

The Power of Disturbance

Elsa Morante's *Aracoeli*



EDITED BY MANUELE GRAGNOLATI AND SARA FORTUNA



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CHAPTER 1



Introduction

Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragnolati

Aracoeli (1982) is the last novel written by Elsa Morante (1912–85), one of the most significant Italian writers of the twentieth century. From *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948) and *L'isola di Arturo* (1957) to *La Storia* (1974), Morante became an increasingly important author, provoking animated debates in the Italian and European literary and cultural milieux. Her final novel, by contrast, was received with profound aversion and almost unanimously dismissed as a desperate writer's self-destructive attempt at a tragic parody of everything she had previously written.

If it is indeed true that *Aracoeli* returns to topics fundamental to all of Morante's texts and questions them in an often disturbing manner, the hypothesis informing this volume is that the novel cannot be reduced to a deep expression of despair, but, rather, succeeds in confronting crucial philosophical and epistemological questions in an original and profound way: through its narrative inquiry into the relationship between mother and child, Morante's text creates a 'hallucinatory' representation of the original mother–child dyad, questioning the classical distinction between subject and object and offering a theory for the genesis of language and meaning. The protagonist's journey to Spain in search of his dead mother forms the poetic and theoretical nucleus for the novel's manifold perspectives and motifs that contaminate and disrupt literary, psychoanalytic, and political paradigms as well as categories of identity, gender, and sexuality. In particular, the novel's intricate structure allows different levels to interact with one another, producing asymmetries and contrasts that represent a form of resistance to the hegemonic and totalizing claims of the *logos*.

The Power of Disturbance, which originates from an international conference held at the Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry in April 2008 within its core project on *Tension/Spannung*, combines literary scholars and Morante experts with scholars from other disciplines — such as Jewish Studies, Psychoanalysis, Theatre, Philosophy, and Indology — who accepted the challenge of engaging with Morante's last novel. The result is a truly interdisciplinary enterprise seeking to re-evaluate the complexity of *Aracoeli* and reflect on the manifold tensions that it stages and that are also present in contemporary philosophical discourse (from feminist to queer to political theory) and authors (such as Carlo Emilio Gadda, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Pedro Almodóvar).

Part I, entitled 'Language and (Inter-)Subjectivity', explores the original way in which the corporeal and relational concept of subjectivity staged in *Aracoeli*

challenges the conventional vision of the world based on binary and disembodied categories.

Fortuna and Gragnolati's 'Between Affection and Discipline: Exploring Linguistic Tensions from Dante to *Aracoeli*' (Chapter 2) deals with a central image in Dante and Morante's meditation on corporeality and language: that of the infant suckling at the mother's breast. While several critics have noted that in *Aracoeli* Manuele's journey to Spain in search of his dead mother is modelled upon Dante's *Divine Comedy*, they have especially placed emphasis on the difference between the two texts, reading Morante's last novel as a sort of anti-*Divine Comedy*, thereby agreeing with the common interpretation of *Aracoeli* as a dark and desperate text. According to Fortuna and Gragnolati's interpretation, the dialogue with Dante's oeuvre allows for a different reading of Morante's novel, which is not only less negative but also — and especially — more interested in the novel's philosophical and linguistic meditation. It is against the background of Dante's discourse of language and corporeality that they propose to use Julia Kristeva's psycho-linguistic concept of the 'semiotic' to explore *Aracoeli*'s complexity and suggest that it elaborates a theoretical model for a corporeal relationship between language and subjectivity.

Rebecca West's 'Seeing and Telling: Anamorphosis, Relational Identity, and Other Perspectival Perplexities in *Aracoeli*' (Chapter 3) argues that in her final novel, Elsa Morante problematizes the sense of sight, and concomitantly complicates issues pertaining to self-identity as well as to narrative point of view, the truth-value of a first-person narration, and the essential bond between mother and son. West explores the symbolic meaning of the protagonist Manuele's bad eyesight, which she links to the visual technique of anamorphosis. The unconventionality of Manuele's distorted/anamorphic vision, on account of which he is incapable of seeing himself, the world, others, and especially his mother Aracoeli in a straightforward manner, is explored as an emblem of the modern author himself or herself, who can no longer use a mimetic or realist style in order to convey the complexities of both the outer world and inner subjective identity. West further explores problems of identity and self-representation by turning to the theory of 'relational identity' as defined by the feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero, in her work that brings philosophical and literary issues together.

Florian Mussnug's 'Resisting Paranoia: Poesis and Politics in *Aracoeli*' (Chapter 4) begins with the claim that *Aracoeli*, set against a background of massive political disappointment, is defined by a sense of directionlessness and despair. In the violently unjust world of Morante's novel there is no transcendent basis for moral action. Nihilism therefore appears to be the only legitimate response to a profound anguish, which floods into all areas of life. Yet, Mussnug argues, *Aracoeli* resists the temptation of absolute nihilism, and against the tragic force of existential despair — the narcissistic *reductio ad unum* of paranoia — Morante's novel advances a different, less heroic vision of ethical subjectivity, suggesting that *Aracoeli* is best approached as a comic acknowledgement — rather than a tragic affirmation — of human finitude. Inauthenticity (the experience of an essentially divided self) is not an obstacle to ethical and political expression, but a necessary basis for the invention of new political subjectivities.

The essays in Part II, ‘Psychoanalysis’, argue that psychoanalytic models inform *Aracoeli*’s narrative and thereby deconstruct classical concepts of subjectivity. In particular, scholars show how by problematizing traditional ways of conceiving of the relationship between mother and child, Morante’s novel becomes a space for the articulation of ‘queer’ and hybrid subjectivities.

Christoph Holzhey’s ‘“The Lover of a Hybrid”: Memory and Fantasy in *Aracoeli*’ (Chapter 5) deals with the many tensions in Morante’s novel, claiming in particular that in Manuele’s ambivalent actions, sentiments, and fantasies there is also a considerable consistency that points to a different kind of logic beyond binary oppositions and the principle of non-contradiction. The essay focuses on the relation between memory and fantasy, upon which the novel reflects in a central scene where Manuele imagines a trial in which he is accused of a ‘pathological confusion of the imagination and memory’ that contrasts with the supposedly ‘healthy’ way to use memory as a ‘teacher of life’. Drawing upon Laplanche and Pontalis’s interpretation of Freud’s seduction theories, Holzhey argues that Manuele’s memory, rather than being pathologically confused, is thoroughly sexualized, making the whole narrative less of a description than an actualization or even fulfilment of Manuele’s sexuality — a pre-oedipal sexuality that emerges through traumatizing seduction and is not univocally painful except within a normative order of reason.

Vittorio Lingiardi’s ‘*Scene madri*: Psychoanalytic Visions from *Aracoeli* to *Volver*’ (Chapter 6) engages Morante’s novel in a dialogue both with some filmic representations on the theme of the mother (to which the phrase ‘Scene madri’ refers) and with some fundamental concepts of contemporary infant research and psychoanalysis. The essay starts by looking at some mothers in Pasolini’s films (from the Mater Dolorosa of the *Vangelo* to the Mediterranean Mothers of *Mamma Roma* and *Medea*), and claims that Morante was pushed by an almost ancestral urge to move away from the model of the mother of Pasolini’s Classical, Greek, and Christian iconography and to enter a dimension which goes beyond the reassuring polarity between good and bad mother. *Aracoeli*’s maternal aspects *always and at the same time* express themselves in the form of a barbaric polytheism and paganism that combines and mixes different genders: hereby their power of disturbance. The essay concludes by exploring the similarities and the differences between this unsettling and queer feature in Morante’s novels and Almodóvar’s films, focusing in particular on *Aracoeli* and *Volver*, which both deal with stories of lost mothers who come back and inhabit their children’s life like ghosts.

Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky’s ‘Baubo — Another and Additional Name of *Aracoeli*: Morante’s Queer Feminism’ (Chapter 7) proposes an interpretation of Morante’s novel which prevents the reader from losing him/herself in the labyrinth of the text’s meanings on the one hand and from bypassing the complexity of this baroque writing on the other. In order to do so, Deuber-Mankowsky proposes to add one further name to the many names by which *Aracoeli*’s son refers to her (‘Shepherdess. Hidalga. Thorn. Death. Immortal. Victim. Tyrant. Doll. Goddess. Slave. Mother. Dancer’): that of *Baubo*. By referring to Nietzsche’s affirmation in *The Gay Science* that the name *Baubo* stands for truth and life and that the will to truth is shameless and indecent, this essay argues that Morante’s feminism is queer and consists in the fact that in constructing the couple mother and son, Morante

superimposes the appearance of the Virgin Mary and her child with the image of the obscene Baubo, from whose vulva protrudes the head and the hand of Iacchus/Bacchus. The battle among these different traditions and meanings is also a battle for the meaning of life and death. Aracoeli can thus be considered the figure in which Morante gives expression to the ambivalence, the abysmal and the indifference reacting to which life responds to the search for meaning. One could also say, with reference to Nietzsche, that Aracoeli is another name for life.

An *intermezzo*, represented by Agnese Grieco's 'Staging the Passion of Aracoeli' (Chapter 8), investigates some theoretical and aesthetic aspects connected with Grieco's work on a 'stage interpretation' of Morante's *Aracoeli*, which she adapted as a dialogue between two actors on the occasion of the Berlin symposium. Grieco explicitly declares that the idea to structure her dramatic project as a dialogue between two actors was based upon an evident challenge, inasmuch as Morante's book is written, from beginning to end, as a classical *monological narration* in the first person. Therefore her hypothesis of a dialogical, transgender presentation of *Aracoeli* cannot find its justification in the first level of the written text or in the formal construction of the narration. It depends, rather, on a deeper analysis of the sources of the narration itself: the possibility of a dialogical perspective is based upon a non-dualistic theory of knowledge according to which the language, experience, and biography of the son's character create the language of his mother Aracoeli.

Part III, entitled 'Elsa e gli altri', explores the richness of *Aracoeli's* literary world with a contrastive, comparative, and intertextual approach that illuminates its take on sexuality, politics, and ethics.

Giuseppe Stellardi's '*Aracoeli* and Gadda's *La cognizione del dolore*: Disturbed Sons, Disturbing Mothers' (Chapter 9) offers a comparative analysis of these novels, which both tell the story of a single male character, whose life and destiny seem to have been profoundly and permanently affected during his childhood by the influence of a powerful and disturbing maternal figure. The two mothers are antithetical: if Aracoeli is unable (also in her educational methods) to abide by the rules of middle-class decorum, and at first swamps Manuele in unbounded maternal love (only to subject him subsequently to a traumatic rejection), *la Signora* seems to have internalized the strictest demands of the paternal-symbolic order and, in the pursuit of an almost inhuman pedagogical ideal, deprives young Gonzalo of any real affection. But the effect on the two men is similar: an emotionally pathological mother-son relationship in the early years leads to disastrous consequences later on. Ultimately, however, the conclusion is different: if Gonzalo, in his Hamletic pursuit of truth and justice, seems destined to a nihilistic rejection of life and ultimately to self-destruction, Manuele's indelible memories of Aracoeli's boundless love seem to provide a path to some sort of salvation, supplying him with a puzzling but indestructible potential for human empathy. The divide separating Gonzalo from Manuele is also reflected linguistically and stylistically: whereas *La Cognizione* constantly oscillates between implosion and explosion (silence and logorrhoea, lyricism and the baroque), *Aracoeli* is clearly dominated by an anamnestic (in both the philosophical and medical meaning), linear-circular and almost Dantesque

orientation, ‘saving’ the text from the destiny of internal incompleteness and infinite deferral that affects all of Gadda’s narrative writing.

Francesca Cadel’s ‘Politics and Sexuality in Pasolini’s *Petrolio*’ (Chapter 10) explores Pasolini’s posthumous novel in relationship to the last novel by Morante, Pasolini’s contemporary and friend. In particular, the essay reads the Mattei Affair as an *exemplum* through which *Petrolio* elaborated his representation of the mutational process — involving both politics and sexuality — taking place in Italy in the 1960s and early 1970s. These were the years in which ‘la strategia della tensione’ (a strategy of tension) between Italy’s Red and Black entities became constitutive of politics and society, and *Petrolio* represents it within a key symbolism indicative of both politics and sexuality: ‘il misto’ (the mixed), a symbolism also used by Morante in *Aracoeli*. Cadel argues that there is a deep dialogue that can be inferred between these two texts, and that in *Petrolio* the reader can experience a similar tension to that represented in *Aracoeli*. But, although dissociation is the form of the search for identity in both novels, and Manuele and Carlos are the final characters used by Morante and Pasolini to express — as in a powerful dystopia — their analysis of the self and society after the Second World War, their proposed vision is peculiarly and significantly different: the tension in *Aracoeli* engages with the maternal dimension and seems to be finally directed towards an asymptotic allusion to paternal love/order, while in *Petrolio* it is embodied by a different understanding and representation of the normative process which leads to a dismemberment of both paternal and maternal love/order.

Elisa Martínez Garrido’s ‘Between Italy and Spain: The Tragedy of History and the Salvific Power of Love in Elsa Morante and María Zambrano’ (Chapter 11) argues that the theme of the journey to Spain in Morante’s novel can be read as an *anabasis* that crosses borders, and that the novel is structured as a path towards the frontier; at the end of it, the protagonist arrives at a salvific union with the father, in the mythical scenario of El Almendral. Martínez Garrido shows that in *Aracoeli*, Elsa Morante shares some philosophical reflections with María Zambrano’s ethical and political commitments in *Lagonía de Europa* (1945) and in *El Hombre y Lo divino* (1955). In particular, Manuele’s ‘retrieval’ of his father at the end of the novel can be read in connection with Zambrano’s concepts of the sacred and mercy: love represents for Manuele a possibility to find the way out from his tragic condition. Martínez Garrido also argues that *Aracoeli* is a victim of history, too, and that it is her sacrifice that allows Manuele to attain his final salvation.

Part IV, ‘Religion’, focuses on the several references to the non-Christian traditions of religious thought that are scattered throughout the novel and convey a mystical concept of knowledge and experience. The essays show how these references, which question the Western idea of rationality, reflect and symbolize the novel’s epistemological project.

Sergio Parussa’s ‘The Womb of Dreams: Cabbalistic Themes and Images in Elsa Morante’s *Aracoeli*’ (Chapter 12) focuses on Morante’s relationship with Judaism and explores the cabbalistic theme of death and rebirth starting with the analysis of ‘Il ladro dei lumi’, a juvenile prose published in 1963 in *Lo scialle andaluso*. The story — the first one by Morante openly dealing with a Jewish theme — is told by

a first-person narrator who remembers herself as a girl living in the Jewish ghetto of an unspecified city at an unspecified time in history. 'I am dead and reborn', says the girl at the end of 'Il ladro dei lumi', 'and at every birth a new uncertain process begins'. Parussa proposes to interpret this voice as an echo of *Gilgul Neshamot*, the principle in Jewish Cabbala that describes the cycle of life of the souls and their reincarnation in different bodies. This issue hints at a spiritual depth that, Parussa argues, comes to the surface again in *Aracoeli*. Indeed, like the girl in 'Il ladro dei lumi', Manuele in *Aracoeli* wonders if he bears in himself the imprint of a previous existence. Parussa claims that the narrative texture of these two stories is woven with deeper spiritual meanings that seem to allude to images, notions, and symbols of Jewish Cabbala and explores how these images help reveal that a secret texture of hope lies behind Manuele's seemingly desperate journey.

The hypothesis of Claude Cazalé Bérard's 'Morante and Weil: The Aporiae of History and the End of the Fairy Tale' (Chapter 13) is that Morante's last novel brings to maturation and fruition the themes, narrative, and meta-narrative procedures of her previous works, deepening their intellectual and ethical engagement. Cazalé argues that Simone Weil's religious thinking plays a major role in the development of Morante's tormented interest in the question of God, already present in her youthful writings and deepened and dramatized in the temporal arc from *Senza i conforti della religione* to *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini*, where the name of Simone Weil appears explicitly numbered among the 'Felici Pochi'. As in case of Weil's thought, *Aracoeli* also represents a conclusive statement against a modernity confronted with the aporiae of history and challenged by witnessing the end of fairy tales and myths. However, in Cazalé's reading, *Aracoeli* takes a different position from Weil's mystical asceticism — that 'uncreation' which leads to the obliteration of the 'I' in an act of love, in the free acceptance of the void, death, and even of God's silence. Manuele's regression 'ad uterum' and the renunciation of his own individualization would not allow him to escape the 'pesanteur' — as Weil would put it — but would make him lose all possibilities of salvation.

Mimma Congedo's 'Indian Traces: *Aracoeli*, Pasolini's *L'odore dell'India*, and Moravia's *Un'idea dell'India*' (Chapter 14) analyses the Indian or Oriental traces which can be found in *Aracoeli*, both by exploring the motifs common to *Aracoeli* and the two other works and by commenting upon the way in which some references to the Oriental world are presented in the text. The three texts taken into consideration share the motif of the journey, and the essay shows that there is an interesting assonance between *Aracoeli* on the one hand and Pasolini and Moravia's texts on the other: they all somehow stage a journey towards the *diverso*, the 'Other', represented as a disturbing and puzzling dimension, which contrasts with the rational/bourgeois/European and Western order. The references to the Oriental world analysed in the essay are the symbol of the stairs, the mention of the brahmanical revelation, and the figure of the Indian dancer. By referring to Morante's *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini*, the symbol of the stairs is brought into relation with the Buddhist tradition and to the representation of a spiritual path of knowledge, while the other references are analysed in connection to the theme of the coexistence and union of opposites.

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