

La Storia and the “Literature of Hiding”: Davide Segre’s Holocaust-related Traumas

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1. Introduction

The scholarship devoted to Elsa Morante has been intensively growing in the last thirty years. In the last decade, in particular, *La Storia* has been re-discussed and re-analysed in light of various frameworks, from Jewish to Holocaust studies, from Trauma and Migration studies to Affect theory, Material culture and Cultural memory studies, just to name a few.¹ Building upon the convincing analyses of *La Storia* as a work of traumatic realism by Tiziana de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi,² this article briefly

1. On the reading of *La Storia* through a) Jewish studies see for example: M. Beer, *Costellazioni ebraiche: note su Elsa Morante e l'ebraismo del Novecento*, in «Nacqui nell'ora amara del meriggio»: scritti per Elsa Morante nel centenario della sua nascita, eds. E. Cardinale, G. Zagra, Quaderni della Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, Rome 2013, pp. 165-120; A. Cavaglion, *Il grembo della Shoah: 16 ottobre 1943 di Umberto Saba, Giacomo Debenedetti, Elsa Morante*, in *Dopo i testimoni: memorie, storiografie e narrazioni della deportazione razziale*, eds. M. Baiardi, A. Cavaglion, Viella, Rome 2014, pp. 245-246; S.E. Ziolkowski, *Jewish Images and Transnational Histories in Italian Writing. From Elsa Morante to Helena Janeczek*, in «Annali d'italianistica», 42, 2024, pp. 289-318; b) Holocaust studies: S. Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories: Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2014; M. Josi, *Rome, 16 October 1943. History, Memory, Literature*, Legenda, Cambridge 2023; c) Trauma studies: T. de Rogatis, K. Wehling-Giorgi, *Traumatic Realism and the Poetics of Trauma in Elsa Morante's Works*, in «Allegoria», 83, 2021, pp. 169-183; K. Wehling-Giorgi, «Come un fotogramma spezzato»: *Traumatic Images and Multistable Visions in Elsa Morante's «History: A Novel»* and T. De Rogatis, *Elsa Morante's «History: A Novel» and Svetlana Alexievich's «The Unwomanly Face of War»: Traumatic Realism, Archives du Mal and Female Pathos*, in *Trauma Narratives in Italian and Transnational Women's Writing*, eds. T. de Rogatis, K. Wehling-Giorgi, SUE, Rome 2022, pp. 55-78 and 79-111; K. Wehling-Giorgi, «Una stampa lucida»: *Traumatic Images and Ruinous Landscapes in Elsa Morante's «La Storia» and «Aracoeli»*, in «Annali d'italianistica», 42, 2024, pp. 105-124; d) Migration studies: T. de Rogatis, *Homing/Ritrovarsi. Traumi e translinguismi delle migrazioni in Morante, Hoffman, Kristof, Scego e Lahiri*, Edizioni Università per Stranieri di Siena, Siena 2023; e) Affect theory: S. Porcelli, «As If He Wanted to Murder Her»: *Fear, Disgust and Anger in «La Storia»'s Rape Scene*, in «Close Encounters in War Journals», 1, 2018, pp. 65-81; f) Material culture: R. Walker, *Bringing Up the Bodies: Material Encounters in Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*, in «Italian Studies», 76, 1, 2021, pp. 82-95; g) Cultural memory studies: Josi, *Rome, 16 October 1943*, cit.; G. Bartolini, «La Storia» come vettore di memoria: il romanzo di Morante nella cultura del ricordo del dopoguerra, in «Annali d'italianistica», 42, 2024, pp. 147-174.
2. de Rogatis, Wehling-Giorgi, *Traumatic Realism and the Poetics of Trauma*, cit.

summarises the experience of hiding and clandestinity that Elsa Morante went through during the Nazi occupation of Rome and Italy from September 1943. It then includes *La Storia* in a newly articulated category of Holocaust-related literature which I define as “the literature of hiding”. This category consists of texts written by Jewish people who evaded deportation and reworked their experiences either in fictional or non-fictional terms. Lastly, this study delves into the portrayal of the highly debated character Davide Segre, focusing for the first time on his complex, tangled Holocaust-related traumas as a young Jewish man who survived deportation by initially hiding and later joining a group of partisans.

Elsa Morante was born in Rome in 1912 to a mother, Irma Poggibonsi, who was Jewish. She became acutely aware of her Jewish identity when Mussolini’s Racial Laws restricted Jewish rights,³ but she avoided direct Fascist discrimination as she had been baptised. When in 1941 she married the writer Alberto Moravia, also of Jewish origin, in a Catholic wedding, neither of the two was under threat. In fact, Morante’s literary career flourished during this time, with notable publications such as *Il gioco segreto*, *Le bellissime avventure di Cateri dalla trecciolina*, and a translation of *The Scrapbook* by Katherine Mansfield.⁴ But, a few days after the sign of the armistice with the Allies and dissolution of the Italian Army on 8 September 1943, Morante’s life drastically changed. With the Nazi occupation of Italy, Moravia received threatening phone calls and was told his name was on the list of people to be deported. In mid-September, they left their two-bedroom apartment and were hosted for two days by a friend. They then decided to leave Rome, taking a train to go south. Morante remembered that «when the Germans took over Rome in 1943, I learned a great lesson, I learned terror. I was afraid for myself but even more for Moravia...».⁵ Morante and Moravia stopped in Fondi because the railway had been bombed in Ciociaria. They found refuge in a hut up on a nearby mountain, in the little village of Sant’Agata. They remained there from the end of September 1943 until the end of June 1944. They went back together to Rome in September 1944. On their arrival, they were told that their apartment had been searched five times by the SS during the occupation.

Historical studies about Jews in hiding have been conducted throughout Europe, in Italy, specifically, by Liliana Picciotto with a publication in 2017, *Salvarsi*.⁶ However, no study so far has systematically considered the

3. L. Fontana, *Elsa Morante: A Personal Remembrance*, in «Poetry Nation Review», 14, 6, 1988, p. 20.

4. K. Mansfield, *Il libro degli appunti*, trans. E. Morante, Longanesi, Milan 1941; E. Morante, *Il gioco segreto*, Garzanti, Milan 1941, and *Le bellissime avventure di Cateri dalla trecciolina*, Einaudi, Turin 1942.

5. Fontana, *Elsa Morante*, cit., p. 20.

6. L. Picciotto, *Salvarsi. Gli ebrei d'Italia sfuggiti alla Shoah. 1943-1945*, Einaudi, Turin 2017.

literary texts that recount the experience of hiding as an independent category. The Italian context is an interesting and constructive starting point for this investigation because, during the Nazi occupation of Italy, 81% of Jews survived by hiding. Elsa Morante and Alberto Moravia are among the Jews who evaded deportation and re-worked their experience in their writings. Morante, like Moravia with *La ciociara*, more or less directly re-elaborated facts of the Second World War and the insecurities and worries that gripped her during the period of persecution in *Il soldato siciliano*, a short story published in 1945 in the Milanese weekly magazine «L'Europeo», and obviously in *La Storia*, which she presented many times as testimony of her time, a testament against any form of Fascism, and pressing and desperate demand for a common awakening.⁷ *Il soldato siciliano*, *La Storia*, and *La ciociara* belong to the category that I defined as “the literature of hiding”. In this article, as mentioned, I focus on *La Storia*.

There are numerous studies related to *La Storia* and the Holocaust. Attention has been focused on the process of discrimination and persecution, on the round-up of Rome and the departure of Jews from Tiburtina Station in October 1943, as well as the arrival of the train at Auschwitz and the return of the very few survivors.⁸ Discussed are the photographs representing extermination camps and circulating in 1945 as well as Ida's nightmares to be re-read in the context of trauma studies.⁹ And yet, there is at least one more perspective to consider which entails looking at discrimination and persecution, and the Holocaust overall, through the lens of Davide Segre, the most developed and complex Jewish character in the novel, leaving aside Ida, who had never been explicitly persecuted for her Jewish origins, and Ida's Jewish mother, Nora, who died before the

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7. A. Moravia, *La ciociara*, Bompiani, Milan 1957. E. Morante, *Il soldato siciliano*, in «L'Europeo», 1, 6, 1945. On *La Storia* as testament see Morante's statements in A. Maffey, *Quando venne a trovarci in via del Tritone*, in «Il Messaggero», 24 November 1986, p. 5; E. Morante, *La censura in Spagna*, in «L'Unità», 15 May 1976, p. 3, cited in M. Bardini, *Morante Elsa. Italiana. Di professione, poeta*, Nistri-Lischi, Pisa 1999, pp. 730-731 and typescript of the introductory note to the American edition of *La Storia* published for the members of the First Ed Society, Pennsylvania 1977, cited in C. Cecchi, C. Garboli, *Cronologia*, in E. Morante, *Opere*, eds. C. Cecchi, C. Garboli, Mondadori, Milan 1990, vol. I, p. LXXXIV.
8. On discrimination and persecution see for example R. Sodi, *Whose Story? Literary Borrowings by Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*, in «Lingua e Stile», 33, 1, 1998, pp. 141-153; S. Nezri-Dufour, *La figure du juif dans «La Storia» d'Elsa Morante*, in «Cahiers d'études italiennes», 7, 2008, pp. 65-74; G.E. Popoff, «Once Upon a Time there was an S.S. Officer»: *The Holocaust between History and Fiction in Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*, in «Journal of Modern Jewish Studies», 11, 1, 2012, pp. 25-38 and C. D'Angeli, *Visioni di sterminio ne «La Storia»*, in «Cuadernos de Filología Italiana», 21, 2014, pp. 91-100. On the Roman round-up and departure from Tiburtina Station, see Josi, *Rome, 16 October 1943*, cit. On Auschwitz and the return of camp survivors, see Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories*, cit.
9. On this see de Rogatis, Wehling-Giorgi, *Traumatic Realism and the Poetics of Trauma*, cit; Wehling-Giorgi, «Come un fotogramma spezzato», cit., and Wehling-Giorgi, «Una stampa lucida», cit.

persecution began. Davide is a torn, contradictory, and ambiguous character.¹⁰ So far, he has been defined as the Antichrist and has been discussed in light of Morante's poetics, the biography and philosophy of Simon Weil, and in the context of the political-traumatic dimension.¹¹ But, he can also be examined specifically taking into consideration his experiences as a Jew who evaded deportation by leaving his home and city as well as embracing life in clandestinity and partisanship in occupied Italy.

The rest of this article explores Davide, whom Morante creates by reworking both individual and collective traumas of persecution. It looks at his experience of hiding and his sense of displacement, alienation, and guilt. It revisits his profile, paying particular attention to Davide's Holocaust-related traumas, which are similar to those narrated in the other texts of the "literature of hiding", and to Morante's strategies to represent Davide's traumatised subjectivity. As will be later discussed, there are several narrative mechanisms through which Davide's traumas are manifested in *La Storia*. His traumatised mind is most of the time recognisable in the depiction of his eyes, long considered windows to the soul.¹² They reveal his feelings of being constantly hunted: «alzò gli occhi, con la malinconia selvatica di un animale che si affaccia dalla tana, incerto se uscire all'attacco»; his sense of precariousness: «un'espressione nauseata, ma stranamente inerme e nuda»; and his dichotomous representation: «allo sguardo protervo di poco prima, succedeva, nei suoi occhi mutevoli, un altro suo sguardo speciale, del tutto opposto: da far pensare che dentro di lui convivessero insieme un lupo, un cerbiatto».¹³ Davide's traumas are also explicitly revealed in the repetition of occurrences of intrusive thoughts

10. On this see E. Puggioni, *Davide Segre, un eroe al confine della modernità*, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria 2006; M. Zanardo, *Le poesie di Davide Segre: un'appendice inedita a «La Storia»*, in «Cuadernos de Filología Italiana», 20, 2014, pp. 49-71, and *Il poeta e la grazia: una lettura dei manoscritti della «Storia» di Elsa Morante*, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Rome 2017, pp. 113-204; C. Sansoni, *I personaggi di Elsa Morante: costruzione e dinamiche relazionali dei personaggi nei romanzi di Elsa Morante*, Guida editori, Naples 2019, p. 140.
11. On Davide Segre as the Antichrist see A. Cinquegrani, *Davide Segre e l'Anticristo*, in «La Storia» di Elsa Morante, ed. S. Sgaviechia, ETS, Pisa 2012, pp. 175-182. On the relationship between Davide beliefs and Morante's see L. Re, *Utopian Longing and the Constraints of Racial and Sexual difference in Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*, in «Italice», 70, 3, 1993, pp. 361-375, and M. Gimenez Cavallo, *Elsa Morante's «La Storia»: A Posthumanist, Feminist, Anarchist Response to Power*, in «Annali d'Italianistica», 34, 2016, pp. 425-447. On Weil's influence see C. D'Angeli, *Leggere Elsa Morante: «Aracoeli», «La Storia» e «Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini»*, Carocci, Rome 2003, pp. 81-103; A. Borghesi, *Tra "Epos" e epicedio. Paragrafi sulla «Storia» di Elsa Morante e Simone Weil*, in «Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana», 43, 3, 2014, pp. 91-113; S. Lucamante, *Quella difficile identità. Ebraismo e rappresentazioni letterarie della Shoah*, Iacobelli, Rome 2012, pp. 223-330. On the political-traumatic dimension see de Rogatis, Wehling-Giorgi, *Traumatic Realism and the Poetics of Trauma*, cit., pp. 171, 179.
12. In relation to *La Storia* see E. Fumi, *La Storia negli occhi*, in «Studi novecenteschi», 21, 47/48, 1994, pp. 237-250: p. 238, and Wehling-Giorgi, «Come un fotogramma spezzato», cit., pp. 70-72.
13. E. Morante, *La Storia*, Einaudi, Turin 2012, pp. 220, 224, 578, hereafter referenced as S.

and images – through the description of which Morante allows readers to visualise the unfathomable realities Davide recalls¹⁴ – and less explicitly disclosed in Davide’s erratic, aimless, and disoriented wandering when he gets to know that his family was captured and when, later, Nino – his only friend left – dies. Davide’s traumas are also detectable in the narrator’s asides, which clarify the character’s experiences, in the omissions and hesitations that punctuate most of Davide’s direct and indirect speeches, and, more interestingly, in his uncontrolled use of dialect. Dialectal words appear in moments of exhaustion, indirectly signalling the trauma Davide is grappling with at that very moment, and are italicised to capture the reader’s attention. Lastly, objects, too, embody Davide’s traumas marking the porous border between characters and the material world in highly tragic and traumatic moments.¹⁵ In the next sections, I will examine each of these mechanisms.

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2. War Period

The first time readers meet Davide Segre is in Chapter1943, section 5. When arriving at the Pietralata refuge shelter, where Ida and her youngest son Useppe live after the bombing of their little apartment in San Lorenzo, Davide is in feverish confusion due to the traumatic experience in the Nazi bunker and his escape, as well as his life in hiding. He is at the end of his strength. His eyes are hidden behind a pair of sunglasses.¹⁶ He speaks very few words and tellingly the first person pronoun is in dialect: «*Mí* voglio tornare a casa mia, voglio *tornar...*» (S, p. 200). The dialect is the first, although only understandable in retrospect, signal indicating the split of his identity. Readers do not yet know that he is only pretending to be a Catholic evacuee from Bologna. In this moment of exhaustion, he compromises himself. The boundaries between his real identity – he is Jewish and from Mantua – and the false one blur.

Davide collapses onto a sack, in the last available corner of the barracks. Characters and readers obtain information about him indirectly. Carulina,

14. In relation to *La Storia* see de Rogatis, Wehling-Giorgi, *Traumatic Realism and the Poetics of Trauma*, cit. For a more general approach to the representation of trauma in fiction see for example R. Eaglestone, *Trauma and Fiction*, and S. Vice, *Trauma in Holocaust Literature*, in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, eds. C. Davis, H. Meretoja, Routledge, London and New York 2020, pp. 361-371 and 450-463.
15. Walker and Wehling-Giorgi have discussed it in relation to the bombing of San Lorenzo and Ida’s nightmares, respectively. Walker, *Bringing Up the Bodies*, cit., Wehling-Giorgi, «*Come un fotogramma spezzato*», cit.
16. In this respect, Puggioni contrasts the beneficial darkness of Pietralata – which serves as a refuge – with the perpetual light of the Nazi bunker – symbolising exposure and insecurity. Puggioni, *Davide Segre*, cit., p. 63.

who is a bombing refugee from Naples, rummages through Davide's things. She opens his canvas bag and finds three books, a squared notebook with Carlo Vivaldi written in capital letters, some lire, and an identity card. The identity card is false, but neither the characters nor the readers know it:

Sulla carta d'identità, di contro alla fotografia del titolare, si leggeva:
Cognome VIVALDI
Nome CARLO
Professione studente
nato a Bologna
il 3 ottobre 1922. (S, p. 198)

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Morante offers an immediate comparison between the young man in the identity card picture and the one lying on the sack. The once innocent face has become disgracefully altered, now bearing a corrupted expression, which is the manifestation of the violence he endured, as Concetta D'Angeli points out.¹⁷ The difference with the photograph from the past is one of the first evident elements through which readers can grasp the extent of Davide's trauma. But this is not the only manifestation of his wounds, there are other objects in the sack that, albeit indirectly at the beginning, indicate Davide's traumatic experiences. The books, one on philosophy, one on poetry, and one on religion, do not only represent the character's ideology, as Monica Zanardo points out.¹⁸ They also exemplify what is left of Davide's real identity. When fleeing, among all his belongings, he picked these three books which end up mirroring his past. They symbolise the loss of his everyday life and the collapse of his orderly world.¹⁹ Also, the identity card and the notebook are material representations of the daily micro-traumas Davide has endured.²⁰ They mark a rupture from his real identity and a continuous reinterpretation of his present situation. This is further demonstrated by the notebook, where Davide writes in capital letters the name he uses undercover: Carlo Vivaldi.

The turning point in understanding this enigmatic character occurs with the arrival at Pietralata of Nino, a key figure from *La Storia*, the eldest son of the protagonist, Ida. When Nino suspiciously asks him whether he is

17. D'Angeli specifically looks at the violence Davide suffered and the violence which now «si diffonde da lui sull'universo», D'Angeli, *Visioni*, cit., p. 96.
18. Zanardo, *Le poesie di Davide Segre*, cit., p. 50.
19. Similar considerations have been suggested in the traumas related to displacement, migration, and refugeeedom. On this see for example M. Hron, *The Trauma of Displacement*, in *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J.R. Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, pp. 284-298, and de Rogatis, *Homing*, cit., pp. 30-37.
20. According to Masud Khan, micro-, insidious traumas are a sort of cumulative dynamics that fracture the subject and occur silently and invisibly. M.R. Khan, *The Privacy of the Self*, Hogarth Press, London 1974, pp. 42-58.

a deserter, Davide's answer is elusive but filled with indirect indicators of his true identity and Holocaust-related traumas, which become evident in hindsight: «Sono scappato da un convoglio di deportati, in viaggio su un treno piombato verso la frontiera orientale» [...]. «T'avevano preso in una retata?» domandava ancora Ninnarieddu. Vivaldi Carlo scosse la testa. «Io...» borbotta, «ero clandestino... facevo la propaganda politica! Qualcuno fece la spia... m'hanno denunciato al Comando tedesco» (S, pp. 220-221). Tellingly the suspension dots follow the first-person pronoun and indirectly indicate the vulnerability and danger the character feels in introducing himself after years of discrimination and above all after the Nazi occupation. They then recur other two times signalling the vagueness of his statement. The indication that he was a «clandestino» is not solely attributed to his political convictions, as the ellipsis indicates – although characters and readers are initially led only towards this hypothesis. «Clandestino» also serves as a forewarning of Davide's need to hide because of his Jewish heritage.

Under pressure from Nino, Davide narrates his capture and confinement in the Nazi bunker as well as his coping mechanisms for avoiding intrusive thoughts:

Se ti viene da pensare a tua madre, a tuo padre, alla *sorela*, alla ragazza, buttarsi subito a calcolare la loro età in anni, mesi, giorni, ore... come una macchina... *sensa* pensar... [...]. Io lavoravo in città... (però la città non la dico)... Manifesti... volantini... propaganda... imputato politico... per questo mi destinarono al treno!. (S, p. 223)

The speech is chaotic, revealing a traumatic state. It is characterised by hesitations, omissions – «però la città non la dico» –, and the use of dialectal words – «sorela» and «sensa» – which also returns shortly after when he reports how he escaped from the Nazi: «Come hai fatto a scappare?!» [...]. «Come ho fatto! Ho fatto, che mi sono buttato giù... a una sosta... a Villaco... no, prima. Non lo so, dove... C'erano due morti, sul vagone, da scaricare: un *vedo* e una *veda*... Basta! non ho più voglia di parlarne! Basta!!» (S, p. 223). Dialect marks his struggles to recollect the traumatic event and the resurfacing of his real identity, before the drastic, irreversible decision of stopping to share.

Another turning point to further understand the traumas of Davide Segre occurs in section 9. The persecution of Italian Jews has begun, as readers know having read the poignant passages devoted to the departure of Roman Jews to Auschwitz in the previous sections. A man is looking for Davide to pass him a message. It is the narrator's comment – «la notizia odierna che lo aspettava era delle più atroci» (S, p. 254) – that indirectly reveals the tragedy of the news and gradually helps readers decode Davide's

real identity. Overwhelmed by what he has been told, Davide experiences a semi-conscious, dissociative state, which further displays the traumatic intensity of the news received and his initial response to the trauma:²¹ «da quando, nel pomeriggio, il cuginetto gli aveva trasmesso la *notizia urgente riservata*, fino a notte alta, non fece altro che correre le strade senza scegliere la direzione, né sapere che ora fosse, né curarsi del coprifuoco» (*S*, p. 254).

Back in the barracks of Pietralata, Davide decides to join Nino in the partisan group “La Libera” and chooses the battle name Piotr. Upon making this decision, his eyes betray inner turmoil – «i suoi sguardi, nelle occhiaie nere dell’insonnia, apparivano infossati, più cupi del solito» (*S*, p. 255) – and foreshadow the traumatic partisan experience of perpetuating violence by killing an SS officer with a succession of kicks to the face. The killing, described through his battle comrades’ auditory perception, is the enactment of personal revenge, a belated response to the traumatic news that his family, hidden in the north with false documents, had been denounced, discovered, and deported by the Nazis. The killing of the SS officer takes on a deeply traumatic significance because it is a vengeance and an initial realisation that his loved ones were gone. But, this episode is even more traumatic when considering Davide’s rejection of violence, which he had discussed with Nino in the barracks just a few weeks earlier: «la – mia – idea – RIFIUTA – la violenza. Tutto il male sta nella violenza» (*S*, p. 225). The killing of the SS officer results in a further, profound disintegration of Davide Segre’s identity – to use Bruno Bettelheim’s words²² – already sufficiently fractured. By assuming the identities of Carlo and Piotr, Davide adopts a set of new behaviours shaped by his experiences of hiding and later partisanship, diverging from his previously expressed ideals. In this sense, the traumas, using Dominick LaCapra’s theorisations, arise from the profound disruption caused by compromising his beliefs, values, and principles and not only for having perpetrated shocking violence.²³

3. Post-war Period

Following the description of the SS soldier’s killing, there is little information about Davide. Readers only learn that he travels south with Nino when “La

21. K. Wehling-Giorgi’s 2022 article, which analyses Ida’s aimless wandering after learning of Nino’s death through the lens of trauma studies, has been particularly insightful for the interpretation provided here. Wehling-Giorgi, «*Come un fotogramma spezzato*», cit.
22. B. Bettelheim, *Sopravvivere*, trad. it. A. Bottini, Feltrinelli, Milan 1988, pp. 24-25 and 73-79.
23. D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2000.

Libera” dissolves. No further news emerges until the liberation of Rome. In the months following June 1944 and during the immediate post-war period, Davide is depicted as grappling with traumas coming from the war and persecution – the struggle to rebuild his real identity – as well as contending with an intense sense of alienation and guilt – grief and disorientation after he goes back to his family household in Mantua. His attempts to reintegrate into ordinary life and society prove unsuccessful – «non frequentava nessuno [...] l’unico suo corrispondente era Ninnuzzu» (S, p. 410). This struggle reaches a dramatic climax with Nino’s death, after which Davide is irrevocably overwhelmed by his tangled traumas and ultimately breaks down, as the analysis of the monologue at the tavern and the description of his last night alive show.

After the liberation of Rome, Ida and Useppe rent a room in the apartment of the Marroccos, who in vain wait for the return of their son from the Russian campaign. While incessantly looking for Nino, Davide gets to the Marroccos. On that occasion and for the first time, he utters his name, which appears significantly in uppercase letters like Carlo Vivaldi in the squared notebook he had brought at Pietralata in his canvas bag: «sedutosi, con un fare brusco e severo, quasi che tutti dovessero già saperlo, avvertì: “Io mi chiamo DAVIDE SEGRE”» (S, p. 348). The second time Davide pronounces his name occurs when he meets Useppe in 1946: «“Carlo! Carloo!” S’era già disabituato a questo nome [...]. A mezza bocca fece notare: “Io non mi chiamo Carlo. Mi chiamo Davide...”» (S, p. 431). These examples demonstrate Davide’s efforts at identity reconstruction, starting with his assertion of his real name after more than a year spent under the fictitious identities of Carlo Vivaldi and later Piotr.

The reconstruction and reaffirmation of his real identity also involve confronting his past by returning to Mantua, where he disassociates from what is left of his bourgeois family. When he is in his family’s apartment, his attention is drawn to the objects. The passages that visually frame the objects populating Davide’s household are significant for two reasons. His revulsion towards his family’s belongings – the embodiment of the bourgeoisie and its wealth – had defined his character since adolescence, as Morante describes retrospectively in some powerful passages: «fino da ragazzino si era straniato [...] dai genitori e dalla sorella, perché erano dei borghesi. In tutte le loro usanze, [...] aveva imparato a riconoscere sempre peggio il loro comune vizio sociale, deformante e mistificatorio» (S, p. 408). Hence, the revulsion he feels upon his return represents a reaffirmation of his values and beliefs. However, Davide’s revulsion carries a further meaning. He feels disgusted at finding objects intact while his family has died, the same disgust he feels at finding himself surviving them:

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La casa [...] doveva essere stata occupata da qualche estraneo [...]. Una gran parte dei mobili e degli oggetti di famiglia ne erano stati portati via [...]; ma certi altri, invece, stranamente, si trovavano tuttora intatti al solito posto dove Davide li aveva sempre veduti [...]. Adesso, provava un senso quasi di ribrezzo a ritrovarseli davanti, sopravvissuti incolumi alla gente morta. Ma non aveva voglia di spostarli, né di toccarli. (S, pp. 407-408)

The objects evocatively represent their owners and the Holocaust-related traumas Davide is trying to cope with. His sister's doll, for example, «coi capelli pieni di polvere e gli occhi di vetro aperti» (S, p. 408), almost disturbingly recalls, with its wide-open eyes and dust, the death of Davide's sister in the gas chamber and the ashes into which her body was turned in the crematory oven. Davide avoids any kind of contact with it as if he were afraid that the doll would emotionally connect him to his dead sister. This connection is unbearable for Davide, who, as will be shown later, is tormented by a sense of guilt over his sister and family's capture, deportation, and murder.

Davide's disorientation and sense of guilt are mitigated by Nino's presence. The friendship with Nino protects him and keeps him alive. Returning to Rome and to Nino represents a constant source of hope: Davide «insisteva in ogni sua lettera sulla propria intenzione di tornare al più presto» (S, p. 410) and «diceva che lassù non poteva resistere, e che aveva l'impressione d'essere cascato dentro una trappola» (S, p. 422). Nino's death is therefore the last possible loss Davide can cope with. When Nino dies, Davide falls into «una irrequietezza febbrile, che ogni poco lo cacciava dal suo piccolo domicilio romano» (S, p. 512). As it happened when he is informed of the capture of his family, Davide experiences another semi-conscious, dissociative state, which brings him to travel among places where he hopes to find comfort:

Prima si era ripresentato al paese della sua balia, da dove subito era ripartito per Roma in fretta. Poi dopo un giorno era tornato su a Mantova, ma di qua presto aveva ripreso il treno per il sud. Qualcuno dei suoi vecchi compagni anarchici lo aveva visto ricomparire in un caffè di Pisa o di Livorno [...]. Senza preavviso com'era ricomparso, allo stesso modo era sparito di nuovo. (S, p. 512)

In his wandering, he also ends up in Naples, where he finds refuge in the flat of a comrade from "La Libera". Davide has not slept for days, haunted by hallucinations: «vedeva dovunque delle fiamme, cercava una medicina *fredda, fredda* che gli impedisse di pensare» (S, pp. 513-514). His traumas are not discussed but once again revealed in the description of his eyes – «nei suoi occhi a mandorla, infossati, c'era un buio senza nome» (S, p. 513) – and body language revealing panic attacks:

S'era buttato su un divanetto, non a sedere, ma aggrovigliato, mezzo in ginocchio contro lo schienale, e dava nel muro dei pugni terribili, da fracassarsi le giunture delle dita. E singhiozzava, o meglio i singulti si formavano nel suo petto, squassandogli il corpo da dentro, ma non riuscivano a trovare sfogo dalla sua bocca, sortendone appena in certi rantoli informi e faticosi. (S, p. 514)

In an attempt to help him, the comrade injects him with morphine, which eventually helps Davide to calm down although it creates a deadly addiction: «Rilassandosi, commentò dolcemente, nel suo dialetto settentrionale: “L'è bona... l'è bona... l'è rinfrescante...”» (S, p. 514). The use of dialect, this time surprisingly not in italics, signals the loss of control and the traumatic, forthcoming descent into drug use which reflects Davide's unsuccessful attempt to quell intrusive thoughts and a self-destructive pattern leading to further psychological traumas and a sense of disintegration of the self. On the one hand, there's a physical and internal urge to forget and silence the post-traumatic stress disorders of wartime and pain for the loss of his loved ones; on the other hand, there's the shame and humiliation associated with succumbing to drug use, which he considers a vice of the bourgeoisie: «la droga [...] gli pareva un vizio proprio della borghesia degradata e repressa, che cerca un'evasione dalla colpa e dalla noia» (S, p. 515). The description of Davide's Holocaust-related traumas becomes more evident when he is under the use of drugs, especially in the monologue at the tavern and his last night alive.

The tavern scene, where Davide articulates his ideology opposing fascism, war, and the bourgeoisie, has been mostly examined in terms of Simone Weil's influence on Morante, who crafted Davide on Weil's life and philosophy, and of Morante's most explicit intervention of her thoughts and poetics within the text. My interpretation links this scene to Davide's last night alive and focuses on the character's Holocaust-related traumas discussed above, which are powerfully revisited in the final chapter of *La Storia* in Davide's intrusive thoughts and hallucinations. From a narratological perspective, Morante's narrative is characterised by what de Rogatis theorises as a “drifting” dynamic.²⁴ This feature of traumatic realism is a narrative technique with a dual-layered narrative universe, continually shifting the reader from the realm of reality to the realm of trauma. There's a disjunction between a narrative level focused on the chronicle of the plot and another one of anguish, pain, and horror stemming from the character's traumas. In the tavern and on the last night of his life, Davide's traumatic memories resurface in a disjointed way. He struggles to translate his thoughts into a coherent

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24. De Rogatis calls it «dinamica dello slittamento». On this, see de Rogatis, *Homing*, pp. 82-86.

narrative, not only due to drug use but also because his traumas persistently intrude upon his consciousness, depicted by the narrator as many horses chasing each other around a circular track: «se tento di ricapitolare i suoi discorsi di quel pomeriggio all'osteria, io me li rivedo nell'immagine di tanti cavalli che si rincorrono intorno a una pista circolare, ripassando sempre per gli stessi punti» (S, p. 562).²⁵

Davide's traumas resurface chaotically. The first one to emerge is that related to his family's deportation and murder. It becomes apparent following two questions. In response to the first question, «dove si trova, adesso, la tua famiglia?» (S, p. 583), Davide remains quiet. His omission, described with the oxymoronic eloquent emptiness of his eyes and his silence, «Davide non rispose alla sua domanda, né mostrò di reagire [...] altro che con uno sguardo vacuo» (S, p. 583), openly discloses the trauma. Davide answers the second question:

“Dove si trova, adesso, tua sorella?” [...] Lì per lì, si ristinse nel corpo, stralunato, come sotto un'ingiuria o un'intimidazione. Poi fece un sorriso miserabile e rispose bruscamente: “Si trova nel mucchio [...]. E pure mio padre e mia madre [...] e... e gli altri. Tutti nel mucchio. Nel mucchio! Nel mucchio!” (S, p. 583)

Davide's traumatic past is evident in the transformation of his posture: an affective response of his body which seems to shrink, to contract. Interestingly, with the choice of the word «mucchio», by definition a disorderly heap of material, often inorganic, Morante makes a clear reference to extermination camps and the reification process that took place within them. Davide is not part of the «mucchio», yet he is a victim too. Morante makes it clear. After having referred to the murder of his family, Davide unconsciously recalls the period of clandestinity, described in traumatic terms – he is once again depicted as a hunted animal: «dalle pupille dilatate gli si riaffacciava l'anima del cerbiatto; [...] una bestiola impaurita all'estremo, cacciata e bloccata da tutte le parti» (S, p. 583). The recollection of the experience of clandestinity creates the character's inner turmoil that manifests in his stream of consciousness: «*qua dev'esserci uno sbaglio... tutto questo inseguire, queste canne puntate... sarà per qualche belva pericolosa che vanno cercando nei dintorni... però non sono io quella... io sono un altro animale... non carnivoro...*» (S, p. 584). In his speech, the correlation between the persecution and the deportation to extermination camps is evident in the abrupt transition from the hunting to the challenging, unanswered question about Zyklon B, the pesticide notorious for having been

25. As Cathy Caruth points out in various of her works, trauma's response is often delayed and appears in uncontrolled, repetitive hallucinations and intrusive thoughts. C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1996, and Ead., *Literature in The Ashes of History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2013.

installed in the gas chambers: «d'un tratto, a questo tumulto visibile gli subentrò il vuoto, i suoi occhi si agghiacciarono. E volgendosi ai vicini, s'informò con una piccola risata fredda: "Non ne avete sentito parlare, voi, dello ZYKLON B?"» (S, p. 584). The Holocaust, the traumatic watershed of our times, using Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's definition,²⁶ is explored by Morante through interconnected traumas stemming from the experiences of extermination camps and life in hiding to evade deportation. It is embodied in the image of a young Jewish man who had not been captured but is nonetheless a victim. The Holocaust is symbolised in Davide's face, which is «murata dentro una fissità senza direzione, in una specie di estasi vuota e bianca» (S, p. 584) and later on in the unequivocal statement: «Questi ultimi anni [...] sono stati la peggiore oscenità di tutta la Storia. La Storia, si capisce, è tutta un'oscenità fino dal principio, però anni osceni come questi non ce n'erano mai stati» (S, p. 583).

Davide's monologue at the tavern is chaotic because his denouncement against any kind of totalitarianism, violence, and war is constantly interrupted by the memories and ramblings regarding not only the trauma of the persecution and of being survived over his family but also that of killing the SS officer. This is the first time we hear this description from Davide's perspective.

"Io [...] sono un assassino! In guerra [...] ho assassinato un tedesco [...]! E mentre agonizzava, mi sono tolto il gusto di finirlo a calci, pestandogli la faccia a morte con i miei scarponi. Allora, preciso in quell'atto, m'ha invaso il pensiero: *Eccomi diventato tale e quale a lui: un SS che massacra un altro SS...* E intanto seguivavo a pestare..." (S, p. 588)

Davide's interpretation of the event highlights the profound extent to which the act of perpetrating violence disrupted his identity.²⁷ And, it foreshadows a post-traumatic disorder, a persistent emotional state of guilt and shame which originates from the killing of the SS officer and from surviving his parents and sister, his Mantuan girlfriend, his best friend, and even Santina the prostitute he used to date:

"Io me lo rivedo, quello, buttato là nel mucchio. Nel mucchio!", ripeté spaventato, "nello stesso mucchio coi *veci*, e la *putèla*..." [...]. Poi ripeteva d'essere lui l'albero maledetto [...]. E se la sua famiglia era morta, la colpa era la sua [...]. E se la sua ragazza era finita in quel modo, la colpa era sua [...]. E se il suo più caro amico era morto, la colpa era sua [...]. E se la vecchia puttana era morta, la colpa era sempre sua [...]. E la colpa di tutti i morti era sua... (S, p. 593)

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26. S. Felman, D. Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Routledge, New York and London 1992.

27. The trauma arises from various forms of loss, including ethical and existential crises. On this see LaCapra, *Writing History*, cit.

Guilt and shame forcefully return to torment Davide during his last night together with the angst of being captured and deported. The hallucination of hearing the crying of the SS officer – «La parola *umiliazione* d'un tratto gli ricordava il suono più orribile fra quanti ne avesse udito: il pianto del giovane tedesco mentre lui gli pestava la faccia con lo stivale» (S, p. 611) – is positioned together with references to extermination camps returning poignantly in the description of a dense black smoke emanating from wagons and barracks as well as in the perception of being hunted down by the fascists/Nazis: «Le voci di fuori sono di fascisti e di nemici, e a lui l'hanno chiuso dentro un bunker: da un momento all'altro potrebbero spalancargli l'uscio con un calcio, e irrompere nella sua tana, per caricarlo sui loro camion» (S, p. 616). The intertwining nature of Davide's tangled Holocaust-related traumas is described through fragmented and resurfacing lucid dreams and hallucinations, which become the manifestation of his temporal and cognitive shifts due to those very traumas. Thus, in the final interaction with Useppe, which is a contributing factor to the worsening of the child's illness, Davide is not only oblivious due to the drugs but also destabilised by the reemerging of traumas experienced during the period of hiding. Useppe knocking on the window is, for Davide, the fascist and the Nazi who want to arrest and deport him, as the description of Davide's body language and eyes shows:

Sùbito, ai primi colpi dati all'uscio, dall'interno si udì Davide esclamare: "Chi è?!" con una voce roca, minacciosa e quasi impaurita [...]. [Davide era] torvo, stravolto, coi capelli sugli occhi, di un pallore livido macchiato sugli zigomi. Gettò a Useppe un'occhiata senza luce, resa cieca dal furore, e gli gridò con una voce brutale, estranea, addirittura trasfigurata: "Vattene, brutto idiota, col tuo cagnaccio!" (S, p. 618)

Traumas from the period of persecution manifest in that very moment: past and present interlace.

4. Conclusion

In 2000, Michael Rothberg published *Traumatic Realism*.²⁸ In it, he theorised a mode of representation that grapples with the tension between the extreme nature of traumatic events and their depiction in a realistic manner while seeking to convey the profound disruption and incomprehensibility of trauma and maintaining a commitment to realistic narrative techniques. He emphasizes the coexistence of everyday realities with the extraordinary horrors of trauma. Through the analysis of the Holocaust-related universe

28. M. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 2000.

and traumas as portrayed in literature set outside the boundaries of extermination camps, Rothberg's concept of traumatic realism can be further explored. This approach opens a new pathway to deepen the understanding of the Holocaust by looking at it from a different perspective. The study of texts reporting Holocaust-related experiences of life in hiding helps to move beyond the dangerous view of the Holocaust as something transcendent, obscene, and detached from reality. Instead, it reveals tangled traumas linked to the threat of deportation when the extreme manifested in the everyday and the everyday revealed elements of the extreme.

While describing Davide's traumas as they occurred as well as their enduring effects on his post-war life, Morante more or less implicitly reworks individual and collective experiences of the persecution and understanding of it. But, more importantly, it seems to me that through Davide, Morante includes those Jews who evaded deportation among the victims of the Holocaust and prompts consideration about their traumas. By doing this, she reaffirms her novel to be the space she uses to disclose and report what has been sidelined by History with capital H.²⁹ And indeed, the traumatic experience of hiding due to racial persecution during the Nazi occupation has been for a long time overlooked, even though largely re-elaborated in literary terms. This reading of *La Storia* is part of a research project I have been investigating in the last three years and for which I am analysing 43 texts that depict life in clandestinity in Italy between late 1943 and mid-1945. This corpus, through which I defined "the literature of hiding", includes novels, short stories, chronicles, autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries published from 1944 up to the present. It comprises publications by authors who were adults or children. It brings together male and female authors of diverse cultural backgrounds. Despite variations in authors' experiences and the genre adopted, these narratives are characterised by the description of Holocaust-related traumas. They delve into psychological wounds stemming from the collapse of the orderly world, the necessary adaptation of ideals, values, and beliefs, and the consequent overbearing sense of not recognising themselves. They address the most of the time unjustified, oppressive burden of guilt for outliving family members. And, above all, they explore the pervasive fear of being hunted. Morante and the other authors I have been working on anticipate or align with Georges Didi-Huberman's representation of trauma as a spectre which hunts the traumatised person, be it the author, the narrative voice, or the character, in enigmatic, lacunar, disturbing, and persecutory forms.³⁰

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29. On this see C. Della Colletta, *Plotting the Past: Metamorphoses of Historical Narrative in Modern Italian Fiction*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette 1994, pp. 117-151; de Rogatis, *Elsa Morante's «History: A Novel»*, cit., p. 84; Josi, *Rome, 16 October 1943*, cit., pp. 72-73.

30. G. Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2003.