the artistic subject becomes crucial to *Serenata*, in which the protagonist's relationship to the space of the Other is a refusal to conquer it or be overwhelmed by its excess.

<sup>104</sup> 'Ho intorno dei diavoli ... Dietro di me c'è un edificio con le finestre tutte egualmente lunghe ed alte e con due grandi porte d'ingresso. Fra l'edificio scuro e i diavoli, che sono anch'essi scuri, io sono schiacciata: minuscola e senza forme.' (*Memorie*, p.94)

<sup>105</sup> 'Mi sono sempre piaciuti tanto gli alberghi, perché potevo inventare una casa nuova dove non pesava la mia famiglia nei suoi soggetti, nei suoi odori. Capsico perché nel primo Novecento diversi

## ii.ii Going home: *Serenata*

The private sphere can be described, in some instances, as the protective shell of unspeakable words - Graziella Parati<sup>106</sup>

Of all Ombres' fiction, *Serenata* is undoubtedly the most self-reflexive and as such most interesting to this project. It is also one that presents a less exuberant, but richer conclusion than that of her preceding novel. The very profession of Ombres' heroine, Dottoressa Sara Nardi, a respected literary editor for a large Milanese publisher, metonymically indicates the central role of literature. As in many of the other novels examined here literature itself is a fundamental part of the character's psychological make-up. Like *La casa sul lago della luna*, *Serenata* does take a parodic look at the literary industry but its interrogation of the role of literature is principally driven by a series of questions about the relationship between human experience and the stories told about it, about whether there is in fact any difference. In this particular game of mirrors between fantasy and reality, the fantastic emerges as a prism of light between the two. The fantastic becomes the central *theme* as well as the mode of Ombres' novel, not as the result of a systematic enquiry, but as the subject of a montage of thoughts, memories and experiences of the protagonist. Through the hysterical symptoms of the protagonist and the constant re-visioning of reality through Sara's eyes Ombres forces the reader to privilege the fantastic modality over any psychoanalytically derived conclusion. The almost complete identification of the third person narration with Sara's thoughts, often through free indirect speech, intensifies this practice.

Sara, a literary editor in Milan, makes a rare trip down South in order to negotiate with a potential author for her firm. The author of one neo-realist masterpiece in the immediate post-war period, Annibale Lozito is rumoured to be completing a second work, over thirty years in the making. On her arrival at his remote residence Sara meets his mother who informs her that there is no such work and that her son's present occupation is the uncovering of the grave of a foreign king and his gold rumoured to have been buried by the river. The hint of madness and

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scrittori abbiano composto i loro capolavori nelle stanze degli alberghi. Forse nelle loro case sarebbero state troppo oppressi o distratti o vessati, per poterlo fare.' (*Memorie*, p.171)

<sup>106</sup>Parati, p.6.

family tragedy hangs heavily in the air. Defeated, Sara resolves to return to Milan as soon as possible, but whilst eating out in a local restaurant meets one of the firm's authors who insists that she come to a provincial literary soiree in the town. Reluctantly Sara attends and there she meets a local writer and falls suddenly and violently in love.

The remainder of the novel recounts Sara's response to this experience. The threat to her ego of the annihilation of the self in romantic love triggers a crisis and in a state somewhere between hysteria and mysticism she undergoes a passion, neither wholly secular nor religious. Returning to Milan she progresses towards a state of ecstasy, stops eating and starts to sleep on her sofa, dedicating herself to her loved one before she has even declared her passion. A return to G., on the pretext of seeing another of the firm's writers, leads to a further encounter in which Sara and her lover barely have time to declare their reciprocal attraction and kiss before they are interrupted and separate. The following day, before her return to Milan, Sara goes to the sea - a place we are told she always came to resolve her troubles. Now she sees it as a place set apart for her spiritual realisation and in a moment of ecstatic union throws herself into the sea in what could be a suicidal act or a test of faith. The ambiguous manner in which this episode is narrated does not make it clear how she escapes - she is washed up on the rocks, badly bleeding. After a period of convalescence in Milan she returns to work and moves from her apartment to a new house. The final scene sees her pretend to be absent when her lover from the South telephones her. Listening to his voice, she relives mentally the experience of her passion and attempts to leave it behind her.

The narrator refers to the protagonist as both Sara and la Dottoressa Sara Nardi. These two names reflect a split within the protagonist that finds a geographical equivalent in an imaginary latitudinal line drawn across the map of Italy between the North and the South. The division between North and South along the lines male/female helps to emphasize symbolically and materially the difficulties for a woman participating in a man's world, outside the *matroneum*. In the following pages I will examine the ways in which these parallel divisions act upon our perception of the character and how the role of literature and the fantastic shake up the same pairs of binary divisions in the mind of the character and the reader.

## Dottoressa Nardi and the North

The formal intrusion of the protagonist's full title into the intimate intensity of a love story tells us a great deal about what Ombres wants us to see in this character. As a successful career woman, a relatively new breed in the Italy of the early eighties, Sara Nardi is in many ways an earlier, less self-aware incarnation of Durante's Martina Satriano. Her encounter with the fantastic possibility, however, promises to be less controlled, more violent. To maintain her power as a literary editor Sara has developed a high degree of self-control over her public self which finds its inevitable outlets in her 'private' space. For example in the opening pages we are told that, 'Tutte le indecisioni, le incertezze, gli affanni non le saltavano fuori nelle riunioni con la direzione dove era sicura e perfino perentoria, ma nell'approntamento delle valigie.' (*Serenata*, p. 8) Even within this 'private' sphere, however, she sets herself limits, her response to reading vampire stories before going to bed is 'Considerò che era una puerilità ma decise di lasciarsela passare.' (*Serenata*, p.9)

Her relationship with a political journalist named Franco is conveyed as one in keeping with her cerebral occupation - he is described as having a wonderful mastery of language. Unconventionally Sara's private life is presented to us within the framework of her professional one. Franco's brief introduction to the reader is rounded off with Sara's assessment as a professional talent-scout of whether or not he will ever write a book: 'Francesco si sarebbe sempre sottratto alla responsabilità di un libro' (*Serenata*, p.9). The reader is told little of the length and nature of their relationship beyond 'Sara non si era mai annoiata con Francesco' (*Serenata*, p.8) nor given any details of his physical appearance, location or intimacy with Sara.

As the novel progresses it soon becomes evident that Sara has had to adopt her controlled persona in part as a result of her solitude as a powerful, professional woman. No female colleagues or friends are ever mentioned, apart from a female secretary impersonally referred to as 'la Gorini', and her mother appears to be dead. Every one of the many poets and would-be writers who attempt to gain her attention is male. The isolation of any position of power is reinforced by her gender. Ombres does not point this out so crudely but the marginal presence of two older women in the book make the lack all the more visible. When the elderly mother of a writer she is searching for touches her, Sara experiences a great emotion. The novel also reverts on

several occasions to childhood scenes between Sara and her grandmother of the same name, which suggests that she carries this mental ghost around in mourning like some kind of alter-ego. Whilst on the one hand the novel concerns the difficulty of being a professional female in a very specific moment in Italy's history, on the other hand Ombres uses the erudition of her female character to focus on the link between Sara's situation and a more general view of the female condition.

Like Martina Satriano, Sara Nardi is another character who has been transplanted from the South to the North, the city she lives and works in, M., certainly being Milan. At the opening of the novel, looking at a poppy potted on the balcony below hers she describes it as a 'copia di città', - she too is 'la copia di città di altre creature. Quelle che erano nate e vissute dove stava per andare' (Serenata, p. 12). She is about to go to a town called G., perhaps in Puglia, somewhere she has avoided going for a long time. Her past is never completely clarified for the reader, but it is hinted that she was brought up in that same place by her grandparents and that she left, perhaps when they died, never to return. By refusing to make this clear for the reader Ombres conveys the full force of Sara's own repression of her past. By taking away the original cause of the experience of the uncanny Sara encounters on her return down South Ombres heightens the fantastic experience for the reader and for the protagonist.

In her choice of the North as the site of reason and the South as the site of the repressed, Ombres taps into a European tradition in which the South acts as a catalyst for the dangerous release of the unconscious and the irrational. Within Italy itself this same pattern has many precedents, cities like Naples traditionally represented as the *femme fatale* of Italy, the place of physical encounter. Traditionally it is a male subject who encounters this Otherness of the South, more often than not a female one, and must come to terms with it or overcome it. In these examples the male character, on his trip down South, attempts to reconcile himself with the female in order to emerge in tact, continuing to *function* in the way Herrmann describes:

L'homme a donc été élevé pour *fonctionner*, pour s'adresser au monde comme un texte destiné à trouver des lecteurs, tandis que la femme l'était pour

constituer un ailleurs métaphorique, un repos de la pensée qui s'écarte pour rêver un instant.<sup>107</sup>

Ombres certainly seems to echo the division between the Northern world of male self-determination and the Southern world of female superstition from the outset. By making the subject of this journey female, however, Ombres works from a more unpredictable set of variables.<sup>108</sup> A woman, already conceived of as elsewhere, finds the journey into that elsewhere infinitely more complex. As a Southerner integrated into the North and as a woman working in a world dominated by men, on her initial journey from North to South from which point does Sara really set out? Her journey is a return journey, a journey home, as well as one of discovery, but we have already seen in the previous novel how negatively loaded 'home' can be for the female protagonist. The gendered territories of North and South, of public and private are already blurred and gain in complexity through the interwoven fantastic and literary themes. In *Serenata* Ombres launches her heroine into that male topos: the journey of the quest. This presupposes a subject in conflict, for as Teresa De Lauretis has pointed out Lotman's plot typology would have us believe that a woman who travels is travelling against herself, as a man. (see footnote 204, chapter 1)

### Sara and the South

Sara's journey down South is a journey away from the locus of her public self, although she is going in her professional capacity and taking that self with her, it is also away from the present towards the past. Rather than in a chronological account of Sara's background Ombres hints at the mystery of her past in references to religion and superstition, which, from the beginning echo around the chasm between public

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<sup>107</sup>Herrmann, p.90.

<sup>108</sup>More recently the female journey down south has emerged as a productive artistic trope, particularly a cinematic one, see Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1954) and Mario Martone's *L'amore molesto* (1995). However, whilst Rossellini's film lingers ambiguously on the sexual awakening of his female protagonist to a brutal male sexuality, Martone's sensitive film focusses on the reawakening of female sexuality via a link with the mother. The fact that the latter is based on a novel by a female author is no coincidence (Elena Ferrante, *L'amore molesto*, Roma: E/O, 1992). It makes an interesting point of comparison with *Serenata* in its journey - a professional woman goes from the North of Italy back down to the South of her deliberately forgotten childhood - and its more optimistic reconciliatory ending.

self and private self. The name 'Sara' means princess and so reverts to the theme of Ombres' earlier novels of the creative, privileged woman limited by her gender.<sup>109</sup>

The novel opens with the protagonist watching a storm and we are told 'le sembrò di aver anche aspirato quell'odore di zolfo che la nonna Sara disse provenisse, durante i temporali, della combustione di demoni vaganti, che venivano così puniti dall'angelo del fuoco per le loro mendacità.' (*Serenata*, p. 8). This introduction is typical of Sara's ambivalent relation to the influence of her grandmother, an influence which seizes her physically and unawares, reinforcing the uncanny power of names which often perform an act of metempsychosis in fantastic fiction.<sup>110</sup> The idea of the past as a set of reference points which refuse to make any concessions to the present is typical of the representation of the individual's past in the fantastic text, in that it dramatizes the inherently uncanny effects of the human psyche.

What begins as a dichotomy between control and neurosis is enriched by the vast gamma of alternatives which the character is forced to reject in order to continue her life in the North. The contrast set up between North and South is focussed in the references to religion and superstition. For Sara the South is itself a symbol of danger, she remembers that she had cancelled a previous trip down there because of a dream full of foreboding. She knows that it is a journey into her private self, towards the stranger she has made of her past self, and towards her dead. Her grandmother takes on the status of a doppelgänger, one who has haunted her Northern public self, and who, as the above quote suggests, is the cause of Sara's manifold superstitions - for example, her morbid fear of being photographed. The sense that this more ancient self must take over becomes stronger as Sara becomes more embroiled in the South, drawn in irresistibly. In *Memorie* the journey into the past becomes a journey into a fantastic liberated future. In *Serenata* by contrast the past, however far Sara journeys into it, does not completely give up its secrets.

The sense that the South may be a place which exerts its own influence is made clear by the memory of the remnant of chainmail cloth which her grandmother treasured above all else - supposedly a piece of the armament in which Clorinda was slain by Tancredi, showing two angels' wings. The piece is said to blacken if the

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<sup>109</sup>Sarah, of which, Sara is obviously the Italian equivalent, also means princess of God, because it is said that Jehovah gave the last letter of his name to Sara. This background to her name emerges with more force as the religious undertone of the novel develops.

owner's day of death draws near. Far from being a morbid sign of the inevitability of fate, according to the grandmother it can act as a warning although Clorinda took no heed of it. Significantly the piece only has any power in the southern territory. In this anecdote one sees a very important function of the fantastic in this novel, which is to restore an aura of magic to the stuff of folklore and religion - an aura which persists in all levels of culture but which 'high' literature often disdains in the name of positivist thought. We do not know whether Sara brings it with her. Later in the novel when she is mysteriously saved from a (unconsciously?) suicidal act we are reminded of the cloth, of the wings of a guardian angel and we are given no answer - only an infinite series of questions in the chainmail of Ombres' poetic imagery.

Does Sara associate the South with death and try to turn her trip into a self-fulfilling prophecy? Does she decide to meet death head on before it can get her and thus evade it? Is her grandmother a sinister force luring her back to her origins, even to the womb? The progressive descent into this uncertainty is reinforced by the narrative perspective. For the first time Ombres moves away from the first person narrative and forces a certain distance from the protagonist of Sara, but as a narrator she offers no guidance or interpretation of Sara's thoughts and behaviour, at times deliberately withholding what would seem vital links to our understanding.

Sara is certainly excited by the prospect of her journey and loads it with symbolic significance. She reads vampire stories before she goes. She savours the journey, going by train although she could take the plane. She compares herself to the heroine of a gothic novel. She looks everywhere for the signs and prodigies of her childhood memory, readings which take her from the reasoned realm of probability to a world of miracle and destiny. Signs and annunciations take on a central role in her life. At home in Milan this significance is held within the house, limited to a picture of the biblical annunciation on her wall but in her move down South they are infused with pagan animistic practices of imposing meaning on the mysteries of nature. Sara is thus prepared for the encounter with her 'serenade', her meeting with an 'angel', in the form of an overwhelming passion which takes on both religious and romantic dimensions.

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<sup>110</sup>See for example Fogazzaro's *Malombra* (1881).

The whole novel is therefore tantalisingly framed by the possibility that Sara invites her whole adventure on herself - through the creation of signs and propitious warnings - as a kind of ritual blood letting, a necessary psychological sacrifice made to her place of origin in order to be able to return to her other self as a professional woman. For Sara the experience of the South is crucially a vivid combination of both pleasure and pain, of life and death. To counterbalance the ominous piece of chainmail Sara remembers another story of her grandmother's tales - the story of the 'raggio verde' - a green light which appears on the ocean as a sign that happiness will come to the beholder as she sees a green light on the ocean. In her trip to the seashore she believes that she encounters this.

On top of the interpretation of Sara's experience of love as a psychologically inevitable consequence of her return to the South at least two more options appear, both of which are also connected to the symbolism of the movement towards the South. The first is to interpret Sara's response to her passion as a hysterical one. In Freudian theory 'the hysteric is one in whom an occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable' (Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria) and who, therefore, undertakes some form of hysterical conversion in order to avoid the physical act. The somatic manifestations of Sara's response, which include starvation and self-mutilation, could certainly be interpreted as such. Typical of the hysteric's behaviour is Sara's avoidance of physical contact with her lover, as David-Ménard suggests: 'the hysteric's approach to sexual difference takes on the aspect of a refusal: There is something about the body of the other that the hysteric cannot 'take', cannot swallow, inhale, or touch.'<sup>111</sup> Her earlier novel *Principessa Giacinta* certainly set up a model for this nervous hysteria induced by the thought of the sexual act.

The novel invites a further layer of interpretation if we read her 'suicide attempt' in the light of religious symbolism. As Sara encounters the sea she does seem to experience an ecstatic union with the Other as God. In a clear *imitatio Christi* she spreads her arms and undergoes the famous *folie de la croix* in which stigmata or bleeding often occurs, as her bleeding could be interpreted here. Ultimately, since we are not to read the novel in a completely religious key this commingling of the

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<sup>111</sup>cit. by Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.100.

mystical and the erotic seems to lead us back only to negative representations of femininity. Either, as Simone de Beauvoir suggested in her interpretation of the female mystic, it points to the same female who raises the male object of romantic love to the status of a God.<sup>112</sup> Or, alternatively, we can view it as a reversal of that process of demythification of religion that has gone on over the last few centuries, in which she attempts to transcend the body. Within the parameters of modern discourse both suggestions lead us back to a hysterical female - is that to the bottom of the scale of positive representations of women?

The mystical experience has been viewed by many atheists and some believers as a symptom of hysteria, typically female and a form of erotic sublimation, since the turn of the century when men of science like Charcot and Lombroso obsessively and no less voyeuristically catalogued and conflated mystical and hysterical behaviour. It is to this mingling of discourses, and not to one or the other, which Ombres directs her text, but in doing so she is using the fantastic's subversive power to undermine it. Cristina Mazzoni has recently attempted to reconcile the polarized religious and scientific interpretations of this type of behaviour, by suggesting that in fact madness may be a more fertile ground for mystical experience and that the associations between eroticism, hysteria and religious experience may not be completely distinct territories:

The terms, if not the experience, of extreme forms of religiosity and the terms of eroticism, pathology and science frequently correspond to one another, despite critical attempts, on both sides, to tear these discourses asunder, for the spirit can only with difficulty admit its dependence on the flesh for its manifestation, and conversely, the positivist enterprise relies on the exclusion or perhaps the repression of all that appears to be supernatural for a confirmation of its methods and its results.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> See 'The Mystic' in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir, trans. and edited by H.M. Parshley, (Picador, 1988), p. 679-687. She writes: 'Mystical fervour, like love, and even narcissism, can be integrated with a life of activity and independence. But in themselves these attempts at individual salvation are bound to meet with failure; either woman puts herself into relation with an unreality: her double, or God; or she creates an unreal relation with a real being. In both cases she lacks any grasp on the world; she does not escape her subjectivity; her liberty remains frustrated. There is only one way to enjoy her liberty authentically, and that is to project it through positive action into human society.' (p. 687)

<sup>113</sup> Mazzoni, p. 149.

Significantly she looks to fantastic texts of fin-de-siècle Italy as the first signs of an attempt to muddy the deceptively clear waters of science.<sup>114</sup> This is certainly in part Ombres' agenda in her flaunting of this supernaturalized madness, caught somewhere between an experience of alterity which is corporeal possession by the Other and a fleeing from it into the spiritual. Mazzoni is not the first critic to see a positive female role model in that of the mystic. She describes the idea of Christ crucified as a moment for the female to reconcile herself with her own body:

The pleasure the mystic derives from her vision of the crucified Christ is caused not by the (painful) sight of his physical suffering but rather by the redemption of the body - hence, especially of woman - which this sight represents and even brings about.<sup>115</sup>

It is in this key that one could read Ombres' use of the mystical theme - as an interesting mode of reconciliation with the body which bypasses the sexual demands made upon it which were such a preoccupation in her previous fiction. Kristeva sees the female mystic as succeeding 'where modernity now fails, in taming the pre-or perhaps even antisymbolic residue of the maternal body, the semiotic drive that is the object of primary repression and which linguistic communication cannot recover.'<sup>116</sup> In this case, acting as a fantastic symbol of personal rediscovery, the mystical union would become a more felicitous symbol than the act of incestuous intercourse. It is no less controversial. Grace Jantzen has pointed out the danger of positively connoting this experience:

The alleged inexpressibility of mystical experience correlates neatly with the silencing of women in the public arena of the secular world: women may be mystics, but mysticism is a private, intense experience not communicable in everyday language and not of political relevance.<sup>117</sup>

In fact it is the abrupt closure of Ombres' use of the mystical-fantastic experience that points towards the necessity of creating a new female public space out of the highly

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<sup>114</sup>She looks in particular at works by D'Annunzio and Fogazzaro. Speaking of *Malombra* she writes 'the particular fantastic subgenre of Marina's tale combines the representation of madness with the manifestation of the supernatural. By attributing irrational phenomena to psychopathology this genre in turn conferred upon madness a supernatural dimension, thus reversing scientific attempts to define the supernatural experience as an instance of insanity.' (p.103).

<sup>115</sup>Mazzoni, p.154.

<sup>116</sup>cit. By Mazzoni, p.84.

<sup>117</sup>Grace M. Jantzen, 'Feminists, Philosophers and Mystics', *Hypatia*, 9 (1994), 186-206 (p.191).

gender specific discourses of mysticism, eroticism and psychoanalysis. Her novel is therefore a drawing on the three areas in an attempt to reforge spaces and return to a home freed from the negative aspects of these models. It is in the *rejection* of both mystical and romantic union that their full force as a fantastic experience emerges. They constitute a necessary step towards a new relation with space and with literature. Again the fantastic acts as a shadow cast over the protagonist, allowing her to reach a fuller notion of subjecthood.

The process of experiencing the South, as a descent into the perils of the female body is underlined by the symbolism of the sea, frequently used by both male and female writers as a symbol of the female body. Lorenzo Mondo's simile about Sara's experience: 'come Giona inghiottito e risputato dalla balena ne esce mutata, mutata e guarita in rapporto al suo piccolo amore, ma con un una segreta nostalgia per quello stato di pace, di oscuro possesso, di mistiche nozze appena sognate, promesse' suggests that Sara has overcome the typical temptation of the maternal womb and been reborn. This overlooks the specificity of the female protagonist and author who may emerge reborn from the maternal South, but must carry that maternal with her, in her own female body. Although Sara may return to the North, haunting her with something more than nostalgia is 'that first other-place and space, one which we alternately shun and desire.'<sup>118</sup>

### Reading and Writing the Body

If, following Sara's pattern of journeying back and forth between North and South, I focus for a moment more specifically upon the role of literature an interesting pattern of reading practices emerges. In the North, and in her Northern persona, Sara is 'una lettrice di professione' able to recognize work of a contemporary publishable standard amongst her contemporaries, an ability to judge precisely and objectively. The elements of Sara which are drawn from her Southern self, however, read things, the world around her, animistically, obsessively, as a story, reading future happenings into the present as one might in a story already conceived by an author. This could be explained as a consequence of her passion for reading. However it acts to blur the

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<sup>118</sup>Lucie Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic*, p.223.

apparent rational basis of the one activity with the superstitious roots of the other. In fact the explanation of Sara's ability is put down to a 'fiuto' a gift, as opposed to an education in literature. This draws together two seemingly disparate halves of the whole - just as North and South are drawn together in Sara.

At the same time an ability to criticize contemporary literature appears in Sara to be accompanied by a strange subjection to an older literary tradition: the medieval tradition and the biblical tradition. Sara is attracted by the narrative power of the old tales, such that she sees in her lover's appearance a kind of annunciation, when she considers declaring her love she returns to the touchstone of courtly love poetry. She cites pictures of Adam and Eve as her favourites. The premise of her function as a promoter of male-authored literature rests on an absorption of a literary tradition in which the female body is presented as the site of signification.

The intensity of the female experience within this cultural sphere is paradoxically offered an outlet that only leads deeper into the labyrinth: reading. As an escape from the symbolical excess of the female body reading turns out to be a circular process which only leads back to it, as the following thought echoes:

Alcuni pittori d'Annunciazione (Sara l'aveva tante volte avvertito) sapevano che la meraviglia ha bisogno di una tregua: lasciavano perciò pietosamente un oggetto al quale Maria potesse affidarsi per ottenerne una distrazione, perché la meravigliosa visita non la uccidesse. Sarebbe superficiale pensare che il libro, che spesso si vede accanto a Maria, sia un libro di preghiere tralasciato per ascoltare il messaggio di Gabriele. E Sara, appena arrivata all'albergo, ecco che si affidò a uno dei libri che aveva portato con sé per averne conforto. (*Serenata*, p.100)

The very example from which Sara derives this theory is of course central: a painting. Thus the female subject can only seek solace in a culture which refers back to her condition as a socially inscribed body.

The events of the story force us to ask whether it is to this site of signification that her own creativity is channelled. If the story of woman has focussed around the body, then her starvation and self-mutilation could be the sign of her discovery of the hidden story, the invisible upon which the visible rests, and her attempt to rewrite it? In the tradition of *écriture féminine* the mystical ecstasy becomes a form of writing with the body. In her attempt to sacrifice herself to it she creates, temporarily, a

positive trope for action - just as Elisabeth Bronfen has described the female suicide. It becomes therefore a moment of ecstatic realisation in which cerebral understanding, physical reality and self-expression coincide.

By rejecting the call of the alternative realisation of her femininity in romantic love she, like Capriolo's heroines, aspires to a higher metaphysical plane. Although she cannot stay upon it, it does not bring about her death and I would argue that she is not back where she started. In literary terms it is significant that the writer she discovers on her return is a female writer of the nineteenth century - the first female writer to be mentioned in the text.

### **Moving Home, Moving Memories**

As in *Memorie di una dilettante* Ombres revels in an ending which surprises and initially dismays. The utopian dream of incest in *Memorie* shatters too many taboos to be comfortable, just as the violence with which Sara excludes light from her office by pulling down the blinds and aggressively dispelling her past once more appears to cut off hopes of renewal and integration. For feminist readers, after the character has played with many of the female stereotypes of the Western World, that she seeks shelter in the anodyne equality of the present presents a double bind. For all readers the novel poses questions about the real possibilities of escaping the past - not only for the individual female, but for anyone interested in adapting to new ways of being in and perceiving the world. Can the Otherness of the pre-symbolic ever be rediscovered?

However the novel also poses a more important question - should Otherness be abandoned? Sara's attempts to shake off the psychological remnants of her upbringing are part and parcel of her desire to lose all the associations of her sexed identity. Ultimately, like the protagonist of *Il doppio regno*, to do so she must withdraw into a tomb-like enclosure. Distancing herself from postmodern irony and defeat, however, Ombres creates a subject who must make something of the language of patriarchy in order to live. Romantic love and religious mysticism are bathed in a positive light that far from disenchanting them, refuels them with a vitality and relevance which emphasizes their fatal attraction for the modern woman. The ending of the novel is bleak in so far as it suggests that currently choice for the female subject is limited to a

petrification or dissolution of the self. What distinguishes this conclusion from Capriolo's superficially similar conclusions lies, as in *Memorie*, in the power of memory: in what I would describe as the sensorial fantastic and the importance of the home.

I suggested that the end of the novel brings with it a 'sensorial fantastic'. For all three of the women writers in this chapter, in contrast with Capriolo, the senses of taste and smell play a central role, but only in Ombres' work does this itself form part of the fantastic effect. It is an effect closely connected to the role of space and movement, central to the unfolding of the plot. Her privileging of the sense of smell also gains in significance if we examine her choice to play down the sense of sight, so dominant in the previous two works. The visual factor is taken away from her semi-mystical experience almost completely, breaking the association between erotic pleasure and the sight of the female mystic which has its origin in Bernini's famous statue of the ecstatic Saint Teresa and Lacan's reading of it as orgasm. The focus on the sense of smell refocuses attention on the internal nature of the protagonist's experience and the ability of each individual to interpret life according to her own body and brain.

An acute sense of smell was something that marked out the heroine of *Memorie* as a renewed character and set her apart from the men in the novel. This olfactory sensitivity is taken much further by the author in this novel. The arrival of Sara in the South is accompanied by her sense of new smells, of fruit and vegetables, and in particular figs. She first sets eyes upon the figs in the house of the writer, where they disturb her with their air of a table prepared for sacrifice. The symbolic significance of the fig as the female genitalia and fertility is evident. The demonic aspect of the fig, often depicted as the tree of material violation of the sacred, presents a seductive contrast to the purity Sara desires to attain.<sup>119</sup> For Sara as the story

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<sup>119</sup>Nonostante il culto per il fico numinale, i Romani consideravano la pianta come impura quando nasceva sul tetto del tempio consacrato a Dia: sicché gli Arvali, i sacerdoti adibiti al suo culto, strappavano l'alberello e addirittura distruggevano il tempio, diventato impuro, ricostruendone un altro [...] In quel contesto l'albero, che tuttavia doveva essere un oleastro, cioè il fico selvatico che serve per fecondare il fico con la cosiddetta caprificazione, diventava il simbolo della fecondazione materiale e non poteva crescere sul tempio consacrato alla castità [...] ma oltre al fico fecondatore c'è quello diabolico, frequentato dai demoni. In Sicilia si diceva, un tempo:

*Spiritu di ficu e diavulu di nuci*

*Tanti pampini siti, tanti diavuli faciti*

progresses the smell of figs becomes more persistent. When the chance to be reunited with her lover presents itself at the end of the novel, not only is she overwhelmed by her memories but also by the smell of figs. This fantastic power is menacing for Sara and she closes her blind to shut out the sun and sprays a strong pine-scented spray around the office. In this ability to recognise and resist the sensorial Sara rejects what ultimately both the romantic and religious annunciation represent for her: motherhood and a potential death of the self. This ability for resistance suggests that she has met their power and is able to withstand them.

The birth that Sara has been searching for has been her own. In the context of this ending I think we can read what made her choose a spiritual moment of ecstasy over the sexual. Returning to the town where her lover is born she sees it strongly in terms of metaphors of childbirth. The language of the cross however is a language of personal rebirth. Sara has realised that the encounter with the male Other threatened her selfhood by drowning her in the biological functions of the female body.

The ending in her office could be seen as a retreat into this new/old self, but what are we to make of her move from her flat to a new house? This shift symbolizes a new relation to her choice of hometown based on her re-established link with the South. The theme of water was central to Sara's image of the South and one of the details we are told about the house is that it is built near to a submerged river. It is said that this river is sometimes heard. This presence of water, ready to rise up and overwhelm. This recognition of the instability of her new persona, built over water constitutes the foreign that she has recognised at home.

When she finds the foreign in her office - the smell of figs - Sara sprays it with pine air freshener, but the cyclical nature of the novel, the pattern of sacrifice and renewal gives a powerful suggestion that the movement could all begin again. This is reinforced by the symbolism of pine, as a cypher for virility and divine resurrection.<sup>120</sup> Phoenix-like Sara's old self may rise again, or a new self may emerge from this union. Memory itself is the fantastic motor of this novel, in that it can conquer space and

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Era considerato un albero infame, e atale per chi si assopiva alla sua ombra.' Alfredo Cattabiani, *Erbario* (Milano: Rusconi, 1985), pp.46-47. In addition many medieval iconographers associate the fig with the tree of Knowledge which could be brought to bear upon this character, who shows a particular interest in religious iconography and overturns social codes about sexual conduct.

<sup>120</sup>'Il pino-Attis sempreverde è dunque il simbolo di chi ha raggiunto la comunione con il Divino e vi permane sempre verdeggiante, mentre le sue pigne sono il frutto della sua virilità superiore, emblemi di

time, not in the union of lovers, but in the union of the living and the dead, of past and present selves.

The ending, far from being a defeat, with its strange twist on the traditional romance, suggests that the female subject can use the languages of male domination to create a renewed subjecthood, but that she will inevitably touch upon madness and suffering, to emerge with a fragile victory. This victory is not a wholesale embrace of the state of womanhood but a recognition of its limits. Applying this religious concept to a female subject who does not disappear into the arms of God, this tale of romantic love to a female subject who is not channelled into marriage, Ombres presents a potential for self-renewal completely in keeping with her feminist adaptation of the classic male plot typology.

With regard to her early work Mario Lunetta describes *ribellione fantastica* as the correct formula to:

sintetizzare con sufficiente correttezza l'itinerario della scrittrice piemontese, quella sua personalissima strada percorsa da una quantità di personaggi, di maschere, di larve in cui vibra l'energia e l'intelligenza di una femminilità che si libera faticosamente, ma con coscienza progressivamente più lucida, degli impacci di una storia che per sottometterla si è truccata da biologia.<sup>121</sup>

More than ever this applies to the work *Serenata* which constitutes a rebellion against much of the language of the fantastic itself, but emerges in its shadow with traces of a fantastic *al femminile*.

It is in the title *Serenata* that Ombres has the first and last word about this novel. The serenade is imbued with both irony and a poetic persistence which is typical of the fantastic enigma. The serenade refers to the moment of revelation Sara experiences on setting her eyes upon her beloved. By the end of the novel it is clear that this does not herald a great romance, but the revelation of a lingering doubt about what constitutes the female subject, in which stereotypes are exchanged for a radical uncertainty. Ombres' use of the fantastic in the novel as site of textual (s)exchange is marked by a violation of expectations on the part of both readers and protagonists which is modified to a gentler reworking in the novels of Laura Mancinelli.

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risurrezioni, immortalità e fertilità spirituale sia nel paganesimo sia nel cristianesimo.' Alfredo Cattabiani, p.167.

<sup>121</sup>Mario Lunetta, *Novecento: I contemporanei*, p.10168.

### iii. Running away with (his)story: Laura Mancinelli

Mancinelli's sedate and distant tone contrasts so strongly with the exuberance of Rossana Ombres that it is all the more surprising to find a common use in their works of the fantastic as a site of negotiation in a male /female literary conflict. The difference in approach between Ombres and Mancinelli is primarily due to the diverse origins of cultural interplay in the work of the two Piemontese writers. In contrast to the work of the corporeally, poetically, religiously inspired Ombres, Mancinelli is first and foremost a German philologist, translator and editor of mostly medieval German texts.<sup>122</sup> Her novels are therefore a cross-fertilization of an equally interesting set of variables.<sup>123</sup> They cross the historical, the detective and the fantastic genres. This cross-fertilization is a particularly productive one leading Mancinelli into a form of game-playing with her regular readers since every detective novel is potentially a fantastic one, leaving her readers guessing as to whether the answers to the mysteries presented will be provided or not. Since every historical novel works on a tension between the real and the imagined it too provides a fitting ground for the fantastic.

Nothing, it seems, could be further than Ombres' world of sexual, visceral and even excremental violence than Mancinelli's gallant medieval knights, urbane academics and dithering detectives. A corporeality is present in Mancinelli's work, however, but in an incremental form - as food. It has often been commented that her descriptions of food give the books their lifeblood and although this is an accepted window on 'normality' in the detective novel, its use here is more sophisticated. If sexual repression is an undercurrent in Mancinelli's timid characters, as for Martina

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<sup>122</sup> Amongst her translations feature Hartmann von Aue's *Gregorio e il povero Enrico* (Torino: Einaudi, 1989). She has edited the *Nibelungenlied* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972), Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (Torino: Einaudi, 1985) and Wolfgang von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (Torino: Einaudi, 1993). Her other academic work includes a publication on modern literature: *Il messaggio razionale dell'avanguardia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1978) and more recently *Da Carlomagno a Lutero: la letteratura tedesca medievale* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1996).

<sup>123</sup> *Il fantasma di Mozart* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986); *I dodici abati di Challant* (Torino: Einaudi, 1981 - reprinted Torino: L'angolo Manzoni, 1999); *Il miracolo di Santa Odilia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1989 - reprinted Torino: L'angolo Manzoni, 1997); *Amadé: Mozart a Torino* (Latina: L'Argonauta, 1990 - reprinted Novara: Interlinea, 1999); *Gli occhi dell'imperatore* (Torino: Einaudi, 1993); *La casa del tempo* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1993); *I racconti della mano sinistra* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1994); *Il fantasma di Mozart e altri racconti* (1994); *Raskolnikov* (Torino: Einaudi, 1996); *I tre cavalieri del Graal* (Torino: Einaudi, 1996); *Il mistero della sedia a rotelle* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997); *Killer presunto* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998); *Persecuzione infernale* (Torino: Einaudi, 1999) *Il principe scalzo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1999); *Attentato alla Sindone* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000) and *Una sacra*

Satriano, the relation to food often emerges as the way back to a 'felt' and, by implication, sexual life. Lauretta de Renzo writes of *I dodici abati di Challant* that: 'food as a metaphor for love becomes the most powerful liberating instrument of the whole novel.'<sup>124</sup> In this respect food takes on a superior status to that of art and music which provide more ambiguous forms of healing. Whilst in some of the detective novels the forces which are uncovered may be threatening and even violent, the fantastic works move towards the expression of a more positive, if not miraculous, healing power which finds its realist partner in food. The foregrounding of simpler sensorial pleasure does not so much bypass the darker psychological complexities of sexuality as cast them in a new light. This gives Mancinelli's work a positive 'leggerezza' which is not to be mistaken for triviality, but to be read as an alternative set of female poetics.

Other aspects of Laura Mancinelli's work suggest that, like Ombres and Duranti, she does not shy away from traditionally female writing territory. The historical background to many of her novels, most famously her *I dodici abati di Challant*,<sup>125</sup> has a 'staged' feel which has led to comparisons between her works and fables or tapestries. Nor does Mancinelli disdain the use of popular genre fiction to which her many detective novels testify. Some of her fiction also draws on the tropes of the historical romance. This popular vein intersects with a high degree of historical and literary erudition. Despite the fact that this heterogeneity is a much vaunted feature of the postmodern text little attention has been paid to Mancinelli's work. One reason for this may be that because popular literature is traditionally a female territory anyway, postmodern *women* writers who incorporate it into their work are quickly dismissed as writers of imitative popular fiction.<sup>126</sup>

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*rappresentazione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001). Her interest in the figure of Mozart has also led her to write a play: *Notte con Mozart* (Latina: L'Argonauta, 1991).

<sup>124</sup>Lauretta de Renzo, 'I dodici abati di Challant: the Metabolized Middle Ages' in *Gendering Italian Fiction: Feminist Revisions of Italian History*, ed. by Maria Ornella Marotti and Gabriella Brooke (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), pp. 137-147 (p. 140).

<sup>125</sup>It is this work which has received the most critical attention. See 'Il castello degli amori proibiti' in Marco Testi, *Il romanzo al passato: Medioevo e invenzione in tre autori contemporanei*, (Roma: Bulzoni editore, 1992), pp. 83-110. Also Lauretta De Renzo in Marotti and Brooke (eds).

<sup>126</sup>An interesting case in point regarding this has been the reception of Mancinelli's *I dodici abati di Challant*. This novel bears many striking similarities with Eco's bestselling *Il nome della rosa*, including its playful mix of genre and literary register. Despite the fact that it was written a year before Eco's novel, and the press even suggested, erroneously, that it had inspired Eco. It has even been slated as a copy of his work by academics (See Kurtz who dismisses it in brackets as 'impudently orientated towards *The Name of the Rose*', p.35)

Mancinelli's work emerges as the lightest of all uses of the fantastic modality amongst the writers encountered here. Her angle on the dialogue between the sexes emerges through the spatiality of the fantastic and demonstrates the persistence of this theme in relation to the formation of the creative subjecthood. Of her prolific writings I choose to look at how two short novels, published in the same year, serve to develop this understanding of the fantastic potential.

### iii.i *La casa del tempo* - the space of reconciliation

'Je dis ma Mère. Et c'est à vous que je pense, ô Maison!  
Maison des beaux étés obscurs de mon enfance.' - Milosz<sup>127</sup>

Although the gothic traditionally makes the female protagonist prisoner, a flexible transference of this trope into the fantastic allows the contemporary female writer to renegotiate her relation with the creative male subject through the deployment of the spatial enclosure. We have seen how the recurrence of the theme of limitation as a positive form of protection that can easily turn into a prison permeates all the texts examined in this thesis. I would suggest that the woman writer is more comfortable with exploring this closed relationship through the male protagonist, using the fantastic to displace the male-authored text's conflation of woman and enclosure. In *La casa sul lago della luna* the hero's movement, from the closed spaces of his hierarchically ordered childhood, to his Milanese library and finally the enclosure of Petra's bedroom, the trajectory of the unfortunate gothic heroine is parodied. Not only parody is at play, however, since the same trajectory raises questions about the gendered nature of the relation to enclosure. If the pull towards entropy makes Fabrizio's fate seem a return to the womb, it also uncovers the male fear of the home upon which women's enclosure within it is often strangely predicated.<sup>128</sup> Mancinelli's little known work *La casa del tempo* gives an interesting insight into this theme, playfully suggesting the necessity of overcoming that negative gendered binary in which the external world is masculine and the domestic interior feminine. Nancy

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<sup>127</sup>cit. by Gaston Bachelard, p. 45.

<sup>128</sup>Capriolo's novel *La spettatrice* (Milan: Bompiani, 1995) shows how that attraction of the enclosed space is often accompanied by violence towards the women who occasion that attraction (a constant theme of the male-authored modernist text).

Chodorow claims that 'The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense is separate.'<sup>129</sup> Mancinelli suggests that this sense of physical connection is something to which the male subject can be restored, vindicating Jessica Benjamin's argument that the inscription of male domination and female submission within society is not so much a problem of human nature as of human relationships.

In a light-hearted game between the writer and the male protagonist of this novel, the latter is forced to seek a meaningful re-union with the female body and mind via a house. This house of the title is indeed a house preserved by time - a home well known to Orlando in his youth. It is the house of a primary school teacher who acted as a surrogate mother to him when he was very young. He left her and his own mother to seek success away from his small Piedmont village first as a young student, then as an artist in the city. The teacher herself encouraged him to go to a boarding middle school because this was his only chance to gain an education. Unhappy at this school, the one time he returned to see her in the holiday he inwardly questioned her educational justification of his absence from the village: 'Ma era una buona ragione perché uno doveva essere tanto triste da non poter più amare quello che aveva amato?' This silent reproach reflects the transformation of love into resentment - in order to be able to separate himself from the past Orlando rejects it. The wrench away from everything he loved led him to abandon his teacher to a lonely life and death. This rejection of the female body, both the surrogate mother and, by implication the real mother,<sup>130</sup> manifests itself in this remembered parting scene as a wrench away from the teacher's house:

Quando, uscendo dall'uscio dell'orto, ripercorse il sentiero lungo il muro della casa, senza volerlo affondò la mano nella parietaria, e sorrise al freddo contatto della pietra. Ma subito ritirò la mano e allungò il passo, perché non valeva la pena godere quel contatto rassicurante. L'indomani doveva rientrare in collegio. Non tornò più alla casa della maestra. Non la vide mai più. (*La casa*, p.25)

It is a clear echo of the process of disidentification with the maternal body supposedly required in the formation of the male subject. Jessica Benjamin has been one of many feminist critics to question this construction of the male selfhood based on separation,

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<sup>129</sup>cit. in introduction to *The Voyage In* ed. by Abel et. al, p.10.

<sup>130</sup>Although we know he was at least at her death-bed.

suggesting that it leads to a sadomasochistically structured society.<sup>131</sup> Mancinelli's novel explores this interrogative as the far from tidy process of separation catches up with her protagonist. The novel opens as on a rare return to his village his car breaks down outside this house of his now-deceased teacher. The name Orlando suggests a hero who needs to recover his 'senses'. The key to this house will also ultimately provide the key to this recovery.

In a pattern echoing *La casa sul lago della luna* the house itself exercises a spell on him and he buys it, without really knowing why: 'Ma perché l'aveva comprata? Che bisogno ne aveva? E che ne avrebbe fatto?' (*La casa*, p. 6). Orlando is plagued by the irrational in his action, although it soon becomes clear that there is much that is irrational in his response to his home village. We are told that 'il paese gli era divenuto estraneo. Non ci andava volentieri. [...] E aveva sempre fretta di partirsene. E non sapeva neppure lui per qual motivo' (*La casa*, p.6). As he reflects upon his return to the village he thinks 'Che gliene importava infatti di quello che accadeva in paese? Da tanti anni ormai l'aveva cancellato dalla sua vita!' but this is almost immediately belied by the fact that on being asked whether he remembers the teacher's house, he exclaims: 'Come potrei non ricordarla?' (*La casa*, p.7). As in *Serenata* we have an example of a home that has become strange (alien). His encounter with the home is uncanny because he already knows its story but has repressed it. The home will in fact become a great deal stranger (odd), before Orlando recognises that he is in part responsible for that state of uncanniness. First, like Martina, he is made strange to himself.

The purchase of the house does seem far from a sensible idea. It is very ramshackle and part of it is legally inhabited by a mysterious old woman who never emerges, but of whom villagers warn Orlando to be very wary. However, from his very first encounter with it he is able to test Bachelard's theory that 'the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us.'<sup>132</sup> 'Affondò la mano nella parietaria umida, con un gesto di altro tempo, di quando era bambino e cercava con la mano le forme

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<sup>131</sup> This physical nurturing connection is underlined by the discovery of a ladle the teacher used to use to give him milk as a 'merenda.' 'Gli venne in mente all'improvviso che non aveva più bevuto latte da quando quella scodella aveva cessato di esistere per lui.' (*La casa*, p.69).

<sup>132</sup> 'We are very surprised, when we return to the old house, after an odyssey of many years, to find that the most delicate gestures, the earliest gestures suddenly come alive, are still faultless [...] The word habit is too worn a word to express this passionate liaison of our bodies, which do not forget, with an unforgettable house.' (Bachelard, pp.15-16)

delle pietre larghe e pesanti.’ (*La casa*, p.6). His link with this house suggests that it is in fact his ‘oneiric house, a house of dream memory’ but this one is no longer ‘lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past.’<sup>133</sup> A few pages later, in fact, we find that it was here he formulated his artistic ambitions: ‘E alla destra dell’uscio sorgeva un tempo un bellissimo lauro, il più bello del paese, intorno al quale s’erano intessuti i suoi sogni di bambino’ (*La casa*, p.9). This was therefore his dream house in both senses of Bachelard’s term. Mancinelli imagines what happens when this conveniently nebulous past in each individual transforms itself back into bricks and mortar and demands to be kept up to date.

As the story progresses the house, with certain a flirtatiousness, courts the hero, revealing and dissimulating its (and its owner’s) story. It is at once intimidating and alluring. It emerges that the teacher herself had a child who she had to send away, as a single mother, to avoid scandal. She never saw this daughter again, who was brought up by an adoptive family, knowing nothing of her origins, but continued to provide for her secretly. Shortly after this, when she met Orlando as a young child, the intelligent youngest child of a large, poor village family, she took him under her wing as a replacement - something he naturally did not realise. Orlando’s fear of the house and reluctance to move in there suggest that it is ‘the dread of maternal power’ which holds him at bay. Benjamin’s theory that present social relations rarely allow for the subjectivity of the mother to be recognized and thus make all fantasies about her overwhelming is registered in this novel in the mother’s surrogate presence: the house.<sup>134</sup>

Although there is much of the corporeal in the link between the house and the female presence, an equal force of the relationship between Orlando and the house derives from his teacher’s role as intellectual guide. Of all that disturbs him about the decaying house it is the absence of her books which meant so much to him as a child: ‘Quei palchetti vuoti, in cui qualche pagina strappata sopravviveva come un fantasma dei tempi passati, erano ciò che più lo turbava nella casa di cui adesso era lui il proprietario’ (*La casa*, p. 33). Amongst the few books remaining he finds *The Golden*

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<sup>133</sup>Bachelard, p.15.

<sup>134</sup> ‘Unless mother’s external subjectivity is registered there is no reassurance against fantasies (her own or the child’s) of her omnipotence, her seduction, or her control: the fantasies of the mother’s body as overwhelming or invasive are not countered by an experience of mutual recognition.’ (*Like Subjects, Love Objects*, p.195)

*Ass*, one she had once suggested was too advanced for him and which he had since read. Now he discovers her own writing within that text, again in the typically female palimpsestic form. Love letters are enclosed within it which tell of a forbidden (adulterous?) affair with the father of her child and his sudden death. Whether she - dead or alive - chose this text as a way of communicating this story to Orlando is not clear, but indirectly she certainly teaches him to read again, to read a female-authored story, which lies enclosed within the classical text.

Most of her books however have been burnt by the old woman she lived with. It emerges that this old woman, who dies shortly after Orlando buys the house was the teacher's sister-in-law who hoped that the house would go to her own son. She may even have murdered the teacher to bring this about - this is never clarified. The futility of the old woman's actions is clear however, since shortly after the teacher's death her own son is killed in a car crash. She nonetheless continues to burn nearly all the remaining books and any wills left as an act of spite towards the unknowing illegitimate daughter. The presence of this sister-in-law, nameless like the teacher, presents an even less wholesome aspect of the social effects of female enclosure - madness. This destructive female relationship is, however, counterbalanced by a sub-textual plot of female reunion, between mother and daughter, in which Orlando becomes the sometimes unwilling go-between.

Like Fabrizio's childhood home the house is pink, suggestive of its feminine connections. As the words of Milosz cited above suggest, the house seems to embody the missing mother figure. As for Fabrizio this house comes to represent all past houses and the lost mother figure, the traumatic loss of whom Orlando has repressed. This lost female slowly forces the artist to see how necessary emotional wellbeing is to his art, expressing her voice through the body of the house. At the same time she shows how necessary he is to give her own life meaning in retrospect. This is less a demand for '*risarcimento*' as Orlando's friend Placido dramatically describes it than an *exchange*. Her exchange is a generous one, she holds Orlando a temporary prisoner in the house where she was permanently enclosed and out of this temporary enclosure he gains a part in a story which liberates him from his own emotional enclosure. Orlando does not enter into this exchange easily. Whilst on the one hand he is determined to preserve the house as a memorial to his teacher, infuriating the renovators with his eccentric demands to keep the pellitory plant, on the other hand

for a long time he evades the move into the house and the prospect of a complete emotional life. He is happy to keep the house one of time past, reluctant to make it one of time present. The novel is driven by his struggle to accept the 'segnali' the house sends him to remind him of 'le due donne più importanti della sua vita' (*La casa*, p.87). Not only must he re-encounter 'quella infelicità da cui si era difeso dimenticando' (*La casa*, p.44), but paradoxically he is able to move beyond it through the recognition of his own part in the miserable life of his teacher: 'Anche lui nella sua infantile brutalità, aveva aggiunto la sua parte di pena alla vita di quella donna, che pure aveva tanto amato.' (*La casa*, p.119)

How does the house carry out this complex exchange? In fact it goes about exercising the same process of alienation which Paolo Vancelli describes Mancinelli's narrative as exercising on the reader, introducing:

l'increspamento della materia e della realtà determinato dall'inserimento casuale di elementi insoliti o di un accadimento spiazzante che scombina la piattezza geometrica del reale, facendo lievitare da esso qualcosa di inespresso, di strano, un'ombra, una voce mai avvertita, come se la vita volesse inviarci un messaggio imprevedibile attraverso un momento epifanico: l'eccentrica fabulazione della scrittrice tende cioè a riscattare la banalità del reale, straniando il personaggio (e il lettore) e collocandolo in situazioni che perturbano beneficamente la sua anima e l'intelligenza troppo asservita alla categoria e agli schemi della logica.<sup>135</sup>

The fantastic here is a series of accidents or strange coincidences, 'segnali', all of which could be explained away but whose *cumulative* impact suggest something more than the casual coincidence and confound logic. These signals show Orlando what he feels and needs before he is aware of it - or when he has forgotten about it. The first sign comes in the appearance of a rosemary plant where he had thought about planting one, but forgotten to. As the 'pianta dell'amore' this becomes a pointer to the emotional path the house will compel him to follow. When Orlando invites his brother and his wife to stay to help him do the house up his brother leaves with a broken leg, convinced that somebody pushed him. This fall occurs in the very moment in which Orlando is asking himself how he can get rid of his brother. When Orlando invites a female acquaintance to stay a rare lime tree caterpillar falls upon her neck as she sits in the courtyard, causing a serious rash and forcing her to leave. As an act of defiance

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<sup>135</sup>Paolo Vancelli, 'Le increspature della narrativa di Laura Mancinelli', *Il lettore di provincia*, 90 (1994), 55-61 (pp.55-56).

towards the house he invites friends and local villagers to a house-warming, but all their glasses shatter simultaneously as they toast the house. Not only does the house seem to wish to make its superior degree of control over the situation felt, but also works to give Orlando a very select human company.

This seems a strange ambition in the work of a writer who focusses on the notion of hospitality and the open house. The game of the writer, however, and the house, is to echo the closure of Orlando's own emotional life, to play it out before him physically, to confront him with its limited dimensions. Initially Orlando is frightened by the idea of going to live in the house - it repulses him.<sup>136</sup> When he eventually does move into it partially he tries to avoid real commitment to intimacy and the female body by seeking the company of a married relative or by establishing a bachelor's detached joviality with the local villagers. Oddly the same avoidance technique applies to his female guest, to whom the coy title of 'lady-friend' could well be applied. His description of her as 'coinvolgente, ma con misura' makes her the ideal companion for the cautious bachelor. There is a clear pointer to the fact that in her he seeks the lost maternal function - he looks forward to the nail filing which she may perform for him and compares it to his mother's soothing combing of his hair for nits.<sup>137</sup> The house/teacher demands more than this from him, however, it requires of him the adult sexual relationship of which the teacher herself was deprived. The reconciliation with the female must be a developed one, not the infantile regression which Fabrizio seeks, but one which takes into account the subjecthood of the Other. In the final chapter on his return to the house after a spell away he admits this moment of recognition, as a recognition of female desire:

"Ecco" disse mentalmente. "Sono qui"

A chi parlava? Alla casa, che si ergeva silenziosa contro il cielo ancora chiaro del tramonto? o a lei, alla maestra? Guardava la casa, ma era il volto di lei che vedeva, non quello severo della sua infanzia, non quello della maestra vestita di nero, l'altro quella della fotografia, sorridente, in attesa di gioia. (*La casa*, p.136)

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<sup>136</sup> 'La solitudine faceva parte della sua esistenza e nulla l'aveva intaccata, neppure quando s'era innamorato, più di una volta, e seriamente credeva. Ma ora, in quella grande casa, era diversa. Era l'urgere del passato, ecco, che gli dava quella strana inquietudine, quel bisogno di qualcuno, di una presenza umana.' (*La casa*, p.72)

<sup>137</sup> 'Aveva proprio bisogno di lei, di quella sua amica discreta e mite, che gliel'aveva tagliate delicatamente, tutte uguali, eliminando le fastidiose pipite, e poi limandole adagio adagio con una sua limetta sottile ... Gli dava, quel limare lento e continuo, un sonnolente benessere, come quando sua madre gli passava le mani nei capelli, quand'era bambino. Un piacere per cui i discorsi si scioglievano nel silenzio, e la mente si perdeva in immagini confuse, in un lago di eccitato torpore.' (*La casa*, p.74)

The terror of enclosure is diminished when we allow recognition of the Other to enter it. I would not be the first to suggest that the madwoman in the attic needed someone actually to look at her and recognize her subjectivity. Benjamin suggests that:

We might imagine a way to balance the fantastic register, in which self and objects can be omnipotent, with the intersubjective register, in which we recognize, feel, and symbolically represent the subjectivity of real others.<sup>138</sup>

In *La casa del tempo* Mancinelli presents us with a literary example of this balancing act - the house itself allows for the processes of fantasy and recognition to co-exist and complement one another. The house allows the protagonist to develop an alternative space, similar to that alternative model of early psychic development described by Benjamin - the intersubjective space - in which the subject recognizes that his/her own autonomy is dependent on recognising the subjectivity of the mother.

The 'vie misteriose' of the house not only take the form of certain prohibitions set on Orlando's house guests - what of those characters whom he is slowly allowed to have in the house? The first is Placido, his Virgil on this journey of discovery, a fellow villager, a lame inkeeper, who was hopelessly in love with the teacher himself. He guides Orlando in unravelling the tangled knot of mysteries that the house brings back out into the open. An old acquaintance in the village, his important function is to dispense food and provocative philosophical wisdom. The other side of the fantastic coin in Mancinelli's fiction is always a re-discovery of the senses, in particular of food, whose rich description connotes a sexual re-discovery. Placido is vital to the fantastic function of the text, constantly questioning Orlando's (and the reader's) interpretation of events, presenting ideas which hang pregnant with meaning between the preposterous and the plausible. Placido's knowledge often seems supernatural, but is most frequently wisdom derived from the many years he has spent in the village, it is a wisdom of place. It is also however a thought process which embraces the unknown - the possibility of a phenomenologically governed world. His wisdom seems to make him acceptable to the house, or, more than that, complicit with it. His influence over Orlando is therefore also that of a teacher, bridging what might otherwise appear too starkly a gendered division between teacher and pupil, and

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<sup>138</sup>Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, p.86.

bringing Placido into some kind of union with the woman from whom he always remained distant. This role is emphasized by Orlando's response to the episode of the lime-tree worm:

E, intanto pensava a quella storia del verme velenoso, e non riusciva a farsene una ragione.

Già come se si potesse farsi una ragione di tutto ciò che accade. Soprattutto farsi una ragione con la nostra ragione, che vuole andare in un senso solo, come una macchina teleguidata .. Le ragioni sono tante, ogni uomo, ogni bambino, ha la sua. E le cose? e se anche le cose avessero una loro ragione, come dice Placido? "Idee di Placido" gli venne in mente e sorrise. (*La casa*, p.94)

The association between this relaxing of his rigid grip on logic and his friendship with Placido emphasizes the initiatory role which the latter has assumed from the first chapter when he mentions the sale of the house, apparently casually, to Orlando. He also encourages Orlando's return to painting, buying the first work he completes.

The second welcome guest is a cat - a clear ironic pointer on Mancinelli's part to the idea of a familiar, of a link with womanhood which may or may not prove benevolent, the acceptance of whose inscrutability is a second important step for Orlando. Like Martina who adopts a dog, when Orlando invites the cat into his home he is ready to move towards renewed human relations. The third visitor, whom Orlando finds climbing the said dangerous lime-tree with a strange impunity, is a fatherless young boy. With a fairy-tale logic typical of Mancinelli's fiction this child turns out to be the son of the teacher's missing daughter - her grandson. The book closes with a meeting between this widowed daughter, who has also returned unwittingly to her birthplace, and Orlando, in which it becomes certain that they are 'destined for one another.' The 'plan' of the house of time emerges as that of coaxing the lost opportunities of the past into the present, of restoring the link between mother and daughter by including the male subject in this union. As so often the fantastic expression of space metamorphoses into a fantastic manipulation of time: 'In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for.'<sup>139</sup>

Although the way the house/mother goes about prodding the protagonist into renewed human and sexual relations requires a period of isolation this is not, as in Fabrizio's case, an isolation leading towards death, but rather an isolation engendering renewal. The isolation that Orlando imposed upon himself in order to form his adult

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<sup>139</sup>Bachelard, p.8.

self is revealed as lacking, based upon an absence. To enjoy a new bond, the lesson of the house is to teach a separation that prompts return. Although he goes to Venice with the notion of escape in mind, he soon discovers a longing to return 'home'. There he rediscovers his painter's talent, shunning the glories of Venice and painting the dark backstreets which 'gli sembrava adatto a lui, alla sua vita, un posto che può essere brutto, desolato, ma che si può amare'(p.133, *La casa*). This progress, this recognition of possibility draws him back to what he had rejected. On his return:

Varcando la porta pensava che non sapeva, ora, nulla più di quando l'aveva varcato per la prima volta. Ma una cosa aveva capito, che se la morte spezza un filo, bisogna annodare un altro ed è la vita stessa a suggerire come. Ed è la vita stessa a suggerire come. Per vie misteriose, a cui non si deve sottrarre. (*La casa*, p.137)

The pattern of block and release on Orlando's social life also seems to echo a similar saga within Orlando's creative life. Overwhelmed by the weight of repressed memories he has spent a long time prior to the purchase of the house unable to paint.<sup>140</sup> As his self-awareness grows regarding his emotional poverty, in the face of his teacher's courage,<sup>141</sup> so too does his awareness of a link between that and his stunted creativity:

- gli pareva anche - ma aveva riluttanza a confessarselo - che se fosse riuscito a riprendere i pennelli, e soprattutto a dipingere veramente, sarebbe riemerso dal vuoto di sentimenti e di gioia in cui viveva da tempo. Sarebbe tornato a vivere. "Che l'abbia comperata per questo?" si chiese guardando la casa che gli appariva, ora, grandissima e minacciosa. (*La casa*, p.60)

Only as he gives himself up to the designs of the house, assuming a passive attitude, does he begin to find inspiration. The ability to see, essential to the work of the figurative artist, has been restored to him with his submission to the will of the house, as his thoughts about its purchase reflect: 'Il resto era accaduto da sé come se lui fosse stato in quella faccenda soltanto *uno spettatore*' (my italics, *La casa*, p.8). The idea of a Jungian *anima* with which he needs to seek reconciliation is suggested by this theme. It is reinforced by the central importance of nature and the seasons in the

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<sup>140</sup>Like Ombres in *Serenata*, Mancinelli gives us a minimum of information about the hero's intermediate past, suspending him like Sara between the unsatisfactory present and a distant, uncanny past which now re-emerges.

<sup>141</sup> He begins by admitting that: 'Quella donna ha avuto il coraggio di amare, e ha amato chi aveva scelto lei, contro tutto e tutti. (...) Non sarebbe certo contenta di me, se mi vedesse.'(p.56). As his self-awareness grows he describes himself as 'uno che non ha mai saputo amare' (p.73).

novel, which in turn emphasize the cyclical patterns of existence which Orlando must also accept. His move from the city back to the country underlines less the recovery of an actual idyll than the symbolic recognition of his place in a history which involves him with others. In dishing out a 'merenda' to the grandson of the woman who once provided him with physical, intellectual and emotional sustenance he recognises the role of interdependency usually excluded from the construction of the male self. As a result of the textual (s)exchange I see at work in these fantastic texts, however, the control or the position of *animus* accorded to the house, the female sphere, restores a sense of balance to the female writer herself.

### iii.ii *Gli occhi dell'imperatore* - the journey of reconciliation

Mancinelli's best known novel, *I dodici abati di Challant* (1981), ends with the razing to the ground of the medieval castle, symbol of the patriarchal status quo, within whose walls the male and female protagonists have discovered a forbidden passion, guided by the dominant female's sexual passion. When this same woman, Bianca di Challant, is asked whether she will rebuild the castle, she replies: 'Un castello non si può ricostruire. Costruirò una casa, perché possono abitarci tutti quelli che verranno a cercarci' (*I dodici abati*, p.139). For Lauretta De Renzo:

the dismantled castle epitomizes the complex discursive constructs that the narration has revealed and deconstructed. By refusing to rebuild it, Laura Mancinelli, through Bianca's voice, signals her commitment as a woman writer to creating an inclusive rather than an exclusive, a de-totalizing rather than a marginalizing cultural space.<sup>142</sup>

Not only does this example reinforce my argument that Mancinelli's use of space is central to her practice as a writer, but it also demonstrates the different uses of space which emerges from Mancinelli's choice of temporal setting. If the castle symbolizes patriarchy, its kitchen, De Renzo tells us, acts as 'a metaphor for all that Western culture has traditionally marginalized or stigmatized: the female, her sexuality and her right to pleasure.'<sup>143</sup> This kitchen then is perhaps closer to the final, female-centred

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<sup>142</sup>De Renzo in Marotti and Brooke (eds), p.145.

<sup>143</sup>ibid., p.145.

open house of *La casa del tempo*, which Bianca in her liberated anticipation of modernity hopes to construct.

Bianca's statement also suggests the thematic coherence that runs throughout the medieval trilogy. The second novel, *Il miracolo di Santa Odilia* (1989) is also concerned with what a woman makes of enclosure - in this case the more drastically limited convent. Once again, principally through the medium of food and wine the heroine finds a way around the historical accounts of how abbesses lived and how miracles happened, in order to live a full and happy life and extend those effects to her community. The final novel, which concerns me here, however, is about what happens when a woman slips through that grid completely and leaves the patriarchal home. It is not merely down to historical coincidence that this character too is called Bianca. Picking up where the first Bianca left off, at the end of the trilogy Mancinelli offers a perspective on what happens when a woman leaves the patriarchal home completely. Her protagonist sets out on a journey that may have been initiated by patriarchy but ends up being one of her own making. This final book of the trilogy also forms a more unconventional duo with *La casa del tempo*. The opposite movements of reconciliation with the (masculine) external space of exploration and discovery of *Gli occhi dell'imperatore* and with the (feminine) internal space of domesticity and intimacy of *La casa del tempo* provide a fitting reflection on the diverse potential of the fantastic to effect a textual (s)exchange.

This movement towards exchange creates a kind of harmonious alternative to male domination, echoing Paola Blelloch's question about the validity of the female writer's focus on a process of *negotiation* with the world around her: 'L'armonia che essa è riuscita a creare fra il suo intimo e l'ambiente esterno non è forse una conquista altrettanto valida della volontà che l'uomo è riuscito a imporre sul mondo esterno?'<sup>144</sup> There is of course more than one textual exchange at play here. As in the other two stories Mancinelli is concerned with the text of history, with challenging the official version of events. In *Il miracolo di Santa Odilia*<sup>145</sup> Mancinelli's dialogue takes the

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<sup>144</sup> Paola Blelloch, p. 160.

<sup>145</sup> 'Il miracolo di Santa Odilia: Laura Mancinelli' reviewed by I.t, *LeggereDonna*, 26 (1990). The reviewer's comments that it is 'una storia che, conservando sempre un sottofondo di ironia, ci viene narrata riproducendo i toni ingenui di certe agiografie. Il divertimento è continuo grazie alla leggerezza con cui si compie un rovesciamento di contenuti. Invece degli atti sconsiderati e delle efferatezze di cui sono infarcite le vite dei santi è la vita di una persona laica che ci viene raccontata: con la sua operosità, la sua gioia di vivere, la sua generosità nel donare felicità.' The use of language derived from a

form of a dialogue with the tradition of hagiography, in her third novel she returns to the more specific re-write of well-known historical characters she pursued in *I dodici abati di Challant*.<sup>146</sup> One attractive feature of the medieval period, however, is that in itself it seems to offer multiple options on the truth, emphasizing the textual nature of history. Nowhere is this more true than in the eponymous figure of *Gli occhi dell'imperatore*.<sup>147</sup>

The contention and dispute surrounding the life of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194 - 1250), resulting principally from Guelf and Ghibelline tension, has led to a proliferation of myths about his life which historians are still unravelling and look far from ever resolving.<sup>148</sup> He emerges from these two camps either with a reputation as *Stupor mundi*, divinely appointed forger of the Christian Empire or the Satanic corrupter of the Catholic kingdom, fraternizer with the heathen. Although a more balanced picture of his role in medieval history is beginning to emerge,<sup>149</sup> confusion and myth still surrounds his private life. It is known that he married three times for political convenience.<sup>150</sup> It is rumoured that he maltreated these wives, particularly Isabel II of England. Many historians recount that he went around with a harem in tow. He is also known to have had several lovers, the most famous of whom

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religious tradition in the context of irony gives the final fantastic event of the novel a lingering resistance to interpretation. The persistently anticlerical feeling and the introduction of heretical, even Eastern philosophical discourse through the novel seems to leave no room for Catholic miracles. As, however, the bells ring out from every steeple, apparently moved by no hand, the bishop thinks: "Ora nessuno può negare che questa è la mano di Dio" (*Il miracolo di Sant'Odilia*, p.257), but the reader is left pondering the origins of the miracle. Are they to be attributed to a God beyond the remit of the church or to a completely different force? A dominant theme of discussion has, for example, been the influence of the dead over the living. The intertextual element here works hand in hand with the fantastic to question all modes of interpretation, echoing Linda Hutcheon's claim for 'historiographic metafiction' which 'uses and abuses intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony.' (cit. by De Renzo in Marotti and Brooke (eds), p.144). As in other female fantastic texts however the power and the irony compete in equal measure.

<sup>146</sup>See De Renzo's analysis of the 'continual allusion to and the mixing and twisting of historical facts' in *I dodici abati di Challant* in Marotti and Brooke (eds).

<sup>147</sup>*Gli occhi dell'imperatore* (Prima edizione "Nuovi coralli", Torino: Einaudi, 1993), *I dodici abati di Challant; Il miracolo di Santa Odilia; Gli occhi dell'imperatore* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995 edition cited).

<sup>148</sup>See, for example, Antonino de Stefano, 'Le leggende su Federico II' in *Federico II e le correnti spirituali del suo tempo* (Parma: Edizioni all'insegna del Velto, 1981). De Stefano outlines a 'leggenda letteraria' in addition to this 'leggenda polemica'.

<sup>149</sup>A particularly well-received, recent example being David Abulafia's *Frederick II, A Medieval Emperor* (London: Pimlico, 1992).

<sup>150</sup>Costanza, sister of the King of Aragon - m. 1209 d. 1222; Isabella/Iolande di Brienna - m. 1225 d.1228; Isabella d'Inghilterra, sister of Henry III - m.1235 d.1241. Some accounts include a fourth marriage to Bianca Lancia (see *Federico II a Melfi: ritrovato il vero volto dell'imperatore*, A. Ciarello and L.Capaldo, Napoli: Procaccini, 1994).

is Bianca Lancia, the heroine of Mancinelli's tale. The cards of the game of exchange seem to be weighted heavily in Federico's favour.

Bianca, as her name suggests, epitomises the void surrounding the details of Frederick's private life. There is no certainty about her identity, how Frederick met her, nor even where she came from. What is certain is that she bore his son, Manfred, and that at some point she joined Frederick later in his life in Southern Italy where he certainly legitimized Manfred as his heir and may have married her. By choosing to make Bianca the subject of the fiction, Mancinelli gives an oblique view of Frederick and highlights the emotional journey he makes from the patriarchal conqueror to a more passive resignation to his fate, a modern means of understanding the historically repentant emperor. This journey is paralleled by Bianca's literal journey from a state of passivity to a more active state. The fantastic acts as a crucial catalyst in this pattern of exchange.

The novel is marked from the beginning by questions of nationhood and belonging. To Frederick II, despite his German parentage, Southern Italy was certainly home - although disputes still rage with regionalist passion between his preference for Puglia or Sicily.<sup>151</sup> Nonetheless his chequered career as Emperor meant that his youth was a series of long journeys up and down Europe, until he settled down South in 1230. Bianca Lancia is generally agreed to have come from Casale Monferrato and Mancinelli emphasizes the fleeting nature of her union with Federico, dressing it in the language of a romantic passion. The first time she meets him Bianca is a young girl, playing in the forest with her falcon. Federico stumbles across her and is overwhelmed by her carefree spirit - he gives her his falcon. As often the case in the courtly love idyll, the forest represents the free space outside the castle in which both characters can find an ideal self, outside the jurisdiction of courtly pressure - in Federico's case the responsibilities of state, in Bianca's the restrictions of a nobleman's daughter. (The falcons, although originating in a historical truth,<sup>152</sup> become a convenient symbol for the tethered freedom of the two characters, but as both pass into Bianca's hands they also hint at the fact that it is Bianca who will

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<sup>151</sup> Francesco Grassi, *Federico II di Svevia, Imperatore: Puer Apuliae* (Padova: La Garangola, 1983) and Bobò Centonze, *Federico II di Svevia and Bianca di Lancia da Mazzarino* (Salvo Bonferraro Editore, 1992).

<sup>152</sup> Frederick's passion for falconry is well-documented. He wrote a treatise *De arte venandi cum avibus* (The Art of Falconry).

eventually take control of the relationship.) After this initial idyllic moment, which becomes for both a precious memory, all their subsequent meetings have to be conducted within their respective roles. Bianca's family accept the Emperor's will and though he does not marry her immediately he returns once to consummate their love, after which Bianca bears and brings up a child alone.

'L'attesa di Bianca era compiuta, ma il desiderio era rimasto.' (*Gli occhi*, p.274) In this phrase Mancinelli encapsulates the ambiguity of medieval notions of romantic love. The Emperor's absence isolates Bianca completely, but her love for him and convention prevents her seeking solace elsewhere. In fact, although the skeleton of their story epitomizes the standard courtly love poetry themes of separation and adultery, Mancinelli embodies them in characters whose fragility reaches out to the modern reader. In this process the instigation of fantastic doubt is vital. In conversation with his imam, Ben Zargan,<sup>153</sup> who has been with him from childhood, Federico claims that he has set up a spell over Bianca to hold her love to him. Federico has adapted this spell from local Southern *female* superstition 'Passa per gli occhi il dardo che va al cuore/ Finché si incontrano gli sguardi degli amanti,/oltre pianure, colli e menti/ nessuno può sciogliere il nodo dell'amore.' (*Gli occhi*, p.279). Although he began only half believing it, as the book progresses he becomes ever more obsessed by its power or lack of it. Historian David Abulafia explains that 'Frederick was not one to take comfort in the standard argument of men of religion that there are unknown and unknowable things; his was a concrete rather than abstract mind, interested in the facts of the medieval world.'<sup>154</sup> He later concedes, however, that certain questions attributed to Frederick regarding the after-life point towards a less empirical emperor.<sup>155</sup> It is this doubting Federico who Mancinelli draws out in her story of the end of the emperor's life. Insecurities and uncertainties

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<sup>153</sup>Frederick II is rumoured to have had an unknown philosopher-imam as a tutor in childhood. He certainly did have two close philosopher companions in his later court life: Michael Scot and Master Theodore (See Abulafia).

<sup>154</sup>Abulafia, p.259.

<sup>155</sup> Speaking of the philosophical questions traditionally asked as a form of diplomatic communication: 'Several questions he has asked have shown a more human side: "How is it that the soul of living man which has passed away to another life than ours cannot be induced to return by first love or even by hate, just as if it had been nothing, nor does it seem to care at all for what is left behind, whether it be saved or lost?" This passage has always excited comment, yet may be a later interpolation. If not, it perhaps reflects a feeling and loving Frederick whom the historian finds it impossible generally to reach.' (Abulafia, p.260)

necessarily repressed during a life of empirical conquest suddenly begin to present themselves with urgency:

‘Ora per tener vivo il mio sguardo affinché giunga nel cuore di chi deve accoglierlo, ricorro alla magia. Tu non l’hai mai approvato.’

‘Credo che non serva, figlio. Tuttavia non è che l’opinione di un vecchio arabo che crede in molte cose ma non nella magia.’ (p.354)

Ben Zargan dismisses Federico’s claims to magic: ‘Poesia, Federico. Questa è la tua magia’ (*Gli occhi*, p.279). The question regarding the nature of this ‘spell’ also serves to prompt a parallel set of questions in the reader, leading him/her, like Federico, into the labyrinth of human behavioural motivation. Each evening Bianca feels compelled to go to the roof of the castle to meet the gaze of her distant Emperor:

Sull’onda dello sguardo la tensione d’amore unisce le loro menti, varcando i colli boscosi del Monferrato macchiati di vigne, i picchi di Appennino, le calde pianure del Tavoliere, e monti e calli, città turrite e umili villaggi, e tutto il vario mondo che si estende dalla Puglia al Monferrato. (*Gli occhi*, p.262)

Is this a gaze of love or a consequence of power? Here the fantastic, as so often plays with the notion of a literalization of a linguistic conceit - ‘incantata’ - blurring the boundaries between the notion of language as a set of symbols for human usage and a web of control. We are never sure what the real cause of Bianca’s returned gaze is - Mancinelli conveys equally forcefully the possibility that infidelity is not an option for the isolated medieval lady. The opening page gives us evidence of the extent to which belief in this romantic knot is dependent on the suppression of curiosity in the female subject:

Bianca crede a questo incontro di ogni sera, e non si domanda neppure se veramente l’imperatore sia là, se per caso qualche impegno di stato non lo trattenga nelle stanze severe e fredde del castello o una caccia lo trascini per i boschi de Vulture, o perché no? un amore cortigiano lo seppellisca tra le sete di un’alcova. Bianca non si chiede nulla, non vuole pensare né immaginare nulla. (*Gli occhi*, p.261)

The title of the novel emphasizes this notion that control, less than magic, emanates from the emperor, holding woman subject, as ever, to the male gaze. The novel itself negotiates a new state of affairs in which this gaze is returned, with unexpected results. Eventually even the ‘magic’ of Federico’s poetry itself is also brought into

question associated as it is with complete power over the female body. As Beverly Allen observes: 'women's bodies serve the signifying practices of such male-male literary communications as the poetry of the Sicilians at Federico's late medieval court.'<sup>156</sup>

Bianca is trapped in a patriarchal enclosure, physically, and, Frederick would have her believe, mentally. Whilst she remains still, he, the conqueror with a 'ceaselessly itinerant'<sup>157</sup> life, comes and goes, covering territory, to return now and then to woman, to the still interior. Drawing upon Bianca's reputed origin in Casale Monferrato Mancinelli is able to make *her* journey to meet Frederick thus giving her the chance to escape enclosure - to slip through the net of exchange as she moves from the house of her father to that of her new master. The motif of the journey provides a means with which to weave and re-weave the spells situation casts upon us, a force of liberation both gruelling and rewarding. Bianca is an adventurer, from an early age:

Nessuna delle sue sorelle si sarebbe mai avventurata nella grande capanna dei falchi, nella bella radura nel bosco, nessuna avrebbe osato esporsi agli artigli dei nobili rapaci, che lei allevava senza tuttavia addestrarli alla caccia, così, solo perché li amava. (*Gli occhi*, p.266)

It is this wild freedom for which, so their meeting implies, the emperor reserves a special feeling for her. However it is the paradox of this feeling that because of it he keeps her imprisoned by his gaze - waiting in the castle. It is the emperor in the end who has to bear the punishment for the neglect of women, which lies not, the text implies, in their wanton seduction (in which women usually play a willing role, Mancinelli suggests) but in the subsequent physical restrictions imposed upon them.

Mancinelli's use of space sets up traditional models, equating the closed space with the space allocated to women, only to subvert them. By the time the emperor is ready at last for his union with Bianca he is too exhausted to come to meet her and he is suddenly put in the position in which he has kept Bianca: waiting. The imposition of any new relationship to space eventually becomes tiring, even travel itself. For Bianca however travel is new and on her journey she discovers all the excitement and danger of unanticipated encounters - the journey of self discovery is echoed by the sense that

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<sup>156</sup> Beverly Allen, 'From One Closet to Another? Feminism, Literary Archaeology and the Canon' in Mariotti (ed.), pp. 25-35.

she is discovering her own homeland for the first time. If Frederick's youthful ideals about the union of the empire have fragmented into tired stories of battles, conquests and negotiations, Bianca restores the magic of the journey in her appreciation of the small pleasures. Mancinelli's own patriotic celebration of Italy is imbued with a spirit of openness for it is one where ideally there is no distinction between foreigner and native, where Germans feel as at home as Italians.

Reading an argument by a historian who claims that Bianca Lancia must have been Sicilian it is easy to see how radical the idea of a female journey in the medieval period actually is:

Per tanti motivi, quindi, Bianca Lancia non poteva essere del Monferrato; ma soprattutto per il fatto che Federico dal 1231 si trasferì prima a Melfi e poi in Sicilia ritornando in Italia dopo lunghi anni; non poteva quindi, intrecciare una relazione d'amore con una amante di Monferrato.<sup>158</sup>

Mancinelli keeps the journey well within the realms of plausibility by having Federico, in time honoured tradition, send a trusted emissary to collect his bride, when at last he is freed from the necessity of state marriages. This emissary is Tannhäuser, a trusted companion of Frederick's. Once a poet musician, presumably in the tradition of the German Minnesänger whom it is known Frederick II came into contact with in Germany, Tannhäuser has been struck by disaster. After receiving the *malocchio* or *iettatura* in Puglia from an old woman, his right hand, otherwise working perfectly, becomes paralysed whenever he wishes to play his harp, which he sadly carries round with him as a reminder of his lost skill. The curse the old woman has supposedly given him was sent in his direction as a result of the fellow foreign knights' dangerous

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<sup>157</sup>Abulafia, p.253.

<sup>158</sup>Bobò Centonze, *Federico II di Svezia and Bianca di Lancia da Mazzarino*, p.14. Centonze uses Bianca Lancia's potentially Sicilian identity as the only key to his whole theory that Federico's Sicilian School of Poetry was located in the 'entroterra siciliana'. Such a wilful manipulation of history makes one relieved that Mancinelli chooses fiction as the territory in which to exercise such imaginative freedom, after which she can remind the reader 'Se poi qualcuno si sorprendesse di scorgere nei personaggi un carattere diverso da quello che si attendeva, si ricordi che questo è un romanzo e non un libro di storia.'(p.373). Generally, it is fascinating to see how often historians make careless assumptions about female personages on the basis of no evidence. One historian, for example, comments that the relationship between Frederick and his first wife does not seem to have been disturbed by the birth of his illegitimate son, as though it was a modern marriage in which a woman had the space to be disturbed by such an event! 'Tra marito e moglie maturò una profonda attrazione. La nascita dell'unico figlio Enrico rafforzò il matrimonio. Che poi, poco dopo, venisse al mondo anche Enzo, il primo figlio naturale di Federico, non sembra aver pesato sull'armonia della vita con Costanza', Francesco Grassi, *Federico II di Svevia, Imperatore: Puer Apuliae*, p.14.

sexual liaisons with local girls, for whom Tannhäuser becomes the scapegoat.<sup>159</sup> The typically medieval combination of music and poetry are Tannhäuser's life and he is miserable in his affliction: 'Nessuno è più triste del musico a cui la musica è stata negata.' (*Gli occhi*, p.287). As in *La casa del tempo* it is a case of an artistic block, and in this case too both the block and the cure are infused with potentially magical causes as well as psychological ones.

From the first moment of their meeting a mutual attraction arises between Tannhäuser and Bianca. As a loyal subject Tannhäuser studiously avoids Bianca so that she must take on the responsibility for his seduction. Her love seems to work a miracle and in the course of the sea voyage he regains the use of his hand, delighting the crew with his love poetry. There are at least two vital intertextual threads in this aspect of the tale. The first lies in the name Tannhäuser. An actual historical figure, a Middle High German lyric poet, Tannhäuser (c.1200 - 1270) is known to have taken part in a crusade (1228-9) and later became a court poet with a different Frederick (der streitbare of Austria).<sup>160</sup> He also wrote a crusade song which dwells with ironical humour on the hardships of a sea crossing, another detail which makes him a fitting character to put on this sea voyage.<sup>161</sup> In fact the historical figure is so suited to Mancinelli's purpose that she is able to quote directly from this song on at least one occasion: 'Beato colui che va a cacciare/col falcone in terra di Puglia.'<sup>162</sup> It is easy to see why Mancinelli finds this character attractive, he brought innovation and humour to the poetry of courtly love with a daring earthy sensuality 'and he was the first - as far as is known - to discuss the quality of food and drink in a song.'<sup>163</sup> Mancinelli

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<sup>159</sup>His manservant Nico explains that he was punished 'perché era il musico più bravo e il più grande cavaliere della schiera. Gli altri non erano nulla in confronto a lui. Quella vecchia non voleva punire lui in particolare, voleva punire tutta la schiera, o forse tutta la cavalleria tedesca, che cavalca per boschi, e villaggi e seduce le ragazze senza amarle. Ma la colpa è anche delle ragazze che si lasciano incantare dai pennacchi e dalle armature lucenti, e dovrebbero sapere, perché lo sanno tutti, che quei cavalieri se ne vanno e di loro nemmeno si ricordano.' (*Gli occhi*, p.304)

<sup>160</sup>See entry 'Tannhäuser' in *The Oxford Companion to German Literature*, ed. by Henry and Mary Garland (Oxford, New York: OUP, 1986), p.881. See also J.W.Thomas, *Tannhäuser: poet and legend. With texts and translations of his works*, Studies in the Germanic Languages and Literatures, 77 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1974).

<sup>161</sup>As Thomas writes 'The traditional interpretation of this *Spruch* cycle (V) is that its stanzas make up a crusade song which tells of Tannhäuser's personal experiences on a journey from Italy to Palestine.' (p.34)

<sup>162</sup>Thomas, *ibid.* 'Wol im der nv beissen sol/zepulle vg dem gevilde' - 'He's lucky who can hunt today/in Apulia with his hawk' XIII 1, p. 165. This is a quotation from his account of the sea voyage which ends 'I'm sailing far at sea'.

<sup>163</sup>Thomas, *ibid.* 'He composed the first direct parodies in lyric verse of the idea of service of ladies; his were the first songs with a courtly milieu - except the dawn songs - to give a frank account of love's

herself admires his adventurous spirit and suggests that his poetry suffered because it was not love poetry.<sup>164</sup> The figure of Tannhäuser serves Mancinelli because he is more pre-disposed than Federico to slip outside the rigid laws of gender construction and towards modern deconstruction of gender roles. Tannhäuser is already marked by a certain marginality that enables him to communicate with the marginalised Bianca. The reason Tannhäuser is still available to posterity, Mancinelli suggests, is 'per quella sua vena di follia che gli costruisce intorno la suggestiva leggenda che ispirerà Wagner.' She sees the evidence of this 'follia' in the story that the string of his viola broke, preventing him from playing and singing.<sup>165</sup> She in turn uses this as a starting point for the fantastic 'increspatura' of her text – a 'follia' of her own.

Mancinelli's transposition of the poet to the court of Frederick II, apart from being a historical possibility,<sup>166</sup> however, has perhaps more to do with this legendary status arising from the anonymous 'Ballad of Tannhäuser.' This was the poet who indulged in the sensual pleasures of Venus' grotto and then sought absolution from the Pope, which was refused, leading him back into Venus' arms for eternity. In the Wagnerian opera *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf der Wartburg* (1844) the poet is saved by the death of a woman who loves him and a miracle – the pilgrim's staff puts out leaves. The roots of this legend may well lie in the Marian cycle of repentance songs attributed to the later production of the historical poet. These two elements, of a youthful sensuality and later repentance are crucial to Mancinelli's story and much of the poetry she attributes to Tannhäuser is close to the historical original,<sup>167</sup> but it is drawn back into her practice of textual (s)exchange.

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fulfilment; he initiated the use of repetition and catalogues as a deliberate stylistic device in lyric verse.' (p.60)

<sup>164</sup> 'Tannhäuser è un grande poeta al cui prestigio ha certamente nociuto il fatto di non poter essere considerato un vero poeta d'amore in un periodo in cui dominava la poesia di genere: sfuggire a questa classificazione era segno di demerito, e comportava il rischio di essere emarginato dalla tradizione dimenticato.' Laura Mancinelli, *Da Carlomagno a Lutero*, p.216.

<sup>165</sup> 'Mentre coerentemente alla sua vocazione di poeta maledetto, alla sua viola si spezza la corda, sì che egli non può più suonare e comporre, cresce intorno alla sua persona la leggenda. Non sapremo mai quanta parte egli abbia avuto nel favorire quest'aura misteriosa.' (ibid., p.216)

<sup>166</sup> The full details of Tannhäuser's biography are hazy and mostly deduced from his poetry. There is no doubt about his allegiance to the Hohenstaufen household. Of Federico he wrote in *Leich VI*: 'As first of all the lords renowned/ must Kaiser Friedrich stand/ Alas that there has not been found/ in any German land // a king to fit the crown and fill/ his place and match his fame/ Alas that he's not living still/ whom it so well became.' (ibid., p.138)

<sup>167</sup> See, for example, Thomas, p.111: 'A wood was standing near/ I entered and could hear/ a greeting, sweet and clear/ from many a little bird/ What a lovely song I heard.' Compare with 'C'è qui accanto una foresta/ che io sto per traversare/ Ad accogliermi li ho uditi/ gli uccelletti là tra i rami:/ e ricambio il loro saluto/ con la stessa cortesia.' (*Gli occhi*, p.335). The melancholy songs written towards the end of

The heroine does not need to die in order to effect a miracle, nor does Tannhäuser completely renounce sensual pleasure and turn to a virginal intermediary. On the contrary what lies at the heart of Tannhäuser's recovery is the recognition of a different 'miracle' - female desire.<sup>168</sup> By allowing himself to be courted by Bianca, kissed by Bianca, he recognizes the Other that is within himself. One possible interpretation is that the *iettatura* is in fact a psychosomatic symptom of the guilt he feels about his emotionally cold sexual (and bellic) adventures. He admits to Bianca that he has never had the courage to open himself up to any one person, suggesting an emotional 'virginity' that reinforces Bianca's assumption of the 'masculine' role. After a conversation with Bianca in which she parodies the language of courtly love, suggests that he has gathered many flowers but cultivated none, he is able to cry for his loss of an emotional life, and thus regain it. His fear of women is dissolved by the real passion he feels for Bianca. That this fear of female desire is related to the *iettatura* itself is reinforced by the Southern Italian superstition that the *malocchio* arises out of excessive desire<sup>169</sup> - his own fear of female desire could be the cause of his suffering in more ways than one. The reappropriation of the older woman herself, not as a witch, but as a sexual being is also presented in the text in the sub-plot. The camaraderie evolving between Bianca's nurse and Tannhäuser's young servant, as they watch the romance develop between their mistress and master, turns into a mutually comforting sexual one.

Mancinelli also presents a heretical alternative to clerical power in the idea of an absolution from a woman, which does not condemn sensuality so much as contextualise it. The necessity of a healthy dialogue with the Other, as in *La casa del tempo*, emerges as the foundation of the artistic subject. In this respect one form of textual (s)exchange has been carried out. Bianca assumes the role of traveller and

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Tannhäuser's life, of Christian repentance and reconciliation with the Virgin Mary are transformed in Mancinelli's novel into a secular poetry of reconciliation with the cycle of life and death, a paen to life itself: 'Quando, come e dove/ pagherò il debito alla vita?' (*Gli occhi*, p.351) 'Molto m'ha dato, molto m'ha tolto/troppo per quello ch'io sono.' (*Gli occhi*, p.364)

<sup>168</sup>Mancinelli is quite clear that female desire is a major theme, from the beginning, describing her heroine as follows: 'Bianca Lancia, la fanciulla che aveva avuto in sorte un'ora di amore e molti anni di desiderio.' (*Gli occhi*, p.264) She also alludes to erotic dreams Bianca has about the emperor and Tannhäuser.

<sup>169</sup>Per Binde, *Bodies of Vital Matter: Notions of Life Force and Transcendence in Traditional Southern Italy* (doctoral thesis, Göteborg University, 1997) 'In a Calabrese community, the evil eye could be thought to emanate from persons when they stare at something and to be caused by an "abundance of

initiator of events, subtly subverting Tannhäuser's control of the situation, but what of the awaiting Frederick?

He refers us back to another unavoidable intertextual reference: *Tristan*. The original version of this archetypal love triangle does in fact emerge from the hand of one of Tannhäuser's contemporaries, Gottfried von Strassburg, which gives it further resonance within the text. The structure in which the Cornish King Mark sends his trusted nephew to woo the Irish Isolde, only for the two to drink accidentally the love potion destined for Mark and Isolde on the return journey at sea and eventually be exiled by the king. All stories end in the death of the two lovers and in the Wagnerian version King Mark's attempt at reconciliation comes too late. The parallels between *Tristan* and *Gli occhi dell'imperatore* are obvious but Mancinelli takes the theme of a magic spell going awry and backfiring on the perpetrator to rewrite the history of female desire. Whether the power of Federico's spell is real or imagined, whether Bianca's cure is a miracle or a therapeutic treatment of a psychosomatic symptom, what emerges from the voyage of discovery is that Federico, with an emperor's typical delusions of omnipotence, had not reckoned on the possibility of other kinds of magic.

Towards the end of the novel we are told: 'gli occhi dell'imperatore si stavano spegnendo' (*Gli occhi*, p.367). This return to the emperor's eyes, as the title would suggest, provides a leitmotif in the novel that indicates the shift in balance. Bianca discovers that her own life has given her a transferable courage. As Tannhäuser comments on her calm during the storm she reminds him that 'il coraggio non occorre soltanto nelle tempeste di mare. Occorre anche nelle quiete colline del Monferrato.' Part of Tannhäuser's own growth is in realising that imposed passivity is not one with weakness, as he contrasts his own life with that of Bianca: 'Voi, salda come una roccia, nel vostro castello, ad attendere l'imperatore. Io, trascinato qua e là come una foglia dal vento, senza mai sapere il perché.' (*Gli occhi*, p.310) His choice of metaphor also develops the theme that the masculine performance is not necessarily the self-controlled one it seems. This process of re-assessment is closely related to a changed relation to space. Just as Federico feels the power of his gaze ebb as he remains enclosed, Bianca finds that power is dissipated by movement. The eyes which previously defined the limits of her world, the sea, the sky ('Bianca, lo sguardo perso

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heart" which was understood as a "strong emotion provoked by the sight of something desirable or exceptionally beautiful." (p.59)

sul mare, rivedeva nell'azzurro altro azzurro, altra luce, altro splendore. Gli occhi del suo imperatore.' *Gli occhi*, p.295) evaporate as she travels across the sea:

Cercò nell'azzurro del mare gli occhi dell'imperatore, ma l'acqua le rispondeva lieta e cangiante, rotta dal movimento della nave che procedeva verso il largo. Cercò nel cielo, più azzurro che mai, e trovò audaci voli di gabbiani, strisce leggere di vapori trascinati dal vento del mattino. (*Gli occhi*, p.321)

The life of action, contrasted with enforced inaction, shows up long-distance love as a very circumstantial sort of spell:

Bianca viveva quei giorni come un'avventura. La fatica della cavalcata, la sollecitudine di fronte a pericoli, rumori sospetti, improvvisi fruscii o suoni lontani, occupavano interamente il suo pensiero. Non c'erano tramonti in cui cercare gli occhi dell'imperatore. (*Gli occhi*, p.340)

She rediscovers the unconventional girl with whom the emperor first fell in love. Whether or not the emperor is beginning to realise the foolishness of trying to hold love to ransom for so long or genuinely believes that his 'spell' has failed, what emerges in tandem with Bianca's liberation is an anticipation of a new gaze - hers:

'Ho guardato il mio volto nello specchio d'argento - disse - e ho visto i miei occhi offuscarsi. Tu sai quel che significa.'

- 'Sì, per chi crede nella magia. Il potere del tuo sguardo indebolisce.'

[...] 'Temo questo incontro, padre. Sono passati molti anni da quando vidi Bianca per l'ultima volta, e io non sono più lo stesso. Troverà un vecchio anziché l'oggetto del suo amore.' (*Gli occhi*, p.355)

This turn around is also mirrored, as I have suggested, in the relation to space. Mancinelli chooses the Puglian Castel del Monte as the place where the emperor shuts himself away. 'There is no evidence that Frederick made extensive use of Castel del Monte' and, as Abulafia tells us, 'the hunting-box', 'was not one of Frederick's residences, much as he may have hoped to use it for his sport of falconry. Nor was it at all sizeable'<sup>170</sup> Mancinelli's choice of this 'cramped' castle suggests the self-imposed enclosure which the emperor chooses as a prefiguration of death. Unable to adapt to a new notion of a passive male subjecthood he chooses a deadly enclosure. Thus the emperor famous for his liberality and interest in Eastern philosophy, his generosity to Jew and Moslem, fails to account for the difference of women. It is a

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<sup>170</sup>Abulafia, p.288.

lesson in poetry which his Imam had tried to teach him and which he learns at a cost.

It is one he recognises, as his comment to Tannhäuser reflects:

Tu sei un poeta .. e tutto, amore, gioia, dolore, puoi tradurre nel tuo canto. E quando riesci a farlo, sei molto più potente del tuo povero imperatore. La mia mano non è morta per poter tornare alla vita - E dopo una pausa aggiunse - Tu sai che solo i prediletti della sorte hanno il dono di conoscere la morte per poter rinascere.

Art emerges then as the ideal way of framing and interpreting the difficult process of existence. In this respect what Paolo Vancelli has described as 'le increspature' of Mancinelli's narrative become synonymous with the unknown potential of the subject and the fantastic expression of something that may be grasped, but only through art:

la tesi secondo cui noi conosciamo con la logica solo il lato apparente, pragmatico, l'hic et nunc in cui le cose sono inserite, ma non possiamo prevedere le increspature improvvise che esse possono assumere, le metamorfosi che possono trasformarle, i suggerimenti enigmatici che esse ci inviano: determinati certo da una causa, sfuggente però all'nostra logica.<sup>171</sup>

It seems a hard lesson for the Emperor to learn so late in his life, bereft of the real means to deal with it. His 'exchange' of space with Bianca, however, has quieted some of his doubts with an answer to that philosophical question cited by Abulafia (see footnote 155). When he recognises the waning of his spell and the evident bond between his emissary and his wife, on the advice of his Imam, he accepts that his life, for he sees death approaching rapidly, may continue in the relationship between those who loved him best. The exchange at play here is not the exchange of a woman, as between Mario and Fabrizio at the end of *La casa*, but the exchange of knowledge. What Federico has learnt too late - the existence of a female subjecthood - may benefit Tannhäuser. His recognition of mortality and of life in the memory of others is an emotion that is both fantastic and tangible. Its tangibility lies in the text which Mancinelli creates out of love for her historical sources in which the shifts of time weave a new magic on the stories whilst remaining aware of, but not bound by, their steady gaze. It is possible to read this story of a gaze - the power of patriarchy to conquer - as a plea to acknowledge its own capacity to be conquered, not in the colours of battle and literary one-up manship, but in the creation of a new viewpoint which encourages it to reflect upon its own supremacy.

To effect this ending Mancinelli may carry out the largest alteration of historical fact. Generally it is thought that Frederick outlived Bianca and spent some time with his sixteen year-old heir Manfredi (although he does knight him in accordance with the historical fact that Frederick made him regent of Sicily).<sup>172</sup> In this way, however, Mancinelli effects her own exchange with the historical text, sacrificing historical 'truth' for a deeper insight into the conduct of historical relations:

To say the past is only known to us through textual traces is not [...] the same as saying that the past is only textual [...] This ontological reduction is not the point of postmodernism: past events existed empirically, but in epistemological terms we can only know them today through texts.<sup>173</sup>

One question raised by these two texts, but not answered, is the question of female creativity - in particular, the question of female writing. Do the female presences in these texts, as nurturing presences simply present a re-write of an old misogynistic trope: the female muse? If, in Mancinelli's texts, the female provides the grounds for art what does she herself create? Nurture and reconciliation are not, however, her only roles. She is allied with the fantastic, herself an 'increspatura narrativa'. She is the moment of disruption of the code, a role which one might argue is that of art itself.<sup>174</sup> Mancinelli presents radical questions about what constitutes art itself, just as she questions history. Her bold re-valuation of the female body and mind - as locus of sexuality, creation and sensorial pleasure - sites her own literature at the centre of a postmodern search for new configurations of body and text.

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<sup>171</sup>Paolo Vancelli, 'Le increspature della narrativa di Laura Mancinelli', p.58.

<sup>172</sup>At least two angles exist on death and illness in the relationship between Frederick and Bianca but in both cases it is Bianca who is ill or dies. See de Stefano, 'Delle amanti di Federico la più nota è certamente Bianca Lancia, madre di Manfredi, "la più bella e la più diletta delle sue concubine". Ad essa si riferiscono alcune tradizioni raccolte della suddetta cronaca parmense [L'Archivio di Stato a Parma] Secondo la stessa cronaca, la nomina di Manfredi a re di Sicilia sarebbe avvenuta così. Trovandosi Bianca vicina a morte e già spacciata dei medici, Federico, nel farle visita, le domandò cosa avrenne desiderato che fosse stato utile alla sua salute permettendole di soddisfare subito il suo desiderio. Ed ella disse, sospirando: che prima di morire io possa vedere mio figlio Manfredi in grande onore. L'imperatore allora, alla sua presenza legittimò Manfredi e lo fece re di Puglia e di Sicilia. Bianca ne fu tanto contenta che recuperò la salute.' (pp142-3) See also A. Ciarello and L. Capaldo 'con Bianca Lancia, sposata in punto di morte di lei nel 1246, madre di Manfredi.' (my italics, p. 20)

<sup>173</sup>Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.81.

<sup>174</sup>This concept of art may explain Mancinelli's interest in the avant-garde.

## Conclusion

Ma davvero per uscire di prigione  
bisogna conoscere il legno della porta,  
la lega delle sbarre, stabilire l'esatta  
gradazione del colore? A diventare  
così grandi esperti, si corre il rischio  
che poi ci si affezioni. Se vuoi uscire  
davvero di prigione, esci subito,  
magari con la voce, diventa una canzone.<sup>175</sup>

I would like to use Cavalli's poem to return to the question posed and provisionally answered in this thesis as to how women writers relate to the spatial limitations potentially imposed upon them by a close relationship to the male text. In the context of female creativity Cavalli's exhortation that a song can come from thin air is belied by the story of Lavinia's careful attention to the music composed by men that gave her the opportunity to sing her own song in return. It is also belied by the dialogue I have traced in all the women writers of this thesis with a series of male texts. However Cavalli's poem does remind us that the male text can become a prison, a fact reflected in the presence of an agonistic element, to greater and lesser degrees, in that dialogue with the male text.

I suggest that the fantastic enables women writers to dramatize in powerful spatial terms the seduction exercised upon the female reader by the male text, looking in particular at the work of Paola Capriolo. Her use of the fantastic shows that a specifically female authorial anxiety complicates the received interpretation of postmodern authorial anxiety as a sense of late arrival common to writers of both genders. By reading the different intertextual influences behind 'La grande Eulalia' it is possible now to site female authorial anxiety instead in a perceived absence of female predecessors, suggesting the continued existence of 'the female affiliation complex' outlined by Gilbert and Gubar. Moreover working in tandem with this absence we can read a particular anxiety which I have defined as an 'introjective anxiety'- a reaction to the tendency to absorb and reproduce the female figures projected by the male text. The smaller the space allowed to the female imaginary the more powerfully these figures seem to be projected, threatening to erase the existence of any alternative vision beyond the universal hegemony of the artistic masculine

subject. Reading *Il doppio regno* as a form of cultural autobiography, her predilection for the traditional male-authored text, which makes few concessions to the existence of a female subject, emerges as the principle cause of this enclosure. Outlining this aspect of the fantastic, however, allows us to trace the residue of this anxiety in the work of other authors who move away from the closed space of fantasy and gain a distance from the male text.

Capriolo's early work also underlines the danger inherent in more traditional forms of the fantastic that the spatial enclosure of fantasy, tied up as it is to a negative relation to the female, particularly the maternal, can trap the female writer in its alienating space. The material freedom to write and be published is not synonymous with an inspiration completely freed from the fetters of a gender system designed to disadvantage of women. It is in this respect that I think even Capriolo's work reworks the spaces of the gothic, which articulate a despair with the female body, into a fantastic which points to the male-authored text as the predominant source of this despair.

Consequently I have traced the ways in which other writers use the fantastic self-consciously to articulate a break with the dominant male textual space. The fantastic's capacity to relate the mental or psychological space to a physical space means that it can effect the discovery of new spaces, as well as reinforce the power of old ones. This is a fantastic that moves necessarily away from the closure of fantasy, and in doing so modifies our concept of what constitutes the genre.

I have outlined several of the ways in which this fantastic manifests itself in the work of Duranti, Ombres and Mancinelli in relation to space and intertextuality. The protagonists of their texts meet these themes in different constellations according to their gender. A fantastic space of physical enclosure is often inflicted upon the male subject as the punishment for his own retreat into a closed artistic fantasy, into which he often attempts to pull the women around him. In many ways women writers find it easier to practice the fantastic on a male character. Even in this parodic form however they must use space skilfully in order to avoid being complicitous in the perpetuation of a static vision of gender. This punitive process may end in death, as in *La casa sul lago della luna* or, as in Mancinelli's work, an opportunity for reconciliation, in which

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<sup>175</sup>Patrizia Cavalli, from 'L'io singolare proprio mio' in *Poesie (1974-1992)*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1992).

the male is forced to recognize the existence of the space of the Other. Recognizing and accepting the 'foreign' or the strange in the female subject, through the workings of the fantastic becomes a constant motif in this use of the fantastic.

By way of contrast, for the female subject this process of recognition is co-existent with the experience of a journey or movement. This experience makes the self alien, but eventually allows the female subject to distance herself from the closed space of fantasy, so often informed by an anxiety about the male text. This is not an outright rejection of that space, and the preservation of a fantastic element often suggests the need for fantasy. It is a need for an area of darkness that goes hand in hand with a willingness to experience the male-authored self as alien, in order to move beyond it. The use of the fantastic to undergo this process of alienation, in order to overcome it leads to a new relation with the space of the enclosure. In many ways the female subject presents a greater challenge to the female writer of the fantastic than the male protagonist. It is easier to understand therefore Scarsaro's definition of a 'marginal fantastic' in so many women writers. I argue that whilst it may be marginal to the accepted notions of the genre, its use is not marginal to the work of these writers.

The fantastic provides women writers with an opportunity to express a spatially conceived anxiety about their place in literature. In order to avoid the dangers of being swamped by it they must distance themselves from it through laughter or irony like Duranti and Mancinelli or immerse themselves in it to the point of sensual indulgence like Ombres. What all three have in common, is that, in opposition to the eternal closure of *Il doppio regno*, through the fantastic they create temporary spaces of enclosure for the female subject. In the work of Ombres, for example, the hotel becomes a space from which a new self may emerge. Taking us back to the promise of Eulalia's magical caravan these are spaces in movement: aeroplanes, ships, trains. The anxiety about the male text is held at a distance by a similar refusal to stay in one place for very long. We witness a mixing of genres in an approach that refuses to solidify itself into a single formula, blending the fantastic with genres as diverse as the romantic and the gastronomical. At their best these writers do not eschew their predominantly male inheritance, but engage with it in the constant reinvention of spatial relations which the fantastic allows. In this model of the fantastic the walls of Cavalli's prison become porous and allow the female authors to pass through and

return at will, making it less of a prison than a site of inspiration. By achieving within the text a space of temporary balance the female writer takes us beyond 'a world of fixed boundaries with unerasable borders for a transitional territory in which the conventional opposites create movable walls and pleasurable tension.'<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup>Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, p. 70.

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