

‘Totetaco’: the Mother-Child Dyad and the Pre-Conceptual Self in Elsa Morante’s *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*

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Abstract:

The article provides a close reading of the mother-son relationship in Elsa Morante’s *La Storia* (1974) and *Aracoeli* (1982). While previous critics have stressed the antithetical nature of the two Morantian portrayals of motherhood and the filial relationship, I argue that the author’s account of early childhood as a pre-conceptual realm which resists all totalizing notions of identity and language suggests a previously under-explored continuity between the two novels. A Kristevan interpretative framework proves a useful tool in an investigation into the role of the maternal in the early formation of the self and the adoption of *semiotic*, pre-verbal forms of expression. While Ida’s and Aracoeli’s eventual descent into madness and Useppe’s premature death constitute a failed attempt at recuperating a unitary notion of the self in the maternal, I will conclude that Manuele’s ultimate ‘abjection’ of the mother signals an unprecedented step in Morante’s discourse on subjectivity.

Keywords:

Morante, Kristeva, subjectivity, child, mother, maternal, semiotic, pre-conceptual, pre-oedipal, *Aracoeli*

Elsa Morante’s writings, which consistently defy constrictive critical categories, abound in notions of self-alienation and dispossession. Whereas in the early stages of her career the adoption of the fantastic genre proves a fruitful tool to ‘re-shape notions of self and reality’,¹ I will argue that Morante’s complex conceptual and linguistic exploration of the pre-oedipal realm of the child in her later works *La Storia* (1974) and *Aracoeli* (1982)² suggests a commonly disputed continuity of thought. While previous criticism has principally focused on the radical break between *La Storia*’s ‘idealized’ and *Aracoeli*’s ‘disturbing’ image of motherhood and the filial relationship, with Garboli notably arguing that in Morante’s latter

novel 'il vecchio schema glorioso (madre/figlio; Nunziata/Arturo; Ida/Useppe) viene lapidato e dato in pasto ai cani perché ne facciano strazio',³ I will establish some significant *affinities* between the two portrayals of the mother-child bond instead. Firstly, I will identify a number of aspects marginalizing both the son and the maternal figure from the symbolic order of societal and linguistic norms in the two texts. Secondly, I will argue that both Useppe's and Manuele's confinement and Ida's and Aracoeli's regression to the pre-conceptual realm of childhood reveal a profoundly decentred notion of selfhood. In this context, Julia Kristeva's ideas on the role of the maternal in the early formation of the self and language provide an interesting model to further explore Morante's idiosyncratic representation of the mother-son duo.⁴ While the maternal sphere has a simultaneously comforting and disruptive role in both novels, I will conclude that it is only with Manuele's final recovery of the paternal that the author contemplates the possibility of 'abjecting' the disturbing, subversive part of the mother, paving the path for a new form of subjectivity.

***La Storia* and the Marginalized Subject**

Featuring an omniscient, third-person narrator, *La Storia* (1974) tells the story of two 'victims' of a brutal, patriarchal line of history, Ida and her youngest son Useppe, whose destinies are inextricably linked to the events and the immediate aftermath of the Second World War in Rome. Several factors underscore the two characters' marginalized status: while Ida is an untimely widowed single mother who earns a meagre living as a primary school teacher, Useppe is an illegitimate child ('bastarduccio' [*La Storia*, p. 503]), conceived during rape by a German soldier. She is half Jewish, poor and has suffered from epileptic fits since early childhood, a condition which has been inherited by her son, eventually leading to his premature death at the age of six. Unlike the majority of Morantian mothers Ida is

literate,⁵ but much emphasis is placed on her child-like qualities and features, as well as on her inability to ‘fit’ into the social order. Her clandestine, half-Jewish identity and the mystery illness, both of which are well-guarded secrets, instil a profound fear of social situations in the character, to a large part confining her to the enclosures of domestic space.

While the two characters clearly enjoy an intimate, affectionate bond (‘come innamorati’, p. 459),⁶ the dominant critical focus on Ida’s religiously connoted ‘image of maternal abnegation’⁷ has taken little notice of the fragmented notion of selfhood which underlies it, and which clearly foreshadows the more complex reflections on subjectivity in *Aracoeli*. A close reading of *La Storia* in effect suggests that the two characters are entrapped in the pre-narcissistic stages of development, confining them to what Kristeva would term an ‘incomplete’ state of individuation. According to the critic, the maternal figure is central to the child’s development of language and subjectivity. The infant’s early union with the mother constitutes the realm of the *semiotic*, the pre-verbal, maternal space which precedes the formal constraints of the *symbolic*, the realm of structured language and social order. In order for the subject to become autonomous and to achieve ‘la liberté psychique’, the biological and psychic separation from the mother (also referred to as an act of ‘abjection’ or ‘matricide’), remains ‘un condition indispensable’.⁸ And it is precisely Ida’s and Usepe’s failure to sever their intimate bond and to enter the symbolic order which confines them to a decentred, pre-oedipal state of selfhood.

The narrative portrayal of Ida, a mother-of-two in her late thirties, repeatedly emphasizes her resistance to normative conceptions of gender and identity. Despite her prematurely aged appearance, much emphasis is put on her child-like qualities (‘era rimasta, nel fondo, una bambina’, p. 21), and she is commonly portrayed with diminutives such as ‘Iduzza’ and ‘donnetta’. Her lack of bodily awareness, together with the total absence of libidinal drive, is further indication of her defiance of binary gender categories. The intimacy

with her late husband is passively endured and characterized by an utter lack of desire or pleasure. Even more strikingly, sexual intercourse is likened to the act of a child being fed by his mother: 'E così da allora ogni sera gli si lasciava, dolce e disposta, come un bambino selvatico che si lascia docilmente imboccare dalla madre' (p. 37). Her puerile innocence is further underlined in Ida's only other experience of a sexual nature, the rape by the German soldier Gunther. The brutal episode remains profoundly blurred for the victim as Ida suffers an epileptic fit and subsequent blackout, leading her to refigure the act of violence into a dream-like episode in a pre-puberty child: 'Non fu per lei, neanche stavolta, un vero piacere erotico. Fu una straordinaria felicità senza orgasmo, come talora capita in sogno, prima della pubertà' (p. 70).

While on the one hand her resistance to the symbolic order marks Ida's exclusion from societal norms and practices, her regression to the pre-conceptual realm of the child is often represented as a *positive* retreat, sheltering both her and Useppe from the external threats of war. One such escapist route is provided by her dream-like impressions of the 'clandestine' Jewish ghetto, which she pictures as a nurturing, maternal space ('stalla materna, calda di respiri animali', p. 238) evoking lullabies and indistinct sounds:

Riconosceva il richiamo che la tentava laggiù e che stavolta le perveniva come una nenia bassa e sonnolenta, però tale da inghiottire tutti i suoi suoni esterni. I suoi ritmi irresistibili somigliavano a quelli con cui le madri ninnano le creature, o le tribù si chiamano a raccolta per la notte. (p. 337)

With its emphasis on infantile sounds, song and rhythm, the portrayal of the ghetto is reminiscent of the Kristevan *chora*, the temporal and spatial realm of the pre-oedipal,

indistinct totality of mother and child. Kristeva also significantly underscores the potential of the semiotic to *disrupt* the symbolic order of language:

Ce sera donc en fissurant cet ordre, en le coupant, en changeant le vocabulaire, la syntaxe, le mot même, en dégageant sous eux la pulsion telle que la porte la différence vocalique ou kinésique, que la jouissance s'introduira à travers l'ordre socio-symbolique.⁹

The oneiric quality of Ida's impressions of the ghetto, together with their focus on the pre-verbal, vocal characteristics of the maternal sphere have just such an unsettling effect not only on a linguistic but also on a narrative level. Ida's third-person story is indeed frequently fractured by dreams, epileptic fits, hysteria and hallucinatory episodes ('tit tic tic, il passo di Useppe', p. 647). These delusional perceptions, consisting of fragments of everyday discourse ('spezzoni raccogliatici della vita comune di ogni giorno', p. 340) and disconnected voices ('voci [...] slegate una dall'altra senza comunicazione fra di loro', p. 340), consistently interrupt the linear progression of the text. Furthermore, Ida's discontinuous narrative stands in stark opposition to the chronological account of patriarchal history preceding each chapter.

Useppe is similarly alienated from the framework of social conventions. Not only are his illegitimate birth and physical frailty ('piccolo paria senza razza, sottosviluppato, malnutrito, povero campione senza valore', p. 287) clear signs of difference, but like Ida he resists any totalizing categories of identity and gender ('per lui non esistevano differenze né di età, né di bello e brutto, né di sesso, né sociali', p. 185) to the extent that his disinterest for the male sexual organ challenges Freudian theories of infantile sexuality: 'Del proprio organo virile non se ne interessava affatto, né più né meno dei propri orecchi e del proprio naso' (p. 405). Moreover, Useppe's developmental deficiencies clearly distinguish him from other

children of his age group. Much emphasis is put on the inferior state of his mental faculties: he is referred to as ‘ignorante’ (p. 370), and somewhat disparagingly as ‘idiota’ (p. 619) and ‘scemo’ (p. 635), as well as a ‘povero analfabeta’ who is ‘exiled’ from school (p. 476). At the same time, however, his puerile naiveté (‘ingenuità illimitata’, p. 187) grants him an existence in a state of pre-lapsarian bliss, with the pre-conceptual state of childhood providing refuge from the atrocities of the external world.

The little boy’s linguistic development similarly lacks structured progression. He remains unable to pronounce entire words and specific consonants up to the age of five (‘Useppe storpiava ancora le parole e le consonanti, come i bimbi piccoli’, p. 431), most notably including the mispronunciation of his own name ‘Giuseppe’ (‘Useppe’). While he is initially reluctant to ascribe any conceptual value to language (‘le parole, per lui, avevano un valore sicuro, come fossero tutt’uno con le cose’, p. 130), as he grows older his profoundly different use of words is referred to as ‘unique’ and ‘poetic’, with Ida portraying his ‘storie’ or ‘poesie’ (p. 398) as ‘creazioni di fantasia’ (p. 124). Useppe also shows a clear preference for the oral medium, repeatedly refusing to put his ‘stories’ into writing and thereby further resisting normative conceptions of language: “Nnnoo... Io non voio scivere... io... no...” (al solito, nei momenti di emozione e di confusione, Useppe ricascava nella pronuncia spropositata e monca dei pupi) “...le poesie io le *penso*... e le *dico*...” (p. 522, my emphasis).

Ida’s exclusion from both language and society is sealed by her insanity and her withdrawal into silence after Useppe’s death, which provides an interesting parallel with Aracoeli’s descent into madness and her eventual demise. Having cut off all communication with the outside world, Ida speaks with a ‘voce [...] bassissima, bestiale’ (p. 647), uttering only the occasional ‘trasognato mormorio’ (p. 648) which originates in ‘qualche idioma onirico e dimenticato’ (p. 648). Her regression to the pre-verbal realm of indistinction coincides with her total retreat from society’s norms and practices into a mental asylum

(while Aracoeli ends up in a brothel), whereas Useppe's illness similarly confines him to the realm of utter disintegration: death. With the fatal ending of both characters in *La Storia*, Morante seems to be suggesting that dissolution or death are the only ways of reconnecting with the maternal, or in fact of 'rejoining the lost *Einheit*' with the mother, as Serkowska points out with specific reference to *Aracoeli*.¹⁰ Rather than providing two opposing models of the mother-son relationship, Ida's and Useppe's existence within the pre-conceptual sphere, their exploration of semiotic forms of expression and their tragic demise do not contrast but in many aspects indeed anticipate the disturbed concept of subjectivity we encounter in *Aracoeli*.

Aracoeli

Aracoeli has often been dismissed as Morante's self-destructive and desperate last novel. With its prevalent focus on the allegedly antithetical, disturbing nature of the mother-son relationship, critics often ignore the fact that the author's concern with disruptive mothers dates back to her earliest writings.¹¹ In *Diario 1938*, an autobiographical diary in which the young author records her dreams in a non-linear, fragmentary fashion, the mother's ubiquitous presence in fact already oscillates between unfulfilled desire and an insistent threat of death and disintegration:

A un certo punto di questi sogni, vedendo nel riquadro di una finestra il corpo enfiato, il viso disfatto di mia madre, io, distesa a terra più in basso [...], avevo un terrore spaventoso della morte. [...] La morte mi appariva come un corpo squallido, gonfio e viscoso. Un affetto cupo mi attirava a mia madre, già possesso della bruttezza e del disfacimento che preparano per lunghi anni la fine della morte.¹²

What is striking in this passage is both the horror evoked by the mother's abject, decaying body and the near-oxymoronic 'affetto cupo' which she inspires. And it is precisely this profoundly split maternal imago, simultaneously marked by affection and destruction, that lies at the basis of the filial relationship portrayed in *Aracoeli* and which, as I shall argue, finds an unprecedented form of resolution in Morante's last novel.

Featuring the grown-up, homodiegetic narrator Manuele, *Aracoeli* tells the story of his trip to his mother's Spanish native village many years after her death, and his metaphorical journey backward to the mythical, pre-symbolic symbiosis with her. While in *La Storia* the mother-child bond follows a largely linear progression, in the last novel the relationship is tinged by an increasing sense of ambiguity, developing from the blissful union in early childhood to Aracoeli's ultimate rejection of motherhood and her gradual descent into madness and nymphomania. 'Totetaco', Manuele's childish pronunciation of the Roman district 'Monte Sacro' where he spent the early, 'clandestine' years of his childhood with his mother, clearly represents the idyllic, maternal Eden. The 'fluidity, affectivity, and corporeality'¹³ which characterizes their stay in Totetaco come to an end with the fall into the paternal order, namely the legalization of Manuele's parent's relationship through marriage and their 'entrance' into bourgeois society (*Aracoeli*, p. 27).

Like the mother-child duo in *La Storia*, Aracoeli and Manuele are marginalized from societal norms and linguistic practices. Not only has Aracoeli borne a child out of wedlock, but the disparity in the two spouses' socio-economical and educational status further highlights her subaltern position. Her rural, Andalucian background, her child-like persona ('rimaneva tuttora una bambina', p. 190), her hybrid (Spanish-Italian) use of language and her illiteracy remain powerful 'segn[i] di diversità' (p. 10) which clearly exclude her from

both the dominant linguistic order (Italian) and from societal norms: ‘La sua era un’intelligenza diversa dalla nostra [...], era una pellegrina incognita dentro di lei [...]. E si muoveva inconsapevole di qua dalla Storia, e dalla politica, e dai libri e dai giornali, come una nomade attendata in terra di nessuno’ (p. 177).

On a linguistic level, as previously explored by Fortuna and Gragnolati, a clear contrast emerges between the castrating order of the paternal realm and the affective, sensual language prevailing in the passages relating to heterogeneous maternal discourse.¹⁴ The pre-oedipal *Totetaco* period is in fact dominated by Aracoeli’s uneducated, plurilingual register with a clear emphasis on the vocal, pre-verbal sphere: singing chants and lullabies (‘nenie di culla’, ‘canzoncine di paese’, p. 13), the maternal voice is described as a ‘tenera voce di gola’ (p. 13) which produces an incomprehensible stutter (‘incomprensibile balbettio’, p. 13) of which Manuele picks up nothing but the sound (‘ne colgo solo i suoni’, p. 13). Reminiscent of the Kristevan *semiotic*, Aracoeli’s hybrid discourse has a distinctly disruptive effect on the linguistic makeup of the text, further sealing the mother-child duo’s resistance to normative conceptions of language.

Manuele is a maladapted homosexual who struggles with self-alienation and a deep sense of abandonment, and whose hesitant process of individuation is closely linked to his profound anchorage in the maternal.¹⁵ The early years spent in *Totetaco* recall the ‘fusione incantevole’ (p. 108) of the womb, a place of blissful indistinction which precedes the activation of gender categories whilst cancelling out even basic norms of differentiation:

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 uno dall’altro. Per tutto il tempo di Totetaco, io non ebbi nozione di essere maschio, ossia uno che mai poteva diventare donna come Aracoeli. (pp. 118-19)

Reminiscent of the symbiotic filial bond in *La Storia*, in the Edenic phase of childhood Manuele's pre-conceptual notion of the self literally merges with the maternal figure, forming a 'congiunzione inseparabile per natura di cui pareva a me naturale anche l'eternità' (p. 120). And it is from the very moment of separation, metaphorically identified in the act of giving birth, that Manuele embarks on a perennial, regressive journey towards her: 'Da allora in realtà io non ho mai smesso di cercarla, e fino da allora la mia scelta era questa: rientrare in lei. Rannicchiarmi dentro di lei, nell'unica mia tana [...]' (p. 18).

While the novel is dominated by the protagonist's desperate search for wholeness in the maternal and his ensuing state of dereliction,¹⁶ Aracoeli also stands accused of her 'crimini materni' (p. 94) and of her son's abandonment, resulting in Manuele's confinement to the developmental stages of a child and his exclusion from the patriarchal order: 'la tua morte [...] ha sbarrato la mia crescita, affinché la mia-tua invenzione bambina si serbasse immune eternamente dalla ragione' (p. 289). After the sudden death of her baby daughter, Aracoeli undergoes a radical transformation into a subversive and 'abject' mother. The tragic event sees her tender voice change into an unrecognizable 'impasto più denso, vischioso e quasi sporco' (p. 239), and in the eyes of her son she assumes an increasingly repulsive appearance which, together with her suffocating presence, spark the desire for an 'amputation' ('amputarmi di lei', p. 24) from her and the ambition to be 'cured of her' ('guarire di lei', p. 23).

What significantly distinguishes *Aracoeli* from previous Morantian narratives, however, is not so much the mother's transformation in itself, but Manuele's role in it. With previous characters failing to liberate themselves from the grip of the maternal, the protagonist's eventual *abjection* of Aracoeli in the latter part of the novel paves the path for a new form of subjectivity which transcends the pre-oedipal realm and therefore enables the

emergence of what Kristeva would term the ‘autonomous’ self. Rather than passively enduring the act of rejection, Manuele in fact embarks on a striking process of *disfigurement* and *mutilation* (‘sfigurando e devastando’; ‘mutilazione’, p. 300) of the maternal imago, turning her into a figure inspiring horror (‘orrenda Aracoeli’, p. 301) and disgust (‘mi facevi schifo’, p. 303; ‘repulsiva’, p. 301) who is eventually *expelled* as part of a self-protective defence mechanism (‘a difendermi dalla sua morte’, p. 300):

[Q]uesta mia presente Aracoeli [era] la sola che mi riprendesse figura dopo la sua morte [...]. [E]ra lei, [...] ma *ridotta a una vecchia laida, cascante e imbellettata* [...]. Tutti [...] accorrevano, di ritorno, a *lapidare* la brutta Aracoeli. Ma ero io l'*ordinatore della strage*, io l'*esecutore volontario*. (pp. 300-301, my emphasis)

Hence Aracoeli is not only turned into a subversive and repulsive figure after her death, but she is also metaphorically ‘killed’ by her son. In the final scene of the novel, in which Manuele confesses the love for his father, the protagonist reconfirms the abandonment of his mother who, ‘lasciata indietro sola a decomporsi nell’orrido parco’ (p. 327), he claims to have both rejected (‘negazione’, ‘ripudio’, p. 327) and forgotten (‘oblio’, p. 327).

While Fortuna and Gragnolati have convincingly shown that the protagonist’s recovery of the father suggests some ‘new possible intersections’¹⁷ between the linguistic realms of the semiotic and symbolic, I would suggest that the protagonist’s contemplative and liberating *abjection* of the ‘monstrous mother’ enables him to overcome the threat of disintegration emanating from her. In fact, Manuele’s move beyond the maternal allows him to envisage a notion of selfhood which neither confines him to the pre-oedipal realm nor to the dead-ended pursuit of self-obliteration in death, two desperate paths which Morante illustrates in the fatal destinies of Ida, Useppe and Aracoeli instead. The author’s exploration

of the central notion of selfhood through the narrative portrayal of the mother-son relationship and the investigation into the ‘disruptive’ effect of the pre-conceptual realm in both *La Storia* and *Aracoeli* shows a progression in Morante’s thought which is often disregarded, and which can be traced back to her central preoccupation with the split maternal imago in her very first writings.

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¹ Danielle Hipkins, *Contemporary Italian Women Writers and Traces of the Fantastic: The Creation of Literary Space* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), p. 2.

² Elsa Morante, *La Storia: romanzo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974) and *Aracoeli* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982). All further references will appear parenthetically in the text as *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*.

³ Cesare Garboli, *Il gioco segreto* (Milan: Adelphi, 1995), p. 174. See also Laura Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), and Grace Zlobnicki Kalay, *The Theme of Childhood in Elsa Morante* (University, MS: Romance Monographs, 1996).

⁴ A recent study to which I am greatly indebted applies Kristeva’s psycho-linguistic concept of the semiotic to the insistent imagery of the nursing body and pre-verbal language in Dante’s *Divina Commedia* and in *Aracoeli*. See Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragnolati, ‘Between Affection and Discipline: Exploring Linguistic Tensions from Dante to *Aracoeli*’ in Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragnolati (eds), *The Power of Disturbance: Elsa Morante’s Aracoeli* (Oxford: Legenda, 2009), 8-19.

⁵ See, for example, Anna and Alessandra in *Menzogna e sortilegio*, Nunziata in *L'isola di Arturo*, Giuditta in *Lo scialle andaluso* and Aracoeli in the eponymous last novel.

⁶ Garboli likens the mother-child bond to a 'coppia androgina' or an 'insieme animale' (*Il gioco sgereto*, p. 174).

⁷ *The Tigress in the Snow*, p. 79.

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Le génie féminin: la vie, la folie, les mots. Melanie Klein, ou le matricide comme douleur et comme créativité* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), II, p. 214.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1974), p. 77.

¹⁰ Hanna Serkowska, 'The Maternal Boy: Manuele, or the last Portrait of Morante's Androgyny', in Stefania Lucamante and Sharon Wood (eds), *Under Arturo's Star: The Cultural Legacies of Elsa Morante* (West Lafayette, IN.: Purdue University Press, 2006), 157-87 (p. 165).

¹¹ See also the deeply ambiguous relationship between Giuditta and Andrea in *Lo scialle andaluso*, and Wilhelm Gerace's comments on the 'suffocating' mother in *L'isola di Arturo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1957): 'Per quante maligne femmine uno possa incontrare nella vita, la peggiore di tutte è la propria madre! [...] Essa ha il vizio della santità... [...] e, finché è viva, non ti lascia mai vivere, col suo amore' (pp. 158-59).

¹² Elsa Morante, *Diario 1938* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), pp. 48-9.

¹³ 'Between Affection and Discipline', p. 13.

¹⁴ See for example the episode in which Manuele is greeted by a sign in the elevator which introduces him to the laws and regulations of society at his father's house in the Quartieri Alti (*Aracoeli*, p. 28).

¹⁵ As Fortuna and Gragnolati argue, Manuele's traumatic relationship with his mother also lies at the basis of his urge to 'reproduce the trauma of abandonment' in the oral aspect of his sexual encounters, which amount to a Freudian substitution for the 'relationship with the mother's breast' ('Between Affection and Discipline', p. 13).

¹⁶ Serkowska claims that evoking the mother amounts to evoking 'the missing part of the self' ('The Maternal Boy', p. 165).

¹⁷ 'Between Affection and Discipline', p. 17.