

THE SPACE(S) OF MYTH IN PAOLA CAPRIOLO'S *CON I MIEI MILLE OCCHI*

Rita Wilson

Sommario

Nel lungo racconto, Con i miei mille occhi, Paola Capriolo ripropone il mito di Eco e Narciso, in un tempo e uno spazio diversi, disorientati, appena sfiorati dalla contingenza della storia. Il recupero del mito permette alla scrittrice di raffigurare una dimensione assoluta, nella quale la distinzione fra io e mondo, fra soggetto e oggetto, fra io e tu si rivela fittizia.

Several contemporary Italian women writers of fiction have resorted to fabulous or parabolic forms as modes which lend themselves to a mimesis of subjective, internalized reality. The element of myth in the works of these writers is not only a creative method, nor is it the resumption of the role of the mythic poet, it is rather the device for gaining perspective on the self. In this context, Paul Ricoeur argues that we must go beyond the modern view of myth as “false explanation” to a sense of its “exploratory significance and its contribution to understanding”. He describes the “symbolic function” of myth, its power of discovery and revelation and affirms that, as a stimulus to

speculation, myth is a genuine “dimension of modern thought” (Ricoeur, 1967: 5). Moreover, myth is “a disclosure of unprecedented worlds, an opening on to other *possible* worlds which transcend the established limits of our *actual* world” (Ricoeur, 1991: 490). Thus myth carries with it a promise of another mode of existence entirely, to be realized just beyond the present time and place. It is not only foundational but liberating, and it coincides with the project of repossessing the cultural heritage espoused by many women writers.

In the short novel, *Con i miei mille occhi*, published in 1997, Paola Capriolo investigates the liberating power of myth. Her point of departure is the Ovidian story of Narcissus and Echo, a story which embodies numerous interrelated motifs and which is deeply concerned with the Self’s origins and with identity. The myth provides Capriolo with an established model through which to contextualize and explore a personal condition as an authorial concern. The events she narrates are exemplary events, which is why she rejects spatial and temporal settings that are too precise: “I like to place myself in a dimension ‘above’ reality. By ‘above’ I mean something similar to what is indicated by the term metaphysics with respect to physics”¹. In these “scenari irreali”, her characters experience “metamorfosi” and “conflitti metafisici” (Capriolo, 1998: 35), and “mondo vero e mondo apparente” become “un’unica realtà, e questa realtà coincide con il soggetto”(1998: 44). In other words, the self, instead of an *imago dei* or a transcendental unity of apperception, becomes a reflecting reflection. In Derrida’s words, Capriolo sets up “a

¹ Capriolo quoted in an interview with F. Guardiani, in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Fall (1992): 119-122 (p. 120).

nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically' (1976: 36). Thus, for Capriolo, all representations become part of textual play, polymorphously and perversely weaving among themselves the echo of meaning. The *locus classicus* of the literary device of echo is Ovid's story of Echo and Narcissus (*Metamorphoses* III: 356-510). Ovid dramatizes the failed erotic encounter between the two by literally transcribing Echo's fragmentary resoundings of the youth's final words: "emoriar, quam sit tibi copia nostri" (l. 391, "may I die before I give you power over me"). She responds "sit tibi copia nostri" (l. 392, "I give you power over me"). A potent irony results from the repetition, for the reference of the pronouns has changed, and the change introduces not only deferral but also difference, as if to compromise the (narcissistic) identification of the word with its acoustic image. In Capriolo's text, Echo becomes "an originary figure of deconstruction, as altering repetition (*différance*), as a mode of reading immanent to the text which turns reflexively back on itself, as a poetic method of production (of meaning) by reproduction (of sound)" (Berger, 1996: 622).

The role of language in the literal and the figurative dimensions of the story of Echo is emphasised in the later epigram by Ausonius, in which he identifies Echo as the daughter of air and language (*aeris et lingua sum filia*)². In her version of

² Ausonius (310-after 393) wrote the epigram "In Echo pictam" ("On a painted Echo"): "Vane, quid adfectas faciem mihi ponere, pictor / Ignotamque oculis sollicitare deam? / Aeris et Linguae sum filia, mater inanis / Indicii, vocem quae sine mente gero. / Extremos pereunte modos a fine reducens, / Ludificata sequor verba aliena meis. / Auribus in vestris habito penetrabilis Echo: / Et, si vis similem pingere, pingere sonum" [Why do you struggle to put a face on me, vain painter, and disturb a goddess whom no eyes know? I am the daughter of air and speech (language), mother of vain tokens, I who have a voice without a mind. I bring back the last rhythms from the

the tale, Capriolo has made full use of this phrase from Ausonius. In particular, she focuses on the paradox expressed in the epigram's final line, "I live in your ears, the penetrating Echo, and if you wish to paint a likeness of me then paint the sound". The poem seems to question the qualifications of painting to reproduce the characteristic motif of this particular theme: Echo is something heard but not seen; she cannot be painted. It is this last paradox which Capriolo most successfully subverts.

The action of *Con i miei mille occhi* is set in an indefinite Arcadian past. Capriolo's choice of a pastoral setting, and her portrayal of Echo as a wood-nymph links this text to a literary tradition in which the echo-rhyme functions both as literary technique and stylistic device³. Furthermore, the mythical enclosure of the Forest, the pastoral *locus amoenus*, provides a remote landscape which allows the mythological story to be (re)told for its own sake, with the stress on the erotic and sensual element, without moral view-points:

dying end and mockingly follow strangers' words with mine. I live in your ears, the penetrating Echo, and if you wish to paint a likeness of me then paint the sound]. Quoted in Hollander, 1981: 8-9.

³ The echo-reply as literary technique and stylistic device is treated in detail in E. Colby, "The Echo-Device in Literature", *Bulletin of New York Public Library*, 23, 1919: 683-713, 783-804. While echo-reply occurs even in Greek literature, it was probably Ovid who first combined the technique with the story of Echo's fate, and also gave it an adequate pastoral setting in the Narcissus fable. Colby surmises that Ovid's popularity and Ausonius's epigram, with its exhortation to "paint sound", must have contributed to the revival of this technique in 16th and 17th century pastoral poetry. An early Italian example, cited by Colby, is Poliziano's "Pan ed Eco" (1498), where Pan speaks of his unhappy love for Echo, who answers by speaking of her love for another — so here already a hidden allusion to Narcissus is inserted in conjunction with the echo-reply. The lament of an unhappy lover in the open air with Echo as the only listener is a common topos in 16th- and 17th-century literature, but this lament is not always answered by the echo, and does not always contain allusion to her fate in the myth. The combination of echo-reply and mythological allusion in the pastoral elegy remains fairly rare. In epic and dramatic versions of the myth itself the echo-reply becomes, from the 16th century onwards, all but obligatory.

Anche quella scena così famosa ovviamente si svolse qui, sulle rive di una mia fonte che sgorga dalla roccia con uno scroscio sommesso e si espande in una superficie limpidissima. Gli alberi e le rupi, le effimere architetture delle nuvole e le tinte mutevoli del cielo vi si riflettono con precisione assoluta: un altro mondo pare schiudersi su quel fondale, un mondo identico al nostro eppure stranamente trasfigurato, reso più nitido e puro dall'assenza di vita. E come ormai tutti sanno, vi è in quella purezza una seduzione sottile, una forza d'attrazione cui è difficile resistere. (8-9)

Having set the scene, Capriolo then sums up the Ovidian episode, describing it in a series of images which stress the “concatenation of reflection” (Kristeva, 1988: 109):

Ricordo ancora con chiarezza la figura di Narciso china sulla fonte, assorta nell'insidioso colloquio con l'altro Narciso che gli si fa incontro da quella profondità, mentre la ninfa disprezzata lo osserva dall'alto di una roccia e ripete il lamento di lui, ma non può dar voce al proprio. Allora ebbe inizio la trasformazione. Uno spazio vuoto si aprì nel corpo di Eco, al centro, nel punto dove era il cuore, e poi si dilatò, si dilatò, fino a raggiungere le parti più lontane. Narciso seguiva a volgerle le spalle, incurante di tutto fuorché di se stesso, e fu l'unico a non accorgersi di quella metamorfosi cui io e l'intero mio popolo assistevamo con il fiato sospeso. Ormai l'aria poteva scorrere senza incontrare resistenza attraverso di lei che a sua volta era aria, o meno che aria, un nulla animato dal quale si levavano ancora grida di lamento. E quando Narciso tacque, accasciandosi al suolo privo di vita, anche quel nulla dovette tacere. (9)

Elsewhere, Capriolo has said that “important” words can only be pronounced against a background of silence, and that, even in a figurative way, silence is now becoming a utopia (in Guardiani,

1992: 121). In *Con i miei mille occhi*, the stillness serves to highlight the utopic space. The centuries-old stillness is broken by the arrival of a handsome young man⁴, who, accompanied by “i soffi sinuosi di Eco”, reaches a part of the Forest which has never been seen by humans, “una vasta radura a forma di cerchio” (18). In this “luogo segreto” he constructs a simple hut and begins to paint beautiful landscapes populated by mythical figures, “Pan e Siringa, ad esempio, [che] un giorno mi accadde di sorprender[e] in quella stessa posa, lui intento a scrutare tra gli alberi, lei tremante, nascosta dietro un cespuglio, un piede già sollevato per fuggire appena verrà scorta” (23).

The literary milieu is that of pastoral questing and lament for loss, the hypotext that of the Homeric Hymn to Pan which associates Echo and Syrinx⁵, and in which echo is not personified, but instead remains a dominant trope of acoustical vocal image. A trope which Capriolo uses to dramatic effect for the seductive “voice” which relentlessly lures the artist to the site of the “imperiosa fonte”. Despite Echo’s desperate attempts to stop him (she doesn’t want him to suffer the same fate as Narcissus), the artist, seduced by that “other” echo (i.e. the “voice” of the water) literally pushes through the nymph, and finds the spring. Thereafter, he becomes obsessed with the desire to reproduce the image he saw in the water in his

⁴ “Vestito come gli uomini usano vestire di questi tempi, con un corto mantello, stivali dagli ampi risvolti [...], una gorgiera bianchissima a incorniciare i lineamenti delicati [...] [e] il cappello piumato” (15).

⁵ A tradition of mythographic interpretation that derives from the association of Echo and Pan (see, for example, the Homeric Hymn to Pan in *The Homeric Hymns*, translated by D. Hine (New York, 1972): 69) tends to pair Echo and Syrinx: certainly Pan’s sigh of disappointment at the armful of reeds he came up with when he attempted to clutch the metamorphosed nymph, blowing through those very reeds and producing a “faint and plaintive sound” is a version of an echo.

paintings. Dissatisfied with all his portraits, he leaves the Forest for several days and when he returns he is laden with mysterious large parcels. The Forest and Echo think these are more canvases but they turn out to be enormous mirrors, which he hangs all around the hut. Echo tries to distract him from his self-obsession by breathing over all the mirrors so that they mist up. Finally, she uses her breath to sketch herself on one of the mirrors. Based on this sketch, the artist then paints her portrait. As the portrait nears completion, so Echo begins to acquire colour, corporality.

The narrating voice of *Con i miei mille occhi* is that of the ancient Forest. Over the centuries, the Forest has been the refuge of “satiri e ninfe”, “le fate e gli elfi”, knights in search of dragons, as well as “principesse rapite, bambini abbandonati dai genitori, figli di re segregati in una torre per evitare l’adempiersi di funeste profezie” (33). It has heard “il canto sublime di Orfeo” (23), as well as the desperate weeping of “la povera Niobe” (23). Indeed, “tutti, prima o poi, sono capitati qui, uomini di ogni specie” (33), including magicians who are able to “trasformare principi in ranocchi (quanti mi è già toccato ospitarne nei miei stagni!)” (17).

Word play, the allusion to other meanings or previous texts, is usually thought of as linking references in some kind of conceptual space. Capriolo’s Forest is not the means whereby a fictitious or past reality may be represented, but is the mediating space, providing the possibility of a meeting between two realities. Forest, paths and especially the spring, are described with strong visual palpability; details of light, sound and scent produce varying sensual impressions. Capriolo activates the role

of nature in the story in a new way. The Forest's echoing device (e.g., the multiple reflection of images through its *mille occhi*⁶), the choring wails of the winds, are identified with the patroness of the device, Echo herself. It is around Echo and for Echo that the winds are playing, and it is logical that the artist's infatuation with his reflection is surrounded by stifling immobility, while Echo's presence is signalled by winds, gently stirring.

The Forest, as omniscient narrator, provides a "normative", ordering view point, while, at the same time, eliminating temporal processes⁷ and drawing out the interconnections between things, people and/or events: "Per fortuna la mia onniveggenza mi permette di seguire contemporaneamente l'una e l'altra scena. Sono così testimone del loro compiersi simultaneo che sfugge del tutto ai protagonisti" (80). The complex relationship

⁶ The allusive titling of Capriolo's novel fits a rhetorical scheme in which the repetition of the word/phrase, the acoustical echoing, itself fashions a rhetorical figure:

Attraverso gli innumerevoli sguardi delle mie creature (non vi è angolo, in me, che non pulluli di occhi) ora lo vedo anch'io distintamente: è un giovane di bello aspetto. (15)

Ormai spio l'interno della capanna attraverso tanti sguardi differenti, che mi sembra di essere quel mostro dai cento occhi al quale un tempo, in un'altra delle mie radure [...] era affidata la custodia della ragazza tramutata in giovenca. Come Argo, anch'io non conosco riposo. (60)

Ma ecco che torno a spalancare tutti i miei mille occhi quando all'improvviso il pittore si riscuote ed esce dalla capanna con fare risoluto. (76)

[O]ggi quando ho visto il pittore fermarsi di colpo a metà di una salita e tendere l'orecchio al fruscio lontano di quella fonte, la linfa si è agghiacciata nelle mie mille vene. (26)

⁷ By definition past and future must be already known. In a short story, entitled "Il dio narrante", Capriolo depicts a curious and impatient god who often confuses "before and after": "Il tempo giace dinanzi a lui come uno spazio immobile, fatto d'ombre e di luci eppure tutto presente, e solo con grande sforzo può capire la bizzarra prospettiva da cui i mortali contemplanò questa vasta distesa, scambiandola, chissà perché, per un fluire continuo, un trapassare incessante da un nulla all'altro" (in Wood, 1993: 128).

between narrator and characters is convincingly represented through the motif of reflection, both in its auditory form (the echo, i.e. the reflection of sound), and in its visual form (the reflection in the water)⁸. Capriolo maintains the Ovidian motifs of auditory and visual reflection, uniting them in the notion of a “deceptive” spring (Ovid calls the spring *fallax*) which seduces both with its “voice” and with its “image”:

Conosco bene quella fonte, so quanto sia facile perdersi nelle sue note suadenti, nei suoi limpidi incantesimi, fino a dimenticare ogni altra cosa e persino se stessi, quasi che nel breve cerchio racchiuso fra le sue rive si concentrasse tutto ciò che al mondo ha valore e scopo, significato e bellezza. Ciascuno di quelle acque trasparenti crede di trovare ciò che aveva sempre cercato e vi si accosta con un misto di appagamento e di tormentosa nostalgia, stupito nel vedere l’oggetto dei suoi desideri così vicino e insieme irraggiungibile. Poiché per quanto la si contempi, per quanto vi si immergano mani e braccia o si chini il volto su di lei fino a sfiorarla, la fonte non concede nulla di sé, della propria essenza nascosta e prodigiosa, ma si limita a rispondere a chi la guarda con un gioco di immagini fuggevoli che tradiscono la loro inconsistenza appena si tenta di affiorarle. (29-30)

When the Forest notes with surprise the “sconcertante somiglianza” between the artist and Narcissus, the recognition reminds us of Ovid’s “repercussae [...] imaginis umbra” (the

⁸ The parallel between the motifs of reflection in the two episodes is emphasized by a parallel in the choice of words and syntax: at one time Narcissus is “*alternae deceptus imagine vocis*” (l. 385), at another “*visae conreptus imagine formae*” (l. 416). It is generally assumed that Ovid was the first to combine the Echo and Narcissus themes. Perhaps the idea is suggested by a term for “echo” that was used in Latin long before Ovid uses it here, *imago vocis* or simply *imago*. The traditional Latin *imago* here becomes a complex figure, blending a far more visual meaning of *image* (appositive to “shadow”) with something approaching the modern sense of *image* meaning “trope”.

shadow of a reflected image)⁹, and of the continual reciprocal action involved in the process of reflection, an action which increases its attraction even more: “Narciso che si specchia nella fonte, il pittore che si specchia nei propri tratti dipinti, e nello sguardo di entrambi quella fissità alata da cui nulla sembra più in grado di riscuoterli” (39).

The motif of reflection, in Capriolo’s text, foregrounds a particular concept of space, one which Michel de Certeau has called “another spatiality”, an “anthropological, poetic and mythic experience of space” (1993: 154)¹⁰. In this space, the separation between the subject and the object of representation no longer exists and the mimetic mode is not the agent but the mediation between different realities.

Some of my characters look at themselves through the mirror: sometimes in the literal sense [the artist] and some other in a figurative sense [Echo reflected in the voices of others]. But the mirror never reproduces the physical aspect of its user: it projects an ideal model, a sort of archetype that the character tries to identify with through an intense process of transformation. (Capriolo in Guardiani, 1992: 120)

⁹ In Ovid’s version, what Narcissus sees in the water and mistakes for another person is called both *imago* and *umbra*. In one place the words *imago* and *umbra* are combined: “Ista repercussae, quam cernis, imaginis umbra est” (l. 434). It is important here to point out that the words for shadow and reflection remained interchangeable for a long time and that they also stand for the “shadows” of the dead.

¹⁰ “The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other” (De Certeau, 1993: 153).

In other words, Capriolo represents the subject as a field of metaphor, illusion, fiction and myth. The subject becomes an emptiness to be filled by a world with the status of mirror, sign, or representation of the self¹¹. The mirror is not always presented as a simple metaphor of doubling or of self-discovery. The act of reflection does not penetrate the barrier between the “I” and the “other”, nor does it merge the ambivalent dichotomy of inside/outside. Capriolo allows herself to be seduced by the game of “speculations”, in which mirrors, textual or otherwise, simultaneously grant temporary identity and “dispossess” and fragment the subject:

In piedi, al centro della capanna, il pittore [...] contempla la sua immagine che gli si fa incontro da ogni specchio, la esamina, la studia, tenta di intrecciare con essa un muto colloquio. [...] Il pittore si fa più ardito, sfiora gli specchi con le mani, e altre mani si tendono da ogni parte verso le sue, quasi ad afferrarle. Sembra che quei gemelli inconsistenti vogliano attrarlo nel loro mondo, proprio come lui tenta di attrarli nel suo. Sorrisi, cenni di ogni genere, sguardi infatuati e malinconici vengono scambiati tra gli abitanti di quelle due regioni contigue e insieme irraggiungibili l'una per l'altra, e tali scambi diventano così fitti, così incalzanti, da indurmi a temere che gli schermi sottilissimi da cui sono separate possano crollare. (52-53)

¹¹ “[U]nlike the window and *perhaps* like a book, as a source of knowledge [a mirror] is only and totally ‘reflective’. Astonishingly, mirrors and mirror-like objects are the sole means by which we can directly ‘know’ our image [...]. The mirror is the instrument of self-regard. Yet in the very act of so ‘seeing directly’ ourselves, we see not our self but our *double*; someone outside this someone we are. And someone who is the *reverse* of ourself; a negative double whom we shall never see ‘positively’ unless we once again double our mirror, looking through mirror to mirror, ever distancing ourselves from ourselves. Thus the mirror brings both replication and contradiction, in infinite multiplication and an unremitting displacement and alienation, estrangement” (Nash, 1987: 184).

The game of identifications and metamorphoses is interminable. In this game, the action is separate from the subjects, it simply happens.

Qual è dunque, mi domando la volontà che presiede a tutto questo? Non quella di Eco, e neppure quella del pittore [...] ma forse un cospirare segreto di entrambe nella loro radice più segreta, sottratta alla comprensione degli stessi interessati. Di nuovo penso agli specchi, al rispondermi spontaneo delle immagini di qua e di là dalla lastra di cristallo, e la loro legge, che finora mi era apparsa così spietata e nefasta, mi sembra trovare un'inattesa redenzione. (80-81)

Thus, the philosophical subject needs the mirror in order to turn away from its images towards "Truth". Without the mirror there is no opportunity to speculate. Without speculation there is no philosophy and the philosophical subject becomes as "destitute" as the Matter s/he denigrates. Kristeva emphasizes the role of speculative discourse in the transition from the concept of self-as-one-in-relationship-to-another (the *ego affectus est*) to the concept of the self-as-one, as self-defining and autonomous unit (Kristeva, 1988: 109-120).

We can, thus, attribute to Echo, the essential function of a revealer of alterity. This alterity (or alteration) strikes the speaking subject (the artist) within and from out of his language, and threatens the certainty of his self-possession. Hence, in the reflection situation we can identify the central motif of the myth — a symbol which in a mystic way reveals the fate of the human soul as the prisoner of matter, deceived by a beautiful illusion. Narcissus in the face of the reflection in the spring can be taken as an image of rapture in face of beauty. It can also be the

symbol for an aesthetic experience of a mystical nature, and thereby, as symbol for the creative artist. Recognising the self-awareness of the poet/writer and the text (narcissistic narrative) brings out new identifications with Narcissus/artist. Once more Narcissus is the symbol for the relation of poet to his creation, and, in Capriolo's story, is extended at the fictional level to the artist and the nymph.

The narrator and the reader know all the time about the nature of the echo and the reflection better than the artist-protagonist does. This superior knowledge culminates in the iconic passage in which Echo tries to reveal her identity to the artist:

Di parlare non le è concesso, né può, come vorrebbe, assumere una forma salda e visibile per offrirsi agli sguardi di lui. Tristemente, si accosta a uno degli specchi e vi si stende sopra. Il giovane si alza, raggiunge lo specchio soffermandosi a osservare le gocce minute che appannano il cristallo, quindi appoggia sulla superficie il palmo di una mano, vi stampa la propria impronta.

"Chi sei?" dice a bassa voce, e Eco ripete: "Chi sei?" Continua a ripeterlo mentre vaga con la velocità di un turbine da uno specchio all'altro offuscandoli ad uno ad uno, e ora sembra che da tutti gli specchi qualcuno ripeta incessantemente tali parole, in un fitto intrecciarsi di voci identiche. (70)

It is Echo who serves as mirror for the artist (not his reflection) by presenting herself as (an)other, who, through desire, comes to language. What makes Echo "speak"? The desire of the artist to establish her identity. Echo's repetition of his question, multiplies both the mirror effect and the effect of presence. Echo assumes both the artist's voice and his creative function:

Violentemente, spasmodicamente Eco si contrae, raduna ogni sua energia in un soffio sottile come la punta di un dito o di un pennello, e quel soffio comincia a tracciare sul cristallo le linee di un disegno. L'operazione è lenta e faticosa, ma lo sguardo sempre più attento del giovane a poco a poco riesce a discernere in quei segni labili, tracciati con il respiro, una figura di donna. (71)

It is clear that Capriolo draws on the connection between the Pygmalion myth and the story of Narcissus. Capriolo's Echo gives a face to that which does not have one (herself) so that she may represent herself and present herself to the alterity of the other, and, like Pygmalion, indulges in both a narcissistic act and an act of transformation¹²: "la rassomiglianza tra opera e artefice è ora così perfetta da far pensare [...] al compiersi di un pericoloso incantesimo" (55).

The similarity between Echo's act and the creation of a female-centered symbolic which unites (female) desire with a material world becomes apparent. The difficulties encountered in creating a "different" female Other who is constantly revealing herself to be the same, the pain in leaving behind a past that

¹² The theme of metamorphosis or transformation is explicitly portrayed in a short story entitled, "La donna di pietra". In this story, a sculptor, Mur, sees a woman closing a window and is fascinated by the graceful gesture of her arm. He tries to immortalize this feminine grace in stone. As he works on the sculpture, the "real" woman and the stone statue become a single being for him: "se sfiorava con le dita il seno bianco dell'effigie, era la donna stessa che gli concedeva, vinta da quel sortilegio di pietra" (Capriolo, 1988: 90). At this point, Capriolo subverts the Pygmalion theme which underlies this story: the sculptor cannot infuse life into his creation, and is punished for his hubristic behaviour, for viewing his own creation as "real": "Si era spezzato l'incantesimo con cui egli aveva creduto di poter infondere nella roccia la levità di ciò che è caduco, e costringere la caducità in un vincolo eterno. [...] Non gli rimaneva nulla da fare in quel luogo, accanto a quel simulacro di vita, nulla da attendere sotto le finestre della casa, inesorabilmente chiuse" (1988: 91). In this story, Capriolo explores the notion of loss associated with transformation and hints at the type of punishment that awaits those who avoid encounters with the human "other".

continues to reappear or the contradictions that result from the creation of a new one, are important themes in women's writing. Fantastic or tragic materializations of desire in and of language either express a temporary escape from reality or force an encounter with it. The Pygmalion myth allows women writers to reintroduce these themes from two opposing and thus seemingly more complete viewpoints in the text, the creator and the created, and Narcissism becomes a literary device representing a desire for self-understanding through mirror-introspection.

In Capriolo's text, Echo embodies a canonical formal scheme which associates erotic possession with textuality, voice, and contingent presence, The rhetorical device of echoing is used by Capriolo to augment and trope the (re)creation of Echo's subjectivity, a strong, centred subjectivity which locates identity in the body: "quella figura rivela almeno una vaga somiglianza con l'originale, e che si tratti di una ninfa lo si capisce chiaramente dalla posa, dalla lunga chioma e soprattutto da quella qualità imponderabile, da quell'innato fulgore che distingue le ninfe dalle donne comuni" (71). A body, however, whose identity is confirmed only through art, as is evidenced by the artist's final painting in which "la figura [...], sia pure appena abbozzata, e già chiaramente riconoscibile: dalla posa, dalla lunga chioma e soprattutto da quella qualità imponderabile, da quell'innato fulgore che distingue le ninfe dalle donne comuni" (78). The artist imitates the image in the mirror, and in doing so, the distance between the imitating subject and the object imitated is annulled. Through the artist's sketches Echo acquires a new materiality, and her nature becomes similar to that of the (painted) image.

Unlike the traditional figures of the myth, Capriolo's Echo and the artist are not two figures who fail to distinguish between self and other, thus they cease being two selves that have never come into independent existence. The combination of the Narcissus theme with the Pygmalion myth emphasises the power of art to create life, in other words, the materialization of desire brings the inanimate to life /gives the invisible corporal substance

Torna a girarsi verso la figura dipinta, poi guarda di nuovo l'altra figura che le corrisponde in modo così pieno come a un oggetto corrisponde la sua immagine riflessa in uno specchio e tuttavia, diversamente dalle immagini negli specchi, è fatta di carne e di ossa. [...] E quando il pittore con un gesto incerto tende le mani verso di lei, so che al suo gesto non risponderà un soffio ma la salda, corporea stretta di altre mani. (85)

Thus Echo, the voiced other of the myth, does *not* remain unheard and out of sight, while Narcissus is busy painting himself into oblivion. This is the domain of "reason after Freud" (Lacan), i.e., a symbolic space, in which myths allay the unbearable anxiety of living in the truth of the "absolutism of reality". We can thus conclude that the myth is not intended to be its own message but reflects a presumed reality. The purpose of (re)writing the myth is to deconstruct the linearity of history and reconstruct other linearities of view. The intertextuality of this story is not merely dependent on confrontation with Ovid's or Ausonius's versions. There is patently an answer — or a challenge? — to existing critical approaches. The book is in fact

an intertextual “event”¹³, and represents infinitely more than the mere modulation of a prior model, since it subverts, simultaneously, motif, structure, resolution and functioning. The act of remembering and re-creating the narratives of the past in secular, aesthetic terms, is an act of emancipation: not in the sense of rational progress, but in the new spirit of “ludic imagining” and Ricoeur’s “poetics of the possible”¹⁴. In this sense, Capriolo achieves what Ihab Hassan calls “unsettling and resettling of codes” (in Hutcheon, 1989: 18). Firstly, her use of myth recalls and projects an “other” world. Secondly, the myth reminds us that there is always something else, something “other” to be said or imagined. Finally, the myth, as a play of past paradigm and future possibility, gives expression to the “other”, to those voices and causes excluded from the present hierarchy, and opens up a “space of the possible”.

(University of the Witwatersrand)

¹³ It is sold together with an accompanying CD “contenente musiche ispirate al racconto composto da Alessandro Solbiati”. A condensed version of the story is read by Anna Nogara, whose voice, “accesce il fascino di questa originale ricerca sui materiali sonori che per la prima volta vede nascere insieme, in stretta compenetrazione reciproca, un’opera narrativa e un’opera musicale” (quoted on cover blurb of the first edition, Milano: Bompiani, 1997).

¹⁴ “Post-modernism, understood in Vattimo’s sense of a non-foundational and non-functionalist theory of interpretation, solicits an ethical task of remembering that is not a simple repetition of tradition but its joyous re-creation. Such remembering emancipates tradition from servile conformism, transposing it into a historical transmission of overtures to possible modes of being-in-the-world” (Kearney, 1991: 185-86).

References

- Berger, A-E. 1996 "The Latest Word from Echo", *New Literary History*, 27: 621-640.
- Capriolo, P. 1988 "La donna di pietra", in *La grande Eulalia*, Milano: Feltrinelli.
- _____ 1997 *Con i miei mille occhi*, Milano: Bompiani.
- _____ 1998 "L'astrazione e la maschera", in Rustichelli, L. (Ed.), *Seminario sul racconto*, Lafayette: Bordighera.
- de Certeau, M. 1993 "Walking in the city", in During, S. (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 151-160.
- Derrida, J. 1976 *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hollander, J. 1981 *The Figure of Echo*, Berkeley: California University Press.
- Hutcheon, L. 1989 *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Nash, C. 1987 *World Postmodern Fiction. A Guide*, London and New York: Longman.
- Kearney, R. 1991 *Poetics of Imagining: From Husserl to Lyotard*, London: Harper Collins.
- Kristeva, J. 1988 *Tales of Love*, (trans) L.S. Roudiez, New York and Guilford, Sy: Columbia University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1967 *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston: Beacon Press.
- _____ 1991 *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, edited by M.J. Valdes, New York and London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf.
- Wood, S. (ed.) 1993 *Italian Women Writing*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press.