

1. Tiziana de Rogatis

Traumatic Realism and the Poetics of Trauma: Narrative Structures in Elsa Morante's *History. A Novel*

Elsa Morante's *History* is the greatest Italian novel of the second half of the twentieth-century. It is one of the most prominent ones, as well as one of the most decisive works of literature produced in its contemporary literary landscape. Its greatness extends all the way through our current time, affected by Covid-19 and by the ensuing catastrophic derailment of time off its tracks.

History speaks to our apocalyptic perception of a world which the pandemic has suddenly turned into a dystopia. This world has been emptied, silenced by the emergency or, conversely, overcrowded, by a nonsensical repression of the contagion. Dystopia stands as a temporal dislocation, exacerbated by Covid. Nonetheless, even before the pandemic many writers of the *Global Novel* had already staged it, by working on an inevitable sense of emergency through different modes and techniques. In relation to this new and extreme age of anxiety, and to the rebirth of problematic and modern forms of realism performed by the *Global Novel*¹, *History* is an important forerunner and ancestor. This is also the reason why this brief contribution, as well as Katrin Wehling-Giorgi's essay, are written in English.

The literary reality constructed by Morante constitutes an archetypal space of trauma connecting different eras with each other. The trauma consists of a sense of human defencelessness and terror before evil and its social practices. It also implies an overpowering impact that is impossible to elaborate in terms of experience and language. The trauma is a suppressed and denied universe the traces of which are recoverable only through cracks, marks, ellipses, metamorphoses and multiplications. From her very first textual threshold, the epigraph, Morante clarifies the petrifying power of trauma, as well as its connection with the violence of History: «There is no word in the human language capable of consoling the guinea pigs who do not know the reason for their death (A survivor of Hiroshima)»². The epigraph tells us that this story is figurative: it describes a turning point spanning 1941-1947, while also narrating something else, i.e. the «scandal» («scandalo») of History,

¹ In this contexts, see also T. de Rogatis, *Global Perspectives. Trauma and the Global Novel: Ferrante's Poetics between Storytelling, Uncanny Realism and Dissolving Margins*, in *Elena Ferrante in a Global Context*, edited by T. de Rogatis-S. Milkova-K. Wehling Giorgi, forthcoming in «Modern Language Notes», 136, 2021, pp. 6-31.

² E. Morante, *History: A Novel*, translated by William Weaver, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1977, henceforth abbreviated as 'h'. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are from this edition. In a few cases, the translator of this first part of the present essay has opted for different solutions, which are indicated as 't.v.' ('translator's version'). «Non c'è parola, in nessun linguaggio umano, capace di consolare le cavia che non sanno il perché della loro morte (un sopravvissuto di Hiroshima)» (E. Morante, *La Storia. Romanzo*, Einaudi, Turin 1974). Henceforth abbreviated as 's'.

evoked by the novel's first Italian edition.³ It is a scandal that possesses a universal tone, yet it also reveals itself in its utmost intensity only at a stage of technological omnipotence, which gets permanently triggered by the atomic bomb.

Specifically, in an age of modernity and boundless progress of human minds, means and possibilities, what is being renovated is the single, ostensible opposite of progress itself: a barbaric and primitive violence. This mechanism is able to silence the human being, and to unhinge its belonging from its own species, by reducing it – as the «survivor» epigraph declares – to a guinea pig stuck inside a gigantic and uninterrupted social laboratory. Simone Weil – a philosopher and mystic much loved by Morante – interprets the Second World War through the *Iliad*. She proposes a modern re-usage of epic that will eventually become (as already highlighted by D'Angeli, Cazalé Bérard, Lucamante and Borghesi) a crucial hypotext to the writing of *History*, and to its ability of encompassing the traumatic traces that synchronously originate from myth and history.

As she reads closely inside the primordialism of that mythical and ferocious violence, Weil identifies a new battleground in the alienation of workers and human masses (made up of the new «esclaves»), in the annihilation of the victims of capitalism and Nazi-Fascism, as well as in the transformation of the same perpetrators into «choses».⁴ All individuals – victims and perpetrators, servants and masters, innocent and guilty parts – are joined (though with different proportions and ways), by a «force» nestling inside the false bottom of time and history. It is a false bottom of which the current trauma of the pandemic gives us a glimpse, in the shape of a coagulation of differently unspeakable and primordial events. Such primordialism is today being generated by a hyper-technological era, as well as epitomized by a set of simultaneous phenomena: a neoliberal weakening of medical facilities and support, widespread manifestations of full-blown or creeping negationism, increasingly extreme poverty, and even genocide (I am thinking about the peoples of the Amazon, and what they symbolise).

The figurative nexuses of the traumatic archetype staged by *History* derive from a pre-political dimension; however, the latter develops through an acute phenomenology of the political sphere. This is the case of the double prophetic force embodied by one of the novel's main characters, Davide Segre. The «swollen, festering little sore» (h 476; «piccola piaga gonfia e suppurata» s 562) on Davide's arm – not by chance insistently noticed by Ueseppe (h 504, 509; s 595, 601), his

³ The first Italian edition of *La Storia* had a screaming headline that reads «Uno scandalo che dura da diecimila anni» («A scandal that has lasted for ten thousand years»).

⁴ S. Weil, *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force* [1940], in Id., *The Iliad or the Poem of Force. A Critical Edition*, Peter Lang, New York-Washington DC 2003, pp. 23, 19.

«Doppelfigur»⁵ – and his subsequent death by overdose, are all prophetic signs of a drug addiction *ante litteram*. Drugs were, in fact, about to explode precisely around the year 1974, the same year *History* was published, and would become a mass phenomenon, as well as a form of ultimate annihilation for all struggle and protest movements.

On the other hand, a second prophetic reference to the sinking of a whole generation resides in Segre's ideological and intellectual aspirations, which are also incorporated in the parable of the *world saved by kids*. Davide's wounds have been caused by the utmost form of persecution. As a young Jew, he gets tortured to the point of a simulated death penalty, fortuitously escapes from the train convoy leading to the lager, and is deprived of his whole family, whose members have been assassinated in the concentration camps. These wounds will not be healed by Davide's bold partisan militancy, his albeit generous political engagement, nor his intellectual dedication to the «IDEAL» (h 350; «IDEA», s 411-422). Indeed, his anarchic ideology is far too overwhelming, too abstract and distant from the deepest nucleus of trauma that, in the meantime, has contaminated Segre's own life with the «brutal corruption» (h 177; «corruzione brutale» s 207), related to both indifference (the abandonment of his beloved cat Rossella), and wickedness (the ferocious rage towards the German soldier's body). That same nucleus ultimately drags Useppe and his innocence with itself (as is known, the final phase of the little boy's illness explodes right after Segre's brutal rejection of both his friendship and his ability to transfigure the disease into poetry).

As already correctly emphasised (Garboli), *History* is paradoxically loaded with hilarious situations, and inserts a comic register even in those parts of the text that lean towards tragedy. In *History* there is a convergence between the choral quality assigned to the system of characters, the epic totality of the perspective, and the continuous and reciprocal influx between *novel* and *romance*. These narrative devices ensure a constant supply of narrative potentialities to the plot. This structure, where stories are grafted into each other, is no less rich than the one featured in *House of Liars* (see the analyses by Rosa, Zanardi and Porciani). The novel's opening towards the multiplicity of life indicates realism. However, in this realism Morante holds a specific collocation: it is a «traumatic realism», on which *History* develops a new poetics that defines her texts up to *Aracoeli*. Traumatic realism is «a new mode of seeing and listening *from the site of trauma*», a capacity of representing the space of violence «as a borderland of extremity and everydayness»⁶.

In *History*, traumatic realism engenders a doubling in the plot, where a series of gaps force the reader to slide towards a traumatic false bottom, hidden beyond the surface of the plot-driven

⁵ I. von Treskow, *Die transgenerationale Weitergabe von kollektiver Gewalterfahrung und Traumata in «La Storia» von Elsa Morante*, in *Überlebensgeschichte(n) in den romanischen Erinnerungskulturen*, ed. by Silke Segler-Meßner, Frank & Timme, Berlin 2017, pp. 289-310, p. 302.

⁶ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, The John Hopkins UP, Baltimore 1996, p. 56; M. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Minnesota UP, Minneapolis 2000, p. 109.

narration; this is the case, for instance, of the Marrocco's world. On the one hand, this family is delineated through its daily domesticity, a strongly plausible environment and realistic displacements. On the other hand, the same world is eventually destined to collapse in the underground, symbolised by Giovannino's unpredictable freezing to death in Russia (another similar example is the overturning of Useppe's partisan dream into a Nazi massacre). We shall see below a list of the novel's main techniques that are typical of traumatic realism.

a. A Twentieth-Century Poetics of Pathos and a Female Counter-Narrative of History

The act of writing, along with the narrative and metanarrative strategies of *History*, is never a self-evident mechanism, unlike a certain stereotype attached to realism would lead us to believe. In this sense, such the openly pathetic and omniscient tone used by the female narrative voice conceals opposite qualities and techniques attributable to a shaman-epic poet and to a reticent witness, an aspect already extensively examined (see Serkowska, Rosa and Zanardi). We should rather observe the novel's combination of omniscience, magic and oracle-like clairvoyance, reticence, and the pathetic involvement of the female narrator, and question the effect these features may have on the reader. One may, for instance, enquire what is the objective of a female narrator who, from the first pages, depicts «Iduzza» (h 17, s 21) in a maternalistic way ⁷, as an eternal little girl who has never fully grown up, as a small woman of limited intelligence, and yet subsequently reconstructs the origin of her «idiocy» by providing a detailed flashback on Jewish postmemory and the generational traumatic nucleus. What is hiding behind this oxymoron between maternalism and recognition, this medley of superiority and identification?

We are aware that the root of this continuously mended divide lies in Morante's own experience of Jewish trans-generational traumas and matrophobia⁸. However, we also see that this heritage turns into a form of creativity throughout the novel's structures. The moment we meet Ida again – after the long flashback concerning her family, and following the labyrinth of terror bequeathed from mother to daughter – as soon as she runs into Gunther –, that adjective «wretched» (t.v.; «disgraziata» s 43), which identifies her in the description of their encounter, is no longer a maternalistic term, yet an empathic word. The choice of «disgraziata» does not convey patheticism, yet pathos: it is the oxymoronic recognition of an «idiocy» (h 18; «idiozia» s 21), something that from the very first pages has been explained as a «sense of the sacred» (h 18; «senso del sacro» s 21). This primordial and pre-linguistic trauma dwells inside a post-human dimension that connects the guinea

⁷ On this cfr. M. Ganeri, *L'ombra dell'autrice nella «Storia*, in «*La Storia*» di Elsa Morante, edited by S. Sgravicchia, Ets, Pisa 2012, pp. 203-2013.

⁸ M. Beer, *Costellazioni ebraiche: note su Elsa Morante e l'ebraismo del Novecento*, in «*Nacqui nell'ora del meriggio*». *Scritti per Elsa Morante nel centenario della nascita*, edited by E. Cardinale-G. Zagra, Quaderni della Biblioteca Nazionale di Roma, Rome 2013, pp. 165-198

pig to the survivor of Hiroshima. They both have been cannibalised, devoured by a transcendent force that, in the exact case of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, has technically come from above: it is «the universal power that can devour them and annihilate them, for their guilt in being born» (h 18; «il potere universale che può mangiarli e annientarli, per la loro colpa di essere nati» s 21).

A continuous slippage of the narrating voice – from pathetic to pathos, from testimonial document to clairvoyance or its contrary (reticence), from maternalism to empathy –, shapes Ida along with all the other characters, and produces a profound disorientation in the cultured reader, who becomes metaphorically illiterate⁹. As a matter of fact, by sabotaging the supposed transparency of realism, this narrative strategy pushes this kind of reader to feel a continuous uncertainty about their own attitude. While initially being encouraged to maintain – just like the narrator herself – an enlightened and comfortable position of superiority over all humble individuals, the reader gets progressively pushed towards a shadow zone, as he/she enters a liminal and symmetric dimension of precariousness, uncertainty, and oscillation. Through such disorientation, Morante urges both male and female readers to reach for a level of authenticity aimed at deconstructing the cultural dogmas and the current (and recurrent) intellectualisms that work as powerful defensive structures against the reception of the archetypal space of trauma. Morante was precisely thinking of this second-level illiteracy, interpreted as a renewed purity of the heart, when she placed her second evangelical epigraph addressing the «small ones» (t.v.; «piccoli» Luke, X-21), together with the dedication «por el analfabeto a quién escribo».

Thanks to her courageous invention of a Twentieth-century poetics of pathos, Morante here advocates for a female counter-narrative of History,¹⁰ which creates an emblem of human condition out of the tragic losses of the maternal, and its creative dynamics (including those internal to the ambivalent relationship between female narrator and female protagonist).

b. Compassion, Abjection, and the Dramaturgy of Trauma

Another element triggering the reader's profound disorientation is the fact that the female narrator endows her characters with a provocatively inclusive compassion. The first victim of the scandal staged by the plot of *History* is not neatly qualified as such, yet actually corresponds to an ambiguous

⁹ On the strategic «inconclusiveness» of the female narrative voice see L. Re, *Utopian Longing and the Constraint of Racial and Sexual Difference in Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*, in «Italice», 70, 3, 1993, pp. 361-375, p. 372.

¹⁰ On the female and maternal constellations of the novel see also C. Della Colletta, *Fiction and Women's History. Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*, in Ead., *Plotting the Past. Metamorphoses of Historical Narrative in Modern Italian Fiction*, Purdue UP, West Lafayette 1994, pp. 117-151; M. Ganeri, *L'ombra dell'autrice nella «Storia»*, in «La Storia» di Elsa Morante, cit.; K. Wehling-Giorgi, «Il mondo delle madri». *Pre-Oedipal Desire and the Decentred Self in Elsa Morante's «La Storia» and «Aracoeli»*, in *The Fire Within. Desire in Modern and Contemporary Italian Literature*, edited by E. Borrelli, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle Upon Tyne 2014, pp. 190-210; Id., «Totetaco»: *the Mother Child Dyad and the Pre-conceptual Desire in Elsa Morante's «La Storia» and «Aracoeli»*, in «Forum for Modern Language Studies», 49, 2, 2013, pp. 192-200.

figure of perpetrator/victim: it is the rapist named Gunther who «One January afternoon in the year 1941, [...] found himself wandering alone, through the San Lorenzo district of Rome»¹¹ (h 13). The soldier who «of the world [...] knew little or nothing»¹² (h 11, v. 5), and whose «surname is unknown» (h 11, v. 6),¹³ belongs to the same laboratory of violence mentioned by the «survivor» of Hiroshima (Gunther is, in fact, the first guinea pig of the plot, a recruit who is destined to death by sinking in the Mediterranean three days after he rapes Ida). He is also one of the first-level illiterate people to whom the novel is dedicated.

The sense of the poetic epigraph preceding the first chapter, as well as its relationship with the previous ones, lies in its ability to condense in a lyrical form the same compassion addressed towards the character, and eventually disseminated throughout the prose of the plot. However, by way of an evident narrative oxymoron, this compassion pairs up with the brutality of rape («and raping her with rage as if he wanted to murder her» h 59; «and he became the more obstinate [...] like all drunken soldiery» h 59)¹⁴. Another form of intertwinement is provided by a series of misunderstandings. What we witness here is a linguistic and a body-related confusion. Ida and Gunther do not speak the same language, and get two completely different perceptions of their reciprocal encounter (he experiences a nostalgia of his familiar world, whereas she plunges into racial terror). Gunther believes that Ida is opposing resistance to the rape, while the latter is absent from her own body, as she is caught by epileptic convulsions. Errors are thus the foundations of the syntax and the dramaturgy shaping Ida's trauma, otherwise impossible to communicate.

The entire rape scene, after all, interlocks different and opposite levels and spheres: parental/family vs. erotic love, human form vs. animal metamorphosis, sexual violence vs. Ida's «extraordinary happiness without orgasm» (h 59; «straordinaria felicità senza orgasmo» s 70), adult vs. childlike possession, dream vs. clairvoyance. As it is already the case with the female narrator's metamorphism, this «abjection» – which, according to Kristeva, contaminates spheres that are normally separated from logic –, also pushes the reader into a liminal position, as it allows him/her to intercept the experience of trauma, and its drastic dislocation out of the coordinates established by normality, as well as by temporality.

c. The «Scandal», the Narrative Spirals, and the Zones of Trauma

The scene of the rape – during which Ida is simultaneously attacked by epilepsy and brutally penetrated by a German soldier – also creates an explicit symmetry between a mark of physiological

¹¹ «un giorno di gennaio dell'anno 1941 [...] si trovava, solo, a girovagare nel quartiere di San Lorenzo» (s 15).

¹² «del mondo sapeva poco o niente» (s 13, v. 5)

¹³ «cognome rimane sconosciuto» (s 13, v. 6)

¹⁴ «la violentò con tanta rabbia, come se volesse assassinarla»; «ci s'accaniva [...], proprio alla maniera della soldataglia ubriaca» (s 69).

disease and one of racial persecution (causing the misunderstanding by which Ida thinks that Gunther is an SS inquisitor and lets him into her apartment), thus allowing for a representation of both traumas at the same time.

The two symmetrical marks are determined by a transgenerational dynamic, and they both secretly mould the individuals (Nora, Ida, Useppe), who are trying to hide their «scandal» from the world. However, they also allow «the impure» people (h 49; «impuri» s 58) to live according to certain boundaries, which nevertheless become increasingly narrow, a life disguised as normality¹⁵. Inside this progressive symmetrical spiral – where biological and racial evils are interwoven, and the first one naturalizes and objectifies the second one – the plot reveals that same coagulation of primordialism and modernity which I have mentioned earlier.

Within the dynamics of traumatic realism, the spiral also equals a narrative technique that relentlessly makes the reader slip from a zone of reality to one of trauma. Namely, a series of episodes demonstrate a continuous swerve between a chronicle-like narrative plane to an underground horror, as previously stated. However, the recurring feature of traumatic realism clarifies through different narrative moments, as a repetition compulsion, similar to a reiterated scene where both the victim and the reader keep bumping into the signs and the spaces of trauma, which indeed cannot be fully decoded (as it happens with the typical symptoms of trauma).

This iterative technique implying the return to the zone of trauma «serves to *screen* the real understood as traumatic», but at the same time «this very need also points to the real, and at this point the real ruptures the screen of repetition»¹⁶. A decisive feature of all zones of trauma is their concentric and dilating effect, which enables a transfer between physiological trauma, ethnic trauma and total historical trauma. The zones of trauma encompass several passages in the text: the different moments of Ida's return to the Ghetto; Ida's rape (and in relation to this, one must think of the link between racial and biological traumas); the encounter between Useppe and the calf at the Tiburtina station, and the deportation of the Jews also from Tiburtina; the rapes/femicides of Mariulina and her mother, and the femicide of Santina¹⁷; the presence of vagabonds and misfits who have survived both lagers and war; Ida's dreams and the pictures of the lagers (in this respect, see the following contribution by Katrin Wehling-Giorgi); one last and inclusive zone of trauma is the death of Useppe

¹⁵ On the originality of Morante's re-enactment of the Jewish context cfr. S. Lucamante, *Histories and Stories. Historical Novels and the Danger of Disintegration*, in Id., *Forging Shoah Memories. Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity and the Holocaust*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2014, pp. 185-197.

¹⁶ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London 1996, p. 132.

¹⁷ On *History's* focalization on liminal and abjected female bodies and anatomies, and on their interaction with the city, see R. Walker, *Bringing up the Bodies: Material Encounters in Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*, in «Italian Studies» 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2020.1820259>.

– the unforgettable child – incarnating the ultimate return to the massacre of the innocents evoked at the beginning of the novel (h 52; s 60).

d. The Scars of Trauma: Silence, Other Languages, and Animals

One characteristic of trauma is an extreme intensity that allows it to occur inside a timeframe while collocating it out of time, and expresses through language, while ingraining it within the psyche outside of language, in the silence of repression or in the ellipses of dissociation. It is also for this reason that the novel is constructed through a simple language, though one that is functional to reiterating the failure of communication. However, whereas trauma is unspeakable, what always remains speakable, and actually creatively powerful, is the representation of the shadow zones and of the liminal dimensions engendered by trauma. For instance, in the case of Useppe, loss is – on the one hand - connected with silence: in many passages of *History*, almost the same, formulaic sequence of silencing keeps recurring («and he never spoke of it again» h 220; «nor did Ida mention them to him again» h 212; «asked no more about him» h 296 etc.).¹⁸ But, on the other hand, there are many special languages spoken or heard by the child: those attributed to dogs and birds, and the «voices of the silence»¹⁹ (h 432) - a vocal implosion of *History* with stories, a vibrant spiral of war and its revenants - perceived by Useppe in the tent of trees, on the banks of the river. Along with the entire metamorphic universe from animal to human (and vice versa) represented in the novel and opened by the «guinea pigs» in the first epigraph, these special languages are located inside a liminal dimension that dialogues with the notion of loss from a pre-linguistic perspective.

[translation by Serena Todesco]

¹⁸ «non ne parlò più» (s 257); «né Ida gliene riparlò più» (s 249); «da allora non domandò più di lui» (s 347 etc.).

¹⁹ «voci del silenzio» (s 510)

2. Katrin Wehling-Giorgi

Traumatic Realism and the Poetics of Trauma: Oneiric/Photographic Images in Elsa Morante's *History. A Novel*

In her seminal work *On Photography*, Susan Sontag describes the poignant encounter of her twelve-year old self with a photograph depicting the atrocities of the Holocaust («the photographic inventory of ultimate horror»), an experience she refers to as «the prototypically modern revelation»: «Nothing I have seen [...] ever cut me as sharply, deeply [...] something broke. [...] I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded».²⁰

The notion of «wounding», «cutting» or «breakage» as the individual's response to the horrors of history all evoke the notion of trauma. Morante has prominently claimed that her encounter with the «ruinous violence» («violenza rovinosa»)²¹ of WWII provided the impetus for writing her first novel *House of Liars* (*Menzogna e sortilegio*, 1948); the war theme also offers the imperious setting to Arturo's personal drama in her second work, *Arturo's Island* (*L'isola di Arturo*, 1957). In her last novel *Aracoeli* (1982), the confrontation with a traumatic past underlies the text's principal tensions that emerge in the tropes of displacement and the protagonists' queerly gendered subjecthood. It is in *History: A Novel*,²² though, that the atrocities of history – narrated in a text that intimately interweaves personal and collective trauma – most vividly come to the fore. While critics including Rosa, Porciani and Lucamante have acknowledged the traumatic nature of the experiences of the central characters, the textual insights that can be gained by an analysis through the lens of trauma theory remain largely unexplored.²³

²⁰ S. Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin, London 1977, pp. 20-21.

²¹ E. Morante, *Opere* vol. 1, edited by C. Cecchi e C. Garboli, Mondadori, Milan 1988, p. XLIV.

²² Henceforth referred to as '*History*'. All four novels have been translated into English: *Menzogna e sortilegio*, Einaudi, Turin 1948; *House of Liars*, transl. by Adrienne Foulke, Harcourt, Brace, New York 1951; *L'isola di Arturo*, Einaudi, Turin 1957; *Arturo's Island*, transl. by Ann Goldstein, Pushkin Press, London 2019; *La Storia: romanzo*, cit.; *History: A Novel*, transl. by William Weaver, cit.; *Aracoeli*, Einaudi, Turin 1982; *Aracoeli*, transl. by William Weaver, First Open Letter, Rochester 2009.

²³ One exception is an article on transgenerational trauma and violence in *La Storia*: I. von Treskow, *Die transgenerationale Weitergabe von kollektiver Gewalterfahrung und Traumata in «La Storia» von Elsa Morante*, cit.

This short paper will show that a close reading of *History* through the poetics of trauma can provide a new understanding of the temporal, structural and narrative complexities of the novel and the tensions that underlie its relationship with the real.²⁴ Building on Rothberg's notion of traumatic realism as a concept that upholds claims to reference whilst also depicting a «traumatic extremity that disables realist representation»,²⁵ I will argue that a particularly productive interpretive key to exploring the latter is an analysis of *History*'s ekphrastic portrayal of photographs which synecdochally mimic the workings of trauma.

a. «Shrapnels of Traumatic Time»: the Complex Temporality of Trauma and Photography

Caruth posits trauma as an emotional shock which, «in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge».²⁶ Since unprocessed and un verbalized experience can be fully grasped only in connection with a belated time and place, trauma gives rise to a complex temporality and a crisis of representation that is intrinsically relevant for literature. Photography mirrors this complex temporality in its palimpsestic layering of past and present, with its referent always already in the past, pointing to its «having-been-there»²⁷. All photographs give rise to a dual temporality that captures «both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence».²⁸

History's ample photographic pantheon ranges from Nora's picture as a young fiancée to Nino's portrait adorning the family flat, blurry pictures of the rapist Gunther and the young soldier Giovannino, the prostitute Santina and the anarchist Davide, as well as the numerous newspaper cuttings portraying the victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust. In all these pictures, the spectre of death haunts the photographic subject, proleptically foreshadowing a demise that bridges individual and collective destinies. Nora's picture is evoked by the narrator just after her body washes up on the shore;²⁹ Gunther mistakenly associates Nino's photographic portrait with the «family cult of the dead» (h 55; «culto familiare dei defunti», s 65); the picture of the brutally murdered Santina underlines her sense of resignation «of an animal marked for slaughter» («di animale da macello»), marking her picture «[as] the sign of a predestination» (h 359; «[come] il segno di una predestinazione», s 423).

²⁴ For more on Morante's realism, see T. de Rogatis, *Commentare il realismo stregato di Elsa Morante*, in *La Pratica del Commento 3*, edited by D. Brogi–T. de Rogatis–G. Marrani, Pacini, Pisa 2020, pp. 165-190.

²⁵ M. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*, cit., p. 106.

²⁶ C. Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1995, p. 153.

²⁷ M. Hirsch, *Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory*, in «The Yale Journal of Criticism», 14, 1, Spring 2001, p. 14.

²⁸ S. Sontag, *On Photography*, cit., p. 16.

²⁹ E. Morante, *La Storia*, cit., p. 53. Henceforth abbreviated as 's'. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are from *History: A Novel*, cit., henceforth abbreviated as 'h'.

In the collective dimension, the pictures drawn from the conflict posit their blurry subjects as «indiscernible [casualties] of war»,³⁰ as in the case of Giovannino («confused and blurred»; «some dark forms, all in a huddled mass», h 268-69),³¹ with the term «mucchio» («pile», «mass») foreshadowing Davide's poignant, repeated use of the word referencing the imagery of piled up, dehumanised bodies (h 494; s 583). The unidentified massacred victims of the Nazi atrocities whom Useppe discerns in a series of magazine photographs are similarly anonymised and described as «patches of shadow» (h 316; «macchie d'ombra», s 371), establishing a direct link between individual and collective destinies.

While on the one hand the denotative features of the photograph provide privileged access to the past through their material, indexical connection to the real,³² constituting a powerful form of testimony that frequently appeals to the readers' collective imaginary, on the other the immutability and irreversibility of the photographic image mirror the traumatic moment that haunts the present like «a ghostly *revenant*».³³ Useppe's «hesitant awe» (h 315; «stupore titubante», s 370) in contemplating the pictures recalls the «rupture» Sontag captures above. This moment of breakage is a constant companion to the testimonial function of Morante's narrative as it reverberates throughout the novel in the form of an uncanny subtext or «blind false bottom» (my translation; «doppio fondo cieco», s 135) that continues to sabotage the linear temporality and emplotment of the text³⁴: «an enigma, deformed and ambiguous by nature, and yet obscurely familiar» (h 315; «un enigma, di natura ambigua e deforme, eppure oscuramente familiare», s 370).

Since photographs constitute a form of duplication of their referent, the ekphrastic textual translation of the image only adds a further layer of repetition that mimics the structural elements of trauma. Constituting a «“black hole” in the verbal structure»³⁵ that eludes conventionally realist accounts, photographs have the unique capacity of «[capturing] the shrapnel of traumatic time».³⁶ Together with other stylistic devices like dreams, hallucinations and visions, the photographic moment exposes the text's traumatic extremity that escapes conventional forms of witnessing. One might go as far as arguing that these multiple layers of repetition not merely reproduce but *produce*

³⁰ S. Carey, *Elsa Morante: Envisioning History in Elsa Morante's Politics of Writing*, edited by S. Lucamante, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, NJ 2015, p. 70.

³¹ «confuso e sfocato»; «sagome scure [...] in un mucchio e infagottate» (s 583).

³² See R. Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, Routledge, London 2008 (pp. 149-150) for a discussion of the potential problems arising from the notion of the photographic index, especially in the digital age. The photographs referred to in *History* of course precede the digital age and in several cases reference photographs that have become part of the collective imaginary of the horrors of the Second World War (e.g. the photograph of Mussolini's dead body hung in Piazzale Loreto; s 370; h 315).

³³ M. Hirsch, *Surviving Images* et., p. 21.

³⁴ These moments of breakage are often followed by Useppe's (or indeed Ida's) silences (see de Rogatis' essay above on the phenomenology of silence in the novel) as the characters fail to integrate the traumatic moment at a cognitive or linguistic level. Instead, trauma is creatively refashioned into other registers.

³⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, p. 158.

³⁶ U. Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2002, p. 7.

traumatic effects³⁷ that, in the case of fiction, envelop both the characters and the readers, constituting an act of witnessing that not only documents but also unsettles. Furthermore, as trauma necessitates a repetition through retelling, it often involves telling one story in place of another. As I will further emphasize below, the novel's narrative voice plays a crucial role in this polyphonic³⁸ act of re-narration involving a female narrator and the formerly silenced stories of the disenfranchised.

b. The Dissociative Nature of (Photographic) Images

Photographs mirror not only the complex temporality of the narrative, but they provide a similarly productive interpretive key to the characters' dissociative response to trauma, which is often captured in the novel's visual imagery. Dissociation involves the automatic removal from the scene of trauma as the individual fails to integrate sensory data at a cognitive or linguistic level. Considering the difficulty of organizing traumatic experience into linguistic memory, traumatic events are often «registered in a specific, imagistic way that stands outside normal memory creation».³⁹ In their imagistic registration, the workings of the camera bear specific resemblance to the structure of traumatic memory.⁴⁰

The prominent oneiric dimension in the novel often bears features that are characteristic of the photographic image. In one particularly striking dream episode that follows Ida's directionless vagaries through an eerily silent and empty ghetto, she has a dream that in its black-and-white chromatic pattern is «blurred like an old photograph» («sfocato come una vecchia foto»). In the oneiric vision, Ida finds herself in front of a fence, where she discovers a pile of shoes. Just like a photograph, the dream is fixed in this arresting image: «The dream had no plot, only this one scene» (h 292; «Il sogno non aveva intreccio, nient'altro che quest'unica scena»; s 342-43). Despite the unidimensional fixity of the image, which of course recalls the concentration camps, the narrator underlines its wide-ranging narrative powers that point to a transgenerational traumatic reality:⁴¹ «it seemed to tell a long, irremediable story» (h 292; «sembrava raccontare una lunga vicenda irrimediabile», s 343).

In the oneiric diegesis Ida is looking for a small shoe, painfully aware that her search has «the value of a definitive verdict» (h 292; «il valore di un verdetto definitivo», s 342). The dream clearly foreshadows a subsequent episode in which Useppe⁴² is confronted with a blurry photograph

³⁷ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, cit., p. 130.

³⁸ See T. de Rogatis, *Commentare il realismo stregato* cit., p. 188.

³⁹ R. Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, cit., p. 148.

⁴⁰ See U. Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, cit., p. 8.

⁴¹ See I. von Treskow, *Die transgenerationale Weitergabe von kollektiver Gewalterfahrung und Traumata in «La Storia» von Elsa Morante*, cit. on transgenerational trauma.

⁴² Useppe's link with the shoes is further reinforced by the purchase of new footgear, which leads to the discovery of the mass deportation of the Jews at Stazione Tiburtina (s 240; h 205).

(«ambiguous and unclear [images]», h 317)⁴³ that depicts a similar pile of shoes in a magazine, part of a composition of nine photographs that, in their devastating impact («an insoluble riddle», h 317; «blow», my translation)⁴⁴, are registered «as if they were a single image» (h 318; «come fossero una immagine sola», s 373). As the narrator speculates, the illiterate Useppe might well have mistaken the evocative image for the pile of decomposing bodies portrayed in the adjacent picture (h 317; s 373). The trope of the shoes links multiple thematic layers of the text, interweaving the cultural trauma of the Holocaust with the individual tragedy of Useppe's death as the textual pictures synechdochally mimic the imagistic, fixed nature of traumatic memory.

c. The «Spectral Punctum» of the Photographic Images and the Polyphonic Narrative Voice

Ultimately, the imagistic nature of the photographs, read through the poetics of trauma, provides a powerful semiotic code to negotiate the horrors that leak through the façade of *History*'s realist mode («an indelible writing that others cannot read», h 321).⁴⁵ Morante's visual conceptualisation of horror reveals what Rau terms a «spectral punctum», a «synechdocal, painfully obscure representation»⁴⁶ of what is triggered by the picture but lies beyond its frame. The poetics of trauma provides a productive interpretive key to the mechanisms that underlie the negotiation of an untold tale as the images come to «speak» most intimately for the silenced experiences of the victims. In fact, the textual negotiation of the photographic pictures comes in moments of paralysis associated with trauma (e.g. h 317; s 373), and it is the female narrative voice which plays a central role in turning silent horror into narrative memory.

The articulation of trauma crucially requires an act of renarration and is hence often «bound up with the voice of another»:⁴⁷ it is only in the female narrator's retelling of Ida and Useppe's story that previously silenced voices are given expression. It has been widely debated how Morante subverts a number of hierarchies in the novel, not least by telling *History* from the point of view of the marginalised and disenfranchised: a single mother, an illegitimate child who is the product of rape, and nonhuman animals. The expression of trauma through collectively recognisable images provides a widely accessible semiotic code that addresses the «illiterate» («analfabeta») whom this text is dedicated. The ekphrastic negotiation of traumatic moments through the female voice, furthermore, adds a significant layer to the subversive thrust of the novel. While in classic picture theory the image (as an «object» to be passively contemplated) is defined as female and the

⁴³ «immagini ambigue e indistinte» (s 372).

⁴⁴ «un'astrusità senza risposta» (s 372); «percossa» (s 374).

⁴⁵ «una scrittura incancellabile che gli altri non fanno leggere» (s 377).

⁴⁶ P. Rau, *Beyond punctum and stadium: Trauma and Photography in Rachel Seiffert's «The Dark Room»*, in «Journal of European Studies», 3, 36, 2006, pp. 295-325, p. 298.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 314.

speaking/seeing subject is identified as male,⁴⁸ a gendered conception that has long defined the narrative subject of the text, *History*'s female voice defies gendered hierarchies of ekphrastic, literary and historical expression by becoming the constitutive voice of a doubly silenced narrative, with the poetics of trauma powerfully engendering a formerly untold tale.

⁴⁸ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, cit., p. 180.