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Cara's 'creative' writing: the fiction of originality
in Capriolo's *Il doppio regno*

The inventedness of fiction is its sign and glory. But that doesn't mean it comes out of nowhere, made out of nothing. What inventors invent tells you *something* about the world they inhabit. What fantasists fantacize has *some* objective correlative, even if it's only in the inside of their own heads.¹

Michael Frayn's narrator (of *The Trick of It*), an increasingly disillusioned lecturer in English at a provincial university, has spent years telling his students the 'truth' about 'fiction'. One day, the author ('JL') whose books Dunnett has been researching and teaching during his moderately successful career, accepts his invitation to give a guest lecture, and his meeting with her alters the course of his whole life.² Dunnett sets down his story as a series of letters to his friend in Melbourne, aware that his 'diary' represents – indeed is – his life, his story, which he becomes anxious to preserve.³ His epistolary tone is teasing, pithy, and pungent, as he writes – and rewrites – his account of events, confusing the reader, with literary consciousness or otherwise, as to what is 'real' and what is indeed his own fiction.

Cara, the protagonist-narrator of Paola Capriolo's novel *Il doppio regno*, confined to spend what may be eternity in a remote hotel after escaping from a gigantic tidal wave, keeps a diary to record her experience, initially, perhaps, so that if she forgets it she can read about it. Indeed, when she later rereads her entries, she cannot remember some of the scenes, events, people, or 'memories' she has described, they seem merely to be husks devoid of their former sense and transforming power (through association).⁴ Cara writes fluently, eloquently, and reflectively, recognizing, if not comprehending, a literary quality in her account. But whose story is she writing, and why and for whom does she feel compelled to record it?

To date, Capriolo has published eight novels and two collections of short stories.⁵ All her stories revolve around characters who engage in obsessive quests for meaning or artistic ‘perfection’, quests for something beyond normality, in most cases to combat an oppressive or banal reality. There are no specific locations, however, either geographically or historically, and her characters and their concerns are timeless.⁶ In *Il doppio regno*, Cara wants to escape not *from*, but *into*, a safe, lifeless existence, where she can create and form her own reality. Since she cannot find the exit to go outside (where, she tells herself, she would merely find herself in a dark wood), her only activity is wandering up and down the endless, dim, winding corridors in the hotel, where she feels lost as if in a partially remembered or waking dream. Gradually, her eyes adjust to the half-light and she shuns the bright light (signalling the exit) at the far end of a corridor that she later sees in one of her dreams.⁷

Cara fails to find the way out of the hotel. Tormented by feelings of guilt, she believes the reason must lie in her past and that some god may now be administering her just ‘reward’. From the fragmented picture she tries to build up in her diary, it appears she has experienced some sort of momentous and distressing emotional event or accident (which the giant wave may represent). Perhaps she is responsible for a specific tragedy: causing the death of a child, abandoning her mother, leaving her husband; or perhaps she has suffered rejection herself. In more general terms, she appears unwilling to accept everyday responsibilities or vicissitudes, all the numberless goings on of life, and so wants to lose herself in ‘una felice oasi di incoscienza in mezzo a una consapevolezza spesso così dura da sopportare’, as Capriolo phrases it in an article, far away from the ‘maggiore imprevedibilità della “vita vera”’.⁸ With little else to occupy her, writing is one of the ways Cara spends her otherwise predictably alike days: ‘Qui i giorni si susseguono in modo così uniforme che quasi si perde il senso del fluire delle ore: si vive piuttosto in una sorta di eternità’ (*Il doppio regno*, pages 50–51). What, though, does she understand by writing, since as we read her account we are increasingly aware of reading the words of others? Several critics and reviewers have picked up on elements of intertextuality in

Capriolo's work, few have gone further than naming names. This essay sets out to discuss the question and relevance of originality in the creation, or re-creation, of art as emerges from the novel *Il doppio regno*, to examine narrative intention, and to explore the apt description of Capriolo's writing as 'una sorta di letteratura sulla letteratura'.⁹

'Writing is, after all, always re-writing', as has often been stated.¹⁰ Capriolo's interest in structure, patterns, and form, as well as notions of reading and writing, comes over strongly in much of her fiction, particularly in *Il doppio regno*. Capriolo's narrative composition is formal, elegant, and harmonious, sometimes haunting and nostalgic, often disturbing. Her language is carefully constructed, poetic, and classically charged, typically and intentionally conveying multiple or ambiguous meanings for her ideal reader (one who reads and rereads) to unravel. It also abounds in linguistic Chinese jars: words and phrases that recur, develop, and acquire new or more intense meaning over (narrative) time, even across novels.

In many of Capriolo's stories, language entraps and isolates as well as confuses and confounds. One of the waiters in *Il doppio regno* tells Cara, for example, that a plan of the hotel, should it exist, would not help her find the exit since 'i termini "interno" and "esterno" non significano nulla, sono puramente convenzionali' (*Il doppio regno*, page 29), while the manager of the hotel questions or re-interprets the meaning of words such as 'leggere' and 'capire' (*Il doppio regno*, page 48), and distinguishes pedantically between 'camere libere' and 'camere disponibili' (*Il doppio regno*, page 54). His tiresome linguistic reasoning is taken up subsequently in more profound vein by Scarpia of *Vissi d'amore* and Stiler of *Un uomo di carattere*, the more intellectual of Capriolo's protagonists, who both use language as a weapon against the lack of rigidity and self-control in others. Scarpia's mastery of language helps him firstly justify to Tosca his task as judge over men and secondly convince himself of his duty to 'save' Tosca, both purposes aptly conflated in his confusing of 'delitto' with 'diletto' (*Vissi d'amore*, pages 41–42). Stiler's struggle with his opposing duties – cultivating his garden or his relationship with cousin Zelda – causes him to look for a way out of his impasse; yet he tells his

friend Bausa, adamantly: 'Io non cerco un compromesso, cerco una soluzione' (*Un uomo di carattere*, page 92). These protagonists, in deceiving themselves with language, consciously or otherwise, reveal their fundamental all-too-human weakness, in stark contrast with the strong, inhuman Vulpus of *La spettatrice*, the actor who hardly uses his own words at all (since he constantly acts a part both on and off stage), who sacrifices both himself and his companion, who never wavers from his path.¹¹ Is Cara also acting a part?

The act of narration itself frequently results in a sense of disorientation for the reader, and the following examples aim to illustrate how *Il doppio regno* fits into a pattern and yet goes beyond it. In Capriolo's short story, 'Il dio narrante', the narrator begins by saying that he must decide who he is. Is he the dead body of a lord, his assassin, or the investigator? Is he an all-knowing god looking down on events, or one whose gaze is misted and confused?¹² The voice that imperceptibly takes over informs us that, if he is a god, 'come tutti gli dei è un pessimo narratore'.¹³ The story of *Con i miei mille occhi* is narrated from a similar timeless viewpoint, that of a mythical forest with a thousand eyes, claiming to know and be the source of as well as see everything.¹⁴ Capriolo's human narrators, with few exceptions, cast doubt in some way on the veridicity of their narratives, whether they are personally distant from events recounted, or diarists like Cara, relating events, we presume, more or less as they occur.¹⁵ 'La grande Eulalia', *La spettatrice*, and *Barbara* are narrated some time after the events took place, the first two narrators freely admitting that they may not know or be presenting all the facts, while the old narrator of *Barbara* speaks of people and places who may now exist only in the 'appannate immagini della memoria'.¹⁶ In *Il sogno dell'agnello* many descriptions of characters and their occupations are accompanied by comments such as 'a scelta del lettore', 'si può scegliere a piacere' (*Il sogno dell'agnello*, pages 13, 17), while the narrator of *La spettatrice* claims to be omniscient, a sort of 'spettatore divino' as Capriolo calls 'her', but is as much an inventor as a recorder, consciously choosing between different narrative strands.¹⁷

Of all Capriolo's characters, the only one who expresses a desire to observe, dispassionately, from on high, like the 'narrating gods' of 'Il dio narrante' and *Con i miei mille occhi*, is Cara, which isolates her from the other human narrators: 'Nel sogno io sono uno sguardo che osserva dall'esterno'; 'sono l'occhio che guarda, e sono lo specchio' (*Il doppio regno*, pages 86, 162). She too wants to observe, to record events but to remain outside them, apart from them, instead of existing in the world, engulfed by the demands of other people. Indeed, Cara's withdrawal to the hotel suggests a response to the frenzied transience of the world outside, with everything based on contingency and change rather than a quiet permanence. She seems to realize that whole lives can be squandered in such an existence, although she is certainly not pursuing any sort of spiritual goal in the hotel. She is also the only protagonist whose end is not death or disillusionment, and her writing, as we shall see, is connected with this end. And yet Cara has no memory, no name, no identity, she is both subject and object of her account, and she constantly questions and distrusts what she writes.¹⁸

In these stories, then, like that of Frayn's *Dunnett*, we are called upon not simply to accept what we read, not to believe all the narrators tell us, since truth is impenetrable, immaterial, or cannot be fixed in time, if it can be fixed at all. Capriolo says, of her mode of narration: 'A volte forse i meccanismi possono essere diversi, ma quello che per me è importante è che ci sia un netto distacco tra la narrazione e il mondo narrato. Credo che sia importante proprio il senso della distanza, il senso dell'avere uno schermo, cioè del non mostrare la cosa direttamente, ma attraverso un filtro'.¹⁹ These 'filters' can be physical or temporal distance, partial knowledge, or conscious restraint. The narrators are only presenting part of the story, and thus (unless we are only expected to 'read' and 'understand' like Cara's manager, not looking beyond the arrangement of letters on the page), the reader is also to evaluate and interpret.

Cara is, the author recognizes, her most important protagonist, and *Il doppio regno* the novel which best reflects her 'vision of the world', or rather, it is the work in which her questions about life find their most radical expression.²⁰ Not only is Cara the most introspective,

the character who examines her person, place, and position most searchingly, but she is also the protagonist who indulges in creative writing, both poetry and prose.²¹ The first lines of her diary, punctuated with ‘credo’, ‘non ricordo’, ‘forse’, ‘non so dire’, set the linguistic tone for the unfolding of her imaginative and unsettling story. Even her name has slipped beyond the bounds of memory – she is addressed as ‘Cara’ (‘Dear’) by the three guests who arrive in the second half of the story – although she tries several times to recall it, recognizing that a name represents a personality, comfort, and security.²² Memory and identity of course are intimately linked for Cara (perhaps for us all), so it is hardly surprising if her narrative is inconsistent; her impressions of the hotel fluctuate as she undergoes a gradual mental anaesthetizing of her consciousness. The food alters from being insipid to tasty; the card games from pointless to peaceful; the bizarre nocturnal flute recitals become part of her normality; the wave is in turn a threat, a special vision, merely a wave, herself, and desirable (but ultimately eluded); and the hotel’s books, at first illegible, are ‘read’ and gradually appreciated. Cara comes to understand and welcome the (numbing) calm of the hotel, observing that the disturbingly luxuriant internal garden with its vertigo-inspiring dome makes her fully appreciate this calm – or is it hebetude? Her sensory experiences are certainly all flat, and she loses the ability to decide or distinguish between things, externally or internally. Cara is, at times, aware of how she is changing. She even questions the sense of keeping her diary, since ‘la me stessa di ieri non è la me stessa di oggi, né quella di domani’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 43), and what she now judges ‘una testimonianza veridica’ may one day appear pure invention. She later notes: ‘una buona volta dovrei decidere chi sta scrivendo queste note, se l’io di oggi o quello di ieri’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 66).

It is not only the protagonist’s ‘clouded’ memory (see *Il doppio regno*, pages 12, 123, 146) that makes her an unreliable narrator, however. Since there are no proper windows, no clocks or daily newspapers in the hotel, time has no meaning for Cara, past or present; she rarely considers the future. Time is abolished, or else is wholly within her – perhaps she had no such

'habit of life' to give up – and if time is a metaphor for 'change', but 'change' in the hotel is imperceptible, indeed repetition is the nature of being in the hotel (literary and otherwise), then the points of reference which passing time would normally register are absent, and the absence of time is indeed 'eternity'. We are dealing, then, with a mind changed by Place and Time, and Cara's dreams highlight her confusion: she sees Bruno, a figure from the present, in the room of her past, but as he approaches she shouts at him to go away (now), terrified that he might touch her cat (then). Cara's final state, a fixity where all time is gathered, certainly presents elements of continuity suggesting permanence, though in no way is it perceived by the protagonist as (negatively) limiting.

With all these non-determining characteristics, what sort of diary is Cara writing? Whereas novelists, in the writing process, tend to draw on or imitate what they have read and absorbed, consciously or otherwise, representing, reforming, and re-creating, personal diaries are less subject to this process unless they too are written for a wider audience with literary criteria in mind. Originality, of course, is always a questionable concept – is there anything new under the sun? At the beginning of her account, the protagonist notes that she is writing for her eyes only: 'nessuno, credo, leggerà mai queste pagine' (*Il doppio regno*, page 10). And yet she is all too aware that she is paying attention to style, as if she used to have literary ambitions, hesitating over the choice of a word which is ridiculous since, she repeats forcefully, 'la destinazione di queste pagine è puramente privata. Se così non fosse, non mi sarei certo indotta all'impresa impossibile di tenere in vita un personaggio del quale ignoro quasi tutto' (*Il doppio regno*, page 10). Why, then, is literary style so important to her?

Cara is obviously someone for whom literature has been important in her past; she soon admits to missing books: 'nemmeno potevo, attraverso la lettura, sovrapporre alla mia esistenza vuota altre esistenze più avventurose' (*Il doppio regno*, page 45), an apparently innocuous comment at this point in the narrative. She is anxious to fill her time, which stretches out so endlessly before her and which she has not yet learned how to fill, rather than to read other

people's writings as an active step, and she is pleased to discover the hotel has a library. Yet the index cards she consults prove illegible, and the books themselves contain the same sort of scripts, old volumes that seemingly cannot be deciphered. Nevertheless, Cara persists in trying to understand the writings, and gradually, putting aside her intolerable wrestle with words and meanings, she begins to appreciate the patterns, the symmetries, the rhythms, and claims that she *can* read and understand them, 'purch  si intendessero i termini "leggere" e "capire" in un'accezione non volgare' (*Il doppio regno*, page 61). The form of the texts – inviting the application of rules and demanding, rather, an aesthetic appreciation – is safer than content, which essentially means language, the language which has perhaps failed, trapped, or confused Cara in the past, and so is to be displaced.²³ It is context as well as content that is lacking in the books, as in Cara's memories, so what *are* the memories she writes about?

Memories, by their very nature a vital part of a person's identity, affect and even create subsequent development and maturity. The memories inside Cara's head are so hazy and confused that she is unable to make sense of them, unable to create order and meaning out of them, unable to take any direction for her future. She records her story, wondering at times if she is inventing it. What Cara describes as 'memories', however, are images or scenes from books she must have read though erased the *act* of reading from memory. She reworks them in her mind, weaving them into her own reality – or fiction (though she appears unconscious of this process), so making her 'fiction' suspect, as fictions generally are. In one of her memories she 'recalls' a specific scene where she is sitting on the shores of a lake, *reading a book* while a child sleeps next to her. She doesn't notice time elapsing, suddenly realizes it is late, and in her hurry to get back into the boat, drops the boy in the water and is unable to save him (see *Il doppio regno*, page 64). This scene comes directly, though with certain modifications, from Goethe's *Elective Affinities*; it is abridged, as if from a visual remembrance rather than from the narrative, and furthermore may also link up with the drowned boy Grisha of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and the drowned girl Maria of Fogazzaro's *Piccolo mondo antico* (probably

borrowed from Goethe).²⁴ Cara is certainly tormented by the notion that a child drowned while in her care.

Another memory Cara records involves her having abandoned husband and child for a fun-loving officer, although she notes that her own experience of the world (whatever this means to her now), makes her doubt that such a person exists. Or perhaps, instead, some relative has told her tales of their own life; in Cara's words: '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' (*Il doppio regno*, page 49–50). Cara is certainly confused about the provenance of the 'memory' of the officer, and Bruno, one of the guests, does not help by referring to his own love of horses. Yet a further incidence gives her away, causing us to realize that what she has done is create a sort of Vronsky-Rodolphe figure, merging two central episodes from *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*: the scene at the racecourse where Anna displays her love for the jockey, with that at the agricultural fair, the 'fameux Comices' (see *Il doppio regno*, pages 92–93).²⁵ The reader's memory is then jogged to recall that Anna and Emma were two of the names that had come into Cara's mind when she was searching for her own.²⁶

Yet why does Cara record events, dreams, feelings, and reactions so carefully, that is, express a *content*, if the reading she admires has no content? When Cara's initial attempts to read the hotel library books failed, she had turned her attention to some hand-written volumes, 'vecchi quaderni, molto spessi dalle copertine decorate, come quella del mio, con il simbolo in oro della piramide' (*Il doppio regno*, page 55). There are, in fact, pyramids of varying sizes all over the hotel; the tall ones in the alcoves watch over the hotel corridors like images of nameless gods – her presiding, if indifferent, deities, perhaps. One of the notebooks on the library shelves has countless strange, childish drawings in its margins: 'di alberi, edifici, uomini e donne abbracciate come in una danza, di un treno sbuffante vapore' (*Il doppio regno*, page 56). Whilst the train may have various literary precedents, such as the 'locomotiva' from Zeno Cosini's

strange dream or that of the first sentence of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*,²⁷ its main connection is with the constantly recurring and perturbing image in Cara's mind of an elderly woman's veined hand stretching out to her from a train window (see *Il doppio regno*, pages 12–13, 24, 49, 60, 72, 138, 154): Vronsky's mother perhaps, if Cara is Anna, or her own mother whom she may have seen off on a long (or last) journey. The notebooks also contain drawings of the ubiquitous pyramid, which eventually replace all the other images, suggesting that ideas of eternity, death, or preparations for an after-world, increasingly dominate the minds of the palimpsest doodlers, consciously or otherwise. They are no more comprehensible than the books, however, and Cara leaves them aside out of a sort of superstitious respect, fearing they may be memoirs or journals written by her predecessors, 'ospiti rimasti qui così a lungo da dimenticare la propria lingua, il proprio alfabeto, e da apprenderne altri, modellati sugli esempi astrusi offerti dalla biblioteca' (*Il doppio regno*, page 56).²⁸ Cara wonders, however, if she too will gradually slip into one of these languages, if her diary will also find its allotted place on the library shelves, if someone else will try, in vain, to decipher it. While she fears anything connected with life outside, at the same time she obviously cannot fathom the mysteries of the timeless, the sense of existing beyond the 'now'.

The hotel offers Cara no readable journals or books, or indeed anything written in her own language. Even the inscriptions above the entrance to both hotel and library are illegible, as are those to other places of confusion, whether faded, reversed, or in Latin. The hotel contains no content. Whether Cara wants to or not, she cannot 'read' conventionally, so why should she write conventionally? Cara comes to believe, indeed, that if she hadn't chanced upon the hotel (or somehow been destined to enter it), she would never have learned how to read. And indeed she is meekly and obediently re-learning a new way of being, her whole attitude and personality undergoing a process of reduction. Cara's poetic writing is an expression of this process in much the same way.

Whilst writing a novel involves developing and giving flesh to a scheme or idea, with poetry a more intense form of expression is sought, a style that refines, compresses, and distils content. The lines Cara composes are certainly concise and compacted; they are also abstract and apparently disconnected. And yet, rather than being cut off from meaning and context, as are the library books, her verses link strongly with the world she has known, in some cases being pure imitation. She feels inspired to ‘write’, quoting various thoughts and ideas which have prompted her, yet originality and coherence are unimportant, barely questioned concepts. ‘No poet’, of course, ‘no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone’, but is Cara an artist or an artiste, creative, amnesiac, or otherwise?²⁹ Unlike her experience of reading and her acceptance of a new reading curve, Cara doesn’t stop to think whether she knows how to write or whether she is learning a new way of writing. She believes she used to write poetry in the past – indeed it is the mental image of her cat lying on a sheet of note-paper on her desk that prompts this reflection: ‘Può darsi, anzi, mi sembra probabile che io scrivessi poesie, anche se da quando sono qui mi vengono in mente soltanto versi incompleti, strofe dalla metrica zoppicante, e spesso, chissà perché, io mi convinca persino che rimino fra loro parole come “mondo” e “onda”’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 39). Cara recognizes, then, that what she ‘writes’ in the hotel are only truncated verses. The qualities she seems to value most are brevity and intensity, and she analyses her ‘poems’ for their structure as well as for their layers of meaning. The first example she gives (‘le chiamo poesie ma è una definizione impropria’, *Il doppio regno*, page 65) consists of just two words: ‘ferita’ and ‘miracolo’, and Cara feels there must be a language in which one can pass between them simply by adding a letter.³⁰ In this respect, as with the library books, she has patterns and forms in mind rather than any subject matter. She does, however, try to explore briefly what the words mean: does the miracle heal the wound?, is the miracle born of the wound?, is it the miracle itself that wounds?

Other poems Cara has written she thinks may be autobiographical, and she ‘cites’, as an example: ‘A noi prescrisse/il fato illacrimata sepoltura’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 65), lines she has

surely read in her previous existence, and now recalls as if her own.³¹ She tries to work out what they mean, as far as *she* is concerned – nothing else matters, in her increasingly internalized existence, – perhaps that no one is mourning her ‘burial’ in the hotel, an analysis, that reveals her introspective and morbid tendencies. Cara, however, also seems to measure what she writes with what she ‘reads’. While quite pleased with her verses, she believes they don’t compare with the masterpieces in the library. Are they less perfect because she somehow senses they are unoriginal? Or because they attempt to *say* something, unlike the non-emotive library books, clinically detached from subjective meaning?

Cara seems keen to initiate the three guests into her new way of being and elects to read one of her poems to them, saying she knows it off by heart. Does she think she can teach them how to write? (or rewrite?) And so she recites (or re-cites):

Solo nel doppio regno
le voci si fanno
eterne e dolci. (*Il doppio regno*, page 120)³²

When Guido queries her authorship, her reply: ‘L’ho scritta io, certamente, sulla carta da lettere che tengo in camera mia’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 120) may be trite or naïve, yet reveals her own (inner) certainty. After listening attentively and expectantly the guests are embarrassed at both the brevity and unoriginality of her verses, while we as readers may recall the ‘prose’ version of a few pages earlier, discreetly immersed in the text (see *Il doppio regno*, page 99). Cara is disappointed with her venture, as she is with her attempt to show Guido the library which they are unable to enter after her proud build-up (*Il doppio regno*, page 136). She does not repeat her literary experiments, but, troubled by Guido’s response, rereads all her poems and remains fully convinced that she is the author of them, which in the Borgesian sense she is.³³ Cara notes: ‘Ricordo esattamente, per ciascuno, l’occasione, l’immagine che l’ha evocato’. And, just in case we *were* convinced, or had been less than attentive readers, she continues: ‘Ricordo il giorno in cui, contemplando il cielo attraverso l’intelaiatura di ferro della cupola, pensai le parole:

“interminati spazi di là di quella, e sovrumano silenzio, e profondissima quiete”, e appena le ebbi pensate tornai in camera per scriverle’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 121).³⁴ While ‘cupola’ has replaced the ‘sieve’ of Leopardi’s original, it has, in a sense, the same function, that is, as an obstacle between viewer and the infinite, except that the ‘sieve’ blocks it out, and therefore allows space (or the imaginative construct of the ‘infinito’) whereas the ‘cupola’ is transparent, giving a sense of continuity, confusion, and vertigo. The continuation of Cara’s defence further illustrates her invocation and creation of meaning, through re-creating the form (of words): ‘O quando, riflettendo sui frammenti sconnessi di cui mi appare composta la mia vita, la paragonai a una storia raccontata da un idiota, piena di furia e di strepito, una storia che non significa nulla’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 121).³⁵ We note her poetic ‘inspiration’ principally as obvious quotations, yet it also creeps subtly into her narrative phrasing. Is her story without meaning? The quotations and allusions exemplify the ‘frammenti sconnessi’ of Cara’s life, showing how she takes the writings (and experiences) of others to give her own existence flesh, to give it sense.³⁶

Nevertheless, although Cara accepts her new reality, external and internal, she is all too aware, thinking back to her earlier vow to be truthful in writing her diary, that concepts such as ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are false, that things are never static, and meaning alters, even in her timeless and undesiring environment. What is real any more? Cara states her latest belief: ‘Io stessa sono l’immagine illusoria e quella vera’; ‘un giorno [...] ho scoperto in quali abissi di illusione si nasconde il vero’ (*Il doppio regno*, pages 162, 165). When I asked Capriolo about ‘reality’ in her work, she answered, amused: ‘Cosa significa la realtà! Io non ci credo molto nella realtà’, though we went on to establish, however, that in her stories it is expressed especially as the different relationships between interior and exterior, physical and psychic.³⁷ Certainly, in Capriolo’s work, the reality portrayed is not what one sees.³⁸ In its fullest sense, mindful of Capriolo’s (and others’) reaction to the term, ‘reality’ can only ever be ‘a reality’, an individual revelation or experience, real or imagined. Cara, then, is oppressed by her past,

whatever it contains, yet she is doubly ‘protected’ in this sense, since her memories, whether of lover, child, train, guilt, or burial, are invented fictions, *her* sign and glory, to use Dunnett’s words. Despite the fact that her expiation, if such it is, has been made in the name of no god, the final words of her diary record a dream in which she is in a schoolroom reciting: ‘Credo in Dio Padre onnipotente, creatore del cielo e della terra’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 167), perhaps revealing a final recourse to the God she has rejected (unless Cara believes she created these words too...), or perhaps this is a sign that all she has retained of her past life is what she learnt by heart, mechanically, when at school.

Frayn shows the compulsion of fiction when reality disappoints or is ungraspable. Cara reveals that same compulsion since her reality is elusive, insubstantial, rejected. Where does fiction come from, whose fiction is it? Capriolo, in responding to Daniele Marinoni’s statement, in a 1993 interview, that hers are ‘romanzi della Vita e sulla Vita’, notes that since her stories do not deal with everyday life, they tend to be considered ‘libri in qualche modo metaletterario o comunque che hanno più a che fare con una sorta di letteratura sulla letteratura’, although for the author their main characteristic is the search for meaning.³⁹ As far as *Il doppio regno* is concerned, it is certainly Cara’s past absorption of literature, and present reading of and in the hotel, that have led to the creation of her own fiction. The form of words she borrows to express (and fuse) her particular objective correlatives (Leopardi, Foscolo, Rilke, Shakespeare for her poems, Tolstoy, Flaubert, Goethe, Fogazzaro for her diary creation), replaces her vacuum and becomes her content, her meaning, her life.⁴⁰ Form, therefore, becomes content, as Cara inclines increasingly towards a collective rather than a single or individual identity – from her memories of the ‘collected works’ of others.

Were the books in the library, with their ‘ignoti alfabeti’, merely ‘una bizzarria priva di senso’, or did they contain ‘il linguaggio di una realtà superiore’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 164)? When Cara decides not to set foot there again, after the guests have left, believing the books have nothing more to offer her, she prepares to depart, to go down the passage which previously

she did not take. She pays her last respects to the various parts of the hotel, and in the garden, which she has left until last, she comes across the cat – the cat which has besieged her dreams and which she believes she has glimpsed on several occasions, hidden in the exotic shrubbery. For Cara, it is as if the various fragments of her dreams, memories, and visions now come together, all the threads of her life revealing a coherent picture; the cat is the incontrovertible sign, as far as she is concerned, that she must stay. Past, present, and future are all encapsulated and superimposed in the hotel: ‘Non esiste altro mondo che il mondo, e il mondo è un insieme di corridoi e di stanze in penombra, labirintico’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 165). What other reality could there be? The hotel, perhaps Cara’s ‘punto morto del mondo’, her ‘still point of the turning world’, is her means of disowning the past.⁴¹ Here, with only the company of the formal, mindless waiters, and without the inane chatter of the guests, the cat – her epiphany, her moment of revelation – leads Cara to discover or accept her own truth. The library, of course, will lie once more within her dark, silent world, her universe, which others call a hotel.

Cara then, is absorbed by the world she now inhabits, fixed by its form. The homogenous food, card games, books, recitals – all fulfil her longing for repetition, for the cyclic and known (rather than the linear and untried), which characterizes her writing, and her whole experience and existence in the hotel: ‘tutto doveva mantenere nel tempo una perfetta immutabilità’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 42). Cara places value on the rules, rhythms, and routines repeated endlessly, as if she were following some hidden purpose to reach an absolute in which to rest, and part of her intention in writing is to reconstruct or create, as much as to salvage, the safe identity she never had. And yet, despite the overpowering sense of absolutism, Cara is aware of progression, as we have noted, perhaps since if the absolute were totally objective it would exclude her. She wonders whether one day if she looks back on her diary she may not recognize herself, and will think she tried to narrate ‘una vicenda romanzesca, poco verosimile, la cui protagonista è un personaggio fittizio di nome “Io”’ (*Il doppio regno*, page 43). If Cara finds she *has* invented her story, she believes she would no longer write or read it, and though this makes

her anxious, it also gives her a sense of release, underlining her desire to sever connections with the 'world'. She remains unsure of her motive, in a subsequent diary entry:

Scrivo di me stessa, ma non sono piú colei di cui scrivo, e ciò non avviene soltanto quando tento di registrare le rade memorie della mia vita fuori di qui. Avviene settimana dopo settimana, giorno dopo giorno, e forse sarei piú onesta e piú coraggiosa 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. Ma se tutto ciò non mi riguarda, se è la storia di un'altra, perché continuare a raccontarla? (*Il doppio regno*, pages 66–67)

Why does she continue to write? Certainly, aware her existence is empty, one reason is simply force of habit: 'L'impulso di scrivere sopravvive come una coazione senza scopo, un'abitudine cieca' (*Il doppio regno*, page 72). Yet has Cara, like Capriolo from the beginning of her career, found the centre of her life,⁴² realizing that her writing, coming from art, provides a familiar echo to her senses, and empowers her to survive? The literary borrowings show that Cara cannot distinguish between fact and fiction, originality and imitation, first and second-hand experience, and yet also indicate that she has made what she has absorbed from fiction her own.⁴³

What then, are the narrators, or 'inventors', telling us about their fictions, their creativity? Capriolo has stressed the importance she attaches to maintaining 'un netto distacco', a sense of division between narrator and characters, something that also engenders a divide between author and readers. Like Dunnett, as he re-forms and re-creates his story, Capriolo and her narrators, while appearing to allow the reader a certain freedom of interpretation, perhaps intend more to exercise power over those captive to their pages. Even where the story is about other individuals, the tellers are anxious to demonstrate that they retain control of the narrative, of other people's stories; it is their fantasy.⁴⁴ Although Cara's aim to disorient her readers may appear less conscious than that of some of Capriolo's other narrators, nevertheless, she

increasingly endeavours to demonstrate that she is in control. She refers to the waiters as her puppets, and believes the guests will leave the hotel or stay as she commands, perhaps as a reaction against her life outside when others may have tried to take control of her. In the hotel everything has to relate to Cara, nothing else matters, and her solipsistic development provides her with a controlled escape from the human condition and external quotidian realities. She has invented her own 'higher', dual fiction, which separates her from those who are content with a lower, single reality or experience.

Since past reading-memories are all she has, Cara's diary appears to stem from a feeling that she needs to chronicle her life so as not to lose it, as Frayn's character comes to believe. And yet, Cara is finally convinced that all she has written about over the course of months, or perhaps years, is merely part of a greater whole (the hotel) which creates and destroys at will: 'è un aspetto di questa effimera fioritura. [...] Tutto, persino i tre forestieri e ciascuna delle parole scambiate con loro, ma in primo luogo la finzione dalla quale dipendono le altre e che porta il nome secondo i casi, di "Cara" oppure di "Io"' (*Il doppio regno*, page 165). This, perhaps is the real truth behind the façade of fiction. Events and people may be ephemeral or unreal, but the words on the page live on as a stable reality, on library shelves, in people's minds; novels and poems outlive their authors, art outlives life. *Il doppio regno*, more than any of Capriolo's writings, is 'literature on literature', or a narrative on narrative, that is, a verdict on or endorsement of literary art. The citations and allusions show how Cara's life is fused, confused, and infused with literature in the sense of great literature. These are the poets and authors that have spoken to her, that speak to her, that will speak to her, that she deems worthy of recording in her own imaginative way. Cara's writing is creative or re-creative, it is original to her mind, unoriginal, perhaps, to those on the receiving end of her artistry, it is independent in her invention, dependent on her literary forbears. It is her own art, and through it she seeks self-perpetuation, closeted away from the modern world, determined to leave her imprint even if for a careless posterity less well-versed than she. And, like her author, unable to bear very much

reality, the ‘affinities’ Cara has selected in her past are transformed into her creative writings, her life.

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¹ Michael Frayn, *The Trick of It* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 77. (First published in 1989.)

² He is also obliged to give up his university post following a reorganization in which ‘a shift of emphasis from the literary to the visual narrative’, ‘the development of communication skills’, and ‘the challenge of cable and satellite television’ are to determine future courses; Frayn, p. 96.

³ His original motive for making sure his friend would file all his letters away was since ‘they may prove to be the text of my long-awaited *JL: A Critical Study*’. Frayn, pp. 4–5.

⁴ The woman’s hand, the man’s face; *Il doppio regno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1991), pp. 72–73.

⁵ The novels: *Il nocchiero* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1989), *Il doppio regno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1991), *Vissi d’amore* (Milan: Bompiani, 1992), *La spettatrice* (Milan: Bompiani, 1995), *Un uomo di carattere* (Milan: Bompiani, 1996), *Con i miei mille occhi* (Milan: Bompiani 1997), *Barbara* (Milan: Bompiani, 1998), *Il sogno dell’agnello* (Milan: Bompiani, 1999). The short stories: *La grande Eulalia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988) containing ‘La grande Eulalia’, ‘La donna di pietra’, ‘Il gigante’, and ‘Lettere a Luisa’; *La ragazza dalla stella d’oro* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991) three fairy stories for children. Capriolo is also a translator (Mann, Goethe, and Keller) and critic (writing especially for the arts page of the *Corriere della sera*).

⁶ *Il sogno dell’agnello* is a partial exception to the pattern in that it portrays a surprisingly modern world (the impact of computers, the gradual breakdown of society), developing a theme, however, which occupied some of Capriolo’s early articles in the *Corriere della sera*. See, for example, ‘I suoni contro la paura del silenzio: troppe musiche per un telefono’, *Corriere della sera*, 23 November 1990, and ‘Dove ci porta l’estate: i bei delitti delle vacanze’, *Corriere della sera*, 18 August 1991.

⁷ The story itself first appeared to Capriolo in a dream, and the author, as Maria Corti has said, ‘sa bene modellare la materia assillante e vertiginosa di cui sono fatti i sogni’. Comment on the cover of *Il doppio regno*, from *Panorama*.

⁸ Capriolo, ‘Dove ci porta l’estate: i bei delitti delle vacanze’.

⁹ An observation critics have often made, as Capriolo notes in conversation with Daniele Marinoni, ‘*Vissi d’amore*, l’ultimo romanzo di Paola Capriolo alla ricerca del senso della vita’, *Il mattino di Padova*, October 1993.

¹⁰ In this instance, by Peter Smith in a book review of Judith Ryan’s *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 7 July 2000, p. 20.

¹¹ In *Il nocchiero*, Capriolo’s first novel, we find several references to the imprecision or incomprehensibility of language; words are seen to be merely arbitrary descriptors, unable to convey a meaningful ‘reality’. See pp. 57, 75–76, 109, 121, 131.

¹² *Italian Women Writing*, ed. Sharon Wood (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 127–31, p. 127. ‘Il dio narrante’ was first published in the review *Leggere*, August 1989, and subsequently in *Italiana. Antologia dei nuovi narratori* (Milan: Mondadori, 1991), 157–63. Pavese’s gods in *Dialoghi con Leucò* are also all-knowing, this knowledge rendering their existence quite dull; see *Dialoghi con Leucò* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), p. 165.

¹³ *Italian Women Writing*, p. 128.

¹⁴ ‘Tutto proviene da me, da questi recessi eternamente fecondi’; ‘non vi è angolo in me che non pulluli di occhi.’ *Con i miei mille occhi*, pp. 7, 15. The forest also states, of two physically separate scenes: ‘La mia onniveggenza mi permette di seguire contemporaneamente l’una e l’altra scena’, p. 80.

¹⁵ Exceptions: the external focalizer of ‘La donna di pietra’, Eugenio of ‘Il gigante’, Bausa of *Un uomo di carattere*. Distant narrators (in time, or because external to the narrative) casting doubt: those of ‘La grande Eulalia’, *Il nocchiero*, *La spettatrice*, *Barbara*, *Il sogno dell’agnello*. Diarists casting doubt: the prisoner of ‘Il gigante’ and ‘Lettere a Luisa’, Cara of *Il doppio regno*, Scarpia of *Vissi d’amore*. Although Bausa hardly implies that his narrative is not to be trusted, he too is writing his story many years later. See *Un uomo di carattere*, pp. 14, 16, 37.

¹⁶ See ‘La grande Eulalia’, pp. 7, 16, 42; *La spettatrice*, p. 7 (‘Anche quella che mi accingo a narrare è soltanto una possibile storia di Vulpius’); *Barbara*, p. 12.

¹⁷ See Gillian Ania, “‘Un altro mondo’: Interview with Paola Capriolo”, *The italianist*, 18 (1998), 305–41, p. 311.

¹⁸ She describes a scene in which she is looking down on herself from outside the picture, *Il doppio regno* pp. 85–86. See also pp. 43, 66–67.

¹⁹ Ania, ‘Un altro mondo’, p. 311.

²⁰ Personal communications, 30 September 2000, 9 October 2000. See also Ania, ‘Un altro mondo’, p. 324.

²¹ Other protagonists engage in acting, sculpture, painting, and music, as a way of providing meaning, in each case taking their art to its extreme. Eulalia perfects her stage presence purely for the ‘mirror man’; Adele practises a sonata for hours on end; Mur secretly sculpts a female statue; Vulpius and Scarpia seek infinite repetitions of the perfect gesture or act; the artist of *Con i miei mille occhi* is obsessed with his own portrait, and Stiler creates an impeccably ordered garden.

²² Eulalia and Dora, their narrators tell us, are also unlikely to be the protagonists’ real names (‘La grande Eulalia’, p. 7, *La spettatrice*, p. 10), while it is one of the other characters who opts for the name of ‘Principe’, rather than ‘Professore emerito’, for the tramp of *Il sogno dell’agnello* (pp. 20–21).

²³ As Nietzsche believed. See Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism* (Harvester Wheatsheaf: Hemel Hempstead, 1993), p. 45.

²⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe *Elective Affinities* (London: Penguin, 1971), pp. 259–64. See also pp. 75–77, 230–31, 248–49, which set the scene. Cara later shows her lack of understanding and fear of ‘il giardino dei ciliegi’ (*Il doppio regno*, pp. 122–23). Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), Act One, p. 247. See also pp. 253, 254; Act Two: pp. 262–63; Act Three pp. 275, 289. Frayn, incidentally, has translated and introduced Chekhov’s *Plays* (London: Methuen London Ltd, 1993). Antonio Fogazzaro *Piccolo mondo antico* (Milan: Mondadori, 1931), pp. 264–67. See also pp. 257–271.

²⁵ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), chapters 28, 29 (pp. 208–11). See also ch. 21 (pp. 180, 181), ch. 25 (pp. 196, 199), ch. 28 (p. 207). Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Editions de Cluny, 1938), Ch. VIII, pp. 138–55.

²⁶ She also considers Ottilia, as well as Maddalena, Rosa, and Maria (see *Il doppio regno*, pp. 59–60, 88). Ottilie is Goethe’s negligent heroine; Maria is the child in *Piccolo mondo antico*, as well as the mother figure *par excellence*, and the symbol of the mystical Rose, design of Dante’s *Paradiso*; Mary Magdalene is the Biblical repentant sinner; while ‘RoseMary’ would indicate (lack of) remembrance. However, Capriolo admits there are autobiographical elements: her grandmother was called Rosa and her mother is Maria Maddalena; personal communication, 30 September 2000.

²⁷ ‘Vedo, intravedo delle immagini bizzarre che non possono avere nessuna relazione col mio passato: una locomotiva che sbuffa su una salita’. Italo Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno* (Roma:

Newton, 1898), p. 38, my emphasis. ‘*Sbuffa una locomotiva*, uno sfiatare di stantuffo copre l’apertura del capitolo, una nuvola di fumo nasconde parte del primo capoverso’. Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), p. 11, my emphasis.

²⁸ She later uses the word ‘reliquie’ to refer to the journals. *Il doppio regno*, p. 61.

²⁹ T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 15.

³⁰ She is right, for German: *Wunde* and *Wunder*.

³¹ The lines conclude Foscolo’s sonnet ‘Né più mai toccherò le sacre sponde’, in *Odi e sonetti* (Milan: Fabbri, 1968, 1969), p. 44.

³² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Sonette an Orpheus*, Part I, Sonnet IX: ‘Erst in dem Doppelbereich/werden die Stimmen/ewig und mild’. See *Sonnets to Orpheus*, transl. and ed. by J. B. Leishman (London: Leonard & Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1936), p. 52.

³³ Pierre Menard’s intention was not to ‘copy’ the *Quixote*, but ‘to produce a few pages which would coincide – word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel de Cervantes’. Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*’, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1970), pp. 66–67.

³⁴ ‘Sempre caro mi fu quest’ermo colle,/E questa siepe, che da tanta parte/Dell’ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude./Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati/Spazi di là di quella, e sovrumani/Silenzi, e profondissima quiete’. Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), Canto XII, p. 63.

³⁵ ‘È solo una storia/narrata da un deficiente,/piena di rumore e furia, vuota di senso’. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed Romana Rutelli (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), Act V, Sc. 5, 26–28, pp. 234–35.

³⁶ Cara does not only re-create her self from novels and poems. Music has also played a part in her formation, with other ‘dual memories’, including an allusion to Mattias Claudius and Schubert: ‘la fanciulla e la morte’; ‘tra le mie braccia potrai dormire dolcemente’ (*Il doppio regno*, pages 137, 138), the (inverted) title and last line of a poem by M. Claudius, set to music by Schubert as ‘Death and the Maiden’. See *Penguin Book of Leider* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 38–39.

³⁷ Ania, ‘Un altro mondo’, p. 317.

³⁸ As for Montale, in a poem from the collection ‘Satura’: ‘Né più mi occorrono/le coincidenze, le prenotazioni,/le trappole, gli scorni di chi crede/che la realtà è quella che si vede’. Eugenio Montale, ‘Ho sceso, dandoti il braccio, almeno un milione di scale’ in *Tutte le poesie* (Milan: Mondadori, 1984), p. 309. Montale is a poet much admired by Capriolo.

³⁹ See endnote 9.

⁴⁰ Cara does at least distinguish between novelists and poets.

⁴¹ Montale, ‘I limoni’ from ‘*Ossi di seppia*’ in *Tutte le poesie*, pp. 11–12; T. S. Eliot, ‘Burnt Norton’, *Four Quartets*, in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 191.

⁴² See Simona Rivolta, ‘La piccola Paola scrisse, scrisse e inventò *La grande Eulalia*’, *L’Unità*, 29 January 1988.

⁴³ This literary borrowing is further discussed in an as yet unpublished article, ‘Reading Life: the Library of Capriolo’s *Il doppio regno*’.

⁴⁴ Only the narrating gods seem to admit or regret their powerlessness: the forest, for example, frequently laments her inability to influence the course of events. See *Con i miei mille occhi* pp. 28, 42, 44, 49, 56, 57.