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AT CAPRIOLO'S HOTEL: HEAVEN, HELL, AND OTHERWORLDS IN

*IL DOPPIO REGNO\**

Paola Capriolo has stated that the kind of truth she searches for and tries to express is outside the sphere of everyday life.<sup>1</sup> She has also claimed: 'Per me la letteratura non può essere che astrazione; anche autoestraniazione e distacco dall'io. Quindi sia dalla realtà che dal realismo'.<sup>2</sup> Her work stands in contrast to the realistic mode of writing and the novels of social comment and protest prevalent in the Italy of the 1960s and early 1970s (exemplified by authors such as Leonardo Sciascia and Dacia Maraini). Instead she focuses on traditional, timeless themes, embracing the preference for tales of the imagination and fantasy shared by Italo Calvino, Antonio Tabucchi, and Anna Maria Ortese, albeit in different contexts. However, she is distanced from writers like these by her nostalgic return to a more formal Italian, displaying little of the linguistic experimentalism of the 1980s and 1990s (Tabucchi, Alessandro Baricco) or the more 'provocative and innovative' styles and topics of very recent years.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, whilst such comparisons and contrasts may be helpful and of interest, it is reductive to attempt to situate Capriolo purely within her immediate local culture. She is, in fact, one of the first of the younger novelists in Italy to transcend national borders, and it is more appropriate to situate her in a wider, European context. Capriolo refuses a realist or mimetic approach, and can be classed as a late modernist writer. She examines the destabilization of identity, pays close attention to language, to the textures of language, and is

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Francesco Guardiani in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 12, 3 (Fall 1992), 119-22 (p. 120).

<sup>2</sup> Marisa Rusconi, 'Le neo-romanze', *L'Espresso*, 24 February 1991, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> See Claudia Bernardi, 'Pulp and Other Fictions: Critical Debate on the New Italian Narrative', *Bulletin of the Society for Italian Studies*, 30 (1997), 4-11 (p. 6). My thanks are due to Danielle Hipkins for a useful exchange of views on this question.

especially immersed in German Romanticism and high culture (Wagner, Goethe, Mann, Rilke, Gottfried Benn).<sup>4</sup> Capriolo's novels and stories published to date (six novels, two collections of short stories, and one 'racconto lungo', 1988-98) tend to deal with philosophical and metaphysical issues, the whys and whos of existence, questions of destiny, liberty, culpability, and innocence, with little space devoted to characterization or to intimacy in relationships, for example. She explores the deliberately blurred boundaries between reality and fantasy and probes into the veiled recesses of the psyche. Her characters are drawn into a search for inner meaning, of their own existence and of life itself, and in this respect, parallels can be drawn with modern Italian writers such as Francesca Duranti, Sandra Petrigiani, and Lidia Ravera,<sup>5</sup> but Capriolo's worlds, the environments in which her protagonists live, move, and struggle, are more abstracted in both time and space (as in Borges and Kafka, for example), and are indicative of a highly symbolic mode.

In *Il doppio regno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1991), the environment in which the protagonist finds herself is especially extra-ordinary and ambiguous, one which invites scrutiny and interpretation. Cara, the amnesiac protagonist who has fled a terrifying gigantic wave and taken refuge in a remote hotel, cannot determine whether she is staying there as a punishment for some misdemeanour in her past, or whether it is her reward. If the former is true, the hotel represents a sort of hell or hell-on-earth for her; if the latter, it is her paradise, a thought which in some ways, as will be seen, is far more disturbing. The title of the book itself, the 'dual realm', echoes Cara's torn nature, and suggests an additional dimension, two inter-linked worlds or spheres, a place which is, as Capriolo states in an article, 'un luogo oscillante fra il mondo esterno e quello dell'albergo'.<sup>6</sup> Cara refers to 'le due sfere' (p. 123), images of the hotel mixing with those of the outside world, and she wonders whether there are secret relations between the two worlds (p. 138). The hotel occupies a formidable central position in the novel,

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<sup>4</sup> See Sharon Wood, *Italian Women's Writing 1860-1994* (London: Athlone Press, 1995), pp. 266-74. I would like to express my thanks to Sharon Wood for her very helpful comments to me on Capriolo's European frame of reference and the difficulties with fitting her into an Italian 'niche'.

<sup>5</sup> See Carol Lazzaro-Weis, *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing, 1968-1990* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 86, 183, 189.

<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Cassinis, 'Il mondo finisce in un albergo', *Il Secolo*, 15 April 1991.

and in this respect there are notable similarities between it and the hotel of D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981). Yet Capriolo's hotel is not a place of desire or fulfilment of (carnal) desire, but rather — although it is almost personified in the protagonist's account — a place totally devoid of feeling, human warmth, and emotion.

*Il doppio regno* is written as a journal, a tormented first-person account representing past and present experience, real, dreamt, or imagined, as Cara seeks to understand, or find some sort of meaning in, or reason for, her 'imprisonment'. In this article, however, it is not my intention to focus solely on the narrow and contradictory significances, that is, on heaven, as the kingdom of God, a restful place or state of eternal bliss, and on hell, as the abode of the sinful dead, a place or state of supreme misery or torment. In addition I aim to discuss the wider forms, states, and implications of being, suggested by the experience which the protagonist undergoes, and to examine links with other literary underworlds or otherworlds. The ambience and characteristics of the hotel and its occupants certainly suggest an extra-temporal state, where questions of gender and identity are germane. Furthermore, Capriolo makes considerable use of religious symbolism and phraseology in her novel which merit analysis, as do Cara's own thoughts about, and reactions to, her time in this dual kingdom, her position there, and the role the hotel itself plays.

From the text of *Il doppio regno* it is not possible to form any precise impression of the physical appearance of the hotel. It may be an extension of the *Hotel Excelsior* of *Il nocchiero* (Capriolo's first novel), with its dark, mysterious atmosphere, its hold over the protagonist, Walter, and its position overlooking the town.<sup>7</sup> When Cara first sees the hotel, she refers to it simply as 'un edificio' (p. 17), but then, as she wanders around its rooms, she surmises: 'quel luogo era evidentemente un albergo' (p. 18). The term 'albergo', however, contains different levels of meaning, and this underlines its multi-faceted or undefined role: as well as 'hotel', 'alloggio', 'ospizio', 'rifugio', 'ricovero', that is, the more modern sense of a place in which one stays temporarily, one older meaning is 'casa', 'dimora',<sup>8</sup> which, together with its use as a verb, 'albergo' = 'I house' (thus 'l'albergo' = 'I house it' or 'her'/'

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<sup>7</sup> *Il nocchiero* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> The *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (Turin: UTET, 1961- ) cites from Leopardi's *Le ricordanze*: 'Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa, io non credea | tornare ancor per uso a contemplarvi | ... | e ragionar con voi dalle finestre | di questo albergo ove abitai fanciullo'. Petrarch too regularly used the term in the sense of 'abode'.

'him'), suggests more permanent hospitality. Cara learns that her hotel is made up of 'settori', which might suggest some order or plan but, as she records in her diary, 'l'albergo sembra essersi sviluppato a poco a poco da un nucleo originario con l'anarchia di un organismo dai geni impazziti' (p. 28). Rooms and hallways lead off and into one another in labyrinthine chaos and from inside the hotel Cara cannot get any idea of what the hotel might look like from the outside (her first sight of it having been either too vague and fleeting, or already dismissed from memory). All she can say is that it would certainly not be a rectangular figure, or any other recognizable form. In this sense, the hotel resembles the 'castello d'If', the prison in Calvino's short story, 'Il conte di Montecristo', which, because of its disorienting network of corridors and the confusion between outside and inside, is 'quell'ipotetica figura geometrica'.<sup>9</sup> While this may be a conscious literary influence (Calvino being one author much admired by Capriolo), it illustrates, right from the early diary entries, the pervasive and persuasive interplay of fiction and reality for Cara.

Inside the hotel there is an almost convent-like silence, everything is indistinct, sombre, and enveloped in shadow ('inalterabile penombra', p. 30, and 'eterna penombra', p. 153), and it is in this half-light, typical of so much of Paola Capriolo's fiction, that the interior drama is acted out. The lack of light may indicate an absence of 'purity', the need for darkness to cover arcane or subliminal actions, and since there is no regulator of time in the hotel — Cara's watch has stopped and there are no clocks or daily newspapers available — past, present, and future, in this otherworldly location, have no point of reference, no meaning. There is thus an absence of distracting materiality in the flow of time, no sense of night and day, no fresh spontaneity, no vibrancy, merely the greyness of dull routine and safe 'noia': Cara witnesses '[il] trascorrere immemore di giornate che ripetonono con minime variazioni un identico modello' (p. 100). The hotel has no windows or mirrors, which are designed to reflect light and physical 'reality' back to us ('Mi stupì soprattutto l'assenza di specchi', p. 27), and this is in keeping with the absence of colour, brightness, 'life', and 'reality' of the inmates, both as regards their external mien and their inner emotions. Not being able to see oneself in a mirror, unless 'darkly', means that external appearances and changes in both self and other go unobserved, are not valued, much less sought, perhaps suggesting that personal vanity is an impediment to the more worthwhile pursuit of mental development or the acquisition of a spiritual dimension. Furthermore, there is no way out for Cara or the hotel staff, so her stay, her 'permanenza' or 'lunga permanenza' (pp. 88, 154), as well as theirs, would appear to be 'permanent', or absolute.

Not only is the hotel dark and silent; it is also a labyrinth of endless rooms and corridors in which Cara loses her way. The labyrinth, a multi-faceted symbol which has exercised universal fascination on mankind, suggests

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<sup>9</sup> See *Ti con zero* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), e.g. pp. 152-53, 161.

the path followed by the dead in the underworld, a mystic journey to the centre, illusion, confusion, and constant doubling back, a tortuous and torturous quest, with time as non-linear or cyclical.<sup>10</sup> The winding passages may serve to represent a maze of the mind: indecision, searching through the 'corridors of one's memory' to find some past meaning to make sense of the present state or discover the essential reality of one's nature. Alternatively or additionally, they could signify the structure of the text, a linguistic maze in which the reader has to find his or her way. The hotel is surrounded by a dense wood, and although the term used is 'bosco' (pp. 17, 22), later, as the protagonist is wandering along the corridors, she feels she is in 'una selva sacra' (p. 45), which recalls images of Virgil's 'sacred wood', Dante's 'dark wood' (especially as Cara feels 'smarrita', pp. 44, 96), James Frazer's 'sacred grove', and even Calvino's 'dense wood'.<sup>11</sup> Cara's inability to find her way in the maze may also recall the frustrating wanderings of Kafka's protagonists in *The Castle* or *The Trial*. Capriolo recognizes affinities with Kafka, although she told Cassinis (see note 6) that her hotel is not a literary borrowing, but the result of a dream (yet who is to say that dreams are not 'literary borrowings?'); in *The Castle* Kafka's protagonist is defeated, whilst this is not true of Cara, although the novel is not concerned simply with victory or defeat.

What of the occupants of Capriolo's hotel and their significance? The formidable team of waiters for one guest (later four guests) certainly seems excessive. Their main activity, when not attending to Cara, is playing card games, yet these are undertaken quietly, vacantly, without enthusiasm, expectation, cries of disappointment or triumph. They play like mindless automata: 'Lo scopo del gioco pareva risiedere di là dalle persone dei giocatori, limitandosi a usarle come strumenti della propria attuazione' (p. 44). The waiters appear purely to fulfil a function — serving, like priests — rather than to possess personality. In the same way, the whole hotel seems a 'messinscena', with its unintelligible rules, its monotonous and absurd rituals and routines, and the general aura of indifference. Phrases such as 'assenza di significato', 'privo di significato', 'non significa nulla', recur

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<sup>10</sup> Penelope Reed Doob's book, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990) provides an extremely interesting in-depth study of this subject. Not only can the labyrinth be experienced by someone from within (as is true of Cara), but it can also be viewed from above (by Daedalus, or God), in which case its design appears clear, ordered, and artistic. See pp. 1-9.

<sup>11</sup> Calvino's *Il castello dei destini incrociati* begins: 'In mezzo a un fitto bosco' (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), p. 3.

frequently in the narrative, and Cara notes: 'capita, in questo albergo privo di clienti, di vedere un cameriere compiere i gesti del proprio servizio senza ragione, in una solitaria pantomima' (p. 28). The rituals, or 'forms', the rhythms they create through endless repetition, like those of Nature, *are* the only meaning.

One night Cara, on waking from an idyllic, pastoral dream, is guided by a haunting melody to the hotel bar where she finds the manager playing a flute, with the waiters, or servants, all seated in concentric circles around him in respectful attendance. Since the waiters and Cara are mesmerized by the musician's tune, rather than seeing this nocturne as part of a 'grand hotel' scene, readers may be reminded of the legend of Hamelin; it can thus be regarded as both a positive and negative image, bringing salvation (to the townspeople from the rats, and to Cara from the wave) yet permanent enclosure (a dark cave in the case of the children, the dimly-lit, silent hotel for Cara). The manager could be seen as a chief priest, or minister, officiating at some sort of rite: Cara later recalls his face as having had the 'fissità olimpica di una maschera mortuaria' (p. 54), implying something solemn, authoritative, hieratic. In the final recurrence of this scene, in a quietly dramatic and highly symbolic gesture, the manager hands over his flute to Cara, who then plays to the assembled group. The ritual reminds us of Orpheus, seer and bard, charming all nature, animate and inanimate, with his lyre, and indeed he may be the shepherd of Cara's dream, calling her, enchanting her. Furthermore, this is not the only occasion in the novel that the myth of Orpheus is evoked; there is a far more significant episode, in which Cara dreams of following Guido, one of the three guests who later arrive at the hotel, down endless corridors towards 'un chiarore intenso' (see pp. 133-34).<sup>12</sup> She advances, warns *him* not to turn round, yet it is she who does, and the door closes. This almost straight re-telling of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice suggests that the hotel represents the underworld for

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<sup>12</sup> This episode has been prefigured, in a sense, on several occasions: we read of 'un chiarore pallidissimo', the effect of the sun on the small window in her dark room (p. 24); Cara's search for her name (see n. 17), which may have been Euridice (p. 59); her dream of approaching the circle of light and being absorbed by it (p. 86); finally, and notably, Cara's discovery of the way to the internal, enclosed garden: 'in fondo a un lunghissimo corridoio scorsi una luce che si distingueva radicalmente dalle altre per una sorta di nudità. Pensai si trattasse dell'uscita' (p. 62), and she struggles with her strong impulse to turn back. The link with Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* is also of significance here, as will be made explicit below.

Cara, if not an 'outer' world, a world cut off from 'normal' existence.<sup>13</sup> Does this mean that if Cara had not turned round in her dream she could have escaped her 'prison' and left, with the three guests? That leaving was even a possibility, an option for her at this stage or indeed at any stage? Is she trapped in the myth or could she have altered her destiny? Or, indeed, was it her destiny to act thus? Are human beings free to act as they will and is destiny simply divine foreknowledge of what our choices and actions will be? Capriolo ponders this idea, as she told me in conversation: 'C'è la questione della libertà, cioè se effettivamente l'agire è nella sua ultima radice libero, oppure se noi siamo come la schiuma sopra il mare, e quindi il nostro io non è il soggetto delle nostre azioni, ma è qualche cosa di derivato'.<sup>14</sup> The message of the text seems to be: to descend into Hades is easy; the difficulty is to go without dying and to return. Cara, it increasingly appears, unlike Orpheus, Aeneas, or Dante, will not return 'above' with a message, or with new knowledge of this realm, but will remain in the hotel, seeking a primordial state of undifferentiation. The link with an underworld, however, is increasingly discernible.

Not only are the waiters' actions and minds robotic, they are virtually indistinguishable one from another: 'L'assenza di fisionomia creava una somiglianza'; 'pareva dimorasse un'unica essenza' (p. 37). Do all take on a disturbing physical likeness after 'death'? Furthermore, 'l'albergo non è luogo', Cara records, 'dove possono esistere davvero uomini e donne' (p. 128). The waiters appear to be genderless, with the neutral or non-specific term 'camerieri' predominating, and although the protagonist, at one point, does refer to the waiters as 'quegli uomini' (p. 133), the fact remains that they wear identical men's suits and have a short male hairstyle, not to *enhance* their manliness, but rather to conceal or minimize it, just as for a woman, wearing a man's suit diminishes femininity (whilst a dress would generally accentuate shapeliness). In donning the waiter's uniform, both male and female are robbed of their gender, but this is *especially* true for the female, as is shown by the protagonist's reaction to the masculine haircut and the uniform she is given (to replace her only dress) (pp. 68-

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<sup>13</sup> See Virgil's *Georgics* IV. See also Spencer Pearce, 'Dino Campana: myth, memory, and the dynamics of poetic creation', *Italian Studies*, 50 (1995), 48-71 (pp. 48-51), where the myth of Orpheus is usefully discussed; the article includes the comment that the music of the Orphic poet 'reaches behind the appearance of things, to reveal a fundamental unity, a hidden harmony capable of assuaging the pain which individuation inflicts' (p. 50).

<sup>14</sup> Gillian Ania, "'Un altro mondo": Interview with Paola Capriolo', *The italianist*, 18, (1998), forthcoming, section on 'Colpa/Responsabilità'.



71). The nature of the 'stiff' waiters of indeterminate gender may suggest a condition, an ideal life or afterlife, in which all are equal, a place where there is no male or female, no differentiation before the deity, no rivalries, trauma, or passion.<sup>15</sup> When later on in the novel Laura, Guido's wife, persuades Cara to wear one of her (Laura's) dresses, Cara removes the waiter's uniform and feels that she has lost her 'rifugio' (p. 130). But whilst Cara feels less awkward and incongruous in Laura's dress, the sole fact of wearing it is not enough for Cara to reacquire her femininity, which seems somehow to have been lost through the wearing of the uniform. Perhaps it has been a question of physical and mental adaptation for survival? In Goethe's *Elective Affinities* the schoolmaster expresses his opinion, to Charlotte, that men ought to wear a uniform because they need to act as a group, mix with their own kind, and obey 'en masse', whilst women should dress individually, each according to her own style and nature 'because women are destined to stand alone and act alone their whole life long'.<sup>16</sup> This sense of being part of a male group, almost an anonymous part, is very much what Cara is drawn to, or drawn into, whether from reality or fiction.

The issue of gender in the hotel is also bound up with that of identity: Cara often ponders what her real name might be, searching for 'un senso di appartenenza' and her 'identità perduta' (p. 59).<sup>17</sup> She believes that 'I' is the name of a gender covering an infinity of specific differences, none of which necessarily have any connection with her (p. 43). Capriolo told me in conversation that the loss of Cara's name marks one of the phases in her loss of identity, which is interesting, since this would suggest that she was starting to lose her identity even at the beginning of the story.<sup>18</sup> As the three guests all have names, Cara notes, 'a me pare di esistere meno o forse di più, e comunque di appartenere a un livello dell'essere completamente diverso del quale sono l'unica rappresentante' (p. 91). What exactly constitutes this 'livello dell'essere' for Cara will, as further discussion will

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<sup>15</sup> 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus': Galatians 3. 28. See also Matthew 22. 24-30.

<sup>16</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Elective Affinities* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 208. Capriolo translated this work as *Le affinità elettive* (Venice: Marsilio, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> As she cannot remember her name, the guests generally address her as 'cara', a term of affection, although on two occasions as a name, 'Cara' (see pp. 114, 153, 154).

<sup>18</sup> 'La perdita del nome [...] è uno degli stadi di questa sua perdita di identità.' See Ania, 'Un altro mondo', section on 'I nomi'.

show, be revealed (as far as anything is), by the end of the novel. Naming individuates, whilst not naming, or eliminating names, causes a regression into chaos but also into unity, just as physical disintegration in death both reduces and restores bodies to dust. The absence of a name perhaps serves to indicate a sort of 'everyman' or, indeed, 'no man' or 'no woman' quality. Capriolo admitted that in each text, the act of naming has a certain solemnity 'proprio perché c'è un rapporto strettissimo tra il nome e l'individuazione'.<sup>19</sup> The move from individual to group identity may not only indicate a post-life unity, but also a move towards the elimination of differences on earth, a sort of social or spiritual levelling, or even (extremist or Nazi) brainwashing.

Capriolo has stated that she is not herself religious, but that religion in her work has a nostalgic function.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, religious terms occur frequently in the narrative, as part of this intention; in *Il doppio regno*, for example: 'inferno' (pp. 49, 50), 'paradiso' (p. 50), 'divinità' (pp. 45, 74), and 'Dio' (p. 102), but also 'epifanie' and 'resurrezioni' (p. 38), terms not usually found in the plural, in religious discourse, used here, perhaps as Montale's epiphanies, his moments of revelation, to refer to fragments of memories which enter Cara's mind and then, annoyingly, vanish. The symbol of the pyramid recurs tantalizingly in the text, producing an effect similar to that which Calvino achieves in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, with his adroit re-use of vocabulary in different contexts. There is, in *Il doppio regno*, a tall marble pyramid in an alcove (p. 19), a heavy marble pyramid-shaped ornament on the desk in Cara's room (p. 23), a pyramid inscribed inside a circle on the hotel note-paper (p. 35), and references to the hotel garden where, significantly, since it lies outside the domain of the hotel, there are no pyramids (p. 76).<sup>21</sup> For Cara, the pyramids watch over the hotel corridors like images of nameless gods, they are symbols of 'una religione bizzarra, estranea a ogni speranza e a ogni timore, estranea alla vita e forse anche alla morte' (p. 45). In my conversation with Capriolo, she told me she had in mind especially the Egyptian pyramid, as a funereal symbol of eternity, of an infernal realm (with a confluence of Egyptian and Christian symbolism).<sup>22</sup> Therefore the symbol on the hotel note-paper (a pyramid inside a circle) may imply eternity enclosed, eternity in a confined, timeless, perfect space, eternity perhaps contained within the world, the world of Capriolo's hotel.

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<sup>19</sup> See Ania, 'Un altro mondo', section on 'I nomi'.

<sup>20</sup> Daniele Marinoni, 'Vissi d'amore, l'ultimo romanzo di Paola Capriolo alla ricerca del senso della vita', *Il mattino di Padova*, October 1992.

<sup>21</sup> See also *Il doppio regno*, pp. 56, 133.

<sup>22</sup> See Ania, 'Un altro mondo', section on 'Domande specifiche', *Il doppio regno*.

Dantesque imagery is prominent in *Il doppio regno*, and interlinked with the image of the labyrinth, although Cara has no Virgil or Sibyl to guide her through the hotel maze: the waiters' attempts to help her to find the exit prove fruitless. At the beginning of the story, when Cara escapes from the wave (her mid-life 'crisis'), she runs, heading upwards amidst houses and gardens, seeing 'insegne turistiche che promettono *paradisi*, bei soggiorni' (p. 15, my emphasis), but not stopping, thinking only of saving herself, of putting a greater distance between herself and the wave: 'riesco a pensare soltanto alla mia *salvezza*' (p. 16, my emphasis). The opening bears some resemblance to that of *The White Hotel*, where the female protagonist is also escaping, running blindly in a storm. Lisa too arrives at a hotel where the staff are tireless and attentive, she has only the one dress she is wearing, and she loses all sense of time there. Yet perhaps here, in *Il doppio regno*, as will be discussed below, Cara is telling us more what she has read, than actually lived through. Seeking a way of escape, Cara enters a wood, finds the hotel with an illegible sign over the entrance, and enters its dimly-lit vestibule, all of which is also reminiscent of Dante's anxious escape and his entrance into hell. Cara's first visit to the hotel library is described in similar terms: after following the manager along 'una serie labirintica di corridoi' (p. 46), they arrive at a heavy wooden door over which there is an inscription which, once again, she is unable to read.

The well-stocked library in the hotel, with its loans renewable for an unlimited period of time, underlines the rather peculiar, closed nature of the hotel. The index-cards are indecipherable: 'combinazioni di lettere prive di un significato evidente' (pp. 46-47), and the books themselves seem to Cara to be full of 'raggruppamenti di lettere privi di significato' (p. 48). Subsequent visits to the library reveal no 'libri leggibili' (p. 55) — indeed, they resemble those of Borges' 'library of Babel', as unintelligible images of the universe — yet Cara persists in 'reading' various volumes despite not being sure whether 'xeex oxutebex' is the title of the book or the name of the author. The books constitute the ultimate in non-referential literature. No knowledge of the outside world is required in order to read them, which is surely what causes Cara, eventually, to feel at ease with them. Reality may be structured through language, and words may be non-specifically referential (for example, the use of the word 'book' assumes that readers attach some ideas to the word), but if there is no reality outside the hotel (or the text), words are not needed. Indeed, much of the discourse within the hotel reinforces the idea of the impossibility of true communication between individuals. Cara, after her initial, negative reaction to the books in the library, comes round to the manager's way of thinking (that is, contemplating the books constitutes 'lettura'); she believes that seeking meanings instead of admiring the beauty of the symbols is a despicable activity, worthy only of mediocre spirits.<sup>23</sup> Cara's learned response (although not her original reaction) is akin to an

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of 'reading' and 'responding', see Jeremy Hawthorn, *Unlocking the Text:*

unquestioning or mindless form of worship. It is as if she feels that she has entered the circle of the initiated; satisfied, she notes: 'anch'io ero in grado di leggerli e di capirli', provided that the terms 'leggere' and 'capire' are not taken in the ordinary, orthodox sense (p. 61). Meaning here derives solely from form, which is repeatable and apparently more durable than content, which in the hotel is absent.

One passage in particular, which follows Cara's first visit to the library, reveals a very rich religious lexis (see pp. 49-50); starting with the idea of hell, it closes with that of heaven, of 'somma beatitudine', though this is in no way suggestive of a positive progression, or of salvation in an orthodox sense. Cara appears to identify with a sinner who is being punished for a sin he or she has no consciousness of having committed: 'L'inferno più atroce che posso immaginare è quello in cui al dannato sia sottratta la memoria del peccato per il quale è punito'. Unlike the predicament of Joseph K. of Kafka's *The Trial*, presented as being condemned though innocent as well as ignorant of his alleged crime, Cara feels, despite having only very vague memories of her past, that she is being justly punished: 'Quanto mi è accaduto potrebbe essere il meritato castigo per una colpa che non ricordo' (p. 49). Cara has no clear memories, happy or otherwise, so perhaps the loss of memory brings relief, as a self-defence mechanism. Consonant with Dante's *legge del contrappasso*, the punishment for sin being either the sin itself, devoid of illusion and in isolation, or the sin perpetrated against the sinner, perhaps, in the previous existence which Cara cannot remember, she was wilfully indifferent to her life, family, friends, joys and sorrows, guilty perhaps of 'sowing indifference', and so she is now 'condemned' to this vacuum, devoid of excitement, pain, or change. Perhaps she has had an illicit relationship with the frivolous officer who plagues her dreams, and Cara could be seen as a re-evocation of Francesca da Rimini, trapped in the endless, dark corridors of *her* 'doloroso ospizio', in *her* 'loco d'ogne luce muto' (*Inferno*, v. 16, 28).<sup>24</sup> Although Cara seems to blame herself rather than love, her lover, or an author (as was the case with Francesca), their situations are not wholly dissimilar, since, according to tradition, Francesca had previously been tricked into marrying Gianciotto, and so the question of guilt might not be as obvious as it appears. This, quite apart from any link, however tenuous, with this episode, may well be what Capriolo is intimating as far as Cara is concerned. More direct literary associations, however,

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*Fundamental Issues in Literary Theory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1987), pp. 16-22.

<sup>24</sup> Although Capriolo denied this 'intent', she did add: 'Io penso che tutte le affinità, gli echi, tutte queste sono cose valide, salvo il caso che l'autore poi non dica "no, io non l'ho mai letto, quindi non ci può essere", altrimenti, veramente l'autore è l'ultimo a sapere se [qualcosa] c'è o non c'è'. See Ania, 'Un altro mondo', section on 'Immagini dantesche'.

can be made between Cara and other protagonists of fiction and, as Guido himself observes openly to her, her memories are mainly literary memories; as indeed are Capriolo's, since 'experience' is something she seems to have shut herself away from, and reality is as much the dream world of fiction as it is of the objective world. Certain traits, scenes, and events Cara 'remembers' derive from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, and a poem by Mattias Claudius ('Death and the Maiden'), all unacknowledged quotations, the effect of these borrowings, while engendering a sort of literary vertigo for the reader, suggests that Cara can no longer distinguish between the world of literature and the 'real' world.

But why is Cara confined to the hotel, and what exactly did she run away from? The central focus of this passage, upon which Cara's discussion of heaven and hell is based, is her strong feeling of guilt, of betrayal, of deserving punishment somehow in the dual realm. Recording her flight from the apocalyptic wave, fleeing with no attempt to warn anyone else, she had noted: 'A volte mi domando se non sia questa la colpa per la quale sono punita' (p. 16). Believing that she is 'colpevole e giustamente punita' therefore gives her a false sense of relief since she can abandon herself to the situation in which she finds herself; it obviates her need to act, to react. 'Non vi è obbligo infatti di sottrarsi a un meritato castigo', she notes (p. 50). A little later, when Cara is trying to remember her real name, the mental image of a woman stretching out a hand towards her from a train window comes back to her. She thinks the woman may be her mother, and that she was seeing her for the last time. Perhaps her 'colpa' is that she was unable to prevent her mother dying, or being deported to a concentration camp, something too painful to remember clearly, but also to forget entirely. Or she may even have been responsible for the death (by drowning) of a child — the child she repeatedly sees in her dreams. Or was she in fact guilty of adultery, and consequently abandoned by her family? Yet it is quite likely that these are some of her literary memories, incidents she has merely read about, absorbed, and confused, from *The White Hotel*, *Elective Affinities*, *Madame Bovary*, and *Anna Karenina*.

Despite assuming one or all of these sins, Cara is not at all sure that she is in hell. Whilst English and Italian dictionary definitions for hell and *inferno* are similar, there is less overlap for heaven, paradise, and *paradiso*, as the following example definitions illustrate: heaven is 'the abode of God, the angels and the beatified spirits', paradise is 'an intermediate place or state where the departed souls of the righteous await resurrection and the last judgement', and *paradiso*, a place or state of happiness for 'chi, dopo la morte, è *chiamato* da Dio o dagli dei a gioie eterne' (my emphasis);<sup>25</sup> indeed, Cara records her hope that a superior being has called her to this place,

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<sup>25</sup> *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); *Il Nuovo*

hell or paradise. Perhaps it is the hotel itself that has willed her presence. Yet rather than looking to construct some sort of *Weltanschauung*, forgetting herself to seek some higher state, or indulge in mental pursuits like Hans Castorp of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, cut off from the world in his sanatorium, Cara's position appears totally negative, lacking in any spiritual or altruistic goal; she takes comfort in the notion of cancelling out her self, and she observes the guests 'anche per dimenticare me stessa' (p. 108). It does not occur to Cara, but in this state of unconsciousness in which she relinquishes control and responsibility, shunning both living experience and abstract cognition, she may find herself rather in a sort of limbo, or vacuum, similar to the situation of the characters in 'The camp', the final chapter of *The White Hotel*, where the various people in Lisa's life meet up in a limbo-like existence as victims of the Holocaust; although whether it is a regressive state, or rather their 'paradise', is unclear. Cara, indeed, does wonder who has ordained her punishment, whether Providence or man, 'una giustizia umana o divina' (p. 49), or whether human beings are assigned to hell purely by chance, with no more dignity than a pawn on a chessboard. Yet, she reflects, echoing Lisa's ambivalent situation:

Neppure questo è però il pensiero più terribile. A volte si insinua in me un altro dubbio, che con grande sforzo mi impongo di non tacere: questo inferno come l'ho definito in un orgoglioso, forse estremo soprassalto del sentimento dell'io, potrebbe essere invece il mio paradiso, e dimenticare me stessa la somma beatitudine che mi attende. (p. 50)

This oblivion would also free her, although she does not voice this thought, of any obligation towards the rest of mankind. However, that the hotel represents Cara's paradise seems to her, at this stage, to be the most worrying possibility, and this fusion of, or confusion between, heaven and hell persists.

Although Cara finds herself in a double existence, the 'doppio regno', where 'doppio' suggests two-faced, dual-natured (and thus more probably hell *and* heaven, rather than neither hell nor heaven), it is the number three which dominates the text; in addition to the omnipresent pyramid, the hotel vestibule is triangular, the tables in the hotel restaurant are all set for three, and there are three visitors. Three is the 'perfect number', associated with mystery, the trinity (unity in diversity), the Holy Family, and the pyramid, or even mind, body, and spirit, or

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*Zingarelli: vocabolario della lingua italiana* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1984). The relevant definition of *paradiso* in the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* is: 'luogo dell'oltretomba in cui le anime dei giusti godono di una beatificazione perfetta ed eterna conferita da Dio per l'azione della sua grazia che li rende così degni del premio del loro comportamento terreno'.

birth, life, and death. Although the tables are set for three, they are not round (which, with the three-pointed place settings would have given the same sort of shape as the symbol on the hotel writing paper): 'uno dei lati rimaneva sempre sgombro mostrando il candore della tovaglia' (p. 36). They are four-sided, so the effect would be more uneven, almost as if a fourth person is not welcome, or indeed expected. Yet while *all* the tables are set, they remain empty, which conforms with the overwhelming impression of meaninglessness and empty ritual. The characteristics of the hotel suggest that it is outside the world, as we know it, in some sort of *aldilà*: as Cara notes, 'si vive [...] in una sorta d'eternità' (pp. 50-51). She even 'composes' a few lines of poetry: 'Solo nel doppio regno | le voci si fanno | eterne e dolci' (p.120), which give the book, or perhaps Cara's book — her autodiegetic account destined, she would have us believe, purely for her own eyes — its title. Indeed, surely as a hint from author to reader, Guido asks Cara if she is sure that she wrote the poem, to which she answers, disoriented, that of course she did, she wrote it on the hotel note-paper. This may well be, but the poem is (as Capriolo confirmed to me) a quotation from Rilke's *Die Sonette an Orpheus*.<sup>26</sup> Cara's comment is yet another indication of something from her literary 'past' entering her lived 'present', though dimly, like her other fragmented memories. Furthermore, since the lines are from the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, this underlines the presence of the Greek poet in the novel, the Orpheus who, with his captivating music, his gentle magic, 'rules over the double kingdom of life and death'.<sup>27</sup> He unites the two realms, and is, as Walter Strauss states, the 'reconciliator of opposites and harmonizer of man and nature, poetry and the cosmos'.<sup>28</sup> The fact that the voices are 'eterne e dolci' (my

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<sup>26</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Sonette an Orpheus (Sonetti a Orfeo)* Part I, Sonnet IX: 'Erst in dem Doppelbereich | werden die Stimmen | ewig und mild' [Only in the dual realm will the voices become eternal and gentle] (Capriolo having preferred 'dolci' to 'miti'), not from Heinrich Heine, as stated in *Italian Women's Writing*, p. 273. I acknowledge here my debt to Christa Droth-Wagner for her penetrative and illuminating insights into the German. See also *Il doppio regno*, p. 99, where we find the 'prose' version immersed in the text, anticipating the poem: 'Mi è accaduto qualcosa, ma qui dentro sono protetta e ho tutto ciò che mi occorre. [...] Solo in questo silenzio le voci del mondo si fanno eterne e dolci'.

<sup>27</sup> E. M. Butler, *Rainer Maria Rilke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), p. 348.

<sup>28</sup> Walter A. Strauss, *Descent and Return: The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 218.

emphasis) would correspond with Cara's earlier sentiments, that the hotel is a place of edenic calm rather than an uncomfortable hell, and indeed with the phrase that she later recalls from a dream: 'Tra le mie braccia potrai dormire dolcemente' (p. 138).<sup>29</sup> The protagonist, who records, 'Credo di avere una trentina d'anni' (p. 9), is thus 'nel mezzo del cammin' of her life, having escaped from the seashore and the wave. She had set off running in the direction of a hill as if she too had emerged 'fuor del pelago a la riva' from the 'acqua perigliosa' (*Inferno*, I. 23-24). But what was or is this wave from which she fled and which, even inside the hotel, ebbs and flows so distressingly and oppressively in her mind?

The 'onda' could represent some sudden, traumatic experience, possibly of a sexual nature (especially since before the wave breaks, there is a great build up of tension), leading to a state of amnesia, oblivion, or death, with the hotel as some kind of unconscious, comatose state, or afterlife; the protagonist, it will be recalled, escaping from the wave, could only think of her 'salvezza' (p. 15). Since Cara appears to fear male-female relationships, the wave for her perhaps symbolizes the male; its onslaught is certainly seen as a threat, indeed a recurring or constant threat, and her fear of it may represent her dread of being engulfed both emotionally and physically, in being a 'couple' with a blurred, dual identity which, only in the safety of the genderless hotel with its numbing, impassive atmosphere, can she avoid. One night she sleeps restlessly, and wakes with a jolt, having seen the wave advancing: 'L'onda sopravvive, tiene sempre sospesa su di me la sua minaccia, e non posso liberarmi dal presentimento che quando uscirò dall'albergo sarà lì ad attendermi' (p. 146), she records. The wave has been captured, as if in a photographic still, to be released when she recrosses the threshold of the hotel out into the cruel world again, the world of which she has 'visioni d'annientamento' (p. 146). Yet it is more complex than this since she at one point believes that she *is* the wave, perhaps because she has lost her female identity and gained that (inherently male, or perhaps self-sufficiently androgynous) of the waiters. The self she does not know is:

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. (pp. 154-55)

However, at another point she expresses her desire to meet up with the wave rather than never get out of her 'prison', struggling as she does with her identity crisis (see p. 159) and the thought that a 'real' live encounter is

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<sup>29</sup> This is the last line of M. Claudius's poem 'Death and the Maiden', set to music by

Schubert.



preferable to a stultifying non-existence. Alternatively or additionally, the wave may symbolize the all-too-rapid pace of life, time rushing relentlessly past with the result that individuals aim to experience everything, to possess everything, even to know everything, before the untimely onset of ageing and death, which, in the hotel, Cara comes to believe, she can avoid. She thus flees from this pressure, this tremendous liquid force, from oceanic immensity to the calm, untroubled, solid specificity of the hotel. The wave may even signify the approach of death, the ending of physical life itself, the fearful event from which we naturally recoil, although we cannot ignore the wave as *the* elemental life force, essentially a surge of energy and therefore distressing and repulsive to the 'retiring' protagonist who seeks to block out experience. Yet although Cara tells Bruno: 'la mia onda è qualcosa di molto semplice, è molto semplicemente un'onda' (p. 146) — that is, a moment of pure form, the rhythm of a precise point in time, part of the pattern which the waves collectively and endlessly create, indeed are — whatever the wave represents, its importance in her mind, and thus in her ultimate fate, is unquestionable. The ambiguity of the wave symbol, then, allows Capriolo to explore, in her ambivalent realm, different and contradictory levels of experience and meaning at the same time.

How does Cara view her existence in the hotel? She certainly believes at first that she is excluded from 'life', her 'paradiso perduto', as she later refers to it (p. 88). She must, then, find her way out, and return to her previous existence, just as Hans Castorp feels at the beginning of his stay at the isolated sanatorium, and, indeed, Giovanni Drogo of Buzzati's *Il deserto dei Tartari*, in the early weeks of his posting at the remote fortress Bastiani; like these troubled protagonists, searching for meaning, and perhaps even more for justification for their (initially imposed and ultimately voluntary) retreat from the world, Cara will undergo a gradual transformation which living apart from the 'world' causes.<sup>30</sup> Cara tries to find the way out of the hotel, but

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<sup>30</sup> Capriolo has stated that although she read Buzzati at school, she does not believe (perhaps with undertones of Harold Bloom's anxiety) that his work has influenced her. See Giulio Carnazzi, 'Quel fascino discreto della grande Eulalia', *Racconti*, n. 1 (May 1988), p. 46.

Hawthorn, p. 103, refers to 'the anxiety of influence' which writers can suffer, discussed in Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Capriolo does say that she greatly admires Thomas Mann, and enjoys Calvino and Morante among modern writers, although her favourite authors remain the classics. See Claudio

Altarocca, 'Paola Capriolo: nei miei racconti suono le corde malate della vita', *Tuttolibri*, 14,

prevaricates, telling herself that it is late at night, and she would only find herself in a dark wood. She notes here that this decision to put off looking for the exit until the following day was the first bond of complicity that she struck with the hotel, and this causes her to wonder whether she was perhaps not so much victim of, as responsible for, the course of events. Or perhaps this is not so, and she has always submitted to an outside force, and something which she cannot now remember, drove her to meet the wave (pp. 33-34). Yet on the one occasion when she believes that she has seen the exit at the end of a long corridor, an image almost suggesting hope of a heavenly 'light at the end of a dark tunnel', or the light of the stars glimpsed as through 'un pertugio tondo' after a visit to the infernal realm (*Inferno*, XXXIV. 138), her reaction is fear, as well as surprise; although she forces herself to proceed towards the brightness, her instinctive impulse is to turn back, 'come se una parte di me si opponesse all'idea di lasciare l'albergo' (p. 62). Her fear turns to relief when she realizes that the light comes from the hotel garden; a covered dome, from which she can gaze upwards at the sky, at infinity, whilst remaining within the hotel's protection. She feels that this hothouse garden is the most pleasant part of the hotel, perhaps a hint or foretaste of an earthly paradise.

Yet Cara's notion of paradise is closely linked with that of burial. Shortly after this incident, if indeed readers are to accept the time sequence presented, Cara carries out an interesting literary analysis of some poetry, which she believes she has composed ('A noi prescisse | il fato illacrimata sepoltura'), but which is a quotation from a sonnet by Foscolo (p. 65).<sup>31</sup> As she relates the lines she has 'written' to her own situation, her own existence, it can be seen that she considers that the term 'sepoltura' applies either to her condition as an unmourned burying or death (nobody has come looking for her), or to the hotel, the burial place which has been ordained for her, and for the other or others (presumably the waiters, or even Cara's creator) that make up the 'noi'. Cara may, subconsciously, be expressing regret that she is exiled in the hotel eternally, that she will never emerge from this tomb in which she lives, to see the shores of the sea again. Nor can she recapture a lost, identity-less childhood, a serene state of innocence where she does not have to relate to anyone or anything. Although initially, in the hotel, she records her hope to meet someone, when a waiter does approach, she senses that she can have no true communion with him, and the contact is meaningless, purely formal. Later, when the three guests arrive, she

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591, in *La Stampa*, 6 February 1988, p. 2, and Carnazzi, pp. 46-47.

<sup>31</sup> The sonnet is 'Né più mai toccherò le sacre sponde', in *Odi e sonetti* (Milan: Fabbri, 1968, 1969), p. 44. The quotation represents the last line and a half of the poem to Zacinto, although it is presented in the text here as two complete lines.

does not seek them out, but is wary of them. Yet as she listens to their conversation, before daring to make contact with them in any way, the life they describe appears to her 'seducente come un paradiso perduto' (p. 88), if only for its appealing and reassuring aura of normality. So paradise, for Cara, and perhaps for all individuals, is always 'elsewhere'. Yet the only reality for Cara, outside the hotel, is provided by the vision she has in her mind or in her dreams of the room, the desk, and the cat: 'la realtà del mondo, di un'esistenza priva di legami con l'albergo, è custodita ormai fra quelle quattro pareti, in quello spazio che separa una finestra affacciata sul nulla da una porta chiusa' (p. 113), and she clings to this vision (whether it is her room, or a room she has merely read about does not enter into it). Should she risk leaving with the guests? Perhaps if she left with them she would find her own 'cari', her own 'normality'. Cara is aware that her hotel is a place of absences; there is no joy or pain, and no death, but is this enough? One evening Guido asks Cara if she feels at home in the hotel because she is *not* bored, or precisely because she *is* bored. An interesting question, which Cara does not answer directly, merely telling her friends that 'noia' is 'rassicurante' (p. 119), as will be the eventual appearance (after several quasi-sightings) of the 'gatto tigrato' in the garden, the cat which has besieged her dreams and memories (fictional or otherwise), and which symbolizes, as Capriolo has confirmed in a personal communication, the welcoming domestic hearth, her home.

Cara vacillates repeatedly between desiring to leave the hotel and fearing to do so, as the dual kingdom imposes its presence: 'Oscillo fra due mondi [internal and external worlds, that of the hotel and that of past memories], nessuno dei quali è più mio' (p.133), and there is a progressive identification of Cara with the hotel (after her initial complaints and frustrations, which she appears to have forgotten). For Bruno, Guido's younger brother, the 'hotel' is nothing other than a hotel which one can enter and leave at will, whereas for Cara it is not so simple, as she tries to explain to him. Seeking to understand this herself, she reasons that the difference between their views must lie in the fact that Bruno and the other guests did not see the wave: 'e non hanno avvertito alle loro spalle il silenzio di un mondo che muore' (p. 112).<sup>32</sup> Therefore, for her, there is a great divide, an abyss, between inside and outside, between everything and nothing. Yet her dilemma is infinite since, as she notes: 'ciò che ignoro è quale sia il tutto e quale il nulla' (p. 112). Has she, with echoes of Leopardian philosophy, fled from the 'nulla' of life, or has she sought refuge in a Foscolian 'nulla eterno'?<sup>33</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>32</sup> Earlier she had claimed: 'Io sono quella che ha visto l'onda' and that the experience was hers alone (p. 105).

<sup>33</sup> For Leopardi, beyond the material limits of life there was nothing: 'Io mi sentiva come

indications of her familiarity with both these authors can be found woven into the narrative. Or perhaps her task is to face nothingness and to overcome or abolish it. Is her dilemma resolvable? There are certain signs which Cara encounters and interprets, seeking to determine this. When she finds the hotel library door locked, for example, she takes this to mean that not only is leaving the hotel a possibility, but a necessity, as if the hotel is shutting off its treasures to her, perhaps because of her friendship (or contamination) with the guests. This recalls the situation in Eco's *Il nome della rosa* where the librarian struggles to preserve the secrets of the monastery library from the other monks' prying eyes, to avoid their contamination through knowledge. The hotel, then, may be Cara's self-indulgent refuge from the 'onda' (from life's flood, life's threatening or destructive — or indeed creative — elements), her 'arca', or ark, from which she will sooner or later emerge, or, it may be, not her 'waiting room', but her prison, her punishment (the 'meritato castigo'), in which case the 'arca' would represent her tomb, her sarcophagus, as for the passengers in Caproni's 'Stanze della funicolare',<sup>34</sup> and as in the 'illacrimata sepoltura' in the Foscolo verse she 'writes' (p. 65).

Yet Cara is tormented by the feeling that there is a reality for her beyond the confines of the hotel, that someone will be waiting for her, that gradually she will remember more details of her previous 'world', and she looks ahead to a time when the hotel will be just a hotel, 'un luogo fra gli altri, inserito in uno spazio omogeneo e conoscibile, un luogo che forse potrà un giorno rivedere senza pericolo' (p. 142), that is, without fearing it will engulf her or shut her in; if indeed it is a physical reality and not just a temporal space (in her mind). This may suggest the longing for life, with all its faults, felt when life is already past. The waiters appear to show merely a polite indifference to her, whilst the guests seem to be doing their best to help her. Should she not leave with them and continue her quest for the 'paradiso perduto' elsewhere, risking human contact, warmth, and a flesh-and-blood relationship which would need to be two-way? Yet when they start to plan their departure, she obviously feels under pressure, and it is not without significance that at this point she dreams of the threatening, all-consuming wave advancing and takes fright. The hotel, however, can protect her. If Cara seeks nothing other

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soffocare, considerando e sentendo che tutto è nulla, solido nulla': *Zibaldone di pensieri*

(Milan: Mondadori, 1972), p. 85. In his first sonnet, Foscolo speaks of forgetting reality and being transported along the path to death, the 'nulla eterno': *Odi e sonetti*, p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Giorgio Caproni, *Tutte le poesie* (Milan: Garzanti 1984), pp. 142-48. The funicular train is the 'arca silenziosa', running along in the dark, never stopping until it reaches its final destination.

than a safe though interminably dull, lifeless haven, then she will be 'rewarded', yet even towards the end of the story she oscillates. She admits to Guido, in whom she has sensed a kindred spirit of sorts, her fear of finding herself 'nel nulla'. But then she adds: 'Ma dubito sia possibile trovarsi nel nulla' (p. 159). Guido concludes their conversation with the enigmatic words: 'temo di non essere mai stato veramente in nessun posto', words which seem far more akin to something Cara might have said, and they raise the problematic question of the nature of the guests themselves. Just because they are able to depart does not apparently signify that they belong to 'reality' any more than does Cara.

In the closing pages of the novel, it appears that Cara has come to believe that life is to be found *only* inside the hotel (see also p. 151), and she has the uncommon notion that there is no reality whatsoever outside it as indeed the prisoner of Capriolo's short story, 'Il gigante', feels as he asks, rhetorically, without anguish or even interest, 'C'è ancora un mondo, là fuori?'.<sup>35</sup> These are sentiments which her male, literary antecedents, Giovanni Drogo, Hans Castorp, and Calvino's Edmond Dantès have also expressed; the latter states, from his castle-prison: 'il fuori non è altro che il passato, è inutile tentare di fuggire', and it is precisely the unknown, unremembered past which Cara seems to fear.<sup>36</sup> One of the reasons which perhaps persuades Cara that she must remain in this mirage of eternity is the notion that leaving the hotel would re-introduce her (if she was there before) to the world of egoistic, human motives, and indeed Bruno warns her against trusting people, including himself, and life itself, but despite this, he is still assured that she should leave with him. Cara asks: 'In questo modo mi salverei?' (pp. 140-41), but Bruno's reply is paradoxical: 'In questo modo cadresti di sella', which is a reference back to a previous conversation, thoughts, and a 'memory' (see pp. 92-93, 105, 111-12, 114), and suggests that, however much Bruno would like to believe the contrary and however absurd and bizarre this may seem, he too realizes that Cara's place is in the hotel. It is in the hotel, this arcane dual realm, where she will truly have her being.

Yet by refusing 'life' outside, and shutting herself off completely, with both fear and relief, from the 'real' world, Cara will remain fixed eternally in her hotel, her present, possibly like Dante's suicides who, since they refused life, are, as Dorothy L. Sayers notes, 'fixed in a dead and withered sterility'.<sup>37</sup> And yet in the hotel nothing 'dies', as the manager tells Cara: 'Noi sappiamo come evitare inconvenienti del genere' (p. 118), whereas

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<sup>35</sup> 'Il gigante', in *La grande Eulalia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988); see pp. 67, 68, 106.

<sup>36</sup> Calvino, 'Il conte di Montecristo', in *Ti con zero*, p. 158.

<sup>37</sup> D. L. Sayers' translation of *Inferno* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 153.

the flowers which Bruno picks from the hotel garden and offers to Cara fade and wither, subject as they are to the normal laws of nature. Contagion from the outside world, contact with someone who belongs to the outside world, has caused this decay, the result of uprooting things from their natural habitat, of displacing them from where they belong. This, in which a parallel may be perceived between life and art (that is, life will come to an end whilst art can be immortal, 'reality' is not the corruptible world but that of eternal art), appears to be intended as a warning to Cara. The hotel is where she belongs, and only here will she be safe from the cataclysmic wave. Nevertheless, as the guests take leave of her on their last evening, she feels alone, and wonders if this 'desolation' is truly what she wants, that is, the company of the safe, tedious, robotic waiters again (p. 161). Does she really want to be reduced to pure form, to a 'work of art'? The final words of Cara's diary record a dream in which she, an adult though dressed as a child, is in a schoolroom reciting 'Credo in Dio Padre onnipotente, creatore del cielo e della terra' (p. 167), which appears as a pseudo-confession, a last-minute Pascalian safety net, or wager — in other words, that she has nothing to lose from expressing 'belief' through the form of words — which serves to counter the child-instilled, perhaps subconscious, fear of the unknown, of the unknowable.

Cara's metamorphosis, her progressive identification with the hotel, can be seen in several passages: the hotel, she believes, shares the anxiety she feels, which the presence of the guests causes, the manager no longer plays his flute in the night (or, as is equally possible, she no longer hears him), and the card games are rushed. Cara is still aware of the hotel's shabbiness, the cracks in the walls, the threadbare, darned pillowcases, but she no longer regards these defects from an external critical standpoint, seeing them rather, as she explains, from the inside, as symptoms of an illness or old age on the face of a loved one (p. 101). Even her dreams, she comes to feel, are 'of the hotel', they are not hers, but they pass through her mind like an electric current passing through a wire (see p. 124). She later queries whether it is the hotel itself which is amusing itself by putting words into her mouth and thoughts into her head, and notes:

Non sono io a pensare i miei pensieri: essi mi 'vengono in mente', mi assalgono quasi fossero entità estranee, e continuo a domandarmi se siano la verità dell'albergo che si serve di me come di uno specchio dove riflettersi, o invece una mia recondita verità. (pp. 151-52)

Is the hotel, then, using her as it does its team of waiters? Is the manager also an expression of the will of the hotel? It would appear that, as he is about to retire, Cara, after her indefinite, timeless period of preparation, is the hotel's new choice, the flute symbolic of the management's offer. Or perhaps the continuity is unimportant, the past and future life of the hotel irrelevant, the only reality being Cara's retreat into the self. The question of existing inside or outside the hotel, because of or for the hotel, independently of or dependent on the hotel is

significant: is Cara in the hotel, or is the hotel in her? Capriolo put it to me in these words:

Quello che avviene a questo personaggio de *Il doppio regno* è un doppio movimento, cosa che in qualche modo può ricordare certe esperienze mistiche; cioè, da un lato una spoliazione graduale, che alla fine è totale, della propria identità, e dall'altro il senso però che quest'identità cresce man mano che uno se ne priva; e questa propria volontà individuale, personalità individuale, cessando di essere tale, finisce con il coincidere con la volontà del tutto, dell'assoluto, di come vogliamo definirlo, che in questo caso è l'albergo.<sup>38</sup>

For Rilke, 'the poet of the *Weltinnenraum* (world space interiorized)', as Strauss describes him, human beings are divided in a divided world, but reversal is possible, through metamorphosis and fusion.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Cara will eventually claim that she *is* the hotel (see p. 168), which may indicate that the two become one, the duality subsumed in her mind into a unicity, the key, perhaps, for dealing with the absurd, fragmentary nature of external reality, or with the question of the nature of nature itself.

So who is in control? One evening Bruno remarks to Cara on the noticeable lack of guests in the hotel, saying that if the hotel does not attract custom, it will be forced to close. Cara, feeling that this idea is quite grotesque, does not even bother to contradict him, but notes in her diary: 'Se questa è la parte che gli ho assegnato [...], devo lasciargliela recitare' (p. 156), a seemingly incongruous phrase. What does this mean? And in what way is he her puppet? Whether Bruno decides to leave Cara or not, she writes, will be her decision: 'sarò io a decidere. Io o la volontà della quale sono ormai espressione' (p. 158). Perhaps readers are to understand this 'io' as Cara/the hotel and/or the narrator/author controlling the diary/text/world. In this context, the diary entry in which Cara claims to be the abyss, or the empty self, which encompasses everything including the wave and the hotel (p. 154) is pertinent. Perhaps she, a form, is awaiting or looking for a content, or is satisfied to exist without one? As if to confirm Cara's inextricable if indeterminate bond with the hotel, Guido tells Cara that her point of view is 'quello dell'albergo' (p. 160), and she herself feels, despite the fact that there are no proper mirrors in the hotel, that she is looking at her own life in a mirror which distorts the image: 'Io stessa sono l'immagine illusoria e quella vera, e sono l'occhio che guarda e sono lo specchio' (p. 162), in a statement which anticipates the later novel, *La spettatrice* (Milan: Bompiani, 1995). She is all. Indeed, when Cara has been handed the flute, she notes that as she plays, everything appears to spring forth from her person: 'Mentre suono, ogni cosa come la musica, mi pare scaturisca da me' (p. 167). In taking over, in fulfilling this role, she is the source of reality, the only reality.

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<sup>38</sup> Ania, 'Un altro mondo', section on 'La narrazione come testimonianza'.

<sup>39</sup> Strauss, see pp. 141-42, 161.

Capriolo presents us, then, with very mixed images of this cut-off, otherworldly place or state. The hotel is not presented topographically as a heaven or hell for Cara and the waiters, nor is it either especially happy or miserable, a place of joyous reward or of intense discomfort or pain. Attributes of several literary otherworlds are present; of hell: its entrance is in a wood, it is dark, and there is considerable unease and mental anguish; of paradise: as a place of salvation (from the wave); of the earthly paradise: the domed garden of the hotel with its rampant, disturbingly fleshy and luxuriant vegetation; and (although Capriolo remarked quizzically to me, 'le soluzioni intermedie sono sempre escluse'<sup>40</sup>), of purgatory: it is situated on a hill, there is suffering for a time, and, significantly, through the contemporaneous recession of memory and absorption into the hotel, a sort of 'purifying', or subduing of Cara's mind and will, is in progress.<sup>41</sup> This will not lead, however, to redemption as in Dante, but rather to a liberation from the world, from the need for action or for thought, to a release from the bonds of being. The hotel, indeed, is presented as a kind of limbo, an uncertain, non-defined, non-definable but eternal state, with Cara seeking to avoid worldly duties, stresses, and responsibilities. It is a place, perhaps, of 'duol senza martiri' (*Inferno*, IV. 28), and certainly somewhere where the inmates live 'sanza speme' and 'in disio' (*Inferno*, IV. 42). Cara, in trying to recover her memory, for example, proceeds 'senza pena, senza speranza' (p. 60), although she is convinced that she has sinned in some way, unlike those assigned to Dante's limbo.

As far as Cara's position in the hotel is concerned, she recognizes that it is special, perhaps even unique, and that it is the means of attaining 'peace', but she also feels that it is puzzling, ambiguous, and solitary. She feels separate from the waiters, as well as from the guests, 'poiché nessuno qui dentro o fuori è come me in bilico fra due mondi' (p. 147), and if she is eventually to be transformed totally into one of the waiters, she has a long way to go; her purgation, such as it is, is by no means complete. No one, therefore, can really understand her, and hers is, she feels, with undertones of Rilke's paradoxical convergence of opposites, 'un privilegio atroce' (p. 147). In retreating from the world, it may be that she is seeking an Orphic 'dark center of being',<sup>42</sup> or her undivided self which she had somehow lost. According to Jung, if stimuli from the outside are too strong, if there is too much

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<sup>40</sup> See Ania, 'Un altro mondo', section on 'Immagini dantesche'.

<sup>41</sup> The followers of Orphism, for example, had to live a life of 'progressive ritual purification oriented toward the attainment of immortality': see Strauss, p. 8. The books in the hotel library may even represent the sacred writings of such a sect.

<sup>42</sup> Strauss, p. 49.



pressure, a person builds a shell around himself, then emotions are dulled and minds are closed; a state of perfect equilibrium cannot be achieved in the 'world', and a periodic withdrawal can be beneficial.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the purpose of the hotel may at first be seen as protective, to allow Cara to be re clothed in her rightful mind and recover her energies for a future resuming of life following an emotional shock (detachment from mother, loss of a child, rejection by a husband, privation of a lover). Yet Cara takes refuge in the hotel more as a permanent retreat (technically known as autism or catatonia) — returning to the world seems as impossible for her as for Kafka's protagonists — and in the end, the manager seems to hand control over to her, compelling her to stay. In the hotel, in her womb-like existence, Cara is certainly impervious to all forms of external stimuli, she is non-dynamic, non-changing, though also stagnant, since there are no transferences of stimuli. She is as if dead in the hotel (perhaps she herself is the child who drowned, reciting the Creed in her last moments), and although she has contact with the living (the guests — who may even be her husband and his family come to reclaim her from the 'dead' ), she cannot really communicate with them, she cannot cross back over the Acheron. Cara fled from, or was engulfed by, the wave, she fled from the ebb and flow of the sea of life to a backwater, an energy-less static state, where there are no tides (of emotion). She seeks a meaning in the semi-darkness, or, if (or because) there is no meaning possible, accepts her reclusion, her assimilation, and yields to the 'system' of the hotel, a maiden sleeping sweetly in its arms.

So what is the hotel's role? What is its 'reality'? For the three guests, it is just a temporary place to stay, a hotel in the commonly accepted sense of the word, and the guests' function, as far as Cara is concerned, is perhaps to tempt her from her chosen or ordained path. Cara, however, has to work out her own salvation, her own way, and the hotel functions as a mystical catalyst in her interior development. Cara tells Guido that for her the hotel is '*L'albergo*', whereas for him it is '*un albergo*' and she adds, significantly: '*Da un albergo si esce*' (p. 160, my emphases). For Cara, the hotel — with its imperceptible shifts between day and night, winning and losing, male and female — seems at once refuge and prison, hell and paradise, eternal punishment and escapist bliss, a deliverance from reality and the only reality. In staying in this seemingly meaningless and empty but ambiguous, Heraclitean world where things become, merge into their opposites (dream–reality, death–life), Cara both saves and loses herself. As Maria Corti writes:

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<sup>43</sup> As Jung himself practised, following Freud's proposal that they break off relations. See Demaris S. Wehr, *Jung and Feminism: Liberating Archetypes* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 42, 44.

Questo fantomatico e funereo albergo non solo si configura come l'altro regno contrapposto al reale, ma in effetti è per la donna l'unica realtà in cui vivere o sopravvivere di fronte al mondo logorante, il nulla che sta fuori delle mura dell'albergo.<sup>44</sup>

If there is no exit, nothing outside it, it represents for her an eternal, if existentialist or even nihilistic, state, or state of mind. Calvino's Edmond Dantès reasons similarly about the relationship between the 'castello d'If' and the outside world: 'Devo pensare la prigione o come un luogo che è solo dentro se stesso, senza un fuori — cioè rinunciare a uscirne —, o devo pensarla non come la *mia* prigione ma come un luogo senza relazione con me né all'interno né all'esterno'.<sup>45</sup> Yet Capriolo's protagonist believes not only that she is intimately linked with the hotel, but also that there must somehow be a connection between what is real inside the hotel and what is real outside it:

Forse è la relazione simmetrica che lega una figura alla sua immagine speculare, o forse un rapporto di subordinazione di cui, ancora una volta, non saprei stabilire il senso. Ma certo in questo luogo imperturbato, vuoto di eventi, è racchiuso il segreto per affrontare il regno del dolore, o per sfuggire a esso. (pp. 147-48)

Cara 'chooses' the hotel as an environment whose co-ordinates are constant, a solid ambience to which she can attach herself safely, unlike the guests who favour a world 'dove tutto muta rapidamente e rapidamente giunge a maturazione per cedere il posto ad altro' (p. 89); a reasoned statement relating to the nature of reality at any time and in any place, to the inevitability of all existential reality, to lability rather than to absolutes. Capriolo has commented, to Daniele Marinoni, that today people appear to be suffering from a lack, both at a collective and personal level, of a deeper meaning.<sup>46</sup> Religion and morality, the two great sources of 'deeper meaning', are no longer visible, and in their place is an extreme twentieth-century emphasis on the concrete, the physical. Loving solitude and her own space, her own four walls, desk, and cat, Capriolo, rather than succumb to her admitted instinct to flee,<sup>47</sup> because of the fundamental incompatibility between her way of thinking and external realities, is effectively reverting to classical theosophy in search of something which will give a meaning to material existence. The nocturnal, mystical (perhaps even Orphic) rites taking place in the hotel

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<sup>44</sup> Maria Corti, 'Sogno dunque penso', *Panorama*, 28 April 1991, p. 21.

<sup>45</sup> 'Il conte di Montecristo', in *Ti con zero*, p. 159.

<sup>46</sup> See n. 20.

<sup>47</sup> 'La mia reazione istintiva di fronte al mondo che ci circonda è la fuga'. See Ania, 'Un altro mondo', section 'Domande generali sullo scrivere'.

suggest that, by taking away its inmates' unwanted strain and stress, the hotel in return demands that they revere and worship it or its master of ceremonies, or at least show a deep sense of gratitude.

The hotel, then, is a symbol of the process or processes going on inside Cara, and playing a dual role, it both protects and controls. It may also have, as Maria Corti has stated, an allegorical function.<sup>48</sup> Feelings of alienation and the desire to escape life engulf Cara, and the story perhaps conceals a call to readers to rethink their lives so that they want to be in them fully, not tucked away out of them, or in limbo. For Daniele Marinoni, reading Capriolo's novels gives rise to a multiplicity of sensations and anxieties, 'costringe quasi a ripensare il proprio modo di essere', and despite Capriolo's discomfort at being referred to in any way as a feminist writer, issues of gender and gender roles are prominent. Capriolo appears to be looking backwards to a more traditional view of gender, or at least revealing the confusion in modern feminism and the gradual fusion of gender roles. The hotel is Cara's mind, yet, choosing this form of genderless, 'eternal' rather than feminine, 'external' life, opting for an existence of dull routine and fixed, neutral, dependable form rather than unknown, metamorphic, ephemeral, unreliable, and sexual content, is she a prisoner or the controller of her mind? In this private heavenly or hellish abode where her soul and her desires are deadened rather than being subject to acute torment or rapture she reveals a nostalgia for childhood memory, an obsession with identity, guilt, and death, and an introspective self, perhaps seeking immortality (even through her diary). Since Cara is more attuned to the rhythms of her uterine home than she believes would be true of any other existence, her esoteric development leads her to welcome her 'imprisonment' in the dual kingdom where time, space, and language are sacralized. Here, through her pursuit of Platonic form, in living the endless, repeated, and unvarying events and actions without regard for their content, value, or purpose, she is transmuted from nothingness or existential strife to eternal glory and inner harmony. Through repetition and the absence of pressure, longing is effaced and happiness or peace becomes possible. And if the cat is there (see p. 165), it must be where she belongs, her home.

Capriolo herself has said to Marinoni that the protagonist of *Il doppio regno* is not a negative, defeated character in that she does arrive at a kind of self-knowledge at the end of the novel. She manages to break down the barriers of her individuality and gain access to 'una dimensione in qualche modo assoluta, metafisica, nella quale trova un compimento del proprio essere'. In being, remaining in the hotel, a Eurydice who does not want to emerge from her realm and follow Orpheus, indeed, who is renewed through her 'loss' of him, she comes to know and accept with serenity the conditions of non-existence, of 'death in life' (the process of absorption) in this 'unica realtà'. The hotel *is* the world and there is nothing outside it. This echoes the sentiments expressed by

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<sup>48</sup> Corti, p. 21.

Rilke in his *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, as Capriolo has stated in a review of a new edition of his poetry: the inner nature, no longer separated from the whole, recognizes that it is nothing other than 'cielo più intenso',<sup>49</sup> which is precisely Cara's experience. Like one of Rilke's maidens, she finds her highest fulfilment in 'non-fulfilment'. Orpheus's dual aspect as poet and magician of the lower and upper worlds, as part of the 'paradox of the coincidence of opposites',<sup>50</sup> represented Rilke's own deeply-felt views about poetry, thus for Rilke, this myth was a powerful symbol. Perhaps, in the same way, Capriolo's deepest feelings come through, in *Il doppio regno* as in so much of her work, from the literary resonances encountered, that is, the belief in the lasting value of art and classical literature, the transience of life and momentary fads (or as Foscolo writes, after Hippocrates: 'Breve è la vita e lunga è l'arte'<sup>51</sup>), and the impossibility of reconciliation or complementarity between art and life. Cara, then, is perhaps living out what can be a very human instinct, the yearning to live for ever, which can beset people at different stages in their lives, and in differing intensities. She wants to transform the 'here and now', the insignificant and ephemeral, into the infinite, timeless, and absolute. In her, the need to survive outweighs the need to experience life, or emotional strife, pleasurable or disturbing, and she cherishes this 'death' or dissolution of the self, an inchoate being within and undifferentiated from a maternal body. Ambivalently, yet firmly (as opposed to her hesitant opening: 'Credo di avere una trentina d'anni', p. 9), expressing something which cannot be communicated in rational discourse, Cara concludes: 'Io non sono nulla, o se sono qualcosa, sono l'albergo' (p. 168). In the hotel (ambiguity intended), Cara has found her otherworldly realm, a hermetic sanctuary, a virtually mindless, certainly emotionless, state, her 'ospizio', 'rifugio', 'dimora' where voices are gentle and eternal, her own particular paradise.

Hull

GILLIAN ANIA

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<sup>49</sup> See Paola Capriolo, 'E il divino Rilke ordinò: da oggi esista l'universo', in *Corriere della sera*, 28 December 1995, p. 20.

<sup>50</sup> Strauss, p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> *Odi e sonetti*, p. 50.