

**Review of: *La Logica della Solitudine*, a novel by Rosarita Cuccoli
Bologna: Pendragon, 2004, ISBN 88-8342-285-6**

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based on the speech given by Dr Christopher Rollason at the official launch of the book at the Libreria Pendragon (Bologna) on 21 September 2004, in the presence of the author and Dr Vincenzo Bagnoli

Edgar Allan Poe, after whom a street is named in Bologna, wrote an essay on 'The Philosophy of Composition', and José Saramago has very recently named his latest novel *Essay on Lucidity*. If in the world of letters composition can have its philosophy and lucidity can be the subject of a novelistic essay, solitude too can have its logic, and thus *La Logica della Solitudine* emerges as the title of the debut novel by Rosarita Cuccoli, a native of Bologna who has already published *L'Amore Più Profondo*, a volume of poems which appeared in 1998, also under the Pendragon imprint and with a preface by Vincenzo Bagnoli. Certainly, in this new book of the author's we are dealing not with an essay but with a novel, but by the end of this finely sensitive narrative the reader may yet wish to extrapolate some conclusions - none too comforting - about human relations and the solitude they paradoxically generate.

The narrative follows the time-honoured path of the star-crossed, man-woman love story, suitably updated for the age of the Internet. It is told throughout in the third person, obeying the general conventions of classical realism and with the events seen entirely from the viewpoint of the female protagonist, Anna. An Italian student in Cambridge, Anna falls in and out of love with Marco, a co-national also studying there, but Marco fails at all moments to show the commitment which Anna from her side both offers and demands. The narrative traces Anna's passion and disillusion in linear fashion and in the past tense, with interpolations in the form of letters and e-mails. The names Anna and Marco - though not the story - appear to be taken from a song of that name written and recorded in 1970 by another Bologna native, the singer-songwriter Lucio Dalla (indeed, Dalla is mentioned in the text, as we are explicitly told that Anna owns one of his albums on cassette - 73).

This is a novel of expatriation, with Anna, a postgraduate student from Bologna who is preparing a doctorate in international relations, tracing out her academic path between Cambridge, Brussels and Geneva, while Marco, from Florence and also a postgraduate, pursues his studies in experimental psychology in the laboratories of the famous British university. Cambridge itself becomes in a sense a laboratory for the exploration of intensely lived personal relations within a narrow space, as they develop between two members of a small, closed group. That group is the foreign and, more particularly, Italian student community (above all postgraduate) at the University. Across the narrative, the lack of contact between Anna, Marco and friends and the native British student community is notable. Cambridge is liable to be perceived as an alien space by Italian students coming from a different university tradition: proud though Anna and others may be of being 'sublimi menti cantabrigiane' ('sublime Cambridge minds' - 11), of studying 'nella stessa prestigiosa università' ('at the same prestigious university' - 8), the concept of an elite university is foreign to the Italian model, as is Cambridge's collegiate system. At the same time, however, certain features of Cambridge student life - lodging-house accommodation, parties and late nights - would be familiar enough to one used to Bologna's own bohemian student culture. A dialectic of strangeness and familiarity is thus woven as the relationship unfolds, against the

backdrop of a Cambridge made concrete by frequent evocation of the toponyms of university and city - Madgalene (Anna's college), Trinity Hall (Marco's college), the Downing Site, the Backs, Jesus Lane, Round Church Street, Trumpington Street, and, indeed, more plebeian city locations such as the Grafton Centre.

Expatriation meets modernity in a relationship that is structured as much around e-mails as it is around physical encounters. Anna and Marco do not see each other every day, but their e-mail exchanges ensure the relationship's continuity, if not its harmony, for as long as it lasts. Internet communication thus paradoxically serves to link two people who live not on different sides of the world but near each other, in the same city and the same milieu. From Anna's side at least, the apparently cold and neutral world of the computer environment becomes charged with emotion, as whenever she opens her mailbox she wonders if she will find a message from Marco - and if so, what manner of message: 'Anna si precipitò a occupare uno dei due computer nel corridoio laterale per controllare l'e-mail. Scopri che Marco le aveva scritto, diceva di aver passato una bella serata e la invitava a cena per ricambiare l'invito, questa volta, però, a casa da lui. Com'era accaduto per il precedente messaggio, Anna lo rilesse immobile sulla sedia per un numero imprecisato di volte' ('Anna rushed to occupy one of the two computers in the side corridor and check her e-mail. She discovered that Marco had written, saying he'd had a nice evening and inviting her back to dinner, this time at his place, As with the previous message, Anna re-read it, motionless in her chair, an indeterminate number of times' - 18). To a sensitivity like Anna's, an e-mail message becomes a text to be re-read, returned to, excavated between the lines, endlessly interpreted and kept in the memory as a cherished good.

La Logica della Solitudine seems, indeed, with Anna's delicate and observant sensibility at its centre, a clear instance of what might be called 'female writing'. This novel could hardly have been written by a man: the reader discovers a seeing eye that looks inward, giving priority to the inner world of thoughts and sensations and colouring the outer world with the hues of emotion. The text offers the portrait of a woman - an intellectual and reflective career woman, certainly, but above all a feeling being - of her occupations, habits and tastes, as well as her beliefs and aspirations in the sphere of human relations. Anna is a woman of depth and spirituality, 'più anima che corpo' ('more spirit than body' - 63), prone to self-analysis: 'Anna era incapace di essere superficiale, suo malgrado, tutto in un modo o nell'altro la coinvolgeva. Dai più quel suo stato mentale e psicologico veniva definito "sensibilità" o addirittura ipersensibilità, enfasi che implicitamente doveva indicare una dote quasi soprannaturale riservata a pochi' ('Anna was incapable of being superficial - despite herself, everything touched her, one way or another. Most people defined her mental and psychological state as "sensitivity" or even hypersensitivity, an emphasis which, implicitly, had to indicate a virtually supernatural gift reserved to a chosen few' - 38). We are in the presence of a certain type of female literary production characterised by clarity of introspection, as the reader watches the ever-vigilant Anna 'osservare lo spettacolo della sua vita' ('observe the spectacle of her life' - 88): the literary critic might here wish, through more detailed textual study, to place Rosarita Cuccoli's writing in the tradition marked out by the likes of Virginia Woolf and Marguerite Duras, or, further afield, by Clarice Lispector in Brazil or Rosario Castellanos in Mexico. The sentences are coolly and carefully balanced, with a few laconically expressive words managing to bear the maximum weight of emotion without collapsing, as thus: 'Di notte si girava e rigirava nel letto in un vortice di pensieri, Marco era su ogni lato. Ossessione, senza dubbio, ma insieme ad essa anche orgoglio, rifiuto del rifiuto, inaccettabile perdita di potere. E se invece fosse stato più semplicemente un legame, tanto più forte perché senza senso?' ('At night she turned round and round in her bed in a whirlpool of thoughts. Marco

was there on every side. Obsession, no doubt, but also pride, rejection of rejection, unacceptable loss of power. And what if it was, more simply, a bond, meaningless and all the stronger because of that?' - 109).

Marco, meanwhile, appears throughout as incorrigibly and congenitally superficial, unwilling to dive deep and unable to commit. It is true that the lovers' tale is narrated throughout from Anna's perspective, but the reader has the impression that had Marco been allowed to speak for himself the difference would have been minimal. He is characterised by a complete lack of awareness of or consideration for others, Anna included. This is memorably exemplified in an apparently banal but revelatory episode when he disappears for no reason in the middle of a discotheque evening.

Anna is repeatedly and painfully disillusioned by his everlasting indifference. Over several months and as long as her faith in him remains, she manages to maintain a delicate balance, not transgressing certain limits and always aware of 'le regole tacite della loro storia' ('the tacit rules of their story' - 97). Later, she vainly struggles to understand a story which, she admits, 'non aveva senso' ('didn't make sense' - 131) - trying to interpret what she herself had earlier seen as 'quell'universo privo di logica' ('that universe bereft of logic' - 67). Nonetheless, the book's title suggests that the whole episode must, after all, have its logic hidden somewhere. Anna's solitude may be seen as the logical result of Marco's inability to build bridges with people. Marco too evidently suffers from his own logic of solitude, from not being there for others. This may, in the end, be the 'logica paradossale della loro storia' ('the paradoxical logic of their story' - 53).

The sensitive reader will certainly lay down this volume in a state of empathy with Anna, sharing her hurt and perplexity but also appreciating her resilience, her capacity to survive what has been an inferno of non-communication. What emerges from this careful, reflective novel is the sense of Anna as a continual and, finally, undefeated searcher ('un'anima alla ricerca' ('a questing spirit' - 128), a chaser after the fleeting moments when time stops and all makes sense for the duration of a flash ('incontrare, per qualche istante, il paradiso' ('to encounter, for a few instants, heaven' - 111). The reader will close Rosarita Cuccoli's pages with the ultimate sensation that, however baffling the world of human relations may appear, existence remains justified precisely by the search for those ever-elusive, yet endlessly necessary, moments of epiphany.