

The Nest of a Migratory Bird: Embodiments of Fear in Elsa Morante's *La Storia*

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1. Introduction

The image of a wild bird which flutters in terror and shame in Ida's heart is the metaphorical site of my critical investigation of Elsa Morante's *La Storia*.¹ In the novel, scenes of destruction and traumatic events affect the two protagonists – Ida, an elementary school teacher, and her son Usepe – as well as people, animals and places that are directly or indirectly connected to them. Representing the many victims traditionally left out of historiography, Ida and Usepe are at the same time exceptional and typical, and their tragedy is both private and collective. The scenario is, therefore, simultaneously personal and historical, and both specific and global. Such continuous reverberations between the particular and the universal are evident in the macro-structure of the novel, with each chapter composed of what looks like a historical account and a narrative section in which the plot unfolds. However, at a closer look, the particular and the general often mirror each other in individual scenes and even in specific imagery and phrases, as my considerations on the extended image of the wild bird in (and as) Ida show.

In this essay, I suggest that this powerful yet unexplored image, which recurs in the first part of *La Storia* with small but significant variations: (1) directly links Ida's traumatic experience of the rape that opens the novel with the historical persecution of the Jews, representing a terror that Ida directly inherits from her mother Nora; (2) highlights the “pathos of migration” as a leitmotif of the novel;² and (3) casts a postcolonial and

1. E. Morante, *La Storia. Romanzo*, Einaudi, Torino 1995, hereafter referenced as *S*.

2. I would like to thank Tiziana de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi for organizing the seminar *Vivere il pathos delle migrazioni* (Siena, February 28-29, 2024), where I had the opportunity to present the ideas for this essay. I am also indebted to them for their reading of *La Storia* through the lens of trauma studies.

ecocritical gaze upon history, by conveying the Asian bird's experience of place and displacement.³ In other words, the metaphorical flight of the migrant bird from mother to daughter represents how strong emotions can be transmitted and inherited – as the affective component of a transgenerational trauma⁴ – while calling attention to the displacement of all living beings caused by History across the globe.

The first part of this essay delves into fear and shame through the lens of affect theory, theory of emotions, and philosophy. I also see such affect as transmitted from Nora to Ida along the lines of their Jewish identity. This legacy has already been explored in important studies.⁵ However, here I aim to focus on how a specific image – the Asian bird – is used to convey Ida's fear as migrating from Nora to her daughter's heart. The second section – analyzing the second occurrence of the metaphor – concerns the animal imagery in *La Storia*, which has been at the center of various readings.⁶ But unlike the birds' song interpreted by Useppe as meaning «è tutto uno scherzo», or the maternal role assumed by the dog Bella, the image of the migrant bird with its layered meaning has so far gone unnoticed. Building on Tiziana de Rogatis's work, in which the scholar foregrounds *La Storia* as a novel of migration,⁷ I also suggest that such migration is not limited to the national territory and does not concern only people but also extends to animals and other geographic areas. My conclusion, touching upon yet another reference to the bird, proposes that Morante combines, in this

3. For the definitions of this interdisciplinary field that combine postcolonial and ecological perspectives see at least: G. Huggan, H. Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Routledge, London and New York 2010. See also *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, eds. E. DeLoughrey, G.B. Handley, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.
4. As theorized by Marianne Hirsch in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, Columbia University Press, New York 2012. On trauma and transgenerational trauma in *La Storia*, see the *Introduction* (pp. 9-51) and the chapters written by Katrin Wehling-Giorgi («Come un fotogramma spezzato»: *Traumatic Images and Multistable Visions in Elsa Morante's «History: A Novel»*, pp. 55-78) and Tiziana 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*, pp. 79-111) in *Trauma Narratives in Italian and Transnational Women's Writing*, eds. T. de Rogatis, K. Wehling-Giorgi, SUE, Roma 2022. See also I. Treskow, *Die transgenerationale Weitergabe von kollektiver Gewalterfahrung und Traumata in «La Storia» von Elsa Morante, in Überlebensgeschichte(n) in den romanischen Erinnerungskulturen*, hrsg. S. Segler-Meißner, Frank & Timme, Berlin 2017, pp. 289-310.
5. For example by Stefania Lucamante, who has so compellingly argued that Morante wrote *La Storia* to give voice to the «intestimoniati», but also «secondo un'ambizione parallela, e del tutto privata rispetto alla precedente [...] per un approccio finalmente più organico alla questione del proprio ebraismo», S. Lucamante, *Quella difficile identità. Ebraismo e rappresentazioni letterarie della Shoah*, Iacobelli, Roma 2012, p. 154.
6. Especially by Concetta D'Angeli and other scholars mentioned below, in the third section of this article.
7. T. de Rogatis, *Homing/Ritrovarsi. Traumi e translinguismi delle migrazioni in Morante, Hoffman, Kristof, Scgeo e Lahiri*, Edizioni Università per Stranieri di Siena, Siena 2023.

image, the postcolonial attention to diasporic movements with a discourse about space, place, and environment typical of ecological discourses.⁸

2. «Cuore geloso di mezza ebrea»

As I have already argued elsewhere, given Ida's affective history, fear is her defining emotion, entangled, however, with other strong feelings like disgust, guilt and shame.⁹ If we look closely at the scene that triggers the plot, we can see that the disgust Ida feels when she is raped by the German soldier Gunther is not directed toward the aggressor, but stems from her fear that the soldier has come to take her or her son Nino away because of their Jewish heritage. Ida never seems to actually see beyond Gunther's uniform. While facing him, she rather sees herself, from the outside, as it were: «Più che vedere lui, essa, sdoppiandosi, vedeva davanti a lui se stessa: come ormai denudata di ogni travestimento, fino al suo cuore geloso di mezza ebrea» (S, p. 63). This sense of being naked, exposed in her most intimate part, indicates that shame prevails at this point, and that the object of her shame is her own identity, her Jewishness, which the narrator positions in her heart, a location which, I believe, must be taken literally as part of Ida's body, rather than metaphorically. The subjectivity at issue here is an embodied one.

Analyzing the literature of the survivors of the Shoah, Giorgio Agamben dedicates a chapter («La vergogna, o del soggetto») to the inseparability of shame, sense of guilt, and repugnance at the core of every subjectivity:

La vergogna non deriva, come nella dottrina dei moralisti, dalla coscienza di un'imperfezione o di una manchevolezza del nostro essere, da cui prendiamo le distanze. Al contrario, essa si fonda sull'impossibilità del nostro essere di desolidalizzarsi da sé, sulla sua assoluta incapacità a rompere con se stesso. Se, nella nudità, proviamo vergogna è perché non possiamo nascondere ciò che vorremmo sottrarre allo sguardo, perché all'impulso infrenabile di fuggire da sé, fa riscontro un'altrettanto certa impossibilità di evasione.¹⁰

Agamben's view has been criticized for positing shame as the most fundamental affect, as an ontological part of the subject, excluding

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8. Space, place, and environment are key geographical terms, although somewhat polysemic. I will be using "place" to indicate a point in space that gains meaning through human action and emotions attached to them, "environment" to indicate the natural world as affected by human action, and "space" as a more abstract concept. For a discussion of space and place in the Western thought, see E. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, University of California Press, Oakland 2013.
9. S. Porcelli, «As if He Wanted to Murder Her»: Fear, Disgust, and Anger in «La Storia's Rape Scene, in «Close Encounters in War Journal», 1, 2018, pp. 65-81.
10. G. Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz: l'archivio e il testimone*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1998, p. 96.

collective responsibility,¹¹ whereas other theories of shame see this affect as affirming our relationality to others.¹² (As Jean Paul Sartre put it: «I am ashamed of myself before the Other».)¹³ In the case of Ida, however, the relation is between her metaphorical nakedness and herself as her own observer, which virtually leaves out the Other from the structure of shame and validates a notion that Agamben, quoting Heidegger, terms the shame of Being, «la vergogna di essere».¹⁴ Agamben adds that «per sottolineare questo carattere ontologico della vergogna – il fatto che, nella vergogna, ci troviamo esposti di fronte a un essere che esso stesso si vergogna – Heidegger invita a comprenderla a partire dal ribrezzo».¹⁵ For Agamben, «la sensazione dominante nel ribrezzo è la paura di essere riconosciuti da ciò di cui proviamo schifo».¹⁶ The impossibility of fully removing what is in oneself, the very intimacy with oneself, causes revulsion.¹⁷

To further support my analysis of the entanglement of fear and disgust in Ida, we could look at the moment when Ida first appears in the novel with her shopping bags and is called out by Gunther. She stares at the soldier: «con occhio assolutamente disumano, come davanti all'apparizione propria e riconoscibile dell'orrore» (S, p. 20).¹⁸ It should be clarified that 'orrore' is in itself a term with multiple meanings. The Treccani dictionary defines it as an «impressione violenta di ribrezzo, di repulsione, di spavento, provocata nell'animo da cose, avvenimenti, oggetti, persone che siano in sé brutti, crudeli, ripugnanti».¹⁹ 'Orrore' is, in other words, a combination of fear – or even panic – and disgust, dismay and repulsion. Although the term is only used eleven times in *La Storia*, it occurs in such dramatic moments that it assumes a significant weight. For example, it appears in relation to Ueseppe witnessing the fright cars ready to deport the Roman Jews from the

11. See, for instance: R. Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2007; and L. Guenther, *Resisting Agamben: The Biopolitics of Shame and Humiliation*, in «Philosophy and Social Criticism», 38, 1, 2012, pp. 59-79.
12. Among others, see, E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2003. For a view of shame as relational and productive, see E. Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2005.
13. J-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes, Routledge, London and New York 2003, p. 296.
14. Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, cit. p. 98.
15. *Ibidem*.
16. *Ibidem*.
17. See also Ida's relationship with her own body, «cresciuto con lei come un estraneo» (S, p. 83). Ida feels ashamed of her body to the point that she never even looks at herself naked.
18. I have also argued that «these lines position Ida outside of the human realm ("occhio disumano") and start a long series of similes and metaphors that compare her mostly to female animals and contribute to the construction of the character as Other», Porcelli, «As if He Wanted to Murder Her», cit., p. 67.
19. *Orrore*, in *Vocabolario Treccani*, s.v., <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/orrore/> (last accessed: 27/11/2024).



Tiburtina station,²⁰ when Ueseppe looks at the photographs of the concentration camps,²¹ and in relation to Davide Segre's «dolore senza soluzione» (S, p. 515).²² Therefore, the word bears a deep connection with the Shoah, which in *La Storia* is both the historical event and the ultimate symbol of History's oppression of the vulnerable. Indeed, as Adriana Cavarero writes in *Orrorismo* (2007):

Come testimoniano i suoi sintomi corporei, la fisica dell'orrore non ha a che fare con la reazione istintiva di fronte alla minaccia di morte. Ha piuttosto a che fare con l'istintivo disgusto per una violenza che, non accontentandosi di uccidere perché uccidere sarebbe troppo poco, mira a distruggere l'unicità del corpo e si accanisce sulla sua costitutiva vulnerabilità.²³

The entanglement between fear, shame and disgust in *Ida* and its bodily symptoms, apparent in the scene of the rape, had already been established in the long flashback preceding it. For instance, when reporting from the census, *Ida* feels both shame and repugnance. She goes to the city offices «vergognosa e tramortita come un'imputata al Palazzo di Giustizia» (S, p. 54; my emphasis). She provides all the documents for her maternal and Jewish side and for her paternal and "Aryan" side, «ma una specie di ripugnanza, che valeva quale un piccolo omaggio estremo, le aveva fatto tralasciare ogni segno di accentuazione sul cognome della madre» (S, p. 55, my emphasis). The mother's last name, a clear index of her Jewish descent, becomes attached to *Ida* herself. She had left out the accent (as a homage) because her mother *Nora* had started to do so to hide her Jewish identity.

Nora, who migrated to *Cosenza* from *Padua*, is described as a woman without special qualities, a good mother «brava come una leonessa e provvida come una formica» (S, p. 33), but a victim of «inquietudini sotterranee, capaci di assediare giorno e notte con vari pretesti, che le diventavano addirittura delle fissazioni» (S, p. 23), and that triggered her «scenate» (S, p. 23), which then caused her remorse. Indeed, «per quanto

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20. «Il bambino stava tranquillo, rannicchiato sul suo braccio, col fianco sinistro contro il suo petto; ma teneva la testa girata a guardare il treno. In realtà, non s'era più mosso da quella posizione fino dal primo istante. E nello sporgersi a scrutarlo, lei lo vide che seguiva a fissare il treno con la faccia immobile, la bocca semiaperta, e gli occhi spalancati in uno sguardo indescribibile di orrore» (S, pp. 246-247; my emphasis).
21. «Resterà per sempre impossibile sapere che cosa il povero analfabeta Ueseppe avrà potuto capire in quelle fotografie senza senso. Rientrando, pochi secondi appresso, *Ida* lo trovò che le fissava tutte insieme, come fossero una immagine sola; e credette di riconoscergli nelle pupille lo stesso orrore che gli aveva visto in quel mezzogiorno alla Stazione Tiburtina, circa venti mesi innanzi» (S, p. 373; my emphasis).
22. «C'erano, però, dei giorni, in cui lo strano eccesso di energia che lo lacerava, tutta deviata verso un dolore senza soluzione, lo portava a un punto di angoscia e orrore insopportabile» (S, p. 515; my emphasis).
23. A. Cavarero, *Orrorismo: ovvero della violenza sull'inerme*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2007, p. 15.

atea non meno dello sposo, essa viveva come soggetta a un dio vendicativo e carcerario, che la spiava» (S, p. 25). Her Jewish identity, her husband's political ideals and addition to drinking and Ida's epileptic attacks are all "scandals" that Nora tries to keep secret.²⁴

Nei riguardi del suo segreto ebraico, essa aveva spiegato alla figlia, fino da piccolina, che gli ebrei sono un popolo predestinato dall'eternità all'odio vendicativo di tutti gli altri popoli; e che la persecuzione si accanirà sempre su di loro, pure attraverso tregue apparenti, riproducendosi sempre in eterno, secondo il loro destino prescritto. Per tali motivi, era stata lei stessa a volere Iduzza battezzata cattolica, come il padre. (S, p. 24)

Fear, as theories about emotions have claimed at least since Aristotle, is linked to time because it arises from the anticipation of something terrible happening.²⁵ But the origin of Ida's fear is in the past, precisely in her mother's terror of racial persecution. This is not to say that Nora has experienced the Shoah, but Ida has a sort of secondary trauma anyway – a point also made by Isabella Treskow.²⁶ As a matter of fact, Nora's fear derives from the «personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before», to use Marianne Hirsch's words,²⁷ because the Jews have always been persecuted («dall'eternità», «sempre», «in eterno»):

To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.²⁸

24. «In Nora's view, epilepsy is but a variant of the "universal scandal": the stigma of a guilt that keeps haunting her and is primarily rooted in her Judaism [...]. For Nora, the performativity of shame must remain hidden inside a family's closed domestic space, so much so that she silences both herself and her family». de Rogatis, *Elsa Morante's «History: A Novel»*, cit., p. 90.

25. Aristotle defines fear as «a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future», Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, Dover Publications, Mineola 2004, p. 81. Similarly, Sara Ahmed's study of fear highlights the temporal dimension of this emotion, «since fear is caused by an object that is approaching and involves an anticipation of pain in the future», S. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Routledge, New York 2004, p. 65.

26. «Die Erfahrungen, auf die sich Nora Ängste beziehen, sind die kulturell-historische Erfahrungen der Juden, die als feste Repräsentationen in der jüdischen Geschichte fortexistieren und der Roman direkt zwischen den Figuren und indirekt über Symbolisierungen vermittelt» (The experiences to which Nora's fears relate are the cultural-historical experiences of the Jews, which continue to exist as fixed representations in Jewish history and which the novel conveys directly between the characters and indirectly through symbolization), I. Treskow, *Die transgenerationale Weitergabe*, cit., p. 298.

27. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, cit., p. 5.

28. *Ibidem*.

For Hirsch, this is «the structure of postmemory and the process of its generation».²⁹ Although she lives before the Shoah, Nora comes *after* an already long story of persecution. She might not have lived it personally, but she “remembers” it anyway.

Nora raised Ida as a Catholic to protect her. Now Ida is similarly afraid for her son Nino, although the Italian laws would not consider him a Jew.³⁰ Yet Nora and Ida respond to fear differently. Ida is not inclined to take any action because, even as an adult, she is still a child, and her affective relation to the rest of the world is «una soggezione spaurita» (S, p. 21). The impression of fear on Ida’s body is in her hands, «un tremito impercettibile ma continuo delle sue mani» (S, p. 43). Connecting the future to the present and the past, strong emotions like fear, generated by trauma, impress themselves on people’s bodies: «Fear presses us into that future as an intense bodily experience in the present».³¹ Fear is, in addition, a force that sometimes involves «taking flight, and other times may involve paralysis».³² The difference between Ida and Nora is that instead of attempting to hide or escape, Ida tends to comply with the law and discloses her Jewish identity. Besides reporting herself for the census, she donates her wedding ring to the homeland (unlike her mother, who didn’t want to part from hers),³³ and teaches her pupils according to the fascist scholastic programs (S, pp. 45 and 87). Nora, instead, modifies her last name, attempts to escape, and ultimately dies while trying to leave the country. Again, fear and shame combine: while shame is generally considered the failure of a subject to keep up with expectations, it also brings «the fear of abandonment by society, of being left to starve outside the boundaries of humankind», as Elbeth Probyn put it.³⁴ Nora feels precisely that «per lei, nell’intero globo, non c’era nessun posto» (S, p. 49), even before the racial laws were promulgated by Mussolini in 1938.

Section III of chapter19** of *La Storia* opens with the text of the racial laws distinguishing between Arians and Jews. Ida had never heard the word ‘ariano’ before, not even from her mother, and she tries to make sense of the distinction through the naïve and dichotomic language she probably uses with her own elementary school pupils:

29. *Ibidem*.

30. See the scene, rich with anxiety, in which she traces Nino’s family tree to measure his Aryan part against the Jewish one (S, p. 62).

31. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, cit. p. 65.

32. *Ivi*, p. 65. Cavarero, on the other hand, distinguishes fear (‘terrore’) from horror (‘orrore’), specifying that horror brings paralysis rather than turmoil (Cavarero, *Orrorismo*, cit. pp. 11-15).

33. «E lei (diversamente dalla sua timida figlia Ida) nonostante il suo conformismo patriottico non aveva voluto separarsene neppure quando il governo aveva invitato la popolazione a “dare oro alla patria” per aiutare l’impresa abissina» (S, p. 52).

34. Probyn, *Blush*, cit. p. 3.

Ida imparava che gli ebrei erano diversi non solo perché ebrei, ma anche perché *non ariani*. E chi erano gli *Ariani*? A Iduzza questo termine delle Autorità suggeriva qualcosa di antico e d'alto rango, sul tipo di *barone* o *conte*. E nel suo concetto gli ebrei vennero a contrapporsi agli *ariani*, più o meno, come i plebei ai patrizi (essa aveva studiato la storia!) Però, evidentemente, i non ariani, per l'Autorità, erano i plebei dei plebei! Per esempio, il garzone del panettiere, plebeo di classe, di fronte a un ebreo valeva un patrizio, in quanto ariano! E se già i plebei nell'ordine sociale erano una rogna, i plebei dei plebei dovevano essere una lebbra! (S, p. 57)

While establishing a hierarchy of valuable lives (Aryan, non-Aryan, Jews, defined «i plebei dei plebei») Ida realizes that Jews are like a disease in the social order («una lebbra»). Shame, guilt and disgust – even abjection in Kristeva's sense³⁵ – are one thing for her, who feels more and more impure as she learns the word 'ariano'. Precisely in this moment the idea that Nora's emotions can inhabit her body shapes up: «Fu come se le ossessioni di Nora, sciamando in tumulto alla sua morte, fossero venute a nidificare dentro la figlia» (S, p. 57). Nora's obsessions are not only inherited but also embodied, and intensified by the semantic choice of 'nidificare', which introduces the imagery of the bird building its home. Birds are not, of course, the only animals that live in nests (there are bees, hornets, snakes), but this is only the first part of an extended metaphor that will be clarified later. In this multilayered and recurring metaphor, the bird's flight ends up representing the transmission that Hirsch calls postmemory:

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.³⁶

As a matter of fact, «the bodily, psychic, and affective impact of trauma»³⁷ are at work in both Nora and Ida as postmemory of an ancient oppression and a precognition of future oppressions (the Shoah and beyond): «E nei suoi grandi occhi a mandorla scuri c'era una dolcezza passiva, di una barbarie profondissima e incurabile, che somigliava a una

35. Julia Kristeva defines abjection as the feeling of the subject for something that is not totally other, that repulses but at the same time attracts: «Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. [...] It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite», J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L.S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York 1982, p. 3.

36. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, cit. p. 5.

37. *Ivi*, p. 2.

precognizione» (S, p. 21; my emphasis). Naturally, Ida is not capable of rational knowledge, and the narrator here uses a simile to clarify the sense of the term ‘precognizione’:

Precognizione, invero, non è la parola più adatta, perché la conoscenza ne era esclusa. Piuttosto, la stranezza di quegli occhi ricordava l’idiozia misteriosa degli animali, i quali non con la mente, ma con un senso dei loro corpi vulnerabili, “sanno” il passato e il futuro di ogni destino. (S, p. 21)

Once again, such unconscious knowledge, so to speak, positions Ida at the border between the human and the animal, anticipating more recent critiques of the binary opposition between human and animal as artificial.³⁸

3. «Un disperato migratore asiatico»

Several scholars have analyzed the animal imagery in Morante’s works: Concetta D’Angeli, for instance, considers «l’animalità» in *La Storia*, not as a heavenly alternative, but as «la metafora del desiderio di cancellare la storia e, della storia, l’immagine più traumatica per la memoria contemporanea, i carri bestiame che portano gli ebrei allo sterminio».³⁹ D’Angeli distinguishes three kinds of “animalità” in Morante’s works: animals that are real characters, similes with the animal world used to describe the human condition, and – more important – «l’animalità come metafora».⁴⁰ D’Angeli explains: «nel testo si può [...] seguire il percorso che permette il passaggio dei paragoni con gli animali alla *con-fusione* e infine alla *metamorfosi* di creature umane in animali».⁴¹ Both D’Angeli and Elisa Martínez Garrido underline how animal imagery, predominant in Morante’s entire oeuvre, intensifies in *La Storia*, where Usepe is «il personaggio più animalesco»,⁴² intermediary between the human and the natural,⁴³ and where animals represent one manifestation of Otherness. On the other hand, theoretical lenses apparently different such as animal studies, posthumanism, and feminism, have all helped us uncover a fundamental ethical engagement at the core of Morante’s novel, what Maria Gimenez Cavallo has defined «the condemnation of any form of oppression

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38. For instance, G. Agamben, *L’aperto: l’uomo e l’animale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2002. Agamben traces how Western metaphysical thought has historically produced an artificial boundary between human and animal by defining the human through its exclusion of the animal.

39. C. D’Angeli, *Soltanto l’animale è veramente innocente. Gli animali ne «La Storia»*, in *Lecture di Elsa Morante*, ed. Gruppo la Luna, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 1987, pp. 66-73: p. 67.

40. *Ibidem*.

41. *Ibidem*; my emphasis.

42. E. Martínez Garrido, *I romanzi di Elsa Morante. Scrittura, poesia ed etica*, Agorà & Co., Lugano 2016, p. 131.

43. *Ivi*, p. 134.

or aggression against sentient beings by those wielding power».⁴⁴ Ida's and Ueseppe's Otherness is indeed multifaceted, but is often conveyed with animal metaphors and similes. For instance, when Ueseppe asks his objectless whys, he resembles exploited or slaughtered innocent animals:

Ma per quanto sapesse d'automatismo, questa piccola domanda aveva un suono testardo e lacerante, piuttosto animalesco che umano. Ricordava difatti le voci dei gattini buttati via, degli asini bendati alla macina, dei caprettini caricati sul carro per la festa di Pasqua. (S, p. 500)

Going back to the first part of the novel, the aggressor, Gunther, is also compared to an animal, specifically a young cat. When he shares with Ida the name of his hometown, Dachau, «il suo tono di voce, nel pronunciare questo nome, fu il medesimo che potrebbe avere un gattino di tre mesi reclamando la propria cesta» (S, p. 68). Ida's affective reaction to this name, as we will see, is one of horror again, even though she doesn't know anything about that place. The animal imagery suggests here another vulnerable being – because Gunther is himself a victim of History – with slightly new connotations: the attachment of the animal to a place, the sense of belonging and the trauma of dispossession («reclamando la propria cesta»). The narrator, indeed, insists on Gunther's longing for his home, his mother and even his prostitute (S, p. 17) and on his feeling of displacement: «“eccomi portato di peso”, si disse, “come un gatto dentro un sacco, verso il continente Nero!”» (S, p. 18). And pacing Ida's small apartment, Gunther is full of envy for Nino, who clearly has still the fortune of living in his own home.

Because Gunther keeps talking in German, Ida does not understand him:

Fra un tale campionario parlante, i fantastici movimenti del soldato si convertivano, per Ida, nei movimenti esatti di una macchina fatale, che stampava anche Nino, oltre a lei stessa, nella lista nera degli Ebrei e dei loro ibridi. I suoi propri equivoci andavano acquistando, col passare dei minuti, un potere allucinante su di lei, riducendola al terrore nativo e ingenuo di prima della ragione. Ferma in piedi, con ancora addosso il cappotto e in testa il suo cappellino a lutto, essa non era più una signora di San Lorenzo; ma *un disperato migratore asiatico, di piume marrone e di cappuccio nero, travolto nel suo cespuglio provvisorio da un orrendo diluvio occidentale*. (S, p. 67; my emphasis)

It would take space to unpack this complex system of imagery, pointing toward a posthuman identification of Gunther with a printing machine and recalling an affect – terror – that is not cognitively owned by Ida, since

44. M. Giménez Cavallo, *Elsa Morante's «La Storia»: A Posthumanist, Feminist, Anarchist Response to Power*, in «Annali d'italianistica», 34, 2016, pp. 425-447: p. 427.

it pre-dates the age of her reason. In Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth's definition, affect refers to

intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise) in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves.⁴⁵

Here the affect invests Ida originating from Gunther/the machine, so to speak, but also from somewhere else – an indefinite past. And if we cannot say what this intensity is, we can nevertheless say what it does to Ida's body. This effect is what D'Angeli, not referring to Ida but to Useppe, calls the «con-fusione» and the «metamorfosi di creature umane in animali».⁴⁶ Ida is not *like* a bird; she *has become* a bird: «non era più una signora di San Lorenzo; ma un disperato migratore asiatico».⁴⁷

It is now time to focus on the imagery of the birds a little longer and to consider the deluge investing its nest. Birds, like other animals, must have retained, as Morante claims in *Il Paradiso Terrestre*, their innocence after the Fall, and they are a gift for human animals, as well as a consolation.⁴⁸ «Are animals sometimes messengers? Come from where? Sent by whom?», asks Luce Irigaray in her essay *Animal Compassion*.⁴⁹ Morante provides a precise and certainly positive answer to this question: animals were sent on earth to console humans in their exile after the Fall. Irigaray also identifies birds as «our angels» that «lead one's becoming».⁵⁰ Indeed, the philosopher notices that birds appear «as the spiritual assistant, even the spiritual

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45. M. Gregg, G. Seigworth, *An Inventory of Shimmers*, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. M. Gregg, G. Seigworth, Duke University Press, Durham 2010, pp. 1-28: p. 1.

46. D'Angeli, *Soltanto l'animale*, cit., 67.

47. Giuseppina Mecchia is right in affirming that Morante's aesthetic project resonates with «the philosophical work that was being conducted by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and, in an Italian context, Giorgio Agamben», in particular «the conceptualization of becomings articulated by Deleuze and Guattari in the early 1970s» (G. Mecchia, *Elsa Morante at the Biopolitical Turn: Becoming-Woman, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible*, in *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, eds. D. Amberson, E. Past, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2014, pp. 129-144: p. 130). See for instance, this often-quoted passage by Deleuze and Guattari: «Why are there so many becomings of man, but no becoming-man? First because man is majoritarian par excellence, whereas becomings are minoritarian; all becoming is a becoming-minoritarian... In this sense women, children, but also animals, plants, and molecules, are minoritarian. It is perhaps the special situation of women in relation to the man-standard that accounts for the fact that becomings, being minoritarian, always pass through a becoming-woman», G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987, p. 291.

48. E. Morante, *Il Paradiso Terrestre*, in Ead., *Pro o contro la bomba atomica e altri scritti*, Adelphi, Milano 1987, pp. 19-20: p. 19.

49. L. Irigaray, *Animal Compassion*, trans. M. Gaddis Rose, in *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity*, eds. M. Calarco, P. Atterton, Continuum, London 2004, pp. 195-201: p. 196.

50. *Ivi*, p. 197.

master, in many a tradition». ⁵¹ We know that Morante was interested in Eastern philosophy and religions ⁵² – also through the influence of Simone Weil – and that she read the *Upanishad* and the life of the Buddhist Milarepa. ⁵³ The bird iconology is widespread in both Buddhism and Hinduism. ⁵⁴ And if it's true, as Angela Borghesi writes, that

classici della spiritualità orientale alimentano la fase d'ideazione della *Storia* e delle opere che la precedono. In particolare, quello spirito lieve e sorridente che aleggia nel romanzo morantiano riecheggia i canti e la biografia del famoso yogin tibetano vissuto nel IX secolo: Mi la ras pa, Mi la vestito di tela, ovvero Milarepa ⁵⁵

we might conclude that Morante infuses here – as in some other much more quoted passages about the character's *preveggenza* – some of this spirituality in Ida, a bird from Asia, a messenger perhaps, but a messenger that has no knowledge – at least in the traditional sense – of the message she carries. If she is a bird, and a messenger, Ida is also one of the Happy Few described by Morante in *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini*, who are also angels, as she wrote in a letter to Goffredo Fofi:

Caro Goffredo

1) il vecchio Milarepa (purtroppo oggi troppo «chiacchierato» ma «consumato» mai!) a un suo scolaro che gli chiedeva: che fare, dunque, andare fra gli uomini, o meditare in solitudine? (Marta o Maria) – ha risposto: è inutile andare fra loro finché non si è capito (ciechi che guidano altri ciechi), e perciò sarà meglio meditare da soli finché non si sia capito qualche cosa, e quando si ha qualcosa da dargli, andare fra loro.

Naturalmente, può succedere che, meditando, si arrivino a capire solo i propri limiti: per esempio, che si è bravi solo a giocare a pallone. Ma anche questo è utile a capirsi: allora si tornerà fra gli uomini senz'altra pretesa che di distrarli la domenica col gioco del pallone. Oppure anche si potrà medi-

51. *Ibidem*.

52. See, among others, L. Dell'Aia, *The Body Wounded by History: Elsa Morante, Between Western and Oriental Spirituality*, in «Between», 1, 2, 2011, <https://ojs.unica.it/index.php/between/article/view/281> (last visited: 26/11/2024). See also A. Borghesi, *Una storia invisibile: Morante Ortese Weil*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2015.

53. «La frequentazione della mistica orientale e confermata dalla presenza, nella biblioteca di Elsa Morante, di testi quali le *Upanishad*, i *Centomila canti di Milarepa* e altri, tra cui un testo di Alan Wilson Watts dal titolo *The Way of Zen*, in un'edizione della Penguin Books del 1970, fitto di numerose tracce di lettura», M. Zanardo, *Il poeta e la grazia. Una lettura dei manoscritti della «Storia» di Elsa Morante*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 2017, p. 227.

54. For example, the deity Garuda is represented as an eagle or a kite. Lucia dell'Aia notes that «one of the passages that [Weil] translated from the Upanishad that had most impact on her reflections on Hindu philosophy, is that referring to the image of two birds. "Two birds, inseparably united companions, are in the same tree. One eats the fruit of the tree, and the other watches without eating"», Dell'Aia, *The Body Wounded by History*, cit., p. 3.

55. Borghesi, *Una storia invisibile*, cit. p. 17.

tare meditare e non capirci mai niente. E questo, ormai, è il mio caso.

Ci sono infine quei felici che attraverso la meditazione arrivano a capire sia pure un grammo o un chilo di verità. Sono gli angeli (aggeløj = colui che porta la notizia) e ti auguro con amore di essere uno di loro.

MORALE: però la meditazione è un intervallo necessario. [...]

Fine della parentesi: E.M., ritira tutto quello che hai scritto più sopra (all'1)! chi ti dice che Marta forse non fosse lei nel vero? Andrai fra gli uomini comunque (COMUNQUE) anche senza aver capito!⁵⁶

I have quoted this passage at length because it's at the end of it that Morante reveals how angels/messengers can go among people even if they do not bring answers: similarly, Ida with her knowledge without cognition, can become a messenger, but one that poses moral dilemmas, instead of providing solutions. Birds interrogate us in *La Storia* as well, and we can wonder, along with Irigaray:

How to respond to their call? If not through becoming their delicate friends they want us to be? By listening to their instruction as well. Calling to love by singing: Is that not better than using the eyes or the hand to try to capture the other's desire? It is, however, what our learned philosophers prescribe, imagining themselves very superior to animals.⁵⁷

Morante's work pulses with the same ethical question: how can human animals be superior to animals if animals are «l'unica testimonianza dell'esistenza del paradiso terrestre»?⁵⁸ What to do with the birds that sing «è uno scherzo» or with Eppetondo's birds, or with other animals victims of History, or with Ida, this migratory bird experiencing the intrusion in her house first, and the violence over her body later?

A number of studies have called attention to Morante's "talking animals," as the title of Cristina Vani's article reads.⁵⁹ Saskia Ziolkowski has focused on the case of Bella as an instance of communication across species.⁶⁰ And Tiziana de Rogatis, in *Homing/Ritrovarsi* has explored the «immaginario translingue» at work in *La Storia*, pointing out how Useppè's special languages add to Italy's multilingualism represented in the novel,

56. Letter 10 to Goffredo Fofi, October 16, 1969, in *Cara Elsa: storia di un'amicizia*, ed. G. Fofi, Liguori, Napoli 2022.
57. Irigaray, *Animal Compassion*, cit. p. 198.
58. G. Agamben, *La festa del tesoro nascosto*, in Id., *Categorie italiane: studi di poetica e di letteratura*, Laterza, Bari 2010, pp. 131-137: p. 134.
59. C. Vani, *Talking Animals "Talking" with Animals in Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*, in «EcoZon@», 7, 1, 2016, pp. 42-58.
60. S. Ziolkowski, *Morante and Kafka: The Gothic Walking Dead and Talking Animals*, in *Elsa Morante's Politics of Writing: Rethinking Subjectivity, History, and the Power of Art*, ed. S. Lucamante, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison 2015, pp. 53-65. See also Ziolkowski's *Kafka's Italian Progeny*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2020.

«pensato da Morante come un repertorio dell'ampia corallità poliglotta italiana».⁶¹ Moreover, Martínez Garrido has dedicated a few pages to the salvific power of the birds' songs in *La Storia*, which reminds us of the harmony of Dante's *Paradiso*.⁶² But here, the bird into which Ida has turned is terrorized and dislodged from the nest. And this is precisely the final point of my investigation: no matter how literal or figurative they are, animals in *La Storia* point toward traumatic experiences of displacement and diaspora: the desperate Asian migratory bird has been «travolto nel suo cespuglio provvisorio da un orrendo diluvio occidentale».

According to de Rogatis, Morante is «solo apparentemente estranea agli attuali mondi postcoloniali e migratori, ma in realtà profondamente collegata a essi».⁶³ As I have mentioned, for de Rogatis Morante intentionally foregrounds phenomena of Italian internal migration,⁶⁴ but I also believe that she anticipates literature concerned with postcolonial and environmental issues. Indeed, contemporary approaches in postcolonial studies, such as postcolonial ecology, would be worth exploring in relation to *La Storia*. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley explain,

to speak of postcolonial ecology is to foreground a spatial imagination made possible by the experience of place. Place has infinite meanings and morphologies: it might be defined geographically, in terms of the expansion of empire; environmentally, in terms of wilderness or urban settings; genealogically, in linking communal ancestry to land; as well as phenomenologically, connecting body to place.⁶⁵

Morante scholars have recently focused on such body-space connection in the novel, especially considering how violence reshapes the city of Rome. As Rebecca Walker argues, «in a novel where bodies bleed into buildings and the material world seeps under the skin, it is important to scrutinize what bodies can and cannot do and what is done to material bodies and spaces to make them inhospitable».⁶⁶ This materialist approach can be certainly extended to any kind of space as place, urban or natural, as

61. de Rogatis, *Homing*, cit., p. 11.

62. E. Martínez Garrido, *La felicità e la musica nella «Storia» di Elsa Morante*, in «Forum Italicum», 48, 1, 2014, pp. 47-63.

63. *Ivi*, p. 10.

64. For de Rogatis, the translingual imagination emerges in the novel «come immaginario translingue di una migrazione interna alla nazione e al suo apparente monolinguisimo», de Rogatis, *Homing*, cit., p. 8. «Nella *Storia*, Morante ha infatti visto un nucleo decisivo dell'epos nazionale nelle migrazioni interne all'Italia stessa e nella eterogeneità di questo universo subalterno», *ivi*, p. 10.

65. E. DeLoughrey, G.B. Handley, *Toward an Aesthetics of the Earth*, in *Postcolonial Ecologies*, cit., pp. 3-39: p. 4.

66. R. Walker, *Bringing up the Bodies: Material Encounters in Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*, in «Italian Studies», 76, 1, 2021, pp. 82-95: p. 85. See also Katrin Wehling-Giorgi's essay in this volume, *Beyond the Eternal City: Topographies of Trauma in Elsa Morante's «La Storia» and Igiaba Scego's «Cassandra a Mogadiscio»*.

conceptualized by DeLoughrey and Handley. Ida's place, «il cespuglio provvisorio», is of course metaphorical, but – seen in the light of the correspondence between particular and global that I have outlined in my introduction – also speaks of a place elsewhere, assaulted and destroyed by the West. After all, writes Eduard Said, imperialism «is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control».⁶⁷ Bringing under control often means destroying the ecological system of a place, forcing both people and animals into their diaspora. Wars and colonialism have historically displaced people and animals from their homes. Ida, assaulted in her nest by Gunther, also becomes homeless after the bombings of San Lorenzo and starts erring through Rome, reminding us of both temporal – as in the case of postmemory – and spatial aspects of trauma.

4. Conclusion: «il forastico migratore in transito»

As I have anticipated, Gunther's attachment to a place that is still unknown to Ida works as a symbolic and «traumatic recall»⁶⁸ for both Ida and the reader. The place – Dachau – will soon become inextricably associated with the history of the Shoah, as in *La Storia* «place encodes time».⁶⁹ The name Dachau is unknown to Ida, but somehow her body recognizes it anyway:

Però a quel nome innocuo e indifferente, *il forastico migratore in transito*, che ora s'identificava col suo cuore, senza spiegazione sobbalzò dentro di lei. E svolazzando atrocemente nello spazio snaturato della stanzetta prese a sbattere fra un tumulto vociferante contro le pareti senza uscita. (S, p. 68; my emphasis)

The name, reactivating Ida's terror, once again brings up the metaphor of the bird. This is yet another element that reinforces the image of the soldier as the personification of the racial laws, hence Ida's repulsion, «come davanti a un mostro» (S, p. 68). The name triggers a traumatic recall whose aftereffects are embodied. However, the name of the place is innocent or indifferent. The place itself, which will forever remain associated with the first concentration camp built by the Nazis, could, in fact, be considered another victim of the «geographical violence» Said refers to, since the concentration camps can be seen as sites of «institutionalized cruelty

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67. E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage Books, New York 1994, p. 225.

68. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, cit., p. 6.

69. DeLoughrey, Handley, *Toward an Aesthetics of the Earth*, cit., p. 4.

against humans, non-humans and the environment».⁷⁰

When Dachau is mentioned, the ornithological metaphor makes its third appearance, and it relates again to *Ida's terrore* and her very identity, since her heart has been previously characterized as the site of her Jewishness. The traumatic transfer is now complete («che ora s'identificava col suo cuore»), while Morante creates the image of a bird that finds itself in a cage and – struck by fear – tries to escape but ends up slamming against its cage. This very image, as I have suggested, recalls both the fear that has migrated from Nora to Ida, and the oppression of all the people and the places that have lost their spirits because of the «obscure and negative entity incarnated by history that is always present throughout the work».⁷¹ This violence destroys human and non-human animals as well as places and territories. In creating such intricacies, Morante foreshadows emotional connections between humans, animals and places that in her time were still at the embryonic level.

70. J. Małczyński, E. Domańska, M. Smykowski, A. Kłos, *The Environmental History of the Holocaust*, in «Journal of Genocide Research», 22, 2, 2020, pp. 183-196: p. 185.

71. C.G. Moretti, *Crises, Suffering and Breakdowns: Re-shaping Intimate Identity in Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*, in «Italica», 90, 3, 2013, pp. 422-432: p. 423.