A PLATONIC LOOK AT HERSELF: KNOWLEDGE, LOVE, AND SOUL IN SIBILLA ALERAMO'S *DIALOGO CON PSICHE*

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Abstract: *Dialogo con Psiche* (1909–10) has received little consideration from scholars of Sibilla Aleramo; yet, this is a work of paramount importance for understanding Aleramo's approach to knowledge and hence gaining a deeper insight into her subsequent autobiographical novels. For Aleramo, knowledge cannot be separated from the knowledge of the Self that she calls soul. Love is the key that opens the door to that wisdom. This essay explores the triangulation between knowledge, love, and soul in *Dialogo con Psiche*, which is the foundation of Aleramo's personal experience as represented in her autobiographical works; in so doing, the essay also clarifies the writer's strong relationship with Platonism, a relationship to which scholars of Aleramo might want to pay renewed attention.

Most of the critical work about Sibilla Aleramo has established that Aleramo's writing of her life's events in the form of fiction cannot be separated from how she thought of herself in the world: as her life affects her fiction, so too her narrative influences her life.¹ There is osmosis between these aspects of her experience. Regarding her

¹ Addressing Sibilla's early production, Rita Guerricchio writes, "Sibilla anticipa quella che sarà la sigla più vistosa della sua produzione successiva, operando il primo 'abuso ideologico' della propria esistenza. [...] [Q]uesti tentativi letterari [...] sono comunque, sia pure con diverso grado di elaborazione, intrisi di umori, di urgenze morali e sentimentali strettamente legate alla condizione autobiografica" (16). Two seminal collections of critical essays about Aleramo are *Sibilla Aleramo. Coscienza e scrittura*, edited by Franco Contorbia, Lea Melandri, and Alba Morino; and *Svelamento. Sibilla Aleramo: una biografia intellettuale*, edited by Annarita Buttafuoco and Marina Zancan. The bulk of the fundamental and most relevant critical work on Aleramo was done during the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars like Anna Folli, however, have written about her work since then, in contexts related to women's writing, feminism, and homosexuality (as in the work of Alessandra Cenni, for example), or to preface new editions of her works. I have cited those most relevant to this essay. Folli herself points her readers to the proceedings of a 1988 conference on Aleramo in Milan: "Quanto alla bibliografia di Sibilla, è ormai tanto vasta che non ha senso darne dei cenni. Rimando piuttosto a quella di Alessandra

literary production, Aleramo wrote that it was always “un furore di autocreazione, incessante” (*Dal mio diario* 33). However, from some critical interpretations, one gets the sense that there is too much of a self-indulgent component in Aleramo’s writing, that her life-long dedication to finding her locus as a woman and an artist was nothing more than this: finding her place.² I believe that Aleramo aimed at being more than a feminist, a writer of her time, a social activist, and a woman who made her life into something worthy of literature — the writer was guided by the necessity to understand human relationships from a spiritual perspective. Although the “author’s discoveries about self and writing helped her to define a new poetics of writing by women, which she was deliberately seeking” (Grimaldi Morosoff 4), that poetics was not the goal per se; understanding and explaining love and life were.

Aleramo was a child of her time, a time that responded to Positivism with renewed attention to the soul and its needs, and with a strong interest in theosophy, esoterism, and spiritualism.³ For her, “soul” and “spirit” were familiar

Spada in appendice agli atti del convegno milanese del 1988 (*Svelamento* [...]); e alla mia in *Penne leggere* (“Prefazione,” *Una donna* XXI).

² With regard to criticism on Aleramo, Anna Grimaldi Morosoff writes, “Critics stressed her [Aleramo’s] excessive concern with herself, her narcissism, her autobiographism. More recently, the emphasis had shifted to her feminism and to her social work. This situation prompted Maria Corti [...] to point out the need for literary critics to leave aside the woman, to let historians deal with her feminism and psychologists with her biography, and to finally do justice to the writer” (3).

³ “Lo studio dell’esoterismo, infatti, era parte integrante della cultura o, per lo meno, parte della cultura alta, di coloro che si dedicavano a studi filosofici e psicologici senza che pregiudizi di matrice razionalista ne condizionassero le scelte e, soprattutto, ne limitassero gli orizzonti. Una libertà intellettuale che trovava le sue origini nei primi decenni del Novecento, in quella reazione letteraria, artistica e filosofica insieme che aveva tentato — in parte riuscendovi — di liberare la cultura italiana dalla stasi in cui si era impastoiata, sul finire del secolo XIX, in forza dell’egemonia della scuola positivista. [...] Di qui un approccio alle filosofie orientali e, soprattutto, al recupero del filone magico-ermetico, proprio della tradizione filosofica italica — in particolare di quella neoplatonica da Ficino a Bruno [...]. Una stagione straordinaria, dunque, che vide la cultura esoterica partecipare del rinnovamento delle lettere e della filosofia italiane, accanto, non casualmente, ad altri fermenti — da Nietzsche a Bergson, dal pragmatismo di James alla scuola sociologica tedesca — con i quali di fatto operò in modo sinergico” (Marcigliano 377–378).

Guerricchio relates Aleramo’s autobiographism to the intellectual atmosphere of her time. Aleramo’s “urgenze morali e sentimentali strettamente legate alla condizione autobiografica” were not “prive di autorità se si considera il clima etico sotteso a gran parte della letteratura del tempo. Si può dire anzi che lo stesso nucleo ispiratore di Sibilla, la bovaryana disarmonia tra

concepts that she used as tools to know the people and the world around her. In 1912, her friendship with Giovanni Papini (Arno in *Il passaggio*, 1919), who had founded the short-lived theosophical journal *Anima* a year earlier, turned into a love relationship. In the years surrounding 1925, she was the lover of figures very much involved with esoterism, such as Julius Evola and Guido Parise; she regularly frequented the groups around the magazines they founded, directed, or were involved with.⁴ She attended the initiatives of the “Società Teosofica Indipendente,” among which were the “Corsi di cultura spirituale.”⁵ However, these love stories were not the reason why she appealed to categories such as “soul,” “love,” and “spirit” to understand life; rather, they were the consequence. In 1910, she wrote a random note:⁶

forte potenziale romantico e meschina realtà piccolo-borghese, trovasse riscontro [...] nella crisi che vivevano in quegli anni molti scrittori italiani: «... il concetto materialistico del mondo e della vita non appaga più lo spirito moderno...», scriveva nel '96 il più lucido testimone di quella crisi [Luigi Pirandello], denunciando il generale senso di insoddisfazione delineatosi verso le teorie positivistiche [...]. Ne deriva [...] un bisogno tutto sentimentale di ancoramento a valori etici e religiosi che rivendicassero gli ormai tornati di moda ‘diritti dell’anima’” (Guerricchio 16–17). Guerricchio describes in detail the consequences on the Italian literary scene of this “rinascenza dell’anima,” an expression she borrows from Arturo Graf (17).

⁴ Aleramo meets Julius Evola in Rome in 1925 and their relationship ends in 1926, when she begins seeing Guido Parise. *Ignis*, like *Ultra* (first *Rivista teosofica di Roma*, then *Rivista di studi e di ricerche spirituali*), *Atanòr*, *Ur*, and *Krur* were journals devoted to esoterism and initiation studies. The “Gruppo di Ur” was actively practising magic. The mathematics professor Arturo Reghini and Evola founded *Ignis* in 1925, which only lasted for seven issues. In 1924, Reghini, already a mason, had founded and directed the review *Atanòr* with his follower Parise. Regardless of the increasing disagreements between Reghini and Evola, the two, together with Parise, founded *Ur*. However, in 1929, Reghini and Evola’s relationship came to an end. Evola took over at *Ur*, which became *Krur*, and Reghini and Parise founded a new *Ignis* (only one issue of the magazine was published). For the history and relevance of these magazines and others, and for their contribution to the Italian literary landscape of the time, see Michele Beraldo, “Le riviste spiritualiste, occultiste ed esoteriche durante il Regime,” in *Esoterismo e Fascismo* 383–387. For details of Aleramo’s relationships with Evola and Parise, see Simone Caltabellota, *Un amore degli anni Venti*; Conti and Morino, *Sibilla Aleramo e il suo tempo*; and, of course, *Amo, dunque sono*, Aleramo’s epistolary novel that tells of her love for Parise (Luciano) and of her estrangement from Evola (Tellegra).

⁵ See Beraldo, “Le riviste spiritualiste [...],” and the note above.

⁶ “Sotto la voce ‘taccuini’ il Fondo Aleramo della Fondazione Istituto Gramsci Onlus di Roma ha inventariato circa 1500 carte [...]. ‘Taccuino’ non è per Sibilla un quadernetto, soltanto un

M'avean fatta soffrire, ed avevo accolto nella mia fibra tutto il dolore del mondo. Poi incontrai un'anima grande e divenni una serena adoratrice dello spirito. Tardi ebbi la rivelazione della bellezza e attraverso la fremente gioia dei sensi attinsi alla fusione con l'universo. Ora le esperienze sono finite, io non vivo più, conosco soltanto, ed unica espressione del mio essere è la filosofia. (Ms. 01050, Note di taccuino)

It is hard to say who that soul is. However, we do know that, between 1909 and 1910, she wrote of a conversation with *the* soul: *Dialogo con Psiche*.⁷

My reading of Aleramo's *Dialogo con Psiche* explores the triangulation between knowledge, love, and soul. This triangulation is a founding part of what Aleramo presents in her fictional works as her personal experience. I call such experience "literary autobiography" after Anna Grimaldi Morosoff, who explains that she does not consider Aleramo's autobiographical novels as "novels with autobiographical subject matter, but literary autobiographies comparable to painted self-portraits. Literary autobiography may take any form that the writer is capable or willing to give it in order to express herself" (*Transfigurations* 6).⁸ The necessary connection between knowledge, love, and soul not only is a crucial component of Aleramo's literary autobiographical works; it also generates the representation itself as follows. Knowledge, for Aleramo, equates to the knowability of, and access to, her inner self, which she calls the soul. This access is granted by the experience of love, and the intuitive knowing that ensues is then made communicable by writing, translated into narrative. This essay clarifies the modalities of the soul/love/knowledge triangulation in *Dialogo con Psiche*; in so doing, it casts light upon Aleramo's relationship with Platonism, which other scholars have indicated but not fully discussed.⁹ It is in *Dialogo* that the overt references to Plato and the clear

qualunque pezzo di carta su cui appuntare una nota volante, impressioni, pensieri [...]" (Folli, *Orsa Minore* 9).

⁷ Folli recalls the same 1909 note in *Penne leggère*, in a different context.

⁸ Grimaldi Morosoff focuses her work on the four novels that Aleramo expressly said to be autobiographical: *Una Donna* (1906); *Il passaggio* (1919); *Amo, dunque sono* (1927); *Il frustino* (1932).

⁹ Besides Meda, who notices that Aleramo shows a good knowledge of Plato's *Symposium* (see below of this essay), Folli also finds traces of Aleramo's Platonism in the author's scattered notes: "[...] arrivare da sola a distinguere il bene dal male, il bello dal brutto, come fa nei taccuini

echoes of Neoplatonism that are present in *Amo, dunque sono* (1927) find their roots.¹⁰

Dialogo con Psiche arises from a unique trip: a voyage in which Aleramo faces death and destruction in an extreme way. Such an experience would make her desire a conversation with her soul. What Aleramo faces is comparable to what, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates says happens to a soul that is led astray by its preoccupations with the body. Plato writes (it is Socrates who speaks),

And were we not saying some time ago that the soul when using the body as an instrument of perception, that is to say, when using the sense of sight or hearing or some other sense (for the meaning of perceiving through the body is perceiving through the senses) — were we not saying that the soul too is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard, when she touches change? (79c, 433–434)

In *Dialogo con Psiche*, a woman, overwhelmed by grief for what she has witnessed in the aftermath of an earthquake, has a conversation with that part of her soul that, on the contrary, remained unmoved and managed to make its presence known, cutting through the depth of the tragedy. For Aleramo, Psiche, the female interlocutor that in the dialogue embodies the soul, is eternal and is in eternal contemplation of being; she is intellectual, wise, and truth-knowing as the wiser and higher part of herself. The writer scripts both parts of this conversation and

dove tra 1909 e il 1910 mette a punto il *vademecum* che diventerà la sua legge [...]. La donna di genio ricava la sua insegna da Platone: «Che cosa diceva il vecchio savio. *Generare nel bello. Ecco l'amore*» (taccuino, 1910)” (*Penne leggere* 44).

¹⁰ Here is an example from *Amo, dunque sono* of how Aleramo relates to Plato and to the Neoplatonic tradition: “18 luglio [...]. Cercavo l'amore come il più certo tramite per giungere a Dio [...]. Dove altri perviene con l'asceta solitaria, io non arrivo se non ho l'ausilio d'un'immagine viva quale sia il mio stesso segno d'immortalità. Mi riconosco incompleta, come Adamo prima che Eva gli sorgesse al fianco, come l'innamorato del mito platonico... [...]. Perché io sono nata poeta, non santa. Tutti i poeti [...], anche gli iniziati come Dante e Goethe, non han forse richiesto il soccorso d'amore, e non forse mediante l'amore son penetrati nei regni occulti, o li hanno, col loro canto, creati?” (51). *Amo, dunque sono* is the epistolary novel that narrates Aleramo and Parise's love story. The book contains only Sibilla's letters to the character Luciano (Giulio Parise), who is away, alone on a spiritual retreat.

projects her better self onto a bust of Psyche that was at the Museo Nazionale in Naples at the time.¹¹

Scholars of Aleramo have not paid much attention to *Dialogo con Psiche*, which was published only after her death, in 1991. Yet, this work is pivotal not only to understand what experience meant for Aleramo, in terms of knowledge, but also to cast light on her later works, beginning with *Il passaggio*, her second autobiographical novel, written between 1912 and 1918. Concerning *Il passaggio*, Susan Jacobs writes: “The narrating ‘I’ strains readers’ interpretative devices by inhabiting a textual territory devoid of historical and social landmarks, and focuses on the rich, evanescent workings of a specifically female psyche that functions by association, suggestion, and allusion in its recalling of experience” (59). Although in *Dialogo con Psiche* there are clear references to historical events, the process of focusing on a specifically female psyche and of trying to establish its features is prominent in this work. Keala Jane Jewell, too, highlights *Il passaggio* as the transitional work between Aleramo’s two different ways of narrating autobiographical events (“Un furore d’autocreazione” 152). Yet, on an artistic level, the writer’s confrontation with her female psyche happens before the writing of her second novel.

Bruna Conti has edited what we now know as *Dialogo con Psiche*, which comprises two dialogues and the poem based on them, *Alla Psiche del museo di Napoli*, published in 1935 in the collection of poetry *Sì alla terra*.¹² The first dialogue, entitled “Colloquio con la Psiche del museo di Napoli,” was completed on January 9, 1909; the second, “Dialogo con la Psiche del museo di Napoli,” was completed on May 22, 1910.¹³ Aleramo, who in both dialogues is “Una Donna,” stops at the Museo Nazionale in Naples on her way back from Sicily, where she had gone as a volunteer to help in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake that killed thousands in 1908. Aleramo went there with Giovanni Cena, her partner at the time. She went to Sicily again in October 1909, together with Cena, Gaetano Salvemini, and Giuseppina Lemaire, to check on the progress of the reconstruction. The second dialogue refers to this trip.

¹¹ Throughout this essay, I use the Italian name “Psiche” when I refer to the character of Psyche in *Dialogo con Psiche*, while I use the English “Psyche” when I refer to the deity in general and not specifically its representation in the novel.

¹² The book also has the annotated schedules of the two trips to Sicily.

¹³ See *Dialogo con Psiche* 11, 14.

On her first visit, Una Donna, prostrated by the grief for what she has seen in Calabria and Sicily, goes to see Psiche in search of peace and understanding. It would be easy to fall into the temptation of believing that Una Donna is simply Aleramo, as the author refers to a specific and detailed biographical event. Una Donna was already the protagonist of the novel published with that same title three years earlier; as a result, not only is the persona now an artistic creation, but she is about to undergo a profound change. At this point in her development as a writer, Aleramo is poised to turn her attention inward and to adopt a more intimist and poetic style, moving away from the clear narrative of *Una donna*, in which a story is chronicled along a specific timeline and with the intent of denouncing the social status of women (besides narrating one woman's story — her own).

The Platonic gesture of the two dialogues is evident from the beginning of the conversation between Una Donna and Psiche. When Una Donna is finally facing Psiche's bust, Psiche reminds her that she was always with her, and Una Donna responds:

È vero, è vero! La sera in cui camminavo da Bagnara a Scilla, nel chiaror lunare, e la spuma marina si frangeva tra gli scogli, sotto la strada di ferro e di selci... Avevo il giorno innanzi avuto la prima visione del flagello, a Palmi [...], a Seminara [...]. A terra, nel fango, i feriti e gli scampati. Famelici tutti. Il terrore, parola strana! Aveva preso un significato su ogni volto. (20)

Una Donna recalls having felt the presence of Psiche in the midst of that despair while coming out of a gallery:

Fu all'uscir d'una d'esse, di fronte a Scilla erta e Bruna nella placidità azzurra della notte, che m'invase per un lungo momento un senso di tenerezza quasi soave, e ascoltai un ritmo fondersi con quello delle onde e delle stelle. O tu che palpiti per l'eternità! Tu serena e immutabile. (21)

It is here that we come to understand Una Donna and Psiche in Platonic terms, as two different states of the same soul. We have already seen how a soul that uses the senses to attend to material things goes astray and becomes dizzy and confused. In his explanation of Plato's theory of the soul in the *Phaedo*, Hendrik Lorenz

calls these tangible things that are subject to destruction “perceptibles” (sec. 3.1). A soul, Socrates tries to convince us, is more akin to the world of things that are not perceptible, but, rather, “intelligible,” things that can be grasped by thought (Lorenz sec. 3.1).

It is helpful here to recall that, in the *Phaedo*, Plato is advocating the immortality of the soul. Socrates says,

But when returning into herself she [the soul] reflects; then she passes into the other world, the region of purity, and eternity, and immortality, and unchangeableness, which are her kindred, and with them she ever lives, when she is by herself and is not let or hindered; then she ceases from her wandering, and being in contact with things unchanging is unchanging in relation to them. (*Phaedo* 79d, 434)

Socrates calls this state of the soul “wisdom.” This is the state in which Una Donna finds herself when facing the town of Scilla, “erta e bruna.” A sense of tenderness pervades her and she is in touch again with that part of her soul that is eternal and unchangeable.

Una Donna calls Psiche “serena e immutabile”; she also refers to her as “sorella” and “anima.” Once she looks at the statue, even her terrible memories take on the contours of Psiche’s torso, “spezzato e perfetto” (19), “fermo e puro, e insieme inafferrabile” (19). Psiche looks down, absorbed in her contemplation of the eternal. She is “bella e assorta nella [sua] luce interiore” (26): all-knowing, eternal, and eternally still. It is important to notice that, in *Dialogo*, Psiche’s gaze is directed downward, since to change the direction of one’s gaze becomes fundamental to the acquisition of knowledge, as we shall see further on. The intellectual aspect of Una Donna’s Self resides in Psiche, who, looking down, is forever contemplating and thus able to know wholly, rather than partially. Aleramo, on her journey, is forced to look around, instead, at the dead bodies and destroyed towns. Bodily needs take the stage dramatically in this trip to Sicily, which leads Una Donna’s soul astray, until she can once again find balance and wisdom in the presence of Psiche.

Within Aleramo’s search for a specifically female approach to creativity, Psiche is the presence of Una Donna’s Self, her divine specular image and, at the same time, the model she looks up to. Psiche is the Psyche of Apuleius’s fable, who is transformed into an eternal being by the intercession of Amore, Love. She is not

only the soul and the higher self of *Dialogo's* specific interlocutor, but the soul and higher self of women in general. In the same way, Una Donna is not only one of the two characters of these dialogues, but also that universal woman who, in the homonymous novel, was meant to represent all women. In this regard, in "Lui, lei e l'altra," Anna Meda writes:

Nella vicenda mitica di Psiche e Eros, come c'insegna lo splendido studio di Eric Neumann, *Amore e Psiche*, è rappresentato il principio d'amore in cui l'incontro tra il femminile e il maschile diventa il fondamento dell'individuazione [...]. Quello di Psiche, infatti, è il mito dell'individuazione femminile per eccellenza. Psiche [...] rappresenta il sé femminile congiunto al maschile superiore (l'amante divino) [...]. Nella figura di Psiche viene quindi rappresentato emblematicamente il destino di ogni donna verso l'individuazione e la totalità. (51)

The male principle to which Neumann refers is to be understood as part of the "masculine powers in the feminine unconscious" (Neumann 134), a concept that Meda clarifies as well.¹⁴ In *Dialogo*, Psiche is the one to whom Una Donna turns in order to understand who she is and to frame her identity. She is also Una Donna's and all women's destiny with whom the "Creatura d'oggi" (*Dialogo* 21), the specific woman, is in conversation.

When referring to Mary G. Mason's thoughts on making distinctions between male and female autobiographies, Angelica Forti-Lewis reminds us that female autobiography "presume invece sempre la presenza dell'*Altro* (la presenza, non la deferenza), figlio, marito, Dio, la cui attenta e amorosa attenzione permette alla donna di aprire il flusso delle proprie memorie" (328). The stream of memories in *Dialogo* is opened up by the sought-after and desired presence of the eternal, female Other in her specificity and totality: that is, Psiche.¹⁵ If, in *Una donna*, the narrator identifies in turn with her father, her mother, and the collectiveness of all

¹⁴ On the masculine within the feminine unconscious, and on the conscious discovery that Psyche makes of it in Apuleius's fable, see Neumann 134–137.

¹⁵ Forti-Lewis adds, "Mary Mason [...] aveva affermato che nella narrativa autocosciente delle donne non si trovavano echi del prototipo agostiniano e rousseauiano perché l'iter introspettivo femminile sembra sempre ammettere automaticamente la presenza reale della coscienza dell'Altro" (333).

women (Forti-Lewis 333), in *Dialogo con Psiche*, the Other is specifically and only the internal female counterpart of Una Donna. However, Una Donna must still be the one in whom all women can recognize themselves.¹⁶

Una Donna's second visit to Psiche's bust is prompted, once again, by a need for peace; this time, though, what has caused turmoil in Aleramo's spirit is also her love story with Lina Poletti, which happened between 1909 and 1910 and was now approaching its end. Poletti is the woman who inspired "La Favola," a chapter of Aleramo's second book. As Conti writes in her edition of *Il passaggio*, "Sibilla uscì contemporaneamente dalla vita di Lina e da quella di Cena" (109).¹⁷ In this second dialogue, the role played by *eros*, passionate love, together with Psiche's response to Una Donna, gives us a clear sense of how love is key to knowledge.

Talking about her desire for another soul (Poletti), Una Donna, who is trying to understand what happened to her during that year, says,

Sì fuggivo da me... E dinanzi, anche in perpetua fuga, avevo il balenar d'una altra anima nuda... Psiche, non eri tu! Era un'anima di ardore e di violenza [...]. Divina anch'ella nel suo mistero! E così l'adorai dapprima, ed ella fu la primavera, i gorgheggi degli alati sui poggi, le nubi dorate sulle chiome dei pini. Fu contro cieli di viola e di fiamma, ogni sera, l'improvviso fior bianco d'Espro. Così fosse rimasta! (35)

Aleramo is not satisfied with an ideal knowledge of her lover, which she expresses with the metaphors related to nature. It is Psiche that points out Una Donna's deficiency, implicit in her desire for the other person. She indicates this wanting as her mistake: "Volesti conoscerla [...] e sognasti una fusione che desse ad entrambe il possesso perfetto del mondo, poiché quell'anima aveva tutto quello che a te mancava e la tua conteneva quel che alla sua faceva difetto [...] e soffristi" (35).¹⁸

¹⁶ This aspect of *Una Donna* marks a continuation in Aleramo's writing. In the introduction to *Dialogo con Psiche*, Conti writes, "La pubblicazione del *Dialogo* diventa allora significativa [...] anche come scrittura ponte tra *Una Donna* e la successiva produzione letteraria dell'Aleramo" (13).

¹⁷ Regarding the love story between Aleramo and Poletti, see also Conti and Morino, *Sibilla Aleramo e il suo tempo* 50–58.

¹⁸ Aleramo suffered when she realized that Poletti's "psicologia maschile" (*Sibilla Aleramo e il suo tempo* 57) was preventing her lover from really understanding and loving women, in general, and her, in particular. In a letter to Poletti that Aleramo titled "Il male," she wrote,

The theme of the reflection is love and how it is conducive to knowledge. It is in fact in relation to Aleramo's love for Poletti that Una Donna and Psiche talk directly about the meaning of life.

We are led to think that Aleramo's lover in *Dialogo* is Poletti not only because of the biographical correspondence, but also because in *Il passaggio* she writes of Poletti using the same words. In the chapter devoted to her love for Poletti, "La favola," Aleramo writes, "Cominciò puerilmente come cominciava la primavera: voci d'alati sul poggio mi destavano all'alba" (71). It is only through her passion for Poletti that the writer understands love: "Imparai, amore, che il tuo mistero non è nella legge che perpetua le speci. Più alto, *indifferente*, estatico" (*Il passaggio* 74). With Poletti, Aleramo reaches the unification of the feminine and masculine principles, that "individuazione e totalità" (Meda 51) of herself as expressed in the myth of Eros and Psyche. In fact, in "La favola," she takes one more opportunity to make a clear reference to her dialogues with Psiche: "Fammi morire! Fammi morire, chiunque tu sia, è l'ora che la mia carne non può oltre sopportare, l'ora che si preparava ma che non attendevo — fermentano fra macerie i cadaveri, una statua risplende per faro —" (*Il passaggio* 75). The corpses are the ones she saw in Sicily and the statue is Psiche's bust.

The referential images that send us back to the author's dialogues with Psiche are important not only to confirm, once again, the sense of the divine that Aleramo perceived when loving another soul. In this case Poletti, who was "Divina anch'ella nel suo mistero!" (*Dialogo* 35), is as divine as Psiche herself. However, what is crucial in *Dialogo*, as in *Il passaggio*, is the meaning of love as an act of knowledge: to love means to unveil the "mistero" and to reach a transcendent understanding of life. In *Dialogo*, the acquisition of knowledge is exemplified by the use of sight: "Sorella," Psiche continues, "ogni anima è sola in terra col proprio ritmo segreto. Crede taluna con il miraggio degli occhi di attingere al ritmo d'un'altra e s'inganna" (35). In the two published dialogues, references to where

Nel dono d'amore la donna (almeno per quello che io ne so su me stessa) non ha affatto quel senso di *sommissione* che tu, con psicologia maschile, supponi [...]. Che se tu prendi la palla al balzo e mi dici che questo avviene nei rapporti tra maschio e femmina, quando la femmina non desidera ardentemente l'accoppiamento, io ti replico che no, che neppure in questo caso v'è... come la chiami? Prostituzione?... non v'è se la femmina è anche un essere pensante e *vuole* quell'accoppiamento per un amore che trascende l'impulso del suo sangue e per una ragione in cui trova la *bellezza* dell'atto. Bada Lina [...] io affermo insomma l'esistenza della *personalità* anche nella cosiddetta *dedizione*. E affermo che il *male* esiste soltanto allorché la *dedizione* vien fatta senza amore e accettata senza amore. (*Sibilla Aleramo e il suo tempo* 57)

the eyes are looking are many; they increase if we take into consideration some of the manuscript's variations that did not make it into the printed text. For example, in the margins of the second dialogue's first page, Aleramo wrote a variation for Una Donna's salutation to Psiche: "Un anno. Come allora, fuori, sulla vita fervente, c'è il sole. E come allora noi guardiamo, anima, a terra immobili e intente, nel ricordo della morte che ci ha sfiorate" (Ms. "Dialogo con la Psiche del museo di Napoli" 1)

In this second dialogue, Una Donna's desperate cry to Psiche begs to allow her to see what Psiche is seeing. Psiche is looking down, absorbed in her contemplation of the eternal mystery of being, as Una Donna tells us, and she would like to share that gaze: "Oh, tiemmi vicina," she asks Psiche, "lasciami guardare con te nel profondo, dove non fu possibile con l'amore, scorgere nelle immobili acque il riflesso dell'invisibile luce!" (36). This invisible light is the mystery of being. Love, the love for another person, was not able to reveal that mystery. At this point, Psiche corrects Una Donna, telling her that love was, indeed, pointing at the forms shaped by what Una Donna calls invisible light:

Hai nominato l'amore? L'amore... Essere una ancora, e credersi il tutto... Distogliere lo sguardo un attimo dal fisso mistero dell'essere, per immergerlo nell'abbagliante parvenza dell'universo... il sole, il vento, il mare, le stelle! Tutto nostro! Null'altro esiste fuor che l'anima nostra, che non è più nostra, che non ci chiede più nessun perché, ecco, rapita nel sublime incanto, un attimo, una volta! (36)

Psiche redirects her gaze from internal contemplation to the contemplation of the universe in its forms and, in so doing, she gives love a specific task. Love pushes her to "distogliere lo sguardo dal fisso mistero dell'essere" in order to discern the universe and to be one with it ("Essere una ancora, e credersi il tutto..."), which means to attain knowledge of it — or to produce the only possible knowledge of it.

Psiche's intellectual activity is here prompted by love. Her task remains knowledge. Aleramo's entire literary production, as much as her life, has been prompted by her experience of love. "Non c'è altro segreto," says Psiche. "Trovare nel proprio specchio un'immagine della vita più grande della vita stessa... Allora sei salva" (37). Conti calls this secret the "utopia categoriale dell'Aleramo [...]". Il tentativo di 'ritrovarsi' che Sibilla riferisce a Psiche è stato nell'amore, [...] necessità proclamata per la propria realizzazione di donna e di artista" (*Dialogo* 12–13).

I would add to these last two aims her realization as a human being. The words “utopia” and “tentativo” seem to imply a failure of some sort, as if Aleramo chased after something that she could not find for her entire life. Yet, her own declaration that the secret is to “trovare nel proprio specchio un'immagine della vita più grande della vita stessa...” means that she considers such reflection the way in which one experiences knowledge. Love was, for her, the path to this Platonic reflection, not as a utopia, but as the way in which she understood life itself. The site of this reflection was her soul.

In 1910, Aleramo wrote the following note:

Cosa erano i miei occhi nei primi tempi della mia infanzia, cos'è la mia anima oggi che saluto tanta mia vita trascorsa: sola e limpida e ignara di quel che le altre anime credono e sanno. E come i miei occhi allora, così adesso la mia anima silenziosamente è avida di tutto riflettere in sé. Tutto il mondo delle apparenze i miei occhi da soli hanno scoperto: tutto il mondo della realtà celata la mia anima da sola va intuendo. E come nella mia infanzia credevo a quel che i miei occhi venivano distinguendo di forme e di luci, così ora io credo a quel che la mia anima percepisce di sentimenti e di idee. (Ms. 010396, Appunti e note)

Drawing upon Jungian psychology and its definition of the feminine as a way of being for the conscience, Meda explains why *eros* becomes the key to accessing knowledge:

La femminilità, quindi, come Eros, cioè come principio di relazione e di unione [...]. Anche nel *Symposium* di Platone, che l'Aleramo dimostra di conoscere bene, Eros [...] guida il percorso dal sensibile al sovrasensibile, è l'intermediario per eccellenza che, aggregando, legando, connettendo, porta alla conoscenza; non quella che categorizza astraendo, ma quella più intima che nasce dal fondersi e dall'accogliere in sé. (50)

Love — *eros* — is thus empowering because it is a mode of the spirit that enables profound, intuitive knowledge.

This aspect of Aleramo's *Weltanschauung* needs to be stated clearly. Psiche clarifies this, telling Una Donna,

Hai detto una parola esatta, donna. Provvisorii dovrebbero sempre sentirsi gli umani. Provvisorii e insieme perenni. Non bada, come specie, ma come individui singoli: non in vista d'una continuazione in altra sfera, ma per l'accordo perfetto dell'istante in cui essi vivono con l'istante di tutti i tempi. (26)

Hence, to understand who she is means for Aleramo to attain knowledge of the eternal. Through love she becomes known to herself. This is, for Aleramo, knowledge *tout court*. In *Il passaggio*, she writes,

Uomini e donne sono sul mio cammino perch'io li ami [...].
Che cosa io sarei senza questi incontri, senza le strade che ho percorso?
Tutto m'attendeva e nell'ora esatta. (14)

Such timing represents "l'accordo perfetto dell'istante in cui essi vivono con l'istante di tutti i tempi." Aleramo continues:

Tutti m'hanno dato. Tutti pareva fossero stati creati per me, per far che divenissi, sì, più grande e più brava. Li guardavo perdutoamente e così adorando credevo di darmi ed invece prendevo. [...] Affermo me a me stessa: null'altro! Null'altro!

Oh, ma affermo tutto ciò di cui mi compongo, tutto che mi sta attorno e ch'io assorbo. (14–15)

Aleramo has a keen awareness of being constituted by the integrated elements of her own experience and of shaping that experience with her love.

In her beautiful *Come nasce il sogno d'amore*, Lea Melandri points at Sibilla Aleramo's platonic gesture from a feminist perspective and sees it as a delusional undertaking that leads a woman away from real autonomy:

L'offerta incessante che [Aleramo] fa di se stessa alla scrittura, diventa «immolazione», e come ogni sacrificio, che abbia un carattere religioso, attende una ricompensa divina. Il sogno d'amore diventa «legge» e «ordine» della donna. Con esso Sibilla si pone al di sopra del

vivere sociale come «cosa sacra» e in quel tempio chiuso finisce per dimenticare da dove viene la sua sacralità.

Credendo di costruire se stessa, si avvicina all'«ideale immagine virile», che l'uomo desidera per sé, ricongiungimento armonioso di parti che ha dovuto forzatamente separare. La donna, che innalza nella solitudine la sua chiesa narcisistica, monumento di forza e di sensibilità femminile, è più vicina al mito platonico che a un'autonomia reale. [...] [I]l miracolo che deve trasformare ogni volta il dolore in felicità, non è altro che il percorso mistico che avvicina una donna, ora al Cristo trionfante, ora al Cristo sofferente. (30–31)

I do not believe that Aleramo's path to knowledge indicates a lack of real autonomy. Pointing toward Aleramo's "Apologia dello spirito femminile," but not only this work, Bernadette Luciano reminds us that "from the beginning of the twentieth century Aleramo had been prescribing what the Italian women's liberation movement of the seventies dictated; that women must not define themselves in relation to men, but rather must recognize their difference" (95).

Alessandra Cenni seems to agree: "Questo bisogno d'amore da far coincidere con l'autonomia e l'indipendenza morale è il nodo centrale dell'esperienza di Sibilla" (18). Although a precursor of many of contemporary Italian feminism's tenets, Aleramo belonged to her time, and her Platonism is a sign of this appurtenance. As contradictory as it may seem, this pushes her thought past the idea of difference: her absolute devotion to love was her way of moving beyond gender differences.¹⁹ Aleramo's closeness to the Platonic myth is, in fact, her way to autonomy. In this regard, Neumann's reading of Psyche's embrace of love as a means of self-discovery and a path to equality provides a clearer understanding of Aleramo's ideals. In his commentary on Apuleius' fable, Neumann identifies a turning point in Psyche, who, tired of living out her passion with Eros in the darkness (which for Neumann represents the unconsciousness of Psyche while bewitched by Eros), decides to see who her lover is:

The Psyche who approaches the bed on which Eros is lying is no longer the languorously ensnared being, bewitched by her senses, who

¹⁹ Italian feminism would have to wait for the work of the philosophers Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero, which began at the end of the 1970s, to see discourses undermining and subverting Plato's philosophy and the establishment of patriarchal modes in Western thought.

lived in the dark paradise of sexuality and lust. [...] In the glow of the newly kindled light, with which she illumines the unconscious darkness of her previous existence, she recognizes Eros. *She loves*. [...] She is no longer a victim, but an active loving woman. She is in love, enraptured by Eros, who has seized her as a power from within, no longer as a man from without. [...] The knowing Psyche, who sees Eros in the full light and has broken the taboo of invisibility, is no longer naïve and infantile in her attitude toward the masculine [...] but is so completely changed in her new womanhood that she loses and indeed must lose her lover. In this love situation of womanhood growing conscious through encounter, knowledge and suffering and sacrifice are identical. (78–80)

Like Eros's lover who enters her womanhood, the author, in conversation with her wiser Self (as Psiche), delineates Una Donna's features. Aleramo's dedication to love, her sacrifices in service of love, "l'offerta incessante che fa di se stessa" (Leandri 30), are not to be related to a patriarchal tradition that Aleramo would have somehow forgotten.

Melandri hints at this tradition when she writes, "e in quel tempio chiuso finisce per dimenticare da dove viene la sua sacralità" (30). Aleramo admits that in the giving of herself, she is taking, thus becoming, and not sacrificing: "Affermo me a me stessa: null'altro!" The act itself of knowing, perpetrated by love, is knowledge. Sacrificial love was never Aleramo's goal. Aleramo's idea of love is further from the Christian sacrifice than Melandri thinks and closer to Psyche's myth. By disobeying her lover and looking at him, Psyche "deprives Eros of his divine power over her. Psyche and Eros now confront one another as equals. [...] It is in the light of knowledge, her knowledge of Eros, that she begins to love" (Neumann 82). In the same way, Aleramo recognizes in love the only path to knowledge.²⁰

In this regard, when discussing *Il passaggio*, Jacobs writes, "Her subject was love, explored through her own love affairs and her self-mythologization as the incarnation of love, the flesh made spirit" (60). *Dialogo* shows that Aleramo's subject, in *Il passaggio* as elsewhere, was not love per se, but love as the key to knowledge altogether. Indeed, mythos means tale and Jacobs' reference to self-mythologization refers to a founding narrative of the self. But Aleramo's founding narrative of herself, based on love, is neither an end in itself, nor is it simply the affirmation

²⁰ See above, *Il passaggio* 14.

of a feminine way of writing. For Aleramo, this founding narrative of the Self is how she comes to understand being and life altogether, beyond matters of gender and history.

Dialogo con Psiche takes us a step even further from interpreting *eros* as the connection between the visible and the transcendent in Aleramo's works. At the end of the second dialogue, when Psiche reveals the secret of finding in one's own mirror an image of life that is greater than life itself, she also affirms,

Allora sei salva.

Un solo desiderio allora ti domina, non smarrire le linee divine che il tuo essere ti ha rivelato, e trasmetterle al tempo. Sei sola, [...] ma la tua esistenza diventa a te medesima sacra. [...] Tu volgi un fermo saluto alle cose che passano, laggiù, e non provi stanchezza né del loro moto, né della tua fissità. E la tua statua si compie. (*Dialogo* 37)

Aleramo has found the "linee divine," the divine contours not to be lost: she is, in fact, talking to that part of herself that knows the eternal. What differentiates Una Donna from Psiche is merely, and literally, point of view. At the end of the first dialogue, Una Donna says to Psiche, "Così tu vivi, bella, assorta nella tua luce interiore! Credi tu che Ulisse abbia veramente resistito al lene canto delle sirene, e sentita la necessità di varcare i limiti delle quotidiane vicende? O non è egli soltanto il simbolo d'una delle nostre aspirazioni irraggiungibili, anima?" (26–27).

Psiche responds: "E quand'anche? Questa è la virtù umana, di creare immagini in cui fissarsi nelle ore di smarrimento. Per questa virtù io vivo e tu sei venuta oggi a trovarmi, piccola sorella stanca..." (27). How can one not think of "questa virtù" as that aspect of the soul that Plato calls "spirit," in the *Republic* (442ab), and that allows a human being to choose between the desires of the appetite and what might be, in the moment, more reasonable, more beautiful, and more just? Psiche is a part of Una Donna / Aleramo and so, when Una Donna / Aleramo is contemplating her own soul, she experiences and knows the eternal in herself; when she turns her gaze elsewhere, she then knows human tribulation, which necessitates a return to Psiche. Love will keep her going back and forth. Love is not "almost" a category of the spirit: it *is* a category of the spirit. The Platonic movement from one image to the next is not "un'utopia categoriale," but an actual, realized one.

I believe it is necessary to begin reading Aleramo's lifelong devotion to love — *eros* in particular — not only as a “necessità proclamata per la propria realizzazione di donna e di artista” (Conti, *Dialogo* 12), but rather as a necessity proclaimed for the sake of her full realization as a human being. The revolutionary force that underlies Una Donna's two dialogues seems to have been overlooked by Aleramo's critics and requires further attention. The autonomy that Aleramo was after, as a woman for all women, and the understanding of others that she sought beyond issues of gender are to be found in her version of Platonism.

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