

Elsa Morante's *Aracoeli*: A Portrait of the Mind as Embodied

Abstract

This paper focuses on Elsa Morante's last novel, *Aracoeli* (1982), as an interesting case study of representation of the mind as embodied. The argument begins by considering the ambiguous status of Manuele as narrator and suggests that his inability to distinguish between true and apocryphal memories should be regarded as a cognitive issue rather than a rhetorical one. The next stage of the argument explores the consequences of adopting a cognitive approach, thus foregrounding the embodied mind as one of the main foci of the narrative, both thematically and stylistically. Assuming a cognitive interpretive key, the central part of the paper illustrates Morante's complex portrayal of the dependence of the mind on the body and in particular on sensory perception, providing also a closer examination of the number of ways in which Morante articulates the body-mind nexus. For descriptive and heuristic purposes, these instances have been gathered into three main clusters: *Embodied nature of emotions and feelings*; *Specificities of embodiment*; *Embodied memory*. Finally, I shall offer some suggestions as to how a cognitive reading of *Aracoeli* corroborates a non-nihilistic interpretation of the novel as expression of existential or literary defeat.

Keywords

Aracoeli, cognitive literary criticism, Elsa Morante, embodied mind, unreliability, memory

Tale, o poco diversa, mi si presenta, coi suoi dintorni, la casa di Totetaco, se qui ne tento una ricostruzione logica. Ma si tratta, invero, di una ricostruzione forzosa, ossia fabbricata dalla mia ragione «reale», senza nessun aiuto della mia memoria. Se getto uno scandaglio nella mia memoria, fino a toccarne l'ultimo fondo, ne riporto alla luce un tutt'altro Totetaco: tanto veritiero e lampante che tuttora, mentre ne parlo, io rimango incerto e diviso tra i due. E denuncio così (non per la prima volta) la mia natura scissa, che spesso invalida la mia testimonianza perfino al giudizio mio proprio.

Quale, dei due, fu il vero Totetaco? [Morante, 1982: 113]

In 1982, Elsa Morante published her last novel, *Aracoeli*. On its back cover, the novel is usually described as the story of Manuele, a 43-year-old lonely, self-loathing homosexual and recovering drug-addict who has a problematic relationship with his long-deceased mother, Aracoeli. On 31st October 1975 he decides to use his All-Saints' Day holiday to embark on a 'voyage-quest' (Serkowska, 2006: 158): his aim

is to reach the tiny Andalusian village of El Almendral, birthplace of Aracoeli, in the attempt to somehow retrieve his lost mother. The narrative itself consists of a seemingly haphazard monologue – ‘monologo sregolato’ (24) – by the protagonist-narrator, Manuele, who lets his mind wander among his memories as the journey proceeds. However, such a synopsis barely scratches the surface of what this specific narrative work is, and does not grasp at all what marks the uniqueness of the novel.

The first pages of *Aracoeli* intriguingly mirror the beginning of Morante’s first novel, *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948). Once again, the narrator Manuele admits his own inability to distinguish true from apocryphal memories and boasts about his unreliability and his ‘fantasia congenita’ (145), exactly like his predecessor Elisa. Yet if in the first novel the issue of fallacious and deceptive memories simply opens Elisa’s narrative, in *Aracoeli* it becomes systematically thematised and explored throughout the whole novel, standing out as one of its cores. By exploring the ambiguity of the narratorial status, this paper advances the hypothesis that to be questioned is the notion of reliability itself. In fact, it is suggested that by admitting the impossibility of providing a true account of the facts of his childhood and instead adhering to his childhood memories however improbable, Manuele is actually proving to be a reliable narrator. This new standpoint triggers a shift in assessing reliability from a rhetorically-oriented to a cognition-oriented process.¹ This, in turn, reshapes how we might look at the narrative design as a whole: remoulding the frame of reference against which the narrator’s reliability should be assessed – namely *what* is supposed to be ‘accurately narrated’ and *about what* the narrator has to prove trustworthy – unavoidably affects the readers’ overall perception of what *Aracoeli* is about.

Without dismissing other possible readings, the cognitive approach brings to the forefront the presence of the mind in the novel and prompts us to explore its interplay with corporeality, which has often been stressed by extant critical literature.² Morante, indeed, not only stresses the centrality of the narrator’s mind, but also emphasises its embodied nature. Processes normally regarded as purely mental – such as the elaboration of emotions, understanding and memory – are actually deeply affected by the

constraints imposed on them as they happen in the body. Reading *Aracoeli* as a complex and insightful portrait of the mind as embodied may provide a new apt lens for re-assessing the issue of reliability as a central concern of Morante throughout her writing career. More broadly, it also encourages to fully appreciate how as she turns the multiple ways in which the mind is affected by its embodied nature into lively narrative matter, propositionally articulated.

An unreliable narrator?

The first-person narrator of *Aracoeli* is almost unanimously regarded as unreliable, either explicitly (Giorgio, 1994: 98) or implicitly by looking at him through psychoanalytical grids that associate the character's unreliability with a pathological condition. Admittedly, such an unquestioned assessment is well grounded, since Manuele's inability to distinguish between 'true' and apocryphal memories is constantly thematised by the narrator himself through mimesis. Additionally, Manuele is short-sighted, addicted to both drugs and alcohol, and, after a page and a half of narration, he already admits to propensity for imaginative visions rather than rational investigations (4). Whenever he actually has any piece of knowledge, which is often patchy, he still undermines his knowledge in multiple ways (to mention but a few, 'ch'io sappia', 6, 7; 'sinistri macchinismi – per me del tutto indecifrabili', 19; the words 'ignoranza'/'ignorante' occur several times over the first few pages). From the beginning of the book, it is clear that Manuele's narration, as well as his entire life, revolves around *Aracoeli* in a totalising way that inspires in the reader a sense of uneasiness, and has aptly prompted many psychoanalytical critiques.

This critical stance is difficult to challenge as the assumption of unreliability tends to go unnoticed because of Morante's regular recourse to unreliable narrators of different kinds. Her four major novels, *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948), *L'isola di Arturo* (1957), *La Storia* (1974) and *Aracoeli* (1982), are characterised by distinctive narrative filters, strongly overarching and marked by a blatant subjectivity,

although they have rarely been considered comparatively. Chillemi (2015) devotes his essay to a discussion of the 'oscillatory' nature characterising the narratorial status of Elisa, who delivers a narrative that may be debatably either 'pure fiction, autobiographical fiction, or a hybrid of a fantasy narrative and a realistic novel' (ibid., 41, 39). Likewise focusing on *Menzogna e sortilegio*, Di Bucci Felicetti (2015) draws attention to Elisa's double role of narrating-I and narrated-I and points out how the distance between Elisa the narrator and Elisa the character varies and changes in a more or less justified manner. Similarly, Harrison (2015) takes issue with the tendency to regard Arturo's claims as Morante's claims, and suggests that, on the contrary, one should take as much critical distance from the adult Arturo as from the young Arturo. Finally, referring to *La Storia* – which is the only novel adopting a third-person narration – Lucamante (2015) and Rosa (1995) expose the contradictions behind the seemingly omniscient narrator and outline the unresolved ambiguity of its partly heterodiegetic and partly homodiegetic nature. In the case of *Aracoeli*, we are dealing with a case of homodiegesis in which the narration is carried out on two main temporal levels: the present, staging Manuele's journey to El Almendral and characterised by the use of the present tense; and the recollected past, to which belong all the memories that the narrating-I remembers during his solitary monologue, narrated in the past tenses.

Since Wayne Booth first proposed the notion of unreliability in his 1961 *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, scholarship has further explored the concept and countless narratives have variously implemented it and tried its limits. My analysis draws on the account elaborated by Phelan, Martin and Rabinowitz as a useful heuristic tool for assessing different types of unreliability. Phelan and Martin (1999) understand narration as a rhetorical act and purposive communication, and they analyse narratorial unreliability by identifying three primary tasks that a narrator could perform and two ways in which the narrator could fail to perform these tasks successfully. By combining these options, they create a flexible taxonomy composed of six types of unreliability (then slightly refined terminologically by Phelan and Rabinowitz in Herman et

al., 2012). The three narratorial tasks consist of reporting (axis of events), reading/interpreting (axis of knowledge/perception), and regarding/evaluating (axis of ethics); if the narrator performs any or all of these tasks *inadequately* by either distorting (e.g. misreporting) or failing to go far enough (e.g. underreporting), then we talk of an unreliable narrator. Interestingly, they also distinguish unreliable narrator from restricted narrator, that is a narrator who performs only one of the three tasks and blatantly leaves one or two of the other operations aside.

Bearing this taxonomy in mind, let us turn to *Aracoeli's* narrator. More specifically, let us consider the episodes in which Manuele recalls the last months of Aracoeli's life, when her still unknown illness – possibly a brain tumour – starts affecting her personality and behaviour, causing her to surrender to outbursts of indiscriminate lust. In these episodes, Manuele limits himself to describing the behaviour of his mother and of the men she approaches, often stating his inability to understand the scene; to the reader, on the contrary, the meaning of what is actually happening is perfectly clear. By limiting himself to report facts, however, the narrator is arguably not so much unreliable as rather restricted. The situation is made more complex by the fact that in a homodiegetic context one can distinguish between a narrating-I, the older Manuele, and a narrated-I, the younger Manuele; the narrative of the older Manuele is necessarily relying on his memories as they are mnemonically 'narrated' by the younger Manuele. The older Manuele, in other words, is reliably reporting facts, but he is also unreliably underreading the scene in order to reproduce the effect of the restricted (mnemonic) narration of the younger Manuele. Occasionally, the use of adjectives that reveal an ethical judgment seems to breach the restricted perspective of the younger Manuele, even though it remains unclear whether these judgments are formulated by the older Manuele only or, due to some obscure awareness, are shared also by the young Manuele ('con la bassa invadenza di un lebbroso a caccia di elemosine', 247).

In another passage of the novel, Manuele dramatises an imagined trial where the Prosecution (A.), the Accused (I.), and the Defense (D.) question the apocryphal nature of his memories. In the following

excerpt, Manuele is asked to describe the garden of his first house, where he and Aracoeli lived isolated from society until he was four years old:

A. «[...] Si sa che il Soggetto ha vissuto i primi quattro anni della sua vita a Monte Sacro. Si tratta di un quartiere periferico di Roma fittamente invaso da costruzioni di massa, tipiche della speculazione immobiliare».

I. «Dall'età di quattro anni, io non ho mai più visto quel territorio. La mia età, oggi, è di quarantatre anni. Al tempo che ricordo io, *Totetaco* era un'altra cosa. [...] Una grande foresta».

A. «Né al tempo che voi dite, né prima – in tempi moderni, almeno – non risulta che la città di Roma fosse circondata da grandi foreste».

D. «Forse era solo una boscaglia. Ma va considerato che le dimensioni sono relative. A un passerotto, lungo pochi centimetri, un cespuglio può apparire una foresta».

I. «Certo, a quel tempo, io avevo la statura di un pigmeo. Ma non credo che tale spiegazioni basti. [...] Credo che i miei occhi possedessero, a quel tempo, una *eccezionale capacità visiva*. [...] Ma io non la invento: *la ricordo*, per averla vista con i miei occhi. [...] E i loro fogliami erano di tanti colori: molti più colori di quanti ne appaiano di norma nello spettro visibile: così che non potrei descriverli. [115-6 – emphasis added]

In this example, the situation is more difficult to disentangle than the episodes describing Aracoeli's extramarital forays, because during the imaginary trial the two perspectives, of the narrated-I and of the narrating-I, are constantly intertwined and emerge and disappear within the same sentence. Moreover, should the mismatching accounts of the garden be regarded as misreporting or misreading? In other words, is there a mismatch between facts or between perceptions?

The question draws attention to the peculiar situation designed in *Aracoeli*. Conventionally, homodiegesis admits a certain degree of incoherence between the narrated- and the narrating-I because, as observed by Phelan and Martin, 'the departure is *rhetorically* effective' (1999: 93). However, I argue that in this case the gap is not just a rhetorical device but rather a *cognitive* issue.

Theoretically, inadequacy – which causes unreliability – should be measured 'against how the implied author would perform' the narrative task (Herman et al., 2012: 34; cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:

100-3). However, looking again at the mismatching accounts of the garden, one may notice that the reader is offered both versions of the information: Monte Sacro vs. Totetaco, 'un irrisorio giardinetto domestico' (112) vs. 'una grande foresta'. The incoherence is not meant to be reconstructed by the reader with the tacit aid of an (implied) author: it is overtly thematised by the narrator himself. Similarly, in recounting the episodes of Aracoeli's shameless unfaithfulness, Manuele's unreliable reports of the scenes he witnessed are not meant to create an empathetic understanding between an (implied) author and the reader, but rather between the older Manuele and the reader, behind the younger Manuele's back. In other words, the notion of implied author seems to be of no use here. And yet this prompts the question of against what, then, one should measure unreliability.

My suggestion is that the unreliability of the narrator is so overtly claimed by Manuele himself and seemingly so blatant for the reader, that maybe it has been taken for granted. Or better: Manuele certainly is an unreliable narrator, but what does unreliability mean when there is nothing against which to measure it? Who could actually say that Manuele's report of the garden seen through his own eyes, as a child, as well as the number of narrations portraying the deformed and distorted scenarios that he experiences when he takes off his glasses, are unreliable? On these occasions, and also when he admits to not knowing whether his memories are actually 'true' or apocryphal, Manuele is paradoxically a *reliable* narrator. Moreover, identifications of unreliability make sense only insofar as they are supposed to trigger some kind of response in the reader, to prompt her to question the origins and reasons of this unreliability, or to reframe the storyworld in some meaningful way in the light of this unreliable status.³ In the case of *Aracoeli*, an assumption of reliability of the narrator works more effectively within the overall narrative design than an assumption of unreliability. In the remainder of the paper, I explore some features that the cognitive perspective helps to expose.

Mind as embodied

One of the first objections one could raise against a view of Manuele as reliable narrator is that, then, the whole notion of unreliable narration could well be discarded; if any unreliable narrator could be regarded as reliable to the extent that it reliably portrays a lying or somehow unreliable mind, there would be a pointless circle. To counteract this objection, it is worth turning to an intentionalist approach to worldmaking.⁴ In other words, the way this particular narrator and this particular context of narration are designed encourages us to think that the author intends us to question the notion of unreliability. To substantiate this hypothesis, I illustrate how the text advances a view of reliability as an unattainable condition, and how, conversely, Morante devotes extensive and detailed attention to the depiction of the workings of Manuele's hyper-sensitive mind.

Some scholars have observed that a strikingly similar unsolvable uncoupling and overlapping of memory and imagination has already been staged in *Menzogna e sortilegio* (Capozzi, 1989; Chillemi, 2015; Di Bucci Felicetti, 2015; Serkowska, 2006):

Ed ecco, invano, oggi, la mia ragione adulta mi suggerisce nomi spietati, d'inferno, per condannare quella tiranna. Invano il mio giudizio tenta di chiamarla stupida, perversa, e volgare donnaccia; il giudizio, ahimè, non può nulla, ch  ancora oggi il mio sentimento riveste d'un colore divino quella figura. [499]

If, in Morante's first novel, similar passages represent significant but isolated instances, in *Aracoeli* this overlapping becomes a core issue, thus revealing its intrinsic fascination for and importance to the author. Although *Aracoeli* often and variously foregrounds the problematic relationship between imagination and memory, at the same time it does not offer any conclusive view about it nor, therefore, a stable standpoint from which to assess the narrator's reliability.

Several critics have stressed the narrator's 'pathological confusion of memories and fantasies' (Holzhey, 2009: 53) – which would call for a diagnosis of unreliability. However, the narrative design of *Aracoeli* could be regarded as different from other classics of unreliable narration. Take, for instance,

Italo Svevo's masterpiece: in *La coscienza di Zeno*, the more the unreliability of Zeno is emphasised the more the reader is estranged from him, and the more the focus is drawn onto the psychoanalytical process, which is the main theme of Svevo's work. Unmasking his unreliability cracks Zeno's account, but through these fissures in his narrative the reader is meant to achieve some truth, a more 'reliable' account that might be potentially explored through the psychoanalytical process. Morante's novel, instead, seems to deny the possibility of achieving a reliable account even after the unreliability has been ascertained. It follows that *Aracoeli* might necessitate a response that acknowledges, whilst also somehow puts aside, the classical psychoanalytical interpretation and establishes a bond – rather than an estrangement – between the narrator and the reader; by flaunting his own unreliability, Manuele seeks to ensure the sympathy of the reader (or of the audience at the trial) despite his own incapability to offer a reliable account. It is Morante herself who seems to protect her narrative from an incontestably psychoanalytical interpretation.⁵

X.Y.Z. (*Uno dell'Uditorio*): «Direi che il caso rientra nel comune schema edipico».

D. «Riscare nei soliti schemi d'obbligo mi sembra, qui, fuori luogo. Il nostro caso non si adatta a nessuno schema prefisso». [115]

Two main questions should now be considered: What does it mean, then, to describe the gap between narrating-I and narrated-I as a *cognitive* – rather than rhetorical – issue, and how does it relate to the issue of reliability vs. unreliability? First of all, by defining the gap as cognitive, the focus moves to the mind and its workings rather than to the act of narration as purposive communication, thus performing a critically profitable shift in perspective. The narrative design of *Aracoeli* prompts the reader to engage with the narrator's viewpoint as Manuele struggles to sort out his entangled relationship with his deceased mother – a struggle of the narrating-I's mind to process the narrated-I's memories. These untouched memories are the only materials on which the adult Manuele can draw because for a long

time he had refused to confront the events of his childhood and had thus failed to re-elaborate them over the years ('oggi, dopo tanti anni di separazione smemorata', 6; 'dopo una lunga amnesia', 7; 'Per me, in quella stagione [as 13-year-old], Aracoeli era negazione – ripudio – vendetta – oblio', 327).⁶

One of the most distinctive features of *Aracoeli* is precisely this attempt to reproduce through a narrative form the struggle of reconciling two different minds, or better two different developmental stages of the same mind, forced to confront each other. Obviously, unless we are considering science-fiction, it is impossible for two minds to co-exist within the same body. Instead, for Manuele, the undeniable presence of somehow conflicting memories within his adult mind prompts it to reconstruct the mindset that may have produced these recollections, a mindset that can be ascribed to the mind of the narrated-I. At some moments, the narrator is simply aware of the blurred co-existence of the traces of different mindsets [a], while at others he acknowledges the mindsets as distinct and belonging to different times [b]:

[a] La mia mente è una stanzaccia promiscua, dove possono ritrovarsi in coabitazione balorda la rigida miscredenza e le superstizioni più futili. [126]

[b] Simili fenomeni sacri non urtavano nessuna mia logica, e il dogma della trinità non mi tornava astruso. Per me fra l'unità e i suoi multipli non esistevano confini precisi, così come *ancora* l'io non si distingueva chiaramente dal tu e dall'altro, né i sessi l'uno dall'altro. [118 – emphasis added]

The primary focus of Morante's narrative could be the representation not so much of a fictional reality or truth, but rather of the narrator's different and sometimes conflicting ways of processing such realities. This consideration takes us back to the second question I posed earlier about how the focus on cognition concerns the issue of reliability. If we assume that one of the main cores of Morante's narrative is the representation of a cognitively complex situation, then the reliability of Manuele's report should be measured against this revised task, it should be assessed on the grounds of its adherence to

this newly reframed purpose of the narrative. After all, the passage on the trial quoted above overtly calls for the issue of relativity of dimensions: if two subjects are bound to perceive the same object (i.e., the garden) as different due to their different *situatedness* – that is, their embeddedness in and dependence on a specific context – then we will have two different perceptual interpretations of reality that will be both individually processed as *facts*. When the narrator foregrounds the incompatibility of these two divergent reports, he is not pathologically unreliable. Rather, he is reliably reporting a cognitively problematic state of affairs.

Yet the co-existence of two different perspectives, that of the narrating-I and of the narrated-I, is not the only reason why this state of affairs proves cognitively arduous. As I mentioned before, Manuele has an uncommonly acute sensitivity for the ways in which his mind processes any kind of information, and he devotes an astonishing amount of attention to reporting the specificities of his mind's situatedness. Situatedness of an agent in a context is an unavoidable condition; in this case, the agent is the mind, and the inescapable context on which it depends for its existence and all its workings is the human body. One should adopt, therefore, not simply a cognitive view but also an embodied cognitive view, which posits the nature of the *mind as embodied*.⁷ An embodied approach to cognition builds on an idea of 'cognition as the product of dynamic interplay between neural and non-neural processes, with no general fracture between cognition, the agent's bodily experience, and real-life contexts' (Wilson and Foglia, 2011: § 4).

Robust emphasis should be put on the embodied nature of *Aracoeli's* narrator's mind for two reasons. In the first place, from a mimetic perspective, it is the physical continuity of the body that prompts the narrating-I's mind to confront the presence of *otherness* even within his own body. Memories that appear to be apocryphal or that the narrating-I did not remember having are nonetheless there, stored in his brain by what now looks like someone else's mind. Undeniably, this context encourages both Manuele and the reader to acknowledge that although the mind is likely to undergo

many changes, traces of them are perpetually accumulating in the body. I will refer to this point later, looking in greater detail at the portrayal of memory in the novel.

Secondly, a view of the mind as embodied is relevant because the centrality of body in *Aracoeli* is overwhelming. There are a considerable number of works in Morantian studies exploring this topic, with reference both to *Aracoeli* specifically and to Morante's oeuvre as a whole. Indeed, the significance of issues such as gender, sexuality, maternity, and ageing almost inevitably prompts critics to engage with the theme of corporeality. While this paper does not challenge the pertinence of the multiple readings elaborated within queer and psychoanalytical frameworks, it takes a slightly different perspective. West's 2009 essay convincingly argues for the relevance of the body as a source of sensory information, sight in particular, and elaborates on how, consequently, Manuele's 'self-presentations through self-narration are bound up in ambiguity, distortion, and the blurring of the line between literal vision and transformative visions' (27). This paper develops West's suggestion further and explores the hypothesis that, through this particular narratorial figure, the novel makes a case for the inevitable embodiment of the mind.

The novel is pervaded by an almost obsessive concern with physicality. Physicality is even central to Manuele's ethics, which is dominated by a sort of infantile *kalokagathia*, a feeling of necessary co-presence of beauty and goodness, where 'goodness' in this case expresses the *right to be loved*. Interestingly enough, physical beauty is definitely privileged over other virtues that stem from one's deeds, technical abilities, or creative skills. It may be no accident that the other favourite categories following 'the beautiful youths' mark a progressive distance in the degree of engagement with the body:

Favoriti, tra i mortali, sono i giovani belli, che possono offrire senza vergogna alle carezze la propria carne radiosa. E riscattati coloro che, almeno, possono offrire qualche altro sfoggio, da farsene piacenti: esempio i campioni, i taumaturghi, i poeti. [108]

Nevertheless, as soon as this ideal of perfect beauty fails, ugliness blossoms into an array of nuances that are representationally explored with a sense of morbid satisfaction (e.g. 13, 270). It looks as though,

according to Manuele (and Morante), the body is such a pivotal part of one's identity that, as soon as things diverge imperceptibly from the Edenic state of perfect harmony between cognition and corporeality, irreparable offence and damage occur.⁸ Indeed, the natural process of ageing itself is repeatedly described as an outrageous scandal (72).

It follows that the worship of beauty and youth is combined with a recurrent feeling of disconnection from and disowning of the body, though in ways that are worth further exploration. Although I will not expand here on this issue, it should be noted that when the narrator perceives his own body as alien to his 'true Myself' ('il vero Mestesso', 140), this does not involve a Cartesian or Christian juxtaposition between something incorporeal – intellect, mind, soul, spirit – and something corporeal. Embodiment per se is not a sinful or a regrettable state. Indeed, in contrast to Morelli's argument (2015: 223), Manuele does not juxtapose his actual body with a disembodied state, but rather with his other 'corpo reale', his true shape, which is a shape but is not subjected to the fixity and decay of the human body, and is at the same time proteiform and eternally young (124, 215, 139, 140-1, 233, 249). According to Serkowska (2006), Morante's re-elaboration of oriental mysticism and gnostic-platonic sources, while not necessarily aiming for internal consistency, nonetheless gains in complexity and reveals a process of continuous revision and reflection on Morante's part. While it is hard to achieve a conclusive standpoint concerning the relationship between the sense of self and the body, there are passages in *Aracoeli* that substantiate the claim that physicality per se is not rejected:

Mi è sempre più difficile (quasi un esercizio innaturale e penoso) riconoscermi nel mio corpo, voglio dire in quello esteriore. Nell'interno di me, secondo il mio senso nativo, il mio mestesso [sic] s'incarna ostinatamente in una forma perenne di fanciullo. Questo ammasso di carne matura, che oggi mi ricopre all'esterno, dev'essere una formazione aberrante, conosciuta per maleficio sopra al mio corpo reale. [106]

Loved or despised, old or young, the body is omnipresent, and this omnipresence goes even further. Body and bodies, indeed, compete for agency against more mind-centered expressions of selfhood represented by personal pronouns and are often appointed the grammatical function of the subject. The tendency of Manuele to describe his situation by referring to 'his body' rather than to 'himself' ('Il mio corpo, intormentito nei suoi panni umidi e attaccaticci, tuttora giace inerte', 105; 'il mio corpo, arreso alla pesantezza, si è lasciato inghiottire lentamente dal sonno', 98) and to describe human

relationships in terms of relating bodies ('In realtà fra il suo [di Eugenio] corpo e il mio si era stesa (e s'infittiva con la mia crescita) una nebbia confusa', 184), could be considered along the same lines. Similarly, when Manuele speaks of 'corpi d'amore' (141) referring to someone he loves, or when he mentions being afraid of the bodies of the dead rather than of their spirits ('Non era del suo spettro, che nutrivo spavento; ma proprio di lei, com'era stata nel suo corpo vivo di prima', 300), he seems to reiterate the fact that, despite its double-edged nature, the body is actually the most authentic means of interacting with the world.

It should be noted that, although the image can be used heuristically in my discussion, the hypothesis underlying this paper is that one should not posit a *connection between* body and mind, but rather consider them as aspects of one single unity: the embodied mind. An embodied mind that can reveal itself only through the body as it cannot exist without a body. Let us consider, for instance, the number of occurrences where emotional detachment is described in terms of physical mutilation: 'nell'amputarmi di te' (289); 'La mamita Aracoeli regina dei ricordi si strappava via da me, come una mutilazione' (300); 'si tolse il cappello piano piano, come in una lenta amputazione' (316). Likewise, verbal harassment is perceived as physical attack (172). These descriptions of emotional detachment through bodily images are not an isolated phenomenon, nor they depend on a merely representational choice. As Lakoff and Johnson point out, a view of the mind as embodied builds on the claim that 'the very properties of concepts are created as a result of the way the brain and body are structured and the way they function in interpersonal relations and in the physical world' (1999: 37). In other words, since the individual learns to know only through bodily experience, the expression of emotional detachment as a physical phenomenon is indeed metaphorical (or simile-based), but it is a metaphor that works precisely because our way of conceptualising emotional detachment is ultimately informed by the experience of physical detachment. Although it is unlikely that Morante was reasoning in terms belonging to cognitive science, the complexity and ambiguity of her portrayal of the connection between

body and mind actually aim to blur the boundaries between these two traditionally separated entities, rather suggesting a unity.

Inflections of an embodied mind

The present analysis mostly focuses on Manuele's body rather than Aracoeli's because it aims to consider the nexus between body and mind, and it is Manuele's mind, in his role as the narrator, that is foregrounded in the novel. In this section, the dependence of the mind on the body and on sensory perception is explored and two main points are elucidated. Firstly, that cognition is a process starting with the senses, long before the conscious interpretation of the inputs in the brain; secondly, that those functions usually regarded as high-level mental processes – from elaborating emotions to understanding and memory – are instead deeply ingrained in the corporeal matter from which they are produced. By describing the various ways in which the embodied mind takes shape in Morante's narrative, I intend to substantiate the hypothesis that *Aracoeli* should be regarded, to some extent, as the result of the author's ongoing exploration of the mind as embodied.

The inescapability of Morante's portrayal of the mind as embodied endorses a view of unreliability as a standard and unavoidable condition. Reliability is unachievable because it is objective (fictional) reality that is unreachable in the first place. Our cognitive elaboration of reality and of experience cannot but depend on the mind's situatedness and cannot but be filtered by at least one ultimate (or first?), irreducible filter: our body. It is precisely in order to emphasise such a point that Morante designs a narrator, Manuele, who is affected by an almost hyper-sensitive awareness of his own body and of the constraints that the body imposes on his own cognition, which he describes in meticulous detail. As Holzhey remarks, *Aracoeli* 'thematizes the difficulty of distinguishing between different levels of subjective and objective reality and fantasy, but also indicates that this difficulty may be considered as its poetic principle of narration' (2009: 46). Morante lingers on and skillfully emphasises the visibility of the

embodied mind, blurring and re-shaping its boundaries. Through a diversified range of strategies, she indirectly prompts her readers to sharpen their awareness of how Manuele's (and their own) ways of processing the world are dependent on the embodied nature of his (and their) mind. The description below is structured as a list for descriptive rather than normative reasons – to highlight the diversity and complexity of Morante's conceptualisation. The various ways in which Morante draws the reader's attention to the embodied mind are in turn gathered into three loose clusters (A, B, and C) which identify the different focuses that one may assume in looking into this complex narrative portrayal.

(A) *Embodied nature of emotions or feelings.* Due to his natural sensitivity and to the self-analysis that he imposes on himself in an attempt to sort out his relationship with Aracoeli, it is not surprising that Manuele puts a strong emphasis on his own feelings and their nuanced changes. However, a close reading reveals how recurrently these feelings are associated with the materiality of the body, in a number of ways. Sometimes, the connection between body and emotions consists in causality, so that the narrator's attention lingers on the (1) *bodily reactions to emotions*:

[...] pur non avendo nulla in bocca, io non cessavo di muovere su e giù le mascelle, quasi mi stessee fra i denti un impasto di creta [275]

[...] quasi che sui grossi occhioni spalancati gli fosse calata una doppia cataratta. Le fatiche rituali obbligatorie a cui [Eugenio] si era sforzato nelle ultime ore in famiglia, gli s'erano condensate addosso in una coltre opaca, di una evidenza brutta, quasi materiale [284-5]

Il primo fenomeno che segnò, fino dall'inizio, il mio soggiorno presso i nonni, fu la balbuzie. [...] E in loro presenza disimparavo non soltanto a parlare, ma addirittura a camminare, procedendo a piccoli sobbalzi inquieti. [...] al cospetto dei Nonni capitava che non soltanto il mio cervello, ma gli stessi miei muscoli soffrissero di amnesia. [285, 292]

It is worth remarking that material consequences are rarely or not necessarily direct physical reactions, i.e. blushing or trembling. Rather, Morante seems to be interested in recording looser but more holistic

consequences of one's emotional life on the material body. Sometimes, she does so by resorting to rhetorical tropes: when Manuele describes how his grandmother's sermons 'mi si rovesciavano sulla testa come volumi di enciclopedia travolti e scompaginati da un sisma' (287), a simile is used to rhetorically describe the shock ensuing a psychologically aggressive behaviour. Yet, when Manuele says that 'avvertii, nella mia carne, una trafittura acutissima, quale di un pungiglione di vespa gigante che dal collo mi penetrasse fino in fondo alla gola' (327), the physical reaction is not metaphoric anymore and here Manuele actually perceives the effects of a non-physical phenomenon as a physical attack. Once again, this seems to suggest the existence of one entity, the embodied mind, that relates to the world and reacts to it, choosing different paths at each turn.

Alternatively, the relation of causality can be looked at in the opposite direction, with Manuele stressing (2) the *perceptual source of emotions or feelings*. Here, it is the biological nature of perception that emerges: references to the neural system are particularly frequent, and in general Manuele tends to show a scientific precision in indicating the body parts responsible for perception over the more common referent, e.g. 'rètina' instead of 'occhio' (111).

[...] un sentore di profumeria che subito emanò sui miei nervi, senza definirsi, un presagio confuso d'angoscia [282]

Fu un avvertimento inaudito e sensazionale, che mi vibrò nei nervi quasi me lo trasmettesse un'antenna di là da un'artide diaccia [174]

La vicenda del nome faceva lavorare il mio cervello [222]

[...] tumulto vorticoso dei nervi [266]

Another means by which Manuele foregrounds the embodied nature of emotions is (3) *distortion of perception due to emotional engagement*. In the following example, sight is concretely affected by emotion,

and the experience described below is analogous to those occasions when Manuele removes his glasses (cf. West, 2009):

Ma poco importa quello che potei vedere in realtà, se il mio senso era intriso degli *amati succhi materni, allucinanti quanto l'erba magica*: per cui tutte le parvenze attuali di là da quel cancello mi si assunsero con violenza a un regno d'altra natura, di materia levitante e falotica. [277 – emphasis added]

(B) *Specificities of embodiment*. A second broader cluster contains those instances that reveal a consistent awareness on Morante's part of the constraints that the specificities of the body may impose on its way of processing reality.⁹ To fully emphasise this point, Morante stages (4) *disruptions in the sensory system itself*: as Manuele is short-sighted, vision is constantly affected by his continuous removing of and donning glasses. The novel offers plenty of such examples, of which I quote just a representative one:

A intervalli, volgo qua e là uno sguardo sfuggente; e il mondo circostante, ai miei occhi semiciechi senza gli occhiali, si scioglie, secondo il solito, in un brulicame acquoso, corso da luci stralunate e immagini storpie. Le lampade si gonfiano in enormi bolle infiammate, scintille trafiggono i muri e filamenti elettrici si attorcigliano tra i passi della gente. Dal soffitto pende un vasto quadrante tenebroso, fornito di pupille luminescenti e di ciglia verdi movibili; passa una signora obesa con due teste; e dritti in fila, rivoltati contro una parete come per una perquisizione, traballano degli individui che al posto della faccia hanno una proboscide. Però simili scherzi ottici per me sono effetti abituali già scontati, e non mi curo di smascherarli. [23]

(Le mie impressioni – come avviene ai miopi – cominciano dall'udito). [273]

As Margolin points out, 'the fictional presentation of cognitive mechanisms in action, especially of their breakdown or failure, is itself a powerful cognitive tool which may make us aware of actual cognitive mechanisms, and, more specifically, of our own mental functioning' (2003: 278). Morante further enriches her portrayal of nonstandard modes of perception by (5) *distortions of perception* due, for

instance, to drug taking. In a number of episodes, Morante draws the attention to how phenomena of distortions may intervene either at the level of perception – if the senses are somehow dulled or altered by drug intoxication when the information is processed as input in the first place – or in the subsequent phases of memorisation.

(C) *Embodied memory.* A third cluster includes those passages that foreground the embodied nature of memory, a central theme of the novel. As mentioned previously, by arguing that Manuele has to cope with two different mindsets, I do not mean that they actually co-exist within the same mind in perhaps a pathological schizophrenic condition. It is instead on the terrain of memory that such an encounter is possible: memories that the narrating-I does not recognise as true may be regarded as traces of the workings of the same mind when Manuele was a child. Taking into account the embodied nature of memory thus helps elucidate some aspects of Morante's narration.

It is a commonplace that memory and memories take one back in time; however, this is a misperception. As Turner (2014) points out, both memory as a system and as particular recollections are biologically present events, reassessed and rebuilt in the present. Although the exact neural processes of memorisation are still unknown, what is clear so far is that memories are not images indelibly printed somewhere in the brain, but rather products of a more or less constant update and re-elaboration through later experiences. Manuele's case, as pointed out earlier, is unusual because many of the memories that he retrieves over his narration have been left almost untouched; they have not been re-elaborated through time, as would be natural (at least according to mimetically justified dynamics that have been aptly described by psychoanalytical readings of the novel).

Such a view of memory as a present phenomenon matches with Wood's observation about Morante's interest in exploring the notion of the 'past in the present' (1991: 314), rather than of the past intended as some external reality. 'There is a sense' Wood continues, 'that for Morante all time is present time, and this has profound psychological as well as narrative consequences' (319).

Acknowledging the embodied nature of memory provides a useful framework as it not only justifies, but makes a point of, the annihilation of time that we witness on several occasions in *Aracoeli*; the use of the present tense in the recollection of some particularly vivid memories (e.g. the framed mirror, the breast-feeding scene, 11-13), along with some expressions used by Manuele ('E certo nel suo discorso, *che ora ascolto, riconosco gli accenti spagnoli*', 13 – emphasis added), stress the presentness of the phenomenon of remembrance.

Once again, it is likely that Morante was not herself articulating the question in these terms. However, it is reasonable to assume that, maybe prompted by the painful awareness of the new constraints that biology was imposing on her own body and mental life at the time she was writing *Aracoeli*, Morante was strongly conscious of how memories and strategies of memorisation were regulated by biological and neural processes. Arguably, a certain attention to these issues emerges from the subtle reproduction of temporality that I just pointed out, and from the acute sensitivity displayed by the narrator to the different phases of cognitive mechanisms of attention and to the workings of memorisation. For instance, Manuele records the multifarious ways in which memory can operate, either by (6) *condensing multiple episodes* into a single remarkable one, or, vice versa, by (7) *making one single episode echo through many other memories*. The example below is illustrative of Manuele's narration, and of the ambiguous border between reliability and unreliability: on the one hand he is stressing his inability to state which one is really the case, but on the other, by affirming his ignorance, he is showing a fascinated insight into the mind's workings:

Così, devo osservare che a questo punto non posso distinguere più con certezza se le «passeggiate» dei nostri pomeriggi, quali adesso le ho descritte, fossero propriamente più d'una, o non piuttosto una sola, esemplare. [237]

Furthermore, Manuele acknowledges the possibility of (8) *modifications affecting stored memories*:

Così, l'ho vista marciare fuori dalla latteria, figura immensa e funebre, la testa curva sulla sua forte schiena gibbosa, fra i due spilloni acuti. [...] Spesso, nella testa dei bambini, si accampa un genio della trasfigurazione e dell'arbitrio; e io non so davvero quale mio estro mentale abbia prestato un simile fasto imperituro alla baba-cammello della latteria. [254-5]

One last but crucial case is offered by the number of episodes where Manuele denounces (9) *incongruities due to the fact that a specific memory was first processed by a mindset ascribed to a stage of cognitive development different from that of the mindset actually retrieving it (narrated-I vs. narrating-I)*.¹⁰ The examples discussed above – for instance that of the garden of Totetaco/Monte Sacro – are included in this latter sub-cluster.

The number and pervasiveness of examples analogous to those provided above prompt us to think that what we witness here are not merely some felicitous or isolated experimentations in style. All the narrations of what Manuele sees when he is not wearing glasses and the descriptions of his perceptions from an infantile perspective are not simply enrichments of the main narrative but rather constitute the primary narrative matter of the novel. *Aracoeli*, then, is specifically about the deeply subjective – yet not arbitrary – ways in which Manuele, as a unity of body and mind, processes his reality. Further proof that Manuele's awareness of the embodied nature of his mind itself becomes substance and object of narration is given by the last sub-type of cases. This sub-type contains (10) frequent *descriptions of the involuntary actions of the brain*, perceived in their not-yet-consciously-interpreted dynamics:

[...] al modo di quei fili luminosi che balenano sotto le palpebre al buio [4]

[...] nelle tenebre dei miei occhi si formavano lenti cumuli lattescenti [...]. Come un frullo di ali impazzite mi sbatté nella testa. [...] Qua il mio cervello si mutò in una sorta di centrale impazzita, corsa da lampi di colore acceso, e da vociferazioni mielate e stridule. [160-1]

[...] finché la sua faccia – a forza di guardarla – sembrava disfarmisi davanti come una nube. [265]

The awareness of the mind as embodied is central to *Aracoeli* as an inescapable condition affecting the subject's relationship with herself and with others and, even more interestingly, as a concept to be explored mimetically and stylistically. My previous classification of the variety of ways in which material constraints operate on the mind's activities is meant to corroborate this hypothesis. In the last part of this paper, I will suggest that acknowledging the richness of this exploration of the embodied mind by Morante may add something to the still open question of whether *Aracoeli* depicts a final defeat, an existential checkmate ('un fallimento totale' as Garboli defined it (1995: 17)).¹¹ Most of the examples quoted above seem to indicate that the condition of the mind as embodied is experienced as disorienting at best, and as a burden, a prison or a curse at worst. In fact, the whole novel revolves around the status of Manuele as trapped – that is, blocked – by the inability to solve this tension between true and apocryphal memories, unable to overcome the sense of entrapment in an adult body that he perceives as ugly and decaying.¹²

Eppure mi ritrovo con la mente lucida, preparata a consumare un'epoca di veglia notturna incalcolabile.

[100]

This quotation is followed by one of the passages in which the material constraints of the mind emerge most claustrophobically. Not even dulled by drugs or sleepiness, the mind is awake – trapped in a cage of flesh that follows its own rhythms, has its own unbearable weight ('arreso alla pesantezza', 98), and forces the mind to follow the *route written within the flesh* by bonds of love primarily stemming from the first physical connection, that between mother and son (100-3).

Nonetheless, this is a condition that Manuele ultimately manages to master to some extent, and with which he, at least partially, reconciles himself. The ending offers more than one element in support of a non-pessimistic interpretation:

C'è però una terza risposta, che *ora* mi tenta con la sua curiosa ambiguità (per quanto caduca e inverosimile):

piangevo per amore.

Amore di chi? Di Aracoeli, lasciata indietro sola a decomporsi nell'orrido parco? No – impossibile. Per me, *in quella stagione*, Aracoeli era negazione – ripudio – vendetta – oblio. Niente amore di lei. NO. Di lei no. Amore di un altro, invece. Di chi?

Di Eugenio Ottone Amedeo. [328 – emphasis added]

Manuele's acknowledgment of his feelings of affection for his father adds to the partial rehabilitation of Aracoeli when he realises that by alienating her son from herself she may have been attempting to protect him (302-3). These two facts already suggest a possible recovery, or, at least, challenge the impression of a permanent defeat. However, another element emerges from this last quotation: at the end of his narrative effort, the narrator is proving capable of performing a cognitive activity that he seems to have lacked throughout the previous account, that is the source-tagging of memories (Zunshine, 2006). Indeed, if one of the symptoms determining his feeling trapped in his own (embodied) mind is the inability to distinguish between true and apocryphal memories, here instead Manuele is able to assign specific memories to specific stages of his own development. In other words, the narrator is giving evidence of a potentially game-changing attainment, which could mark the beginning of a thorough cognitive and psychological re-elaboration of his personal experience. Arguably, being able to identify what happens in the ending as an achievement presupposes a cognitive-oriented perspective that foregrounds the embodied mind and makes of Manuele's struggle with his own memories one of the foci of the novel.

This leads me to the last point of my paper, which further corroborates the hypothesis that the embodied mind does represent one of the main concerns and themes of *Aracoeli* and that such perspective enables us to maintain an overall positive interpretation of the novel. Not only is there content-related evidence that encourages a non-pessimistic reading, but also it is the multifaceted portrait presented above that confirms how Morante turns a largely negative state of affairs into a trigger for artistic exploration and creation. In this sense, I fully agree with West's observation that 'although art is "il contrario della disgregazione" for Morante (at least when she wrote "Pro o contro la bomba atomica" in 1965), this does not mean that art cannot express within its integrative structures the forces of disintegration' (2009: 25). *Aracoeli* is far from a nihilistic palinode both because of its successful subversive nature and ambiguity (Fortuna and Gragnolati 2009: 17) and because of its successful integration of the issues stemming from a troublesome relationship with the body in the mimetic, thematic, and structural constraints imposed by the narrative discourse and the novelistic form.

In conclusion, recognising the centrality not only of the body, but of the *mind within the body* as an irreducible unity, encourages the reader – in addition to the critic – to foreground the related constellation of issues. On this basis, I would argue that Manuele may be a reliable narrator, thus reshaping the view of *Aracoeli* as more than the textbook account of a standard pathological case (Holzhey, 2009: 53). *Aracoeli* represents an exquisite achievement within Morante's lifetime narrative project, aiming to represent the workings of a mind and the ways one mind can inform and shape the surrounding world. The present article will, hopefully, go some way towards assessing the extent to which Morante thematises and problematises the embodied mind in her novel.

Referring to *Menzogna e sortilegio* – but arguably this holds for *Aracoeli*, too – Wood observes that with Morante 'narrative becomes the mirror to reflect not so much the world as the mind-in-the-world' (1991: 321). She continues by saying that, then, this 'mirror is indeed bewitched': I would argue, however, that is the only way to be.

Notes

1. A cognitive approach to narrative studies falls within the broader area of postclassical narratology. Rather than offering a rejection of structuralist theories, postclassical narratology is characterised by their reinterpretation and enhancement through a range of concepts and methods peculiar to disciplines such as – to mention but a few – gender theory, philosophy of language, cognitive sciences, and sociolinguistics, which were either neglected or unavailable to structuralist scholars (Herman, 2009).
2. To mention but a few of those with a specific focus on *Aracoeli*, see the collected essays edited by Gragnolati and Fortuna (2009); part III ('Queering Morante: Bodies that Matter from *Diario 1938* to *Aracoeli*') of the work edited by Lucamante (2015); Bernabò, 2015; Capozzi, 1989; Serkowska, 2006; Setti, 2015; Wehling-Giorgi, 2013.
3. In the entry for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Herman describes the notion of storyworld as a type of mental model (Johnson-Laird, 1983) – namely, a non-propositional global representation of the situation described by a (set of) sentence(s) – specific to narratively organised discourse: 'Storyworlds are thus mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters relocate (Ryan, 1991) as they work to comprehend a narrative' (Herman 2005: 570). Herman argues for the use of this term on the grounds that it is optimally calibrated to capture the way in which interpreters, in understanding narrative, do not simply understand the sequence of events, but also seek to reconstruct the surrounding context or environment.
4. An intentionalist stance is consistently adopted by Herman (2009, 2013a; Herman et al., 2012), who posits the initial assumption that stories are a form of communicative action. Therefore, in order to fully understand them, one has to ultimately reason about the teller's motives. In other words, one has to consider 'why the story creator has designed a narrative with these particular characteristics in this specific context or occasion for telling' (Herman et al., 2012: 151).
5. To various degrees, many scholars have redefined their distance from an interpretation of *Aracoeli* as a sheer application of Freudian schemes. Those who maintain a psychoanalytical framework tend nonetheless to shift the focus onto post-Freudian Lacanian, feminist and queer approaches, stressing the significant role of Jean Laplanche or Otto Rank, and of Luce Irigaray, Melanie Klein and Julia Kristeva (Bernabò, 2015; Capozzi, 1989, 1990; Fortuna and Gragnolati, 2009; Giorgio, 1994; Gragnolati, 2015; Holzhey, 2009; Wehling-Giorgi, 2013, 2015). Other scholars, such as Wood, instead, explicitly resist psychoanalytical readings; referring to *Menzogna e sortilegio*, Wood suggests what I believe can be extended also to *Aracoeli*, namely that imposing a psychoanalytical model on the text would equate 'to invok[ing] a teleological model which fits uneasily with Morante's refusal to sanction any social sense of history, linearity, and progress' (1991: 316).

6. This interpretation of the role of memory clearly contrasts with that suggested by Capozzi (1989). He draws a comparison with Pavese's *La luna e i falò* (1950) and argues that Manuele's journey through memory is different from Anguilla's, inasmuch as Manuele 'already knows everything about himself' (49), and thus memories are for him only a means for retrieving the trauma of abandonment and unreturned love.
7. The notion of embodied mind has been at the centre of the philosophical inquiries of John Dewey (1922, 1925) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962). For an introduction to the debate on embodied mind that integrates both philosophical inquiry and cognitive science, see Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1993) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999) (to which I refer also for a more detailed bibliography on the subject and in particular of the paradigmatic shift from philosophical cognitivism to an embodied view of cognition).
8. As to the idea of fall from an Edenic state, see also Serkowska (2006). Overall, these observations should not be limited to *Aracoeli*; Morante's own concerns for beauty and for her body, along with the profound crisis that followed her ageing are well documented (Bernabò, 2012; Garboli, 1995; Schifano, 1993).
9. On a broader note, this point reminds us of how an embodied cognitive approach neither automatically implies assumptions of universalism nor undermines other approaches. Since the body is always placed within a cultural and social context, and characterised by further individual specificities, adopting a cognitive approach does not 'exclude considerations of cultural difference, material embodiment, emotional engagement, or any other aspect of the larger social and physical contexts in which people produce and interpret stories' (Herman et al., 2012: 220).
10. From a scientific perspective, evidence indeed suggests that the way we store memories is directly dependent on the way we process information the moment it is taken in by our senses. As to the ongoing debate, for instance, on the perception of colours (universal vs. culturally- and context-based), see Roberson, Davidoff and Shapiro (2002).
11. More pessimistic views, together with the identification of a caesura in Morante's production marked by *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* (1968), are dominant over, although not limited to, the first phase of scholarship on Morante (Becchi Patrucco, 1993; Benedetti, 2007; Gambaro, 2006; Garboli, 1995; Giorgio, 1994). In 2006, Serkowska still regretfully depicts a state of criticism that devotes the least attention to *Aracoeli* and, when scholars do consider *Aracoeli*, they mostly relegate it to either a parody or a palinode of *La Storia* (ibid., 157). However, a positive critical shift can be detected over the last decade, not only in terms of an increasing interest in the novel, as demonstrated by the number of published essays (Fortini, Misserville, Setti (ed.), 2015; Gragnolati and Fortuna (ed.), 2009; Lucamante (ed.), 2015; Lucamante and Wood (ed.), 2006), but also in the interpretive stance toward it. This interpretive stance can be aptly summarised through the words of Fortuna and Gragnolati, who, commenting on the edited collection of essays on *Aracoeli*, do not deny the disturbing nature of the novel but rather aim at integrating it with a specific purpose that has thereby been fulfilled. For other scholars explicitly holding a non-hopeless view of *Aracoeli*, in addition to those gathered in Gragnolati and Fortuna (2009)'s volume, see Bernabò (2015), Cazalé Bérard (2009, 2015), Morelli (2015), Serkowska (2006) and Wehling-Giorgi (2015).

12. Other authors (e.g., Deuber-Mankowsky, 2009; Morelli, 2015) have described Manuele's relationship with his body in terms of alienation. However, there remains further scope for exploring the protagonist's relationship with his body through the notion of entrapment; the abundance of 'confined spaces' across Morante's oeuvre has been acknowledged by Orsi (2015: 119), while Di Bucci Felicetti (2015: 86) points out the recurrence, real and symbolic, of the image of the prison in Morante's first two novels.

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