

# *IL VELTRO*

RIVISTA DELLA CIVILTÀ ITALIANA



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ITALIA NEL MONDO intende promuovere, in Italia e fuori, la consapevolezza della tradizione e del presente della società italiana; delle sue affermazioni ideali, creative, umanitarie; dei valori e dei problemi che ne hanno orientato il corso storico; delle relazioni con altri Paesi, culture, società.  
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già dirigente culturale del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale e direttore di Istituti Italiani di Cultura

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LETTERATURA  
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**Il sacro e i santi nella letteratura contemporanea**  
a cura di Magdalena Maria Kubas

(A MOTHER’S) SACRIFICE IN *HISTORY*: A NOVEL  
BY ELSA MORANTE

*La Storia di Elsa Morante è stata definita dai critici come l'esempio perfetto di amore materno e sacrificio, in cui Ida Ramundo è interpretata come l'incarnazione sia di Maria che di Gesù. Sebbene il romanzo contenga numerosi elementi religiosi, userò il concetto di religiosità di Kristeva per sostenere che questo romanzo non riguarda il sacrificio, ma la consapevolezza contro l'irrealtà dei tempi moderni, che è centrale nella poetica di Morante. Questa consapevolezza si ottiene attraverso la rappresentazione della malattia (epilessia), della follia (il destino di Ida dopo aver perso entrambi i figli) e della parola poetica (il compito del poeta di vendicare gli emarginati). Basando il suo pensiero sulla definizione freudiana di religiosità, secondo cui chiunque confessi il sentimento dell'insignificanza umana è profondamente religioso, Julia Kristeva aggiunge che l'essenza della religiosità risiede nella reazione contro questo sentimento, cercando aiuto per combatterlo. Nota che le donne sono più inclini ad accettare umilmente il loro ruolo minimo nell'universo, rendendole irreligiose nel senso strettamente freudiano. Questo riflette perfettamente la posizione di Ida Ramundo all'interno della cattedrale de La Storia. Tuttavia, come sosterrò, le eccezioni sorgono dalla malattia della protagonista, in cui si sente parte del collettivo, non più fuori dalla Storia e dal Simbolico. Queste eccezioni sono più metafisiche che religiose o politiche. La consapevolezza di Ida invita il lettore a cercare e trovare il significato della Realtà al di fuori dei contesti politici, biologici o religiosi, enfatizzando l'altruismo e l'agire per gli altri, come Morante definisce la religione.*

*History: A Novel by Elsa Morante has been defined by critics as the epitome of maternal love and sacrifice, with Ida Ramundo interpreted as an incarnation of both Mary and Jesus. Although the novel contains numerous religious elements, I will use Kristeva's concept of the Religious to argue that this novel is not about sacrifice but about awareness against the unreality of modern times, which is central to Morante's poetics. This awareness is achieved through representations of illness (epilepsy), madness (Ida's fate after losing both of her sons), and the poetic word (the poet's task to avenge the marginalized). Basing her thought on Freud's definition of the religious, which states that anyone who acknowledges human insignificance is deeply religious, Julia Kristeva adds that the essence of religiosity lies in the reaction against this feeling, seeking help to combat it. She notes that women are more inclined to humbly accept their minimal role in the universe, making them irreligious in the Freudian sense. This perfectly reflects Ida Ramundo's position within the cathedral of History: A Novel. However, as I will argue, exceptions arise from the protagonist's illness, in which she feels part of the collective, not outside History and the Symbolic. These exceptions are metaphysical rather than religious or political. Ida's awareness invites the reader to seek and find the meaning of Reality beyond political, biological, or religious contexts, emphasizing altruism and acting for others, as Morante defines religion.*

*History: A Novel* is the third novel by the Italian writer Elsa Morante. It is a piece, following the wish of its author, published in an economical edition, and dedicated to «the illiterate to whom the author writes»<sup>1</sup>. The novel was published in 1974, and it immediately caused a great divide among the general public and started a vigorous debate inside intellectual circles, both in terms of its theme and its 'scandalous' ideological position the author takes in it. As it is, the novel is centred around the Second World War and the destiny of the marginalised, of the unprotected, and of the poor people caught in it through the prism of motherhood and the role of the woman in History. Unlike the dominant Communist and left-wing position the majority of intellectuals in the 1970s Italy take, this novel is rather sceptical about the possibility of human rights being equalled and of the oppressed not being ill-treated. Instead, it observes history and contemporary society as generators and promoters of such inequalities. With regard to its structure, the novel is quite unique, given that it is divided into nine chapters, the first and the last of which are designated as 19\*\*, whereas the remaining seven reflect the historical years of 1941 through 1947.

The beginning of each chapter features a historical overview of the most significant events of the period, provided in a bureaucratic fashion and brimming with statistical figures, with the names of pre-war, of war-time, and of post-war operations and with power distribution among the then world leaders. These introductions are clearly juxtaposed with lives and destinies of

common people, who are in the focus of our interest. The story weaves around a modest Jewish woman, the teacher and the widow Ida Raimundo, mother of 16-year-old boy Nino, who, in 1941, is raped by a German soldier just arrived at Rome at the beginning of his short war-time experience. Hidden from prying eyes, Ida gives birth to Giuseppe, a boy marked with epilepsy, whose short childhood is followed until the year of 1947. The backdrop of their stories is the war, the persecution of Jews, the bombardment of Rome, and hunger as a driving force for Ida to get her children nourished. The three of them survive the war, against all the odds, with Nino getting killed afterwards in a car accident as a smuggler of stolen goods and Useppe dying amidst a fit of epilepsy in 1947. His body, his mother driven mad of pain for her loss, and their beloved dog Bella are found by the police upon breaking into their apartment and upon being forced, subsequently, to kill Bella, which did not allow them to approach the mother and the dead son. The inspiration for this novel came to Elsa Morante after she had come across a piece of news from a daily crime log featuring the discovery of a child's body, of his mother insane from intense pain she had felt over the event, and of a dog the police were forced to kill in order to access the mother and the son. According to the notes by the author having been found afterwards, Morante had designed the novel as a book written against history, against war, against violence. Yet, Morante remarks, «writing against history is ridiculous», since «the author and the poet are not judges but witnesses»<sup>2</sup>.

This novel has often been partially interpreted by critics as an ode to motherly love and sacrifice. Thus, Garboli defines the story of Ida and Useppe as «a delivery in public»<sup>3</sup>, maintaining in his critical works on Morante an idea of the latter treating her novels like the children she never had, but whom she had so desperately desired. For his part, Gian Carlo Ferretti, in one of numerous reviews that followed the publication of the novel, claims that the true value of this piece is «a modern powerful Motherhood, at the same time pitiful and terrible»<sup>4</sup>.

This paper aims at proving that *History* is not a novel about motherly sacrifice, especially in religious terms, but that Morante in it successfully advocates the idea of single unorthodox religiosity, somewhat observable in her previous work entitled *The World Saved by Kids*, as well as in her prosaic essay entitled *For and Against the Atomic Bomb*. Our intention is to show how



it is exactly through the processes of “raising awareness” connected with an atypical experience of religion that the female protagonist Ida becomes the torchbearer of the perception of reality by means of process of illness, madness, and that through the very process of writing a battle against the disintegration of reality is realized, for which Morante claims to be the crucial role of any poet.

**Introductory notes: *The world saved by kids* and *Pro e contro bomba atomica***

One of the most compelling testimonies as regards the poetics of Elsa Morante is a conference entitled *For and Against the Atomic Bomb*<sup>5</sup>, which Morante held at the Carignano Theater in Turin (Italy), and then at the Eliseo Theater in Rome (Italy) in 1965. According to the author, contemporary world has been flooded with irreality, which is, at a symbolic level, identified with the atomic bomb. Irreality is faceless power, which is, at the same time, political, intellectual, and cultural. It manifests itself in a culture not only through civic, but also through populist engagement. Art is assigned a task to counter disintegration of reality through the integrity of the real by presenting life itself in all its diverse manifestations and shapes. Only art as such is «liberating and revolutionary»<sup>6</sup> and close to oppressed social classes. The reality that provides life to words cannot be defined through the abstract. Instead, it can be “touched” through feelings, in an emotional and direct manner<sup>7</sup>. The notions Elsa Morante presented at the conference represent an obvious tool for understanding the poetics of the novel in question, since the latter features faceless power through the character of History itself, which destroys whatever obstructs its way, by means of collective and individual ordeal of the innocent.

Along with the said conference, there is a hybrid work entitled *The World Saved by the Kids*, published in 1968, in which it is exactly the Happy Few who are capable of comprehending reality, whereas the Unhappy Many are incapable of recognising the processes of disintegration in modern times, which the author mentions during the conference. One element in which this work «clearly anticipates History is the one concerning illness and ‘madness’ as alternative instruments of perception, as the only possible beams by which one can access reality in the universe in which ratio serves violence, egotism, and death»<sup>8</sup>. In this very work, Morante

creates an alternative version of Sophocles' Oedipus in Colonus, as featured in the section of the collection under the same title, where Oedipus is in agony, losing his mind, while his daughter Antigone, a 14-year-old peasant girl, becomes the torchbearer of the perception of the World, that is, reality. She is going to accept suffering, illness, and death, Claudia Messina points out, while preserving a bewildered view of reality<sup>9</sup>. In that sense, the idea of possibility of perception, according to Morante, is given not to the intellectually capable, but to the 'pure ones', to those who, filled with curiosity, observe reality, accepting all their aspects in their entirety. Apart from that characteristic, perception depends on altruism as well, on the ability of one to give love and comfort to another person. It is these qualities, then, already expressed in *The World Saved by the Kids*, that are found in the novel *History*, through glorification of an unorthodox religious feeling, through love and perception of the world which is, eventually, made possible by the experience of illness, of 'madness' (in the sense of losing one's mind), as well as by the very act of writing. With regard to this, indicative for understanding of the relationship of the author towards *ratio* are the words uttered by Oedipus, lying in a psychiatric facility, in which the life of Ida Ramundo comes to an end as well:

il cervello è una macchina furba e idiota che la natura ci ha fabbricato studiandola apposta/per escluderci dallo spettacolo reale, e divertirsi ai nostri equivoci. / Solo quando la macchina si guasta, nelle febbri, nell'agonia, noi cominciamo a distinguere un filo / dello scenario proibito./ Nella mia cecità spasmodica e corrotta/ adesso io vedo cose nascoste alla innocente salute, agli occhi intatti<sup>10</sup>.

According to Morante, an objective approach by means of *ratio* is the one that prevents one from comprehending reality, and it is only at the moment of agony, of breaking down of that machine, that is, losing one's mind, that one recognises the forbidden scenario-disintegration of reality in contemporary world. In her interpretation of the novel, Graziella Bernabo points out that Morante talks about the perception assigned to the cracks that are, in traditional logos, opened due to free imagination<sup>11</sup>.

### Ida Ramundo and alternative means of reality perception

Critical reviews have done injustice to the character of Ida Ramundo by reducing her to a motherly function in the novel. She is a prototype of a mother sacrificing herself for her sons, Useppe and Nino, but she is also the central character in the novel «embodying an alternative form of perception that is connected to some kind of sacral “madness”»<sup>12</sup>. In her classic study on motherhood in the Italian literature entitled *Tigress in the snow*<sup>13</sup>, Laura Benedetti describes Ida as a devoted mother, dedicating her entire life for the benefit of her children, but one whose sacrifice does not bring redemption since, in her words:

In Morante’s works, mothers are trapped in an irrational and instinctive role, as is indicated by the frequent animal metaphors used to describe them. Theirs is the world of animals and children. They are trapped in a universe that is essentially prehistoric, and their influence stops with adulthood, when history begins<sup>14</sup>.

Here Benedetti points out how Ida fails in her single life mission, to keep Useppe alive, thus making it impossible for humankind itself to attempt at any process of redemption.

Furthermore, Benedetti, in the character of Ida, sees an embodiment of Jesus and Virgin Mary, while Petrocchi speaks of saint mother in the novels by Elsa Morante,<sup>15</sup> finding in the closing scene of the novel, in which Ida kneels down over Useppe's sunken body with her arms stretched, an image of Pietas. Ida's asceticism, her rejection of food so that she can feed it to Useppe, as well as her complete asexuality, they all serve to corroborate this claim. Within the Symbolic, Ida is unaware of her corporeity and its function. She is portrayed as an asexual being, a being that does not enjoy in any sexual act but perceives it as a way of pleasing her husband. In addition, she is ashamed of pregnancy caused by an act of rape committed by a German soldier. Ida feels her uterus to be «like an anomalous wound that at times exhausted her with violent hemorrhages»<sup>16</sup>, that is, to be disgrace to her. All these mechanisms represent a patriarchal experience of a female body as a basic medium of reproduction which needs to be secluded from public scrutiny and which performs clearly defined functions:

She had never felt at ease in her own body, to such a degree that she didn't look at it even when she bathed. Her body had grown up with her like an outsider; and not even in her girlhood had it ever been beautiful, with its thick ankles, frail shoulders, and the prematurely withered bosom. Her single pregnancy, like an illness, had been enough to make her misshapen forever; and afterward, in her widowhood, she had never thought that someone might use her body again as a woman's, to make love<sup>17</sup>.

In that sense, this corporeal experience is additionally accentuated through conditioning of the Italian culture by the Roman-Catholic creed, where the basic symbol of a mother is exactly Virgin Mary and where the ideal dyad is that between a mother and a son. A picture of the mother as an embodiment of Virgin Mary is not a novel one in the Catholic Italian culture. Adalgisa Giorgio, in her influential study on the relationship between a mother and a daughter in the Western culture, explains how Virgin Mary «became the symbol of the Church as mother of the faithful, and, finally, the essence of all mothers»<sup>18</sup>. Her position is subordinated to that of a child, but, according to Giorgio, the mother-son dyad is the dominating one:

Womanhood has been erased by motherhood, and motherhood has primarily meant generating and nurturing the male child. The archetype of the powerful, self-sacrificial, possessive, suffering, resilient Italian mother, who is the pillar of the family and demands lifelong exclusive loyalty and affection from her children in exchange of her devotion<sup>19</sup>.

A “definition” of genuine mothers by Elsa Morante, in which she praises women who are uneducated, instinctive, and out of culture<sup>20</sup>, has already made it to anthologies. Nevertheless, over the past few decades critics have shown, through interdisciplinary approach, that the position of the woman in the novels by Elsa Morante is a multi-layered and elusive one, very much like her oeuvre, in terms of one-sided and stereotypical interpretations. Such is Morante's notion of religion. In one of her rare interviews, she talks about one of the most important problems today, the defect of religious sense<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, she mentions, in the same interview, that «without religion one cannot live», as well as that she does not denote «a

specific official religion but any religion, not orthodox one, speaking [...] of that religion, which is altruism, working also for others»<sup>22</sup>.

Following her argument, religion is mostly based upon altruism, upon one's ability to offer love and consolation to another person, but it is, according to her, a counterpoint to disintegration of reality. That is to say, in *For and Against the Atomic Bomb* Morante mentions religion as a collection of knowledge about the final destruction (annientamento finale), as the only possible point of bliss, and as Nirvana in Eastern religions, to which one can reach through contemplation, through giving up on oneself, through universal mercy (Pietas), and through unity of consciousness<sup>23</sup>. The scriptures, according to her, oppose in their respective manner the disintegration of reality, of which Morante gives an address at the very conference, in the age of the atomic bomb and domination of power, with intellectuals standing aside in the state of conformity.

It is exactly this kind of elements that we find in the opening description of Ida in the novel. When observing her figure of a girl that never grew up, one can single out her look possessing an almost animal-like feature of corporeally comprehending reality:

*Foreknowledge*, actually, is not the best word, because knowledge had nothing to do with it. Rather, the strangeness of those eyes recalled the mysterious idiocy of animals, who, not with their mind but with a sense in their vulnerable bodies, “know” the past and the future of every destiny. I would call that sense — which is common in them, a part of the other bodily senses — the *sense of the sacred*: meaning by *sacred*, in their case, the universal power that can devour them and annihilate them, for their guilt in being born<sup>24</sup>.

This passage talks about several significant elements: sense of the sacred, whose perception comes through the medium of the body, not at a cognitive level, and is much closer to the animal than to the human world. In addition, this sort of perception of a universal power that can destroy and devour an individual out of their sense of feeling guilty for having been born in the first place is atemporal and implies, as we find about Ida at the very beginning, ‘precognition’ of future.

Indeed, as we are about to show through several examples, Ida's experience of unity of consciousness, which is of predominantly corporeal character, implies, in some key scenes of the novel, consciousness of what is going to happen in the near future. Along with her body, Ida's perception is supported by her feeling of tragic guilt over her Jewish descent. It is a type of fear conditioned by the social, which, in her particular case, is the fact that the latter will cause the death of both her and her sons. On the other hand, it is also a type of fear that conveys an idea of one feeling helpless before a universal power that can destroy them. Julia Kristeva, in her correspondence with philosopher Catherine Clément entitled *The feminine and the sacred*, mentions Freudian claims about religiosity, according to which it consists of feeling helpless when confronted with the infinite:

The critics persist in calling 'profoundly religious' any man who confesses the feeling of the insignificance of man and of human powerlessness in the face of the universe, even though it is not that feeling what constitutes the essence of religiosity, but rather the behavior that results, the reaction against that feeling, a reaction that seeks help to fight it. Anyone who does not take that step, who humbly acquiesces to the minimal role that man plays in the vast universe, is, in contrast, irreligious in the truest sense of the word<sup>25</sup>.

Kristeva maintains that it is women who are more likely to accept that role, which makes them irreligious in the orthodox sense of the notion<sup>26</sup>. Ida's social position is exactly of that sort. She is portrayed as an eternal child in constant fear over her Jewish origin, on her mother's side. Pasolini, in his review of *History*, is rather confident when he claims that the first section of the novel, which provides us with the childhood of Ida Ramundo, as well as with the death of her anarchist father and the suicide of her mother Nora, triggered by the fear of persecution following the introduction of racial laws, is of autobiographic character, and that this first section is where Morante had embedded her own «fear of a semi-Jewish woman at the beginning of racial persecutions»<sup>27</sup>.

Pierluigi Franchi talks about two kinds of Judaism in the novel, both of which represent «the author's two different approaches to Judaism»<sup>28</sup>. In case of Ida and Nora, it is an atavistic

memory of the persecution<sup>29</sup>, a form of mythical Judaism that follows neither tradition nor exercising religious beliefs, but which is connected to the idea of biological transmission of destiny and, in case of Davide Segre, it is demystified Judaism that rejects such an idea.

The episodes in which Ida experiences the unity of consciousness, along with premonitions of imminent future, are almost always connected to the Ghetto. Although Ida goes through the experience of war completely oblivious of the historical moment by waging «her private war for survival began [...] growing more and more ferocious»<sup>30</sup>, it is in the Ghetto itself that she makes contact with other people, that she finds about the details of the course of the war, and that she gives birth to Useppe in the house of Ezekel, an old midwife. The Ghetto symbolises the safety of uterus, the space of Chora in Kristeva's words, which is atemporal and out of historical dimensions. In *The Revolution of Poetic Language* (1974), Julia Kristeva discusses the concept of the semiotic, which she defines as a form of meaning that goes beyond language and is connected to maternal and infancy aspects of language. It's important to emphasize that Chora, according to Kristeva, is a trace representing a maternal aspect before sexual differentiation, an original motherhood for each individual, or more broadly, a cosmic dimension where encounters with others become possible<sup>31</sup>. Chora is not stable and comforting; instead, it is a dynamic dimension involving a blend of fusion and, simultaneously, division between self and other. The Ghetto is a place that unstoppably attracts Ida, even in moments when it means danger for her own life. Otherwise rather inert, Ida shows incredible bravery when she acts upon her instincts that lead her towards it. That way, Ida witnesses the day of deportation of Roman Jews. After she comes across the empty Ghetto, she notices a Jewish woman in the street and she decides to follow her, taking Useppe by the hand all the way to the railway station where both women find goods wagons brimming with Jews, on their way to concentration camps. Ida's unity of consciousness is displayed in that scene through her giving up on herself (it is said that «she too, had almost forgotten about herself»<sup>32</sup>), as a powerful force that has no temporal or spatial connotation, but that is «a combination of memories and some irresistible sweetness, that ultimate possibility, such as a place of repose that drew her down, into the promiscuous den of a single, endless family»<sup>33</sup>. Even after the Ghetto is completely vacated, Ida continues to pay visits to it, despite the danger

she exposes herself to, she recognized «the call that was tempting her there and that came to her this time like a low and somnolent dirge, still loud enough to engulf all exterior sounds»<sup>34</sup>. The rhythm of that lament reminds one of lulling mothers use to put their children to sleep, but of death as well, given that «they are written already in the seed of all the living, subject to death»<sup>35</sup>. An identical derailment outside the realm of sanity, through which Ida is going to find out about a tiny portion of ‘the forbidden scenario’, takes place on the day of Useppe’s death. Ida can sense the upcoming death of her son, as she has sensed the tragic destiny of the deported Jews. The precognition she feels is beyond reason, but it represents an instance of awareness of tragic reality, as opposed to the disintegration caused by the workings of Power. Ida feels unrest while she is in a meeting at school, she takes her coat, and rushes towards her apartment, sensing the tragic end for her son. Once again, her unity of consciousness is presented through a slip outside the Symbolic, through the sound of the lament from the space of Chora, which keeps returning to her like a leitmotif:

In the brief distance from school to home, Ida had been excluded, really, from external sounds, because she was listening to another sound, like something she hadn’t heard since her last walk in the Ghetto. It was, again, a kind of cadenced dirge which called from below, and summed up, in its tempting sweetness, something bloody and terrible, as if it were calling toward scattered points of misery and toil, summoning the flocks inside for the evening<sup>36</sup>.

Once again, this seizure is characterized by co-existence of various, this time mainly traumatic recollections, and by mixing various temporal levels, in which Ida «comprises tattered shreds of memory»<sup>37</sup> through her «clouded consciousness»<sup>38</sup>.

After she, upon returning to her apartment, discovers Useppe’s body, Ida loses her sanity and this scene, apart from the aforementioned similarity with Jesus and Virgin Mary, points to a similarity of two conditions: illness (epilepsy) and madness. Ida’s face features a smile, that



wasn't very different, to see it, from «the smile of calm and of wondrous ingenuousness, which came to her in her infancy after her hysterical attacks»<sup>39</sup>.

Her condition after the seizure and her loss of sanity are equaled, given that both point to the process of recovery from the unconscious into the conscious state of mind that is characteristic of the Happy Few, who observe the world around themselves with bewildered naivety. Illness and madness, apart from being equaled, feature the same function of awareness, that is perception of reality. At the same time, that is a moment in which Ida's blurred consciousness gets cleared. The illness, as well as the onsetting madness, represent Ida's tragic end and, at the same time, a clear urge to regain consciousness she has experienced. By referring to Ida's loss of sanity as a miracle («and here the miracle occurred to her»<sup>40</sup>), the voice of the narrator juxtaposes the plans of reality and irreality, clearly pointing to the death of Ida's son Useppe as a parable of the tragic experience of a marginalized individual since

«all History and all the nations of the earth had agreed on this end: the slaughter of the child Useppe Ramundo»<sup>41</sup>. In addition, the voice of the narrator reminds one of the roles of the poet, to portray disintegration of reality as the fundamental task of the artist.

## Conclusion

Ida Ramundo shares some features with the female protagonist of Elsa Morante's last novel, *Aracoeli*. Very much like Ida, Aracoeli is completely oblivious of the historical moment she lives in, she is deprived of political power, and she is, in her essence, still a child. In the words of Adalgisa Giorgio, Aracoeli, «does not signify the female essence but woman's position of marginality to culture<sup>42</sup>». Giorgio, however, points out that Morante does not see the unfitting of her female protagonists as a disadvantage, but, on the contrary, as an «empowering condition, because it allows her character to resist being crushed by History»<sup>43</sup>. Ida also perfectly fits that definition, since her existence is defined through episodes outside the Symbolic order. That way, the sacrifice she takes, which reminds many critics of Virgin Mary, is not of religious character, although it does look similar.

It is the Semiotic, to recall Kristeva's words, that leads to Ida's risk of losing sanity, which manifests itself through her epileptic seizures, hallucinations, and unity of consciousness. Yet,

it is these ‘seizures’ what makes Ida part of the Happy Few, described in *The World Saved by the Kids*. All those attempts to ‘regain consciousness’ of reality as opposed the irreality of modern times could be labelled as attempts by Elsa Morante to offer an alternative to social and cultural institutions embodying the Symbolic order. According to Morante, the extent to which the atomic bomb society deals with disintegration of reality matches the extent to which the author deals with disintegration of the official religion, history, and culture. In that ‘disclosure’, the role of the woman is, regardless of well-known attitudes about feminism of Morante herself<sup>44</sup>, is extremely important because, through motherly love and altruistic care for another human being, a space is opened for a vision of reality that is not contaminated by evil and domination of violence.

As we can see, Ida Ramundo does experience episodes of regaining consciousness, related to the Ghetto, but these episodes are not of religious character. They are directly linked with the experience of religion about which Morante, on rare occasions in her interviews and conferences, talks. Religion is, anyway, present in a similar, unorthodox fashion across her oeuvre. Ida and her sons, through their existence, provide us with an insight into a more genuine image of reality, the one overwhelmed with love for another human being, with no differentiation as regards class, gender, or any other criterion, as well as with the consciousness that the entire world is connected into one whole. They may end in a tragic manner, but their destiny also testifies about the power of poetry to fight against evil, as well as about the task of the writer to transpose that testimony and offer an insight into alternative realities. According to Stefania Lucamante in Morante’s poetics, «only the truth of writing can constitute a safe refuge from the unhappiness of existence»<sup>45</sup>.

Redemption does not come through History and political ideologies, but through alternative instruments of reception, through an unorthodox experience of religion, and through the consciousness that everything in this world leads to the point of truth, just like in the poetry Giuseppe ‘thinks’, for which the anarchist Davide Segre claims to be the poetry on God, which is recognized through the resemblances of all things and whose «most reliable witnesses, obviously, are not clergy, but atheists»<sup>46</sup> for «it’s not with institutions, or with metaphysics that you testify»<sup>47</sup>. The moment of truth and perception implies altruism and love, as is the case

with not only Ida the Mother, but also Ida the Individual in a battle against a destructible force such as History.

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(accessed 6 January 2023)

## Note

<sup>1</sup> It refers to the line of “por el analfabeto a quien escribo” from the poem of César Vallejo.

<sup>2</sup> M. ZANARDO, «Un atto di accusa, e una preghiera» *Un autocommento a La Storia*, in *Santi, Sultani e Gran Capitani in camera mia. Inediti e ritrovati dall'Archivio di Elsa Morante*, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Roma, 26 ottobre 2012 - 31 gennaio 2013, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> C. GARBOLI, Prefazione a E. MORANTE, *Pro o contro la bomba Atomica e altri scritti*, Milano, Adelphi 1987, p. 24

<sup>4</sup> G. BERNABÒ, *Come leggere la Storia di Elsa Morante*, Milano, Mursia 1991, p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> E. MORANTE, *Opere*, (a cura di) C. CECCHI-C. GARBOLI: vol.I, Milano, Mondadori 1990, p. 1547.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> G. BERNABÒ, *Come leggere la Storia di Elsa Morante*, cit., p. 23

<sup>9</sup> C. MESSINA, *At the center of Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini by Elsa Morante. A reading of the Serata a Colono*, on "Bollettino di italianistica, Rivista di critica, storia letteraria, filologia e linguistica" 1/2014, p. 115

<sup>10</sup> The brain is a clever and idiotic machine that nature has made for us/ studying it on purpose / to exclude us from the real show and have fun with our own misunderstandings. / Only when the machine breaks down, in fevers, in agony, we begin to distinguish a thread / of the forbidden scenario. / In my spasmodic and corrupt blindness/ now I see things hidden from innocent health, to the eyes intact (the translation is author's).

<sup>11</sup> G. BERNABÒ, *La fiaba estrema. Elsa Morante tra vita e scrittura*, Roma, Carocci 2012, p. 194

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>13</sup> The title of the book is a quotation from the novel *History: A novel*. Ida's frenzic search for food, as well as her attempts to find groceries in an empty Rome in order to nourish her son, are compared to a tigress which, in moments of scarcity, tears down chunks of its flesh and feeds them to its cubs while eating snow on its own.

<sup>14</sup> L. BENEDETTI, *Tigress in the snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press 2007, p. 81.

<sup>15</sup> A. PATRUCCO BECCHI, *STABAT MATER: Le madri di Elsa Morante*, «Belfagor» Vol. 48, No. 4, 1993, p. 436-451.

<sup>16</sup> E. MORANTE, *History: A Novel*, Hanover NH, Steerforth Press edition 2000, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> G. ADALGISA (a cura di), *Writing mothers and daughters*, New York-Oxford, Berghahn Books 2002, p. 119.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>20</sup> In one of the rare interviews given to the press, Morante famously replies to the question of what makes the ideal woman for her, and her inclination towards simple and uneducated women is no less famous: «Sì, adoro le madri, le vere madri. Ho grande amore per la donna semplice. Non amo molto le femministe perché ritengo che la donna sia una creatura necessaria all'umanità, agli uomini. Amo molto le donne come Nunziatella dell' Isola di Arturo, come Aracoeli. Mica tanto le signore borghesi o le intellettuali. Forse è un peccato».

<https://mostrebncrm.cultura.gov.it/morante/periodici/interviste/ESPRESSO00006.html>

<sup>21</sup> «Il Giorno», 4 settembre 1963 in E.MORANTE, *Opere*, (a cura di) C. CECCHI-C.GARBOLI: vol.1, Milano, Mondadori 1990, p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> E. MORANTE, *Opere*, cit., p. 1547.

<sup>24</sup> E. MORANTE, *History: A Novel*, Hanover NH, Steerforth Press edition, 2000, p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> J. KRISTEVA-C. CLÉMENT, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, Basingstoke, Palgrave 2001, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> Un'idea troppo fragile nel mare sconfinato della storia (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 2 agosto 1974), [https://mostrebncrm.cultura.gov.it/morante/periodici/dibattito\\_sulla\\_storia/TEMPO\\_2AGO00003.html](https://mostrebncrm.cultura.gov.it/morante/periodici/dibattito_sulla_storia/TEMPO_2AGO00003.html).

<sup>28</sup> P. LANFRANCHI, *Opposti ebraismi ne La Storia*, in *Elsa Morante. Mito e letteratura*, Milano, Lezioni 2021, p. 83.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>30</sup> E. MORANTE, *History: A Novel*, cit., p. 144.

<sup>31</sup> J. KRISTEVA, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, New York, Columbia University Press 1984, p. 27-28.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 702.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 701.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 704.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 703.

<sup>42</sup> G. ADALGISA, *Nature vs Culture: Repression, Rebellion and Madness in Elsa Morante's Aracoeli* in «MLN», vol. 109, no. 1, 1994, p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> In 1976, Morante declines the invitation by Biancamaria Frabotta to publish her poetry in a collection entitled *Donne in poesia* and in different occasions refuses to be defined as a *scrittrice*.

<sup>45</sup> S. LUCAMANTE (a cura di), *Elsa Morante's politics of writing: Rethinking subjectivity, history, and the power of art*, Vancouver, Faileigh Dickinson University Press 2014, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> E. MORANTE, *History: A Novel*, cit., p. 570.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*