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"UNA STAMPA LUCIDA": TRAUMATIC IMAGES AND RUINOUS LANDSCAPES IN ELSA MORANTE'S *LA STORIA* AND *ARACOELI*

Abstract: The article provides a new comparative reading between Morante's *La Storia* and *Aracoeli* through the lens of trauma studies. Arguing that both works negotiate individual and collective trauma, it identifies the aesthetic tropes of images and spatio-temporal topographies as powerful expressions of loss. A close reading of (photographic) images, postcards, visual dreamscapes, material topographies and palimpsestic temporalities provides new insights into Morante's poetics of trauma, shaped by the close entanglement of a realist narrative surface and the uncanny deposits that underlie it. Referencing the latest studies in the imagistic and spatial negotiation of trauma, the comparative reading underscores the lasting legacy of *La Storia* as a traumatic sub-text in the author's later narrative production.
Key Words: Elsa Morante, trauma, photographs, visual narratives, ekphrasis, *Aracoeli*, *La Storia*, temporality, materialism, dreamscapes.

Introduction: *La Storia* and *Aracoeli* as Trauma Narratives

Recent research has posited Elsa Morante's novel *La Storia* (1974), the story of the half-Jewish, widowed mother Ida and her son Useppe set during the Holocaust,[1] as one of the foundational trauma narratives of the Italian post-war period (de Rogatis and Wehling-Giorgi, "Traumatic Realism and the Poetics of Trauma"; *Trauma Narratives*). While critics had previously associated the novel's publication in the 1970s with the latent trauma of the Shoah experienced by its half-Jewish author (Lucamante 159), and identified forms of doubling rooted in the protagonists' traumatic experiences (Rosa), it is only in recent re-readings through the critical lens of trauma studies that scholars have begun to shed new light on the novel's structural, temporal, narrative and ontological dimension, as well as pointing out new comparative links with other female scribes of historical atrocities (von Treskow; de Rogatis, "Elsa Morante's *History: A Novel*"). Research on traces of trauma in Morante's oeuvre to date has principally focused on *La Storia*, as well as on the hallucinatory delirium portrayed in her earlier lyrical collection, *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* (Rubinacci). This article, instead, proposes to shed new light on the traumatic dimension of Morante's seminal novel by placing it into a productive dialogue with her lesser-studied last novel, *Aracoeli* (1982). While the latter work has long been considered radically distinct (see Garboli) from Morante's earlier production, a comparative reading of the two texts through the lens of trauma theory will provide new insights into the complex negotiation of historical atrocities and individual traumatic experience that is central to both works.

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[1] For a very helpful problematisation of the terminology relating to the extermination of Jews in Europe by the Nazis during the Second World War, see e.g. Anna-Vera Sullam Calimani. In this contribution, I will employ both the term of biblical origins, "Shoah," as well as the more widely used term "Holocaust," to refer to the above.

To illustrate these points, I will focus on the principal role played by two recurring aesthetic tropes in the novels that synecdochally mirror structural elements of trauma: these include a focus on the imagistic and on the spatio-temporal negotiation of trauma. Firstly, the article will focus on how *La Storia* and *Aracoeli* distil trauma through a distinctly visual focus on dreams, (photographic) images and postcards, inviting parallels between the notion of loss embedded in the image and the complex temporality of trauma, as I shall explore below. Secondly, given that trauma is "fully evident only in connection with another place" (Caruth, *Trauma* 8; Luckhurst 218) and a "deferred" moment (Freud 356), this article will also focus on forms of spatial and temporal dislocation that abound in Morante's narrative. In fact, both novels are set against a ruinous landscape scarred by war that provides a striking, and often palimpsestic, backdrop to the novel's various doublings and disarticulations, constituting powerful spatial topographies of trauma: these include the scarred cityscape of Rome, an urban setting that is clearly wounded by present (*La Storia*) and past (*Aracoeli*) conflict, and the symbolic space of El Almendral, site of the Spanish Civil War and of the protagonist Manuele's phantasmagorical musings of the past. Referencing the latest studies in the imagistic negotiation of trauma (Luckhurst; Petit and Pozorski) and the role of trauma in the co-constitution of material and discursive productions of spatial reality (Gundogan Ibrisim 238), my analysis will highlight the lasting legacy of *La Storia* as a traumatic sub-text in the visual and spatio-temporal topographies of Morante's subsequent narrative production.

Picturing Trauma

I have previously addressed the key role of images—and their ekphrastic portrayal in literature—in providing an arguably less mediated yet structurally complex form of testifying to otherwise unspeakable historical atrocities (Wehling-Giorgi, "Unspeakable Things Spoken"). It is undeniable that images play a key part in bearing witness to collective and personal trauma (Kruger), the latter being all the more relevant in the current age of spectacle and multimedia consumption in which "traumatogenic" images (Elsaesser 27) can be reproduced and circulated instantaneously and globally. While reflections on the reproducibility of the image and its unrepresentable dimensions were of course already central to Walter Benjamin's influential reflections in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), it is only since the 1990s that scholars of art history (Foster; Didi Huberman), visual culture and literary studies (Baer; Hirsch, "Surviving Images"; *The Generation of Postmemory*; Bishop) have begun to systematically investigate the *structural* and *aesthetic* links between the image and trauma.

One of the key structural similarities between trauma and the image lies in their complex temporalities, with traumatic experience only fully grasped in connection with a belated time and place (Luckhurst 5) as it remains overwhelming—and hence unprocessed and unverbalised—in its immediate somatosensory impact. In their seminal essay "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," psychiatrists Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart reflect on the specificity of the engraving

of traumatic memory that—in its blunt emotional impact—fails to be translated into a coherent verbal narrative. Yet, it is captured as a visual frame that returns in various belated enactments:

> The experience [of trauma] cannot be organised on a linguistic level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organised on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioural reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks.
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> (van der Kolk and van der Hart 172)

If trauma "in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" (Caruth, *Trauma* 153) or indeed apprehended in language, it can arguably be registered in a form that is commonly held to be less mediated than linguistic expression, i.e. in an "imagistic way that stands outside normal memory creation" (Luckhurst 148). In fact, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) is regularly accompanied by disturbing, often context-free images or flashbacks that compulsively haunt the individual (Luckhurst 148).

The complex temporality of trauma is equally relevant to the photographic image: while on the one hand the denotative features of the photograph provide privileged access to the past through their material, indexical connection to the real,[2] on the other the immutability of the photographic image mirrors the past traumatic instant in the present moment of contemplation, resulting in the palimpsestic layering of past and present (Baer). The photographic referent is always already in the past, pointing to "the presence, the having-been-there, of the past", whilst haunting the present like "a ghostly *revenant*" (Hirsch, "Surviving Images" 14; 21) in its material embeddedness.

Coming back to the relevance of images in decoding trauma in literature, there is a specific complexity, as well as a distinct potentiality, in the ekphrastic portrayal of the traumatic moment. Images can arguably capture the haunting nature of loss by articulating an otherwise inexpressible traumatic moment whilst staging its various iterations and repetitions. Ekphrasis is, of course, in itself a mediated form of the image. However, the textual reproduction of images adds a further layer of repetition that mimics the structural elements of trauma even more vividly. According to W.J.T. Mitchell, ekphrasis in fact constitutes a "'black hole' in the verbal structure" (158) that eludes conventionally realist accounts, with ekphrastic images having the unique capacity of "[capturing] the shrapnel of traumatic time" (Baer 7). The latter *imagetexts* (Mitchell 9) of trauma and the iconic subtext they form in Morante's work constitute a salient feature and an as yet underexplored link between the two novels.

La Storia: Traumatic Images

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[2] See Luckhurst (149-50) for a discussion of the potential problems arising from the notion of the photographic index, especially in the digital age. The photographs referred to in Morante's work of course precede the digital age.

As I have previously shown (Wehling-Giorgi, "Come un fotogramma spezzato"; "Unspeakable Things Spoken"), in *La Storia* there are some poignant examples of how trauma remains largely unspoken, while it is processed and articulated through the often visually focalised episodes of hallucinations, visions, and dreams. Similarly, the novel's numerous photographs provide fleeting glimpses into the horrors of war and the atrocities of the Holocaust, often appealing to a collective archive of images that would be recognisable to an Italian readership and beyond.[3] While Mussolini's death is not explicitly mentioned in the narrative, for instance, it features in the *cronistoria* (Morante, *La Storia* 364, henceforth referred to as S), the chronicle of historical information preceding each chapter that stand in a "fluidly dialogic" relation to one another (Josi, "From Book to Screen" 86). The latter key event is then translated into the storyline through the ekphrastic description of a widely circulated, and hence collectively identifiable photograph of the Duce's body exposed in Piazzale Loreto, Milan, in April 1945. The blurry image is focalised through Useppe, who views the newspaper print with a sense of "stupore titubante" (S 370),[4] with the female narrator describing the photo as depicting "un uomo vecchio, dalla testa grassa e calva, appiccato per i piedi con le braccia spalancate, sopra una folla fitta e imprecisa" (S 370).

Other photographs synecdochally channel Ida's innermost fears that remain otherwise unspoken in the novel: in fact, one of the pictures contemplated by Useppe, referred to as "misteriosamente atroce" (S 370), seems to capture Ida's own predicament of having (unwillingly) fathered a child with a German soldier, and hence fearing persecution for this act of "treason": the photo shows a woman with a shaved head, heckled by a crowd of bystanders whilst carrying a young baby with blonde curls ("con una testina di ricci chiari," S 370). The fear ("la donna […] pareva spaventata," S 370) we can read in the woman's features clearly reflects Ida's own anxieties, translated into an image of collective resonance. Visual glimpses in the novel indeed provide a powerful subtext that destabilises the storyline through the narrative techniques of traumatic realism (de Rogatis and Wehling-Giorgi, "Traumatic Realism"), defined by Michael Rothberg as "a realism in which the claims of reference live on, but so does the traumatic extremity that disables realist representation as usual" (106).

Morante not only employs photographs to proleptically foreshadow the demise of individual characters (Wehling-Giorgi, "Come un fotogramma spezzato" 59), but the novel is populated with a series of photographic images

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[3] See also Josi, who argues that Morante creates an "empathetic bridge" through her individual character descriptions which influence the recollection of the "readers" images of the past ("From Book to Screen" 87). My point is that it is precisely the novel's numerous ekphrastic images that powerfully evoke a collective archive of historical images.

[4] As Stefania Porcelli has shown, the term "stupor" in *La Storia* signals moments of affective intensity (80). I have previously linked the term to moments of traumatic experience in the novel (Wehling-Giorgi, "Come un fotogramma spezzato" 62).

that point to an indistinct mass, or "mucchio," of nameless victims that are otherwise absent from the immediate plotline. The unidentified fatalities of the Nazi atrocities are portrayed in a series of magazine photographs that Useppe contemplates at several points in the novel. These publicly displayed images depict formless and anonymized casualties of war ("macchie d'ombra," S 371),[5] establishing a direct link between individual and collective destinies: "un cumulo di materie biancastre e stecchite, di cui non si discernono le forme" (S 372-73). The indistinct mass of bodies is further evoked in Giovannino's photographs that point to a huddled mass of bodies ("in un mucchio e infagottate," S 314), with the term "mucchio" taken up subsequently by Davide on several occasions to refer to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, including his own family members (S 583; Wehling-Giorgi, "Come un fotogramma spezzato").

La Storia: Dreamscapes and Material Topographies

I have previously drawn attention to the close imbrication of the body and broader material culture in Elsa Morante's *La Storia*, focusing specifically on Ida and Useppe as potent focalizers of trauma. In fact, there is a distinct focus on the porous boundaries of the material spaces surrounding the characters, with the moment of traumatic experience often coinciding with an instance of material dissolution. This occurs in the fusion between Ida's porous body and the urban topography of Rome following her directionless vagaries after learning of Nino's death (Wehling-Giorgi, "Come un fotogramma spezzato" 63) as well as in the moments of psychic and material disintegration that ensue in the aftermath of Ida's rape by the German soldier Gunther, which sees familiar objects metamorphose into "creature vegetali o acquatiche, alghe coralli stelle marine" (S 71).

Morante weaves a rich web of spatial references throughout the novel in which the destruction of the Roman cityscape penetrates both the realist surface of the narrative and its oneiric blind spots. In the first instance, the urban ruins are vividly described in Ida and Useppe's narrow escape of the San Lorenzo bombing in chapter 1943. As they stumble through the debris in the immediate aftermath of the attack, their perception of time has been obliterated (S 169) and their surroundings have been pulverized, with the human literally "intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (Alaimo 238). The immense cloud of post-explosion, tar-stained dust penetrates the victims' lungs ("faceva tossire col suo sapore di catrame," S 169), while a horse has turned into an inanimate object. The surrounding cityscape assumes anthropomorphic features and emerges as an equally vulnerable "receptive surface" (Walker 85), with "gli alberi massacrati e anneriti" and "cipressi neri e contorti" (S 170) as elements of nature are mutilated and stained by war in the same way as the massacred human bodies. The dry, pungent smoke starkly contrasts with the surprisingly reassuring soft, warm liquid (S 170) of Useppe's urine as he wets himself amongst these scenes of utter destruction.

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[5] See also Sarah Carey's chapter on historical images in *La Storia*.

The porous trans-corporeal fusion of the characters' bodies with the war-scarred urban landscape is, however, most prominently explored in the novel's oneiric and delusional dimension. It is precisely when the characters lower their defence mechanisms, "come il crollo di una parete divisoria" (S 128), that central elements of the conflict resurface in the novel's rich dreamscape (see also Porciani; Gambaro). The urban scenes of destruction referenced above—as well as the unspoken horrors of the Lager—are indeed prismatically channelled into the oneiric realm in various iterations in the text. In an earlier chimeric vision in chapter 1942, for instance, Ida pictures herself amidst a crowd of naked people, all standing in close proximity that leaves them no space to breathe (S 128). In its emphasis on the defenceless human body and suffocation, the scene clearly alludes to the horrors of the concentration camp. This huddled mass of bodies forms an entanglement of organic matter that is mirrored by the inorganically enmeshed "mucchi di travi e di pietrisco" (S 128), reminiscent of Alaimo's notion of the trans-corporeal constitution of the body as a "terrain through which things pass" (Abram 230).[6] These piles of rubble and the atrocities they conceal foreshadow the tragic destinies both in the collective—"sotto quei mucchi si sente un fragore come di migliaia di denti che masticano" (S 128)—and in the individual sphere ("e sotto a questi il lamento di una creatura"; S 128), foreshadowing Useppe's tragic destiny.

Further highlighting the porous border between the character and the material world, the above-described dream episode subsequently morphs into an image of Ida standing like a wooden marionette ("come una marionetta," S 128) that practically merges with the rest of the amassed debris,[7] with her eerie laughter confounded with the barking of a dog (S 128). Dreams in Morante's text clearly dialogue with one another, weaving a subterranean web of a traumatic, formerly inaccessible imaginary. The latter preserves a distinct focus on the co-implication of bodies and their spatio-material surroundings, with the central trope of the "mucchio" and its oneiric transfigurations closely interlacing the material landscape with a discursive, and often imagistic, reflection on trauma.

Aracoeli: Lucid Imprints of Trauma

In both *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*, visual imprints that engrave themselves in the mind—pertaining to a realist, documentary or an imaginarily constructed origin—become placeholders of otherwise silenced events that closely anchor the individual in the collective sphere. *Aracoeli*, the story of a complex mother-son relationship that is set in 1975 and preserves less immediately identifiable traces of past historic trauma than *La Storia*, similarly privileges

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6 For further discussion on the concept of the trans-corporeal, see Alaimo, who defines the latter a "time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment'" (238). See also Walker for a discussion of the trans-corporeal in Morante.

7 The skeletal figures of the camp inmates are similarly referred to as "burattini," or puppets (S 373).

the trope of vision, as previously highlighted by Rebecca West (20) with a specific focus on the linkages between apocryphal vision and self-knowledge. What to date has received little attention, however, are the striking parallels in the imagistic and spatio-temporal textual elaboration of a collective, traumatic past in *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*. The latter novel, in fact, often superimposes the events of the Second World War with the Spanish Civil War (and hence fascism with Francoism),[8] an association that is foreshadowed in the iconic first cover image of *La Storia* depicting a lifeless casualty of the Spanish conflict on a pile of rubble.[9] The novel skilfully interweaves these collective past atrocities with the individual deaths of the protagonist Manuele's beloved uncle Manuel, his mother Aracoeli and his prematurely deceased sister Carina, or indeed with the loss experienced in the aftermath of the sudden departure of the military assistant Davide from the characters' household. The varying degrees of traumatic recall associated with these events are translated into a series of images throughout the novel in which individual destinies stand in a close dialogue with historical conflict.

Aracoeli opens on a single image focalising the semiotic mother-son bond (Fortuna and Gragnolati; Wehling-Giorgi, "Totetaco") that arguably condenses the major traumatic stressors which haunt the text in various iterations whilst providing the focal point of the protagonist's discontinuous, disruptive trajectory of selfhood. Likened to a painted portrait ("scena specchiata, che pareva dipinta"), the image depicts a "donna con al petto un lattante," Aracoeli breastfeeding an infant Manuele, reflected in a mirror (A 11). Scholars have previously linked this primal scene to the symbiotic, pre-symbolic bond with his mother Aracoeli in the edenic space of Totetaco in Rome, Manuele's infantile designation of the place where the two of them lived before the union between his parents gained a seal of social approval with marriage.[10] Given its foundational role in the protagonist's developmental trajectory, as well as its deferred resurfacing in central moments of Manuele's journey, the image also bears close associations with individual and collective trauma linked to the violent separation of mother and son and its aftermath that shapes the torturous mental and spatial journey recounted in the novel.

The mirror image of the mother-child bond haunts the narrative in its entirety ("La primissima visione […] che fa da sfondo a tutti i miei anni," A 11), and it also provides the initial impetus for Manuele's journey back to

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[8] As Gabrielle Popoff has previously shown, Morante's concern with fascism in her last novel confirms a sustained interest in the latter which she terms "Mediterranean" version of the "German Vergangenheitsbewältigung" (22).

[9] As recent scholarship has established (Josi, *Rome 16 October 1943*), this image was not taken by Robert Capa as has long been assumed, but by the young war photographer Gerda Taro in 1937 shortly before her death.

[10] Scholars have also pointed out parallels between the mirror image and the Lacanian mirror stage as a fundamental step in the development of the self (Fortuna and Gragnolati).

Almeria in Andalucía, Spain, in search of his maternal roots. As the protagonist points out, Almeria in Spanish means mirror, thereby providing an interesting lexical layering of visual and spatio-temporal coordinates: "Almeria in spagnolo significa specchio. Questo mi appare un nuovo segno del destino, chiaro simbolo della specchiera da cui sempre mi riaffiora, viva e presente, Aracoeli," A 41). Throughout the narration, the image is denoted by its fixity and is reminiscent of a photograph: it is described as a "scena intatta, fissa" (A 11), and it is later also referred to as a "stampa lucida" (A 41) that has "documentary" features in its precise registration of the primal scene. The image resurfaces at regular intervals throughout the text, constituting one of the central moments of deferral in the narration: "È possibile che sia rimasta fissata là, nei momenti subacquei dello specchio, per venirmi oggi restituita, ricomposta nei suoi atomi, dal vuoto? […] quella scena intatta, e quasi immobile, risale a me da più indietro" (A 11). While the foundational image remains in the pristine form of "una stampa lucida e minuziosa, da documentario o da trattato," its recall alternates with apocryphal memories and "sequenze sfocate, abbagliate e mutile" (A 41).

It is not only the repetitive, haunting nature of the image that is reminiscent of traumatic memory, but the latter furthermore collapses the temporal linearity of experience, iconically condensing the complex temporality of the traumatic moment and its deferral: "Per me, che corro verso El Almendral, i tempi si riducono a un unico punto sfavillante: uno specchio, dentro il quale precipitano tutti i soli e le lune" (A 22). In fact, the very material embeddedness of the recent mirror image in its baroque, golden frame collapses multiple temporal levels: while the screen is "lucida e di fabbrica recente," the frame is "vecchia e impallidita nelle dorature […] e di uno stile secentesco maestoso" (A 10-11). When recalling the mirror image, Manuele evokes the breakdown of linear temporalities with reference to the figure of the clairvoyant, who considers mirrors as bottomless objects that ingest both past and future impressions ("Secondo certe negromanti, gli specchi sarebbero delle voragini senza fondo, che inghiottono, per non consumarle mai, le luci del passato (e forse anche del futuro)," A 11).

Photographic Frames and Montage

The focus on the fixed mirror image is then further reproduced in the visual focalization of traumatic recall. Mental images and memories throughout the novel are in fact often referred to as "stampe" or imprints that distinguish themselves in their fixed nature, akin to a painting. It is in those terms that Manuele refers to the obscene image of his nymphomaniac mother masturbating in public that haunts him throughout adulthood, as "il quadro si è fissato innanzi a me" (A 237). Furthermore, Manuele repeatedly references the cinematographic nature of his memories, with cinema constituting a "metaphor for memory and for time" (Popoff 23). The protagonist's experience is often registered in filmic or photographic sequences ("tutte le sequenze, una ad una, sono rimaste fotografate, da quell'ora, nel mio cervello," A 150; "ogni nostra esperienza […] è là stampata su quel rullo di pellicola, già filmata da sempre e in proiezione continua," A 291), with the

latter often ruptured at crucial moments of encounter with trauma and loss (A 41; 111; 275; 291). The disruption of a filmic sequence in turn recalls a central moment in *La Storia* that sees Ida aimlessly wandering through the streets of Rome on her way to the morgue after learning of her eldest son Nino's death. As she wanders in a state of dissociation that affects her sensory perception to the extent of distorting the urban landscape as if viewed through a convex mirror (S 466), Ida's perception is ruptured like a torn film frame ("come un fotogramma spezzato," S 465).

Further reinforcing the link with the visual, performative dimension of his dreams, Manuele often refers to his mind as a "teatro," or as a "fabbrica di sogni." The iconography of his past indeed often superimposes individual memories and hallucinatory visions like a "photomontage," akin to the original cover image of *La Storia*'s first edition and to the similarly hybrid nature of Ida and Useppe's dream visions that project fantastic elements onto a backdrop of historical atrocities that preserves realist features ("ma forse qui mi servo di un fotomontaggio. La scena resuscitata potrebbe riferirsi a qualche altra occasione […]," A 229). In particular the filmic projections of his memories relating to his mother's illness assume the features of a documentary film that re-emerges in fragments ("come […] effetti di fotomontaggio," A 230) after a long period of latency, in the form of involuntary memory or flashbacks that are characteristic of traumatic recall: "alcune sequenze e figure […] oggi mi si proiettano davanti con la forza delle allucinazioni […]. Per tanti anni si finsero cancellate: e adesso vengono ad esibirsi, quali documentari d'archivio, nel mio teatro vuoto" (A 242).

Manuele's musings on the past often read like an account of the repressive mechanism of trauma in a visual key. In the following passage, for instance, Manuele reflects on the apparent absence ("una eclisse dei miei sogni," A 291) or the repression of dreams (referred to as a film sequence ["rullo"]), which often hold sensitive material ("qualche larva terribile che minaccia il nostro paesaggio reale," A 291) that succumbs to the mechanism of repression:

> Si può tuttavia supporre […] che [i sogni] continuino a vegetare e a crescere nei nostri depositi sotterranei, creandovi a nostra insaputa una serra mostruosa, che infesta coi suoi parassiti il nostro intero campo. E così, di sotto alle nostre vicende contate, s'interrano altre vicende cieche, escluse dalla somma, di qua dallo zero come i numeri negativi. E alla fine, la nostra esperienza totale risulta un ibrido, di cui ci appare solo il tronco esposto e mutilato, mentre la parte confitta ci scompare nella foiba. Quest'ibrido è il mio stesso corpo, è il tuo: sei tu, sono io.
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> (A 291)

The narrator here interestingly establishes the hybrid nature of his body that interlaces a surface narrative ("vicende contate") with a covert subtext ("vicende cieche, escluse dalla somma") that seeks to capture the experience of trauma.[11] Coming back to the notion of traumatic realism, one might argue

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[11] My reading of *Aracoeli*, and in particular of Manuele's phantasmagoric musings through trauma theory productively align with Marzia Beltrami's previous reading of

that this hybridity lies at the core of Morante's very poetics, shaped by the close entanglement of a narrative surface and the uncanny deposits that routinely puncture it.

As highlighted above in the lexical recalls in the semantic field of vision, there are some further terminological echoes here that establish close links with the narration of the Shoah in *La Storia*. While the metaphor of blindness and negative numbers in the above passage predominantly refers to an unfathomable horror lurking in the character's psyche, the few surviving Jews returning from the Lager in *La Storia* are similarly described in terms of a blind spot, or negative numbers, further emphasizing the location of horror as lying beyond rational grasp:

> […] i racconti dei giudii non somigliavano a quelli dei capitani di nave, o di Ulisse l'eroe di ritorno alla sua reggia. Erano figure spettrali come i numeri negativi, al di sotto di ogni veduta naturale, e impossibili perfino alla comune simpatia. La gente voleva rimuoverli dalle proprie giornate come dalle famiglie normali si rimuove la presenza dei pazzi, o dei morti.
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> (S 376)

Postcards, or Collective Archives of the Past

The memorial archive that Manuele gradually releases into the present, though, is by no means restricted to his personal, affective memories. On the contrary, there is a consistent interlacement of the individual and the collective sphere that can be powerfully illustrated with reference to another recurrent visual document: the novel's numerous postcards that capture crucial moments of loss, linking these with historical events that are similarly silenced in Manuele's family. Notable is the succession of three postcards that depict Aracoeli's silenced past in Almeria. These effectively constitute the only documents—whose visual recall has lodged itself in the protagonist's mind—that he possesses of his mother's home town: "Le sole immagini sue, che tuttora porto fisse nella mente, sono un paio di cartoline illustrate, giunte in passato a Roma, col timbro di Gergal, e conservate per anni in casa nostra." These postcards come to signify the "real" existence of Almeria for Manuele as he takes ownership of the latter and keeps them safe in a drawer: "Per me ragazzetto, queste due cartoline hanno significato il vero ritratto dell'ignota città Almeria. Ma di una terza, poi, mi sono addirittura impadronito, serbandola, in seguito, nel mio cassetto, tanto mi affascinava" (A 41).

Loss in the novel is synecdochally channelled through postcards depicting the spaces of his mother's pre-maternal self in Almería which, through the metaphor of the mirror, further highlights the convergence between vision and space. The illustrated "cartolina," itself a versatile object that has travelled in time and space, becomes a placeholder for possessing the evanescent figure of the mother. For, as Susan Sontag argues, the photograph

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the novel through a cognitive critical framework that rebuts the frequent reading of the protagonist as an unreliable narrator. Rather, Beltrami argues that "*Aracoeli* […] represent[s] the workings of a mind and the ways one mind can inform and shape the surrounding world" (165).

contains a trace of the real, "an extension of [the] subject; and [it is] a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it," with Manuele in fact treating the postcards as a "surrogate possession of a cherished person" (A 155). Similarly, the loss of Aracoeli's beloved late brother Manuel is channeled through a postcard depicting the Puerta d'Oro of El Almendral that captures the complex temporality of traumatic experience: on the one hand the card carries visible traces of Manuel's material presence in his "caratteri […] di un bambino" and signed off with his "firma abituale" (A 197), on the other hand it mimics the moment of deferral inherent in trauma as it arrives "posthumously," when Manuel has already died two months previously (A 197), "per via di un disservizio postale" (A 199). The intimate link established between postcards and loss is further reminiscent of Giovannino's postcards from the front in *La Storia*—notably adorned with fascist propaganda in capital letters—that remain one of his fiancée's few tangible keepsakes after his death. The last messages by Giovannino, riddled with spelling mistakes (and hence evoking the "analfabeta" whom the novel is dedicated to) and variously censored by the fascist authorities, can be read as yet a further visual marker ("marca di riconoscimenti dei destini," de Rogatis, *Homing* 97) of the subaltern destined for a tragic ending.

The postcard's disrupted journey not only provides a material embodiment of the notion of temporal deferral, but the "silenzio reciproco" surrounding Manuel's death is further described by the protagonist as a "complicità segreta" that characterizes the mother-son relationship. Lastly, the central loss of Daniele—the military assistant who becomes Manuele's "solo amico" (A 264) during the lonely days of his mother's illness—is similarly channeled through a postcard depicting a petrol station and a modern café that undertakes a comparably adventurous journey stretching the length of the peninsula: it travels from the Southern region of Apulia to Rome before it is forwarded by zia Monda to the North of the country, where Manuele is staying with his grandparents. While Daniele's first abrupt departure from Manuele's household occurs after he is coerced into intercourse by a nymphomanic Aracoeli and subsequently attempts suicide, the final, painful parting from the young protagonist's life is sealed by a postcard: "Quella cartolina fu l'ultima notizia di lui da me avuta. Poi, silenzio per sempre" (A 264).

Whereas the visual dimension of the postcards seems to speak eloquently to Manuele, the written messages they bear distinguish themselves by silence: they skip over crucial events, such as Aracoeli's illness ("la zia Monda nelle sue lettere e cartoline […] non toccava mai l'argomento di mia madre," A 295), as well as avoiding any references to the war that remain similarly repressed in the grandparents' household ("la Guerra d'Europa non si sentiva affatto dalla casa dei Nonni […]. L'Europa attuale mi si rappresentava come un sito remoto e straniero, non meno che la Gerusalemme dei crociati," A 295). While he claims to be "negat[o] alla politica e alla storia" (A 142), it is in his affective relationships that history comes alive for Manuele, as for instance in the links between his uncle Manuel and the Spanish Civil War: "L'unico evento della Storia che mi avesse mai portato a sventolare […] la

mia bandierina, era la guerra civile spagnola. Ossia la Storia di mio zio Manuel, fratello di Aracoeli" (A 296). As we shall see in the following section, it is also in El Almendral, and hence upon the return to the maternal space, that the ghosts of history re-emerge in the phantasmagoric setting of the stone quarry.

Topographies and Palimpsestic Temporalities of Trauma

The spatial dimension of the postcards (as documents portraying places as well as material objects that travel) takes us to the last section of this article, namely the frequent backdrop of ruinous spaces and war-scarred topographies that provide a palimpsestic layering of the novel's temporal and spatial settings. At the beginning of his journey, in fact, Manuele underscores the complex interplay of time and space that defines his trajectory, thereby clearly condensing the experience of maternal loss along the two central vectors of traumatic experience, time and space: "[ero] alla ricerca di mia madre Aracoeli nella doppia direzione del passato e dello spazio" (A 9).

We encounter the ruinous settings scattered with the detritus of the Second World War both in Manuele's solitary journey to his last encounter with Aracoeli in post-war Rome in 1945, and in Almeria (in 1975), where the scars of conflict date back to the times of the Spanish civil war. The latter, however, remain closely linked with the protagonist's childhood experiences in the Italian capital that provide the backdrop to memorial recall:

> Scorgo la vecchia rovina di un casamento di media altezza [...] e incerto mi domando se questi avanzi non forse risalgano ai giorni ormai remoti della guerra civile. Mi riemerge difatti […] l'eco di una notizia appena raccolta, allora, non so da dove, nella nostra casa dei Quartieri Alti: di Almeria bombardata dal mare, coi cannoni.
>
> (A 56)

The ruinous landscape encountered in Andalusia is in fact frequently superimposed with the Roman cityscape in Manuele's recollections and daydreams, hence collapsing specific temporal and spatial coordinates whilst linking the sites of individual trauma with collective memory.

While Morante's protagonists (including Ida and Useppe, as well as Aracoeli and Manuele) are purportedly disinterested in history and politics (A 142) they are all intimately caught up in and indeed shaped by the events of the twentieth century. *La Storia* is of course deeply embedded in the atrocities of the Holocaust and the nuclear anxiety of the 1970s, with each of the book's chapters preceded by a specific historical chronicle, or *cronistoria*. In *Aracoeli*, on the other hand, the characters' individual destinies are closely interweaved with a somewhat diffracted, non-chronological recall of historical moments in the plotline, with some of the latter establishing close linkages with central moments of *La Storia*. The novel opens on Manuele recalling his last visit to Rome in the early summer of 1945, which coincided with the end of the war. On this occasion he learns about the bombardment of San Lorenzo, on 19 July 1943, which resulted in some of the cemetery's graves being uncovered, giving rise to an imaginary resurrection of his mother's corpse, dressed in the same nightgown she was wearing at their final

encounter, who "fuggiva impaurita, sporca di sangue" (A 6). The San Lorenzo bombing and its aftermath are of course also crucial events in *La Storia* that result in Ida and Useppe's displacement (see chapter "1943"). The outbreak of the war in 1939, on the other hand, coincides with Aracoeli's final diagnosis and breakdown (A 295), with Manuele learning of the latter at his grandparents' home. Manuele's journey to Spain nearly three decades later then coincides with Franco's death (20 November 1975), effectively ending the long Francoist dictatorship; and even Manuele's birthday (4 November) occurs on a patriotic holiday celebrating the end of the first world war, further confirming the close interlacement of individual and collective (hi)stories.

One of the passages that most revealingly addresses the palimpsestic layering of space and time in the novel occurs in the stone quarry, a presumed burial site ("si distinguono sullo sfondo forme gobbe di alture disuguali […] si costeggiano cave o frane di pietra spaccata, simili a ossari," A 131) which strikingly brings together the novel's micro and macro histories, linking them to an archive of past atrocities:[12]

> Quegli eventi, per me, sono lontani di secoli, non meno che la presa di Cartagine. Forse Manuel fu abbattuto su questa sassaia? Sotterrato con altri corpi, a mucchio, in questo tratto di terra stepposa? O questo rovinio di note è il bombardamento del Verano, a Roma? Questo sibilo fuoriesce dai bronchi e dai polmoni della folla compressa nella camera delle "docce" a Treblinka?
>
> (A 31)

The ruinous landscape and soundscape evoked in this episode act as memorial triggers and reinforce the superimposition, and eventual collapse, of linear spatio-temporal coordinates. This passage brings together an astonishing line-up of violent historical events and individual traumatic experience: the ancient Roman conquest of Carthage (146 BCE), the San Lorenzo bombing (1943) and the Treblinka extermination camp (1942-43), as well as the presumed death site of uncle Manuel and Aracoeli's burial place at the Roman Cimitero del Verano.

The site of a fictional encounter between Manuele and Aracoeli, the vision of the stone quarry seals the novel's spaces as a locus of historical and individual trauma that stands in close dialogue with Manuele's own repository of personal memories and loss throughout the novel ("la piccola, brumosa necropoli di certe mie esperienze infantili" that harbours "larve minaccianti del passato," A 165).[13] Individual and collective loss are here intimately interwoven with past and present material spaces, while the reference to the concentration camp, together with the key words "corpi, a mucchio," recall the close interweaving of piles of rubble and bodies in the ruinous city—and dreamscapes of *La Storia* discussed above. The haunting

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[12] See also de Rogatis' discussion of the Derridean archives du mal as "metaphorical and liminal vessels of historical truths in a latent state" (de Rogatis and Wehling-Giorgi, *Trauma Narratives* 16).

[13] For a fascinating discussion of the necropolis in the context of latent cultural memory of the Holocaust, see Piperno.

presence of the historical archives of evil, in fact, lurks beneath the surface of the text, interlacing the space of trauma with the ruinous landscapes and iconoscapes that Manuele, Ida and Useppe navigate throughout the novels.

The rich phenomenology of spatiotemporal images, landscapes and oneiric topographies in Morante's *La Storia* and *Aracoeli* provide powerful alternative semiotic codes to articulate the narratives' unique yet often shared traumatic moments. The images identified in the two novels powerfully engender not only the collapsed timeframes and structural complexities of trauma, but they grant a limpid glimpse into the underlying deposits of horror or "serre mostruose" that lie beneath the surface realism of the text.

The comparative reading of *La Storia* and *Aracoeli* through the lens of trauma studies—and more specifically through the imagistic and spatio-temporal realm of the latter—provides new insights into the narrative blind spots that populate Morante's texts, constituting a central feature of her poetics. The above discussion has unveiled unexpected similarities in the interplay of micro and macro levels of history in two Morantian texts that are often considered as radically distinct, further testifying to the lasting impact of the trauma of the Holocaust and the haunting presence of Italy's fascist past, skilfully intertwined with the characters' individual destinies. Fifty years after the publication of the author's seminal work *La Storia*, and in a moment of increasing geopolitical instability and global conflict, Morante's compelling testimony of history's evils and her contribution to the cultural memory of the twentieth century could not be more timely.

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