

RETHINKING ROMANZO ROSA: THE FIRST PERSON NARRATOR AND CHANGING GENDER ROLES IN BRUNELLA GASPERINI'S *ROSSO DI SERA*

FEDERICA BALDUCCI
(Victoria University of Wellington)

Sommario

Questo articolo analizza l'uso del narratore autodiegetico e del punto di vista maschile in Rosso di sera, un romanzo di Brunella Gasperini (Bianca Robecchi, 1918-1979) pubblicato all'inizio degli anni Sessanta. Grazie a tali scelte narrative, Gasperini riesce a costruire un romanzo estremamente innovativo nel panorama della narrativa popolare rivolta a un pubblico femminile. Mentre il racconto in prima persona facilita l'identificazione delle lettrici con la voce narrante, il punto di vista maschile interviene a complicare tale identificazione, aprendo una riflessione sulle identità femminili nell'Italia del boom economico e la loro rappresentazione nella narrativa di genere.

Brunella Gasperini (Bianca Robecchi, 1918-1979), a popular writer and journalist, is known mainly for her long-lasting collaboration with important women's magazines. She contributed to *Novella* (from 1952) and *Annabella* (from 1954) until her death, particularly as a personal advice columnist (Inglese, 1990:866-867). But Gasperini's production includes several novels as well, conventionally grouped under the generic umbrella of romance fiction (Arslan & Pozzato, 1989; Roccella, 1998; Spinazzola, 2005:212). Aimed at a female audience, these novels are usually dismissed as entertaining reading, yet a closer look reveals a compelling relationship with contemporary reality, insofar as Gasperini's

stories often pose complicated questions on more realistic issues that relate to the readers' everyday life and emotions. This rings particularly true for *Rosso di sera* (1964; 1977; 2004)¹, a novel that critic Bruno Pischedda defines a “romanzo di svolta e commiato dal genere rosa” (1985:140) and Eugenia Roccella calls a “romanzo-limite” (1998:106) within Gasperini's literary production. Both statements arise from the fact that, shortly after the publication of *Rosso di sera*, Gasperini moved away from the novel to switch to the so-called ‘cronache domestiche’, family narratives presented in a style that successfully conjugates fiction and autobiography.

In agreeing with both Pischedda and Roccella, I want to take a step further and propose that *Rosso di sera* is a novel that occupies a very innovative space in the landscape of 1960s genre fiction. After the second world war, Northern Italy (and Milan in particular) was the base of modern and dynamic publishing houses focused on popular narratives, a marketing strategy elaborated during the interwar years and now in full bloom². Popular, in this context, was understood not only as commercially profitable, but also as entertaining and directed at a varied audience, one not limited to academics and/or educated readers (Ragone, 1989; Spinazzola, 2005). Publishers created a dynamic and fertile environment by diversifying their products (magazines, comics, novels, short stories

¹ Although 1977 is usually indicated as the year of publication, the back cover of the 2004 reprint states that Gasperini wrote the novel in 1963. This date is confirmed by the ‘Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico delle biblioteche italiane e per le informazioni bibliografiche’ (ICCU), which lists a copy of *Rosso di sera* published by Rizzoli in 1964. My contention is that *Rosso di sera* was first serialised in women's magazine *Annabella* in 1963, like the majority of Gasperini's fictional production, and subsequently printed (and reprinted) by Rizzoli. All the excerpts in this essay refer to the 2004 edition.

² Leading publishers in the field were Mondadori, Rizzoli, Bompiani, and Sonzogno among others. There is no room here for a digression on the evolution of the literary marketplace and culture industry in postwar Italy, which would require a more detailed historical analysis of the Italian socio-political landscape. Some of the aspects related to publishing market and reading habits can be found in Ragone (1989), Bordoni (1993) and Turi and Palazzolo (1997).

and so on), and simultaneously concentrating their efforts on generic narratives. Thus, from the late 1950s genres such as detective fiction (*giallo*), science fiction (*fantascienza*) and romance (*rosa*) were either establishing or consolidating their place among readers³; at the same time, more and more scholars engaged in a critical analysis of such genres, discussing their place and importance in both society and literary tradition (Eco, 1964; Forte, 1966; Petronio, 1979; Bordoni, 1984; Detti, 1990; Spinazzola, 1995; Lepschy, 2000).

As I have mentioned, Gasperini's fictional production is inscribed in the tradition of Italian romance fiction, generally known as *romanzo rosa*. Usually written by women for women, *rosa* stories are grounded in what critics Arslan and Pozzato call the "confronto polemico fra l'uomo e la donna" (1989:1028), in which the woman challenges and resists the man, and where the conventional happy ending is often symbolised by a marriage that reconciles and harmonises the clash between the sexes. In this context, critics acknowledge Gasperini's peculiar position within the genre, that is, less preoccupied with the male/female courtship and more interested in a narrative exploring the emotional tensions related to a wide variety of age groups and relationships, including love, friendship and family; as Pischedda (1985) maintains, her novels "parlano di gruppi giovanili nel loro tirocinio sentimentale per raggiungere, insieme all'amore, la maturità" (129). In an essay on *rosa*'s narrative strategies, Marina Mizzau suggests that *facilità* is the genre's keyword: "il rosa dipinge un mondo in cui tutto è facile [...] tutto è preconstituito, già dato, stradetto, la lettrice non deve fare alcuna fatica, non deve compiere inferenze, ristrutturare le proprie aspettative" (Mizzau, 1987:57)⁴.

³ For example, Mondadori's *Urania*, the first and successful Italian science fiction imprint, was launched in 1952.

⁴ For a comprehensive analysis of *romanzo rosa*, see also Pozzato (1982) and Rosa (1985).

This is not the case with Gasperini's fiction, which I consider pivotal in a critical discourse aimed at rethinking modern *rosa* as the potential ground for the representation and negotiation of contending values, and *Rosso di sera* constitutes a brilliant example of this. As I elaborate below, Gasperini's technique dismantles the *rosa*'s traditional structures and creates a unique narrative voice, one that conveys both a sense of detachment from and identification with the characters, and therefore complicates the position of the (female) reader. Using a first person voice and a young male protagonist, both very unusual in the *rosa* canon, Gasperini unmistakably signals her departure from generic conventions, which are furthermore displaced thanks to the importance accorded to challenging themes such as sexuality and suicide.

Prior to examining the novel in detail, however, a brief overview of Gasperini's production is necessary. As well as running a popular *rubrica della posta*, where she gave voice to the desires and anxieties of Italian women in the postwar years, her columns conducted and discussed surveys on important social issues such as divorce, education and abortion, among others. In commenting on Gasperini's ability to address public and private spheres of feminine identities, journalist Camilla Cederna (1911-1997) praised her irony, courage and intellectual honesty, qualities that secured Gasperini a devoted audience which her writing helped to come to terms with a rapidly changing society: "Attraverso le sue risposte Brunella Gasperini [...] è come se avesse scritto un grande romanzo di costume con tutte le norme di ogni generazione, problemi d'amore, sesso, politica, e via via tutto quello che andava cambiando" (in Gasperini, 1979:5). In the course of her career, Gasperini also wrote a number of popular novels and short stories that Antonia Arslan addresses as a significant insight into Italian women's writing, "uno spaccato di raro interesse della società contemporanea, e dell'evoluzione, in rapporto e in confronto dialettico con essa, della donna come soggetto e oggetto di scrittura" (Arslan, 1998:77). On a similar note, Mirna Cicioni and Susan

Walker suggest that Gasperini's autobiographical works, notably *Una donna e altri animali* (1978), anticipate feminist fiction and narrative writing that in Italy would emerge only years later (Cicioni and Walker, 2002).

Nevertheless, Gasperini's works have been confined to marginal spaces of discussion and largely excluded from academic studies. The few critics who have engaged with her extensive production have focused mainly on the public aspects of her writing, that is to say, her columns for *Annabella*, and on the books she wrote as a 'spin-off' of that profession. This production is exemplary of the so-called *boom economico*: characterised by a rapid economic growth and extraordinary social transformations, the 1950s and 1960s were decades of great development in Italy, and the scene of substantial changes in lifestyles and customs, especially for women. Becoming gradually urban and literate, Italian women started to shift their social and cultural boundaries from domesticity to independence, and such changes are genuinely reflected in Gasperini's production. In this context, it is worth noting that the 1950s showed a dramatic increase in women's magazines, as a response to a more visible role of women in society and culture (Arslan, 1998:61-77; Di Giorgio, 1992; Panizza and Wood, 2000:8-9). These periodicals and magazines produced content that the target readerships would find both entertaining and rewarding, such as interviews, reviews, short stories, letters, advice columns and serial novels. *Annabella*⁵ in particular became an upscale magazine directed at a middle-brow female audience looking for a new and more contemporary identity (Arvidsson, 2003:103); Gasperini's twenty-year collaboration as columnist put her in the unique position of capturing the changing social climate and women's search for alternate role models. Indeed, her articles and advice columns encouraged

⁵ Formerly known as *Lei*, the magazine was founded in 1933. The magazine was forced to change its name into *Annabella* in 1938, as a consequence of the campaign against the formal *lei* (third person singular) promoted by the fascist regime. See Mondello (1987:13).

a wider discussion of both the new and the more conventional feminine identities that were emerging in Italian society⁶. In this sense, Gasperini carried on the tradition of progressive and emancipationist women writers and journalists active in post-Unification Italy and the interwar years (Arslan, 1998:76-77; Patriarca, 2000:151-63).

However, the focus on her journalistic production and family chronicles has somehow put the study of Gasperini's fiction on hold. Critics in the field acknowledge her importance and agree that, through the conventions of *rosa*, her novels negotiate various feminine subjectivities and are therefore defined "d'autore" (Arslan & Pozzato, 1989:1044) or "di qualità" (Roccella, 1998:96). But in spite of this, there has been no extensive critical review or literary study dedicated to her fiction to date. Gasperini herself bitterly commented that publishers and critics levelled all *rosa* novels to poorly written sentimental narratives and did not consider the genre worthy of any serious attention, which is probably the reason why she decided to concentrate on a narrative form (the family chronicle) that had the potential to speak to a wider audience (Spinazzola, 1977:140). Discussing romance fiction during Fascism, Robin Pickering-Iazzi (1997) questions the typical notion that associates formulaic writing with conservative values by default, and points out instead that because such stories centre on the negotiation of conflicting views (in the case of *rosa*, this means male and female), they "offer an invaluable terrain for examining sexual and social relations in the process of transformation" (123). Pickering-Iazzi's observation may very well be extended to Gasperini's *rosa*, where emerging controversial issues such as women's independence, sexuality and education are read through the grain of genre fiction. In this context, Pischedda (1985:144) highlights the realistic tone of Gasperini's novels, which includes a range of different

⁶ In 1958, for example, Gasperini wrote a series of articles called *Processo alla donna moderna*, focused on the changing reality of Italian women. See Arvidsson (2003:100).

points of view thus allowing the readers to engage with a background of ongoing social and cultural transformations. It is not by accident then that in a recent article Silvia Ballestra advocates the re-discovery of Gasperini's fiction, where the romantic dream typical of the *rosa* tradition makes room for a sense of emotional displacement that reflects "problemi più profondi e complessi che riguardano gli uomini come le donne, nei loro rapporti di coppia e familiari" (Ballestra, 2000).

Indeed, Gasperini's novels narrate sentimental stories along with tales of personal growth, a territory that she successfully explores for example in *L'estate dei bisbigli* (1956) and *Le ragazze della villa accanto* (1958). Such novels handle the *rosa* narrative in a way that, although faithful to the traditional pattern of happy ending through conflict, goes far beyond the stereotyped codes of the genre, as they clearly attempt to place such emotions in a wider social and cultural context. In doing so, Gasperini brings to the reader's attention multiple and often contrasting perspectives, creating a polyphonic voice that is quite unusual in the *rosa* (Roccella, 1998:102-106; Pischetta, 1985:125-129). Tensions and conflicts are depicted, as Arslan and Pozzato maintain, not as a rebellion but as a rite of passage for young people and adults alike (1989:1044-45); the happy ending thus coincides with the characters' maturation and their entry into adult life, a step that in Gasperini's fictional world is not intended as conforming to traditional social roles for men and women. Rather, maturation is an ongoing process based on the acceptance of different values and perspectives, one that requires the acquisition of a "profonda coerenza morale, di timbro laico e umanitario" (Arslan & Pozzato, 1989:1045). Also, thanks to a fresh writing style that often mimics the spoken language of the time, for the first time humour plays an important part in the narrative context of *rosa*, and the ironic light in which the characters' sense of displacement is often portrayed results in an original "bildungsroman femminile e adolescenziale" (Roccella, 1998:98).

This brings me to *Rosso di sera*. If previous novels were more or less explicitly directed to a female readership, *Rosso di sera* occupies a much more blurred space. On the one hand, the novel proposes again recurring themes of Gasperini's work, namely complicated sentimental relationships, a provincial town and its scandals, uncommunicative adults and rebellious youth; on the other hand, Gasperini structures the story differently and instead of the usual third-person narrative, this time she opts not only for a first-person narrator, but she also makes him a young male. As I shall elaborate below, the choice of a young autodiegetic male protagonist proves to be the novel's most intriguing element, and indeed Gasperini's greatest achievement, as she takes advantage of the coming-of-age plot to negotiate the rules of popular romance fiction and her need to reach readers of all ages and genders. With regards to the latter aim, the use of the first person allows Gasperini to play with the directness of spoken language, which she successfully reproduces by emphasising dialogues and colloquial speech, alongside spelling or grammar choices that recreate the illusion of spoken language. Likewise, because the autodiegetic narrator facilitates a sense of realism that encourages the reader to empathise with the protagonist's struggles and emotions, such stylistic features help Gasperini to make the perspective of a male adolescent character sympathetic to the (mostly female) audience.

While female characters in the novel occupy a space drawn from fictional conventions, covering the whole spectrum of traditional *rosa* heroines (the dyads Federica/Giovanna and Eliana/Mariasilvia retain for example the typical features of competing *rosa* heroines, such as assertive/submissive personality, dark/pale hair, upper/middle class background respectively), Gasperini's use of generic narrative techniques dismantles such traditional codifications and conveys a portrayal of women's desires and anxieties that challenges the expectations of Italian family and society in the 1960s. At the same time, the sentimental experiences of teenagers Rosso, Federica and Giovanna are mirrored in

those of adults Paolo, Mariasilvia and Eliana, with familial tensions adding a wider perspective that deepens the story (notably Rosso's dysfunctional relationship with his father) and makes it more complex.

These interconnected levels are held together through the character of Rosso, seventeen years old at the beginning of the story, and slowly unfold against the backdrop of his sentimental relationship with Federica. Making him the centre of the story, Gasperini constructs a cohesive narrative in which dramatic tensions and shifting tones coexist. Consider for example the incipit of the novel:

Così sono tornato al fiume. Sembra l'unica cosa rimasta intatta dalla mia infanzia, il fiume, anche se forse già inquinato, come l'infanzia da invisibili veleni. Dovrei aver paura, credo, ma non ne ho. Solo una terribile confusione, come se mi avessero tagliato a pezzettini e poi ricucito insieme in qualche modo, un modo sbagliato, con tutte le cuciture che tirano qua e là. E *così*, cucito sbagliato, rieccomi a guardare l'acqua che passa [...] come quella sera. Chi lo sapeva, quella prima sera, che sarebbe finita *così*. (Gasperini, 2004:1, emphasis added)

Gasperini's narrative and linguistic choices set up a multilayered reading experience that conveys both a sense of detachment and one of participation: firstly, the passage introduces a measured unfolding of the story through the alternate use of present and past tenses, sustained by the first person and the strategic repetition of the adverb "così", which at various stages indicates either conclusion or consequence; secondly, the extensive use of words that evoke hesitation, confusion, and uncertainty creates an atmosphere of emotional displacement; finally, Rosso sets out to recount his story in flashback, yet this first passage is already a flashforward, as readers will discover halfway through the novel. This alternate use of analepsis and prolepsis complicates the traditional chronological storyline and creates a sense of anticipation that positions

both Rosso and the readers in a blurred territory, to the extent that the reliability of the narrator and the story are constantly revised and questioned.

A few paragraphs after the incipit quoted above, Rosso's voice changes to light and chatty as he introduces himself to the readers: "Rosso sono io. Il mio nome sarebbe Gianluca, un nome che deve essere sembrato chic a mia madre, ma mi chiamano tutti Rosso, per via dei capelli"; then he gives a first-hand description of his friends and family using the same spoken register. Shortly after, the tone switches again when he retells his first encounter with the other protagonist of the story, Federica, a beautiful girl who lives in an old and gloomy villa at the margins of town: "Era seduta sul muro, le braccia appoggiate su un ramo sporgente, come su un davanzale. Capelli neri, pelle bianca, foglie cupe e barbagli di cielo rosso. Mi chiedo se verrà un giorno che potrò pensarci senza che mi si strizzi tutto dentro" (12). Here the narrator reverts to melancholy and anticipation but does not lose the colloquial and youthful tone, particularly evident in the last sentence thanks to the use of the grammatically incorrect relative pronoun 'che' ("verrà un giorno che potrò") and the expression "mi si strizzi tutto dentro".

Interestingly, this first encounter brings to mind *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1962), the acclaimed novel by Italian writer Giorgio Bassani (1916-2000), with whom *Rosso di sera*, published one year later, shows a close resemblance. Not only the circumstances of the meeting, but also a certain consonance of themes and narrative structures – notably the presence of an intimate space as the centre of the narrative and the young male autodiegetic narrator – seem to invite a connection between the two novels, suggesting a reading of Gasperini novel as a popularisation of Bassani's. It is not my intention to discuss here how *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* may have influenced Gasperini's *Rosso di sera*, since it would require an in-depth analysis of Italy's literary production of the 1950s and

1960s and the role of women writers in those years⁷. It seems however appropriate to indicate a connection between the two novels, one that may reside in the fact that popular fiction, as Clive Bloom reminds us, is based on the “elevation of character over plot” (Bloom, 1996:152). Bloom notes that “‘serious’ novels [...] emphasize social determinism, class confrontation and sexual warfare” (152), and that the same issues and conflicts are reworked and rewritten on an individual scale in ‘less serious’ novels, such as spy novels, detective stories and romance. Using Bloom’s reasoning, it is possible that Gasperini saw the example of *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*’s narrative structure as an opportunity to go beyond the narrow confines of sentimental fiction⁸. But while in Bassani’s case readers share the perspective of an adult man reflecting on his younger self in light of Fascism and anti-Semitism in Italy, Gasperini’s young narrator proves to be extremely effective in bridging traditional and less traditional features: the teenager’s perspective calls for a wider scenario in which to explore controversial issues like sexuality, death, and suicide, yet at the same time Rosso’s adolescence embodies traits of frailty and innocence that are distinctive of *rosa* heroines, a point I shall discuss shortly. Also, Gasperini chooses the perspective of a melancholic

⁷ Pischetta for example fully inscribes Gasperini in the Italian literary tradition, commenting that hers is “un realismo esistenziale ed etico-intimistico in consonanza [...] con le tendenze di gran parte della letteratura italiana nell’ultimo scorcio degli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta” (1985:144). In light of this observation, I find interesting that both Gasperini and Bassani suffered from being associated – in different circumstances and with different outcomes – to Liala (Amalia Liana Cambiasi Negretti Odescalchi, 1897-1995) the most popular Italian romance writer to date, “quintessenza del genere riassunto in una persona” (Arslan & Pozzato, 1989:1039). In 1963 Bassani was labelled ‘Liala della letteratura italiana’ by Italian *Neoavanguardia* mainly because of his conventional and traditionally elegant use of language, as opposed to the experimental writing advocated by ‘Gruppo 63’. Gasperini’s connection with Liala is of a different kind and comes from the generic framework of *romanzo rosa*, notwithstanding the fact that in several occasions she had stated her distance – both formal and thematic – from her fellow *rosa* writers (Gasperini, 1978:46).

⁸ Gasperini’s desire to experiment with fiction is well documented in *Una donna e altri animali* (see Tommaso, 2000:190).

adolescent who feels estranged not only from his family and friends, but also from himself. In fact, Rosso despises the upper-class and conservative world championed by his father, an eminent surgeon who seems to privilege social position over moral integrity and ideals, and finds an alternative role model in his grandfather, an outcast anarchist who quotes Pablo Neruda's poems and lives in a shed on the other side of the river that runs through the city.

The unresolved teenage angst becomes then the means by which Gasperini constructs Rosso's understanding of events and his intense emotions, from sentimentality to anger, from rapture to despair, cast him as a typically female character. Indeed, Rosso embodies traits that in *rosa* novels are usually attached to heroines, such as sympathy, innocence and a more general tendency toward sentimentality, and such qualities lie at the core of his relationship with Federica, who by contrast is a dysfunctional girl who has spent most of her life in private institutions and psychiatric hospitals and now lives under close watch because of her erratic behaviour. A palpable example of Rosso's gentleness and sentimentality is provided when, upon discovering the girl's broken childhood, he comments: "Mi venne un desiderio lancinante di ripagarla, di coprire la sua strada di cose tutte belle, tutte limpide, musica e cieli stellati e poesie e braccia tenere, le mie" (45). Here Gasperini puts the whole sentimental repertoire at work, inasmuch as Rosso's desire of protecting and nurturing Federica is almost spiritual, but it is worth noting that she manages to preserve the adolescent, naive perspective by having Rosso talk of music, poetry, starry skies and tender hugs.

A further significant feature to consider is that while the romantic relationship between the two characters conforms to the conventions of sentimental, non-sexual love in *rosa* novels, the role-reversal subverts such conventions. Although Federica is presented as a delicate and emotionally fragile character, almost ethereal, it is Rosso who occupies the 'feminine' side of the relationship, insofar as he indulges in the overtly

romantic fantasies of innocent and everlasting love. At the same time, the male point of view adds sexual agency to the picture, which Gasperini simultaneously acknowledges and contains by making the character innocent and hesitant: for Rosso, sex cannot exist without psychological and emotional involvement in the first place. Since his lack of emotional boundaries makes Rosso vulnerable, Gasperini develops his romantic relationship with Federica in a sheltered space, making the interaction between the couple all the more intriguing. Every night Rosso crawls into the villa's garden and runs down to an old wood-shed, where a lonely Federica is waiting for him. In this secluded and mysterious space, surrounded by nature, Federica and Rosso become a self-contained couple: "la legnaia era già un nido, noto e segreto, che conservava e aspettava le orme dei nostri corpi, l'eco delle nostre voci" (58), tells Rosso, who later adds: "tutto era soltanto una cornice qualsiasi intorno al cerchio magico della legnaia e del mio primo amore" (92).

At the beginning of their relationship, the two spend their days talking and reading poems, but soon sexual issues surface, prompted by Federica's overt eroticism and perceived vulnerability: "io continuavo a baciarla piano, straziato dal desiderio, e felice di resistere, e incantato e pazzo. [Federica] era una ragazzina fragile e un po' matta e sola, che io avrei protetto, difeso, guarito" (59). In a significant plot twist that subverts gender roles, the first part of the novel ends with a collapse of this real and figurative chaste haven, when Rosso discovers Federica making love with her caretaker:

Mi parve che il mondo si fermasse in quell'istante assurdo, che si fermasse il fiume, e il fracasso del mio cuore idiota contro le costole. Stavano sotto l'olmo. Lei aveva il vestito bianco. Lui la solita tuta blu. Li vidi molto bene. Li sentii, anche. [...] L'abito bianco, la tuta blu; se mi sforzavo un poco, vedevo anche i piedi nudi, diafani, che avevo baciato tremando, intrecciati a quei tozzi piedi calzati di cuoio sporco [...]. (102)

Reminiscent of *rosa*'s tropes, the passage deconstructs them by focusing on the visual aspects of the narrative, reinforced by the use of short sentences to outline minute details. Federica's white dress overlapping the caretaker's blue uniform, and, more powerfully, the contrast between the girl's naked, slender feet and the man's rough dirty shoes visually underpin the corruption of a virtuous and innocent character, and that of Rosso's idyllic world alike. Bewildered and humiliated, Rosso runs away, as a *rosa* heroine would, but shortly after he goes back to the shed and, pretending to be unaware of what he has just seen, has his first intimate encounter with Federica. Gasperini's rendering of this moment deserves to be quoted at length:

'Amore mio' bisbigliava ansando. 'Mio mio Rosso...' e tremava, e anch'io tremavo e desideravo ucciderla, torturarla e ucciderla. No, pensai atterrito con un angolo di me, no... Devo andar via. Lei mi tirò giù contro di sé, in quell'odore di legna e capelli neri, e io continuai a desiderare di ucciderla e a pensare no, no, devo andare via, no, finché sotto le sue labbra all'odio si mescolò il desiderio, un desiderio da fine del mondo, e fu come ucciderla e uccidermi, per non so quanto tempo. Quando mi staccai da lei girandomi supino, vidi quelle tre stelle attraverso il tetto rotto, e non c'era più desiderio, non c'era più odio, non c'era più niente. Non c'era in tutto il mondo qualcuno più povero di me. (106-107)

From a formal point of view, first person and *rosa* clichés work together in order to capture the reader's participation and build up to a climax that both emphasises and amplifies the focus on Rosso's emotional anguish, particularly the fast-paced language, verb repetition and syntax coordination. In doing so, Rosso's feral metamorphosis leads to an unruly fight that cannot be farther away from the gentleness and romance he had

dreamed of for his first time: gone is the longing to heal and nurture, replaced by an urge to harm and kill. In fact, the focus on physical actions and senses such as sound, hearing, touch and taste all contribute to creating a scene that, although not graphic, is sexually explicit nonetheless. In this sense, Rosso occupies a problematic position: while the emotional hurt may account for his behaviour, the subtle violence in the scene makes a female reader quite uncomfortable, to the extent that she is invited to judge Federica unworthy of romantic love. Most importantly, because Gasperini aligns the audience with Rosso's judgmental perspective, readers are induced to sympathise with Rosso's emotional suffering, sexual arousal and physical violence at once. Gasperini is aware of such a problematic position and does not shy away from it; on the contrary, she draws attention to Rosso's ambivalent feelings and, once the feral instinct evaporates, has him feeling miserable and emptied ('non c'era più desiderio, non c'era più odio, non c'era più niente'), ultimately unable to explain and justify his own behaviour.

The second part of the novel revolves around Rosso's inner reflections on the events and the struggle to make sense of them; as such, it is perhaps the closest to traditional romance, charged as it is with angst and dramatic tension. The language reflects Rosso's change of attitude as Gasperini moves away from youth jargon and dialogue in favour of a more refined style used for self-exploration, as in the following passage:

Non era possibile dimenticare. Non era possibile perdonarla e amarla. Era solo possibile soffrire. Soffrire desiderandola, soffrire baciandola, soffrire lasciandola. Questo solo sapevo fare. [Ero] diviso tra la sofferenza di starle lontano e la sofferenza di starle vicino. (134)

Here the emphasis is on Rosso's crippled emotions, and while the sheer repetition of the verb "soffrire", along with the noun "sofferenza", is consistent with conventional vocabulary of popular romance, the young

character's point of view makes the shift in tone more effective, underlining his attempt to face the situation in a more adult way. As his relationship with Federica becomes merely physical, Rosso slowly withdraws from her and bonds with Giovanna, a childhood friend who has just returned to town. Their developing friendship is the catalyst for Federica's descent into depression, and after a painful farewell to Rosso she throws herself from the wood-shed into the river. This plot device is not unusual in the context of popular romance, where the suicide of a main character often restores an otherwise compromised order and/or becomes a cathartic way to make amends for mistakes. In fact, it might be said that Federica's death conveniently fulfils such premises, but Gasperini's ambivalent approach once again prevents us from drawing simplistic interpretations. This is particularly evident in the part where Rosso witnesses Federica's final moments:

[Federica e]ra stata per me la principessa della favola, profumo di legna e dita di gelsomino. Poi era stata tutte le lordure e le falsità della terra [...] Ma non era mai stata una ragazza vera. Solo adesso lo era: una ragazza con grandi occhi innocenti, che stava morendo sulle pietre di un fiume. Non so quanto tempo restai così, inginocchiato vicino a lei [...] e quella fu l'unica volta che l'amai davvero – adesso lo so – che l'amai com'era, con tutto il suo bene e tutto il suo male. (171)

Avoiding both moral judgment and the temptation to romanticise her death, Rosso is finally able to see Federica not as the deceptive projection of his own desires and frustrations, but as a real person “con tutto il suo bene e tutto il suo male”. Rosso is aware that Federica's suicide is the consequence of her fragile mental health, but at the same time he understands his own ambiguous role in the unfolding of the events. In contrast with the harshness of the scene that describes their first intimate intercourse, now readers are crucially invited to rethink their position

toward Federica, suggesting that the sympathy they have awarded to Rosso so far could in fact have been misplaced. At this point, the flashback narrative comes full circle and reunites with the present, and Gasperini signals the convergence by rewriting the opening sequence:

Così sono tornato al fiume. Perché tutto questo non è accaduto tanto tempo fa, è accaduto adesso, sta accadendo ancora, e io ci sono in mezzo, e qualsiasi cosa accada lei sarà passata su questa terra *così*, una breve comparsa amara, e io l'avrò incontrata *così*, solo per recitarle poesie e ferirla a morte [...] L'acqua è passata, sono passati i ricordi e i miei brandelli si sono ricuciti insieme in qualche modo, un modo che fa male, e sento che in questo momento finisce la mia storia di ragazzo. [...] Quale che sia la mia vita domani, il ragazzo chiamato Rosso finisce qui, con queste lacrime, sulla spalletta del fiume. (177, emphasis added)

Not only does Gasperini have the narrator repeat the very same first sentence, “*Così* sono tornato al fiume”, she also recalls the image of shreds sewn with rough stitches; most importantly, she plays on the adverb “*così*” in a way that brings to the forefront both Rosso and the audience’s retrospective knowledge. This time her choice of words vividly emphasises the proximity of the events (“tutto questo non è accaduto tanto tempo fa, è accaduto adesso, sta accadendo ancora, e io ci sono in mezzo”) and the impossibility of making sense of them, represented by the symbolic conclusion of the story of “il ragazzo chiamato Rosso”. Yet, Rosso’s unresolved tensions are the very basis for the novel’s final part, which begins like this:

Ma non era finita. Adesso che il tempo è passato, e che il cielo è di nuovo rosso sopra la collina dell’infanzia, adesso so che la mia storia di ragazzo non finì lì. Che non è ancora

finita. Che sono ancora un ragazzo e molta acqua dovrà passare sotto i ponti prima che diventi un uomo. Quella fu soltanto una frattura: tra il ragazzo di prima e il ragazzo di dopo. (181)

Despite the fact that he is “ancora un ragazzo”, this time around Rosso’s voice as the narrator suggests a longer timeframe between the present and the past (“adesso che il tempo è passato”), stylistically highlighted by the use of *passato remoto* (“non finì lì”, “quella fu soltanto”), and indicates emotional growth for the character.

As the story reaches its end, Rosso confronts his own limits and failures; as a result, not only he is finally able to reciprocate Giovanna’s love, which he had put on hold because of his estranged relationship with Federica, but he also successfully attempts a reconciliation with his father. Gasperini gives significant space to the latter and builds up to a confession scene that takes place just outside the grandfather’s shed. Half way between two worlds, Rosso’s and his father’s, this location symbolises the need to find a neutral ground where the two sides of the story can understand and respect each other⁹. However, even in this restored harmony a happily ever after is no longer a realistic option; although the story concludes on a positive note, the closing paragraph reiterates a sense of instability that tones down the happy ending:

⁹ In this respect, it is worth noting that Rosso, who at the beginning of the novel had no interest in his professional future, eventually decides to become a psychiatrist, but not an ordinary one: “a modo mio, ben lontano dalle ali di mio padre e dalle sue idee sulla psichiatria” (196). I believe that Gasperini is making a passing yet significant nod to the ongoing debate around the reform of the mental health system in Italy started in 1961 by Franco Basaglia (1924-1980), whose sociopolitical actions revolved around the transformation of mental hospitals and the deinstitutionalisation of patients. In 1978, the reform culminated in the abolition of mental asylums (the so called Legge 180). See Basaglia (1964) and Del Giudice (1998).

Ma la notte, quando torno a casa dopo aver suonato riso, cantato bevuto ballato, il cielo è nero, e le stelle come pietre magnetiche.

Buio il parco, buia la mia stanza, buia la collina dell'infanzia, coi mirti mormoranti e il fiume in fondo. Mi stendo sul letto, con la finestra aperta, e aspetto.

A poco a poco, dal buio stellato nasce odore di gelsomino, l'aria rabbrivisce e il mio cuore si riempie di sussurri. Le foglie, il fiume, e scricchiolio di legna e un riso leggero. Federica, sei tu? [...] No, non voglio dimenticare. (199)

Gasparini seems to suggest here that true individual growth requires critical participation in social rules, thus the final sequence presents Rosso supported by a network of close friends and enjoying life, but also welcoming the memory of Federica as it emerges from the darkness of the night. With remarkable talent, instead of dismissing Federica as a doomed young woman, as her behaviour and death might have indicated, or relegating her to a marginal corner of Rosso's development, Gasparini lifts the young woman to a powerful position, as she becomes the element that grants Rosso his unique individuality. In this respect, I argue that Federica's unpredicted comeback in the final sentence is indicative of Gasparini's desire to bring to the forefront the ambiguous nature of the character, and reiterate that neither Rosso nor the reader should have taken her actions and traits, particularly her overt sexuality, at face value¹⁰.

Roccella rightly points out that in *Rosso di sera* "si avverte la fatica di mantenere il tono di leggerezza tipico degli altri romanzi" (1998:107). Indeed, the novel seems to be difficult to categorise: on many levels it

¹⁰ The fact that Federica's suicide should not be read as a cautionary tale is clearly voiced by Rosso: 'Siamo *tutti* colpevoli, pensai. Noi, il mondo, la vita e la nostra presunzione di capirla. Siamo dei poveri ciechi, tutti quanti.' (174).

belongs to the tradition of *rosa*, especially in the centrality of the love story and the emphasis on emotions, which are deeply scrutinised and described; rather than constructing self-indulgent characters, though, which would impose a strict perspective on the narrated events, Gasperini places the sentimental struggles in the real world, invoking the identification with everyday life and emotions as experienced by Rosso. As a consequence, the novel maintains several defining traits of *rosa* but at the same time it is compellingly realistic, to the extent that it provides a commentary on many of the conflicting issues that Italy was experiencing in 1960s. In this context, the insertion of an adolescent male protagonist gives *Rosso di sera* a peculiar and distinctive identity that separates it from other novels within the genre. The choice of a young male narrator becomes the lens through which a wider scenario is explored, one that offers a fertile ground for the discussion of women's conflicting identities in 1960s Italy and the way these were represented in popular fiction. Rosso's interaction with Federica, but also with his mother and sister (which I do not have time to explore here but would deserve further analysis), results in a depiction of women of different ages and lifestyles that is not only convincing but also very innovative in the context of women's popular fiction. In doing so, the novel challenges the escapist nature of the genre and critically reworks it from within, incorporating a thought-provoking reflection on traditional feminine roles.

References

- Arslan, A. 1998 *Dame, galline e regine. La scrittura femminile italiana fra '800 e '900*. Milan: Guerini studio.
- Arslan, A. & 1989 Il rosa. In: Asor Rosa, A (ed.)

- Pozzato, M.P. *Letteratura italiana*. Turin, Einaudi: 1027-1046.
- Arviddson, A 2003 *Marketing Modernity: Italian Advertising from Fascism to Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.
- Ballestra, S. 2000 Gasperini, e il rosa diventò «lessico familiare». *Il Corriere della Sera*. http://archivistorico.corriere.it/2000/ago/sto/02/Gasperini_rosa_divento_lessico_famigliare_co_0_0008021663.shtml (retrieved 27 November 2009).
- Basaglia, F. 1964 *The Destruction of the Mental Hospital as a Place of Institutionalisation*. London, First International Congress of Social Psychiatry. http://www.triestesalutementale.it/english/doc/basaglia_1964_destruction-mhh.pdf (retrieved 3 February 2010).
- Bassani, G. 1962 *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Bloom, C. 1996 *Cult Fiction*. London-New York: Macmillan.
- Bordoni, C 1984 *Il romanzo senza qualità: sociologia del nuovo rosa*. Naples: Libreria sapere.
- 1993 *Il romanzo di consumo: editoria e letteratura di massa*. Naples: Liguori.
- Cicioni, M. & Walker, S. 2002 Coming Round: Autobiography and Anesthesia in Brunella Gasperini's Cumulative Self-Construct. *Studi d'italianistica nell'Africa Australe*

- 15(2):5-23.
- Deti, E. 1990 *Le carte rosa: storia del fotoromanzo e della narrativa popolare*. Florence: La Nuova Italia.
- Di Giorgio, M. 1992 *Le italiane dall'Unità ad oggi*. Bari: Laterza.
- Del Giudice, G. 1998 *Psychiatric Reform in Italy*. Trieste Mental Health Department. http://www.triestesalutementale.it/english/doc/delgiudice_1998_psychiatric-reform-italy.pdf (retrieved 3 February 2010).
- Eco, U. 1964 *Apocalittici e integrati*. Milan: Bompiani.
- Forte, G. 1966 *I persuasori rosa*. Naples: ESI.
- Gasparini, B. 1978 *Una donna e altri animali*. Milan: Rizzoli.
- 1979 *Così la penso io*. Milan: Rizzoli.
- 2004 *Rosso di sera*. Milan: Rizzoli.
- Inglese, G. & Asor Rosa, A. (eds.) 1990 *Letteratura italiana. Gli autori: dizionario bio-bibliografico e indici*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Lepschy, A.L. 2000 The Popular Novel, 1850-1920. In: Panizza, L. and S. Wood (eds.) *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press:177-189.
- Mizzau, M. 1987 Strategie narrative: il non detto e il troppo detto. In *Intorno al rosa*, ed. by

- Centro di documentazione, ricerca e iniziativa delle donne. Verona: Essedue:47-57.
- Mondello, E. 1987 *La nuova italiana: la donna nella stampa e nella cultura del ventennio*. Rome: Editori Riuniti.
- Panizza, L. & Wood S. (eds). 2000 *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Patriarca, S. 2000 Journalists and Essayists, 1850-1915. In: Panizza, L. and S. Wood (eds.) *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press:151-163.
- Petronio, G. 1979 *Letteratura di massa. Letteratura di consumo*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Pickering-Iazzi, R. 1997 *Politics of the Visible: Writing Women, Culture, and Fascism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Pischedda, B. 1985 I sentimenti giovani di Brunella Gasperini. In: Spinazzola, V. (ed.) *Il successo letterario*. Milan: Unicopli: 123-145.
- Pozzato, M.P. 1982 *Il romanzo rosa*. Rome: Edizioni L'Espresso.
- Ragone, G. 1989 *Editoria, letteratura e comunicazione*. In Asor Rosa, A. (ed.) *Letteratura Italiana*. Turin: Einaudi:1047-1167.
- Roccella, E. 1998 *La letteratura rosa*. Rome: Editori Riuniti.

- Rosa, G. 1985 Lo specchio di Liala. In: Spinazzola, V. (ed.) *Il successo letterario*. Milan: Unicopli:37-69.
- Spinazzola, V. 1977 *Qualche ipotesi sulla narrativa "rosa". Conversazione con Brunella Gasperini*. In *Pubblico 1977*. Milan: Il Saggiatore.
- 1995 *L'immaginazione divertente. Il giallo, il rosa, il porno, il fumetto*. Milan: Rizzoli RCS.
- 2005 *La modernità letteraria*. Milan: Net.
- Tommaso, M. 1999 *Brunella Gasperini: la rivoluzione sottovoce*. Reggio Emilia: Diabasis.
- Turi, G. & Palazzolo, M. (eds) 1993 *Storia dell'editoria nell'Italia contemporanea*. Florence: Giunti.