

DACIA MARAINI'S NARRATIVES OF SURVIVAL

(Re)Constructed

TOMMASINA GABRIELE



Dacia Maraini's Narratives of Survival: (Re)Constructed focuses on Dacia Maraini's narrative from about 1984 to 2004 and makes substantive use of her interviews and essays. While acknowledging the importance and ongoing validity of feminist scholarship of Maraini's work, this book seeks to take scholarship on Maraini beyond feminist readings by identifying a critical framework that cuts across gender and genre and thereby invites alternative readings. Using a method of close textual analysis, the author includes studies of men, children, animals, and imaginary characters in Maraini's narrative, analyzes language, character, motifs, and symbols, and considers some of Maraini's work in light of declining postmodern and emerging posthuman critical social theory.

This critical framework identifies the paradigm of *reconstruction* as narrative center, both strategy and theme, of many of Maraini's works from this twenty-year period and beyond. *Reconstruction* here signifies the strategies by which Maraini's deep investment in survival—which has its roots in the life-threatening conditions she experienced as a small child in a WWII Japanese concentration camp—is enacted in a narrative rebuilding and re-constructing of personal memory; of various personal, social, and political histories; of motherhood and maternal discourses; of crime stories; of postmodern fragmentation; and even of the process of erasure itself. Maraini's narrative is particularly attentive to the mechanisms that threaten survival of the body (and not just the physical body); psychological and aesthetic survival; the survival in the Italian narrative; the author's work, memory, and legacy after her death; the survival of a younger generation; and by extension, collective and ecological survival. Never marked by nihilism or despair, Maraini's narratives offer the ethos of *reconstruction* as a variation on the "begin again" that marks the end of many of her novels and, as we can see in *Colomba*, her own aesthetic process of renewal and regeneration.

This book focuses primarily on *Il treno per Helsinki* (1984), *Isolina* (1985), some of her short stories for children, *La nave per Kobe: Diari giapponesi di mia madre* (2001), *Buio* (Strega Literary Prize, 1999), and *Colomba* (2004).

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«Montigny au clair de lune souvenirs des amours de R-L et de R-R -1918 à 1920 ».

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Gabriele

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OF SUR



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Per Sante Gabriele (1935–2008)

Amatissimo padre

ad Isola Liri

figlio di contadini

muratore

emigrato

a Bridgeport, Connecticut

operaio

capo reparto

proprietario di immobiliari

che mi ripeteva sempre, “Quand’è che lo scrivi questo libro?”

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Introduction

Stretching the Critical Framework

“Qui conta solo la sopravvivenza” (Only survival counts here).¹ So, in February, 1942, Emanuele, the child protagonist of Dacia Maraini’s novel, *Il treno dell’ultima notte* (2008), writes to his dearest friend, Amara. Emanuele writes from the ghetto of Lodz, Poland, where he and his family are on the brink of being deported to a Nazi concentration camp. In the ghetto, survival is the only thing that counts. Maraini understood personally the struggle for survival, for as a child she was at about this same time struggling to survive extreme hunger, starvation, and related illnesses in a concentration camp in Japan.

Many of Dacia Maraini’s narratives reflect an aesthetic imagination marked by a deep personal investment in the problem of survival, an investment that has its roots in the life threatening conditions Maraini experienced as a small child when she and her family were imprisoned in a Japanese concentration camp for antifascists during World War II. As she reports in many interviews and in *Bagheria*, Maraini and her family suffered severe and debilitating hunger and the terror of bombings by warplanes. As she says in an interview published in 2000, “La guerra e il campo di concentramento sono stati per me un’esperienza talmente devastante che ancora oggi non riesco a scriverne. Ne ho accennato in *Bagheria*” (The war and the concentration camp were experiences so devastating for me that even today I can’t write about them. I mentioned them in *Bagheria*).² While *Bagheria* and *La nave per Kobe* mention her experiences, none of her texts thus far addresses systematically or in detail her own concentration camp experience. Yet its influence persists in the motif of the threats to survival that pervades many of her texts.

Maraini’s narrative is deeply attentive to the social mechanisms that threaten physical survival. Yet her concerns are not limited to survival of the

body, but include, among others, psychological survival, a concern that is also rooted in the formative experiences of her childhood and adolescence. *Bagheria* traces some of the difficulties of growing up as a girl in conservative Sicily in the 1940s–1950s after her family's return from Japan. In a 2001 online interview with Gaither Stewart, Maraini elaborates, "One usually feels nostalgia for childhood. My childhood was terrible. The concentration camp and the Catholic school. My years from 10 to 18 in Sicily were on the survival level. We were poor. Society was closed. I was a prisoner in that repressive mentality. [. . .] My home was freedom but not my surroundings. When I went out the door alone, people looked at me from behind their closed blinds and considered me a whore."³ Maraini's explorations of the limitations for girls and women affected by traditional rigid gendered codes of behavior in Sicily testify to her interest in the struggle for psychological survival, and the ways in which that struggle conditioned her own childhood, despite a home environment imbued with her parents' liberal values.

The gendered aspect of the struggle for survival leads us to a deeply rooted concern, another motif, in Maraini's essays, interviews, and narrative, which is the survival of a woman author's work, memory, and legacy in literary historiography, and in particular, after the death of her body. Like the other threats to survival, this one cuts very close to Dacia Maraini's personal experience and concerns. Maraini is today one of Italy's preeminent authors, and one of the most internationally renowned. She published her first novel, *La vacanza*, in 1962, drawing immediate market success.⁴ Yet critical study of her work was meager and slow to emerge, and it is astonishing to realize that it was not until the turn of the second millennium, in the year 2000, almost forty years after her successful debut, that the first scholarly book on Maraini was published in the United States, *The Pleasure of Writing: Critical Essays on Dacia Maraini* (2000), a fine collection of essays edited by Diaconescu-Blumenfeld and Testaferri.⁵ Maraini's prizes are too numerous to list here, but they include the international Formentor Prize for her second novel, *L'età del malessere* (1963), the Premio Campiello for *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990), and the prestigious Premio Strega for *Buio* (1999). On the international level, Maraini's work is widely translated, conferences are held in her honor, and she receives many invitations to speak.⁶ In addition, Maraini was a 2011 finalist for the Man Booker International Prize. It was also widely, though speculatively, reported that Maraini was the top-ranked woman writer for the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature. While books entirely devoted to Maraini's work are still few, articles on Maraini's work now abound, though Cinzia Sartini Blum rightly notes as recently as 2008 that "the Italian intellectual establishment has not adequately recognized [. . .] the contributions" of Italian women writers.⁷

Many scholars and writers, including Maraini herself, have addressed the twentieth-century Italian literary phenomenon—to put it simply, the "misog-

yny"—that has kept women writers out of the critical canon at the same time that they, like Maraini, have garnered numerous literary prizes and have flourished in the book market.⁸ The institutional injustice that women writers face is an ongoing concern close to Maraini's heart. The problem continues to surface in Maraini's interviews and conversations, and not simply because she is concerned for her own reputation and position in Italian literary history. Maraini perhaps best summarizes her assessment of the ongoing discrimination toward women writers in a 2003 interview with the renowned Maraini scholar, Grazia Sumeli Weinberg: "C'è una difficoltà dal punto di vista dell'istituzione letteraria ad accettare come prestigiosa la letteratura femminile. E' sempre considerata alla stregua del mercato [. . .] ma per essere apprezzati dalla critica e da coloro che stabiliscono i valori per le prossime generazioni dal punto di vista del modello, cioè, dell'esemplarità, i libri delle donne vengono [. . .] penalizzati [. . .] Io faccio parte di questa situazione" (There is a difficulty from the point of view of the literary establishment in accepting women's literature as prestigious. It's considered at the level of the market [. . .] but in order to be valued by the critics and by those who establish the values for future generations from the point of view of a model, that is, of exemplariness, books by women are [. . .] penalized. [. . .] I am part of this situation).⁹ She continues, "Anaïs Nin, che è una grande scrittrice francese, è letteralmente scomparsa dopo la sua morte. [. . .] Ci sono delle scrittrici che in vita hanno una rispondenza del pubblico, dei lettori e anche dei critici, ma che poi scompaiono nel momento della sistemazione accademica" (Anaïs Nin, who is a great French writer, literally disappeared after her death. [. . .] There are women writers who in their lifetime have the recognition of the public, of readers and even of the critics, but then they disappear at the moment of selection for academic study).¹⁰ In comparing Italy to other countries abroad, she notes, "Trovo che l'Italia è particolarmente *misogina*" (I find Italy to be particularly *misogynist*) (*italics ours*).¹¹ Maraini observes that while the market is open to women, who also constitute the majority of readers, market success is "profoundly" despised by the academy.¹² She comments,

[Q]uando si passa all'istituzione letteraria, quella che stabilisce quali sono i grandi scrittori del Novecento, che cosa bisogna studiare a scuola e quali modelli prendere per i giovani del futuro, purtroppo, sono quasi tutti uomini che decidono. Sono i grandi critici, i grandi intellettuali, i grandi editori di giornali, e, in tal caso, c'è sempre una scomparsa delle donne. E' così ancora oggi, almeno in Italia. In Inghilterra, per esempio, e anche in America, c'è più attenzione per le donne, mentre in Italia, il mondo letterario è ancora molto maschile, patriarcale nelle sue gerarchie.¹³

When one moves on to the literary establishment, the one that establishes who the great writers of the 1900s are, what should be studied at school and what

models to pick for the youth of the future, unfortunately, it's almost all men who decide. It's the great critics, the great intellectuals, the great editors of newspapers, and, in these cases, there is always a disappearance of women. It is still like this today, at least in Italy. In England, for example, and even in America, there is more attention for women, while in Italy, the literary world is still very masculine, patriarchal in its hierarchies.

As Maraini herself reminds us repeatedly, there is always the risk that a woman writer's reputation will die with her body.¹⁴ In her essay, "Women Writers and the Canon in Contemporary Italy," JoAnn Cannon reminds us that women writers' chance to become part of a lasting canon "depends not only on their intrinsic 'worth' but also on the diligence of their readers and critics in promoting their candidacy. In other words, a canon is intimately and necessarily linked to an interpretive community."¹⁵

Given that Maraini's writing over the past half century reflects her continued interest in the social, physical, psychological and historical conditions of women, it is perhaps understandable that her "interpretive community" has often confined her to the category of feminist writer. Maraini is often viewed as "[la] scrittrice più famosa del femminismo italiano" ([the] most famous writer of Italian feminism).¹⁶ We as reviewers, readers and scholars have often enclosed her work in a feminist framework, one that has been invaluable in illuminating the mechanisms of gender that she explores through complex narrative strategies in her work, but also thereby links her to a particular defining moment, to a national (and Western) historical and political movement, to a set of thematic concerns that some view as specific, limiting, or partisan. Sumeli Weinberg is sensitive to this problem of designation in Italian historiography and literary criticism from her earliest work on Maraini. In her book on Maraini, Sumeli Weinberg quotes a 1980 interview in the newspaper, *Il Messaggero*, in which the writer Sandra Petrignani asks Maraini whether Maraini's attention to "tematiche esclusivamente femminili" (themes that are exclusively women's themes) would cause her to define her work as "'femminista'" (feminist). To which Maraini responds, "Veramente non amo le etichette" (I really don't like labels).¹⁷

Maraini early in her career identified one of the biggest drawbacks of having her writing described as focusing on "'denunce, tutto quanto nel mondo non va o potrebbe andare meglio'" ("denunciations, everything in the world that goes wrong or could go better").¹⁸ This, Maraini tells us, was critic Antonio Debenedetti's response to her own comment regarding *Isolina*, "Per me scrivere significa mettermi prima di tutto nei panni delle donne" (For me writing means putting myself in women's shoes).¹⁹ Debenedetti relegated her writing to the category of "naturalismo," which Maraini, clearly insulted, saw as an attempt to dismiss her work by branding it with "un sospetto di realismo socialista, qualcosa di sconveniente e deteriore, assoluta-