

# "As if He Wanted to Murder Her": Fear, Disgust, and Anger in *La Storia*'s Rape Scene

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the episode of Ida's rape in Elsa Morante's *La Storia* is read as the intersection of three asymmetrical and intertwined conflicts – social, sexual, and racial – that permeates the entire novel. Ida's fear and shame are inherited from her mother's obsession with the racial laws and are inextricably linked to the disgust that knots Jewishness and nakedness. Ida's emotional history shows that the power relations between her and Gunther pre-exist their encounter and is pre-determined by gender, class, and race. I argue that the sets of emotions the two characters experience in the scene under scrutiny depend on such hierarchy. While Ida is petrified by fear, Gunther wavers between the desire for love and anger, which in this scene appears as a one-sided emotion entailing an asymmetrical power, triggered by what he perceives as an offence from a subject that he considers inferior.

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In the first chapter of Elsa Morante's *La Storia* (1974),<sup>1</sup> the German soldier Gunther walks the streets of the San Lorenzo neighbourhood in Rome, torn between the nostalgia for his home with his mother in Dachau and the desire for the warm body of a woman – any woman – in which to find comfort. The year is 1941, Italy and Germany are still war allies; but, despite the desperate expression in his eyes and his palpable loneliness and sadness, the soldier is not welcome in the neighbourhood. In Remo's tavern, the owner's hostility along with that of the waiter leads him to drink too much wine "while his anger tempted him to knock over the counter and the tables and to behave not like an ally but like an invader and a murderer" (*History*: 18).<sup>2</sup> Gunther leaves the tavern feeling both nostalgic and frustrated. And when he sees Ida at her front door, he decides to climb the stairs with her and enter her apartment. There, he rapes her twice, while the woman's mind drifts away, probably due to an epileptic attack.

Ida's rape is not only one of the most powerful scenes in *La Storia*, but also the episode that triggers the plot. The two characters experience intense emotional states and provoke unwanted reactions in each other, which are intensified by their lack of a shared language, until the situation eventually escalates into sexual violence. In this article, I will read this scene as a close encounter in wartime and as the point of intersection of three asymmetrical and intertwined conflicts – sexual, social, and racial – that permeate not only the time span of the novel (1941-1947), but also the years before and after the story. Although depicted as innocent and immature, Gunther – the man, the soldier, and the Nazi – is undoubtedly the stronger party in this encounter, since Ida is a timid woman, with an undeveloped sexuality. She is an elementary-school teacher afraid of all forms of authority, and a Jew by matrilineal descent. Morante's humble characters never win against more

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powerful enemies. Gunther, indeed, changes from an ally into an oppressor, although of a different kind than that imagined by Ida.

An analysis of Ida's fear, shame and subjection throughout the novel suggests that these emotions do not arise in the moments leading up to the rape, but are initially inherited from her mother Nora, who was obsessed with the racial laws. Ida's emotional history, in other words, shows that the power dynamics between her and Gunther pre-exist their encounter and are pre-determined by gender, class, and race. I would like to suggest that the sets of emotions the two characters experience in the scene under scrutiny are also dependent on the social, racial, and sexual hierarchy depicted in the novel.

During this encounter, Ida is petrified by fear and disgust, while Gunther wavers between his desire for love and his anger. Hence, like the power relations between them, the characters' emotional and affective reactions are also asymmetrical. Anger, for example, seems to arise both in the tavern and from Gunther's perception that Ida disrespects him, which he sees as an offence. But it is only against Ida that he becomes violent. Consequently, the question as to whether Gunther feels more offended by a woman than by a man can be raised. Moreover, Ida never feels anger: it would probably constitute an act of rebellion against authority which would be impossible for her. Therefore, both status and gender are at stake in the emotion of anger.

Anger has been studied since the beginning of Western culture and two approaches have emerged: anger is either a rational and just emotion, unless it becomes uncontrollable rage; or it is akin to madness and therefore a feeling to be suppressed (see Bodei, *Ira*: 13). According to Aristotle, who insisted on the cognitive aspect of anger, this emotion derives from the perception of an offence or wrongdoing and is complemented by a desire for retaliation: "Anger may be defined as an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one's friend" (*Rhetoric*: 70-71). Aristotle also links the emotional reaction to the social hierarchy: "The world implied by Aristotle's account of anger is hierarchical, consisting of people who are superior or inferior in regard to strength, wealth, status, and the like" (Konstan, *Aristotle on Anger and the Emotions*: 112). Importantly, anger is directed at someone who was expected to pay respect to the offended person: "The ruler demands the respect of the ruled, and the man who thinks he ought to be a ruler demands the respect of the man whom he thinks he ought to be ruling. Hence it has been said *Great is the wrath of kings* [...], their great resentment being due to their great superiority" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*: 62, emphasis in the original).

The idea that anger is just when it defends one's status in society allowed for legitimate anger on the part of men, but "there was almost no legitimate place for women's anger in the classical city" (Harris, *The Rage of Women*: 137). However, the stereotype that anger is not appropriate for women has long existed and is still reflected in the role played by gender in the socialization of emotions. It has also been suggested that the social control of anger is instrumental in preserving male dominance over women.<sup>3</sup> Although we do not think of anger today in terms of

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class, and women are (re)claiming the right to be angry (a right which subtends the feminist movement), for a long time anger did not belong to them or to those who were either deemed inferior by others or considered themselves to be inferior in the social ladder. The ancient "asymmetrical power" of anger (Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion*: 3) seems more pertinent to the vision of history as "a scandal that has lasted for ten thousand years," as the original subtitle of *La Storia* reads.

Gunther is not a "ruler" in absolute terms. He and Ida are both on the same side in the large-scale war between those that Morante calls "Powers" with a capital P (*History*: 6), "the landowners" (6), or "the usual powerful forces" (8) and the weak and powerless, who are all doomed to succumb. Ida's oppressor is in his turn oppressed and annihilated in his own asymmetrical war against history. Thus, he joins the multitudes of history's victims, further complicating his representation as a violent rapist. However, the emotions activated in the interaction between Gunther and Ida reveal the inequality between the two characters. Gunther is a character who is certainly stronger than Ida. He demands her respect and submission, while Ida's specific emotions are fear and shame.

### A History of Fear and Shame

Ida first appears in the novel as she returns home with her shopping bags; she is described as a shy woman. Gunther, who has just left the tavern, calls out to her with no apparent reason: "She, however, seeing him confront her, stared at him with an absolutely inhuman gaze, as if confronted by the true and recognizable face of horror" (*History*: 19).<sup>5</sup> These first lines about Ida position her outside of the human realm ("inhuman gaze") and start a long series of similes that both compare her mostly to female animals, and contribute to the construction of her character as Other. Her reaction at this point is barely understandable, but the following digression about her childhood and her last years in Rome explains the origin of that horror: she fears that her son, Nino, might not be considered Aryan enough. According to the recent racial laws approved by the Fascist regime, indeed, Ida herself is a "half Jew," because her mother Nora was a Jew, though she decided to keep this detail secret. Ida's father, Giuseppe, instead, was an anarchist, which also had to be hidden in Fascist Italy. Apart from these family secrets, the epileptic attacks Ida suffered when she was a child were another "scandal."

Ida, 37 years old when the story begins, is also said to have remained a little girl, "because her chief attitude toward the world had always been and still was (consciously or not) one of frightened awe" (*History*: 21).<sup>6</sup> Not only is Ida still a child, but she is also unaware of her own attitude toward the world ("consciously or not"), a condition that pushes her toward the limits of what can be defined as human:

[I]n her great dark almond eyes there was the passive sweetness of a very profound and incurable barbarism, which resembled foreknowledge.

*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

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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. (21, emphasis in the original)

This passage, elaborating on Ida's "animal nature" so to speak, is very dense with philosophical implications, mentioning concepts such as guilt, the sacred, the vulnerability of the body, and the boundaries between the human and the animal. It is not surprising that Giorgio Agamben, friend and critic of Morante, wrote about "Elsa's tenacious philosophical convictions" (*The End of the Poem*: 102). Ida's sensations connect her – in the same way as they connect animals – to a superior power that has given her life and can take it back in any moment, as if she were guilty and in debt, as per Agamben's equation "being-in-debt: *in culpa esse*" (*Homo Sacer*: 28). Ida is outside – we do not know whether below or beyond, given that animal dignity in Morante's work<sup>8</sup> – the human and cognitive understanding of the world, and therefore she is vulnerable, as she is exposed to the universal power that can reclaim her life in any moment.

Ida's vulnerability appeared as a mysterious disease, probably epilepsy, when she was a child: "Toward the age of five, for a whole summer Iduppa was subject to attacks of an unnamed disease [...]. In the midst of her games and her childish prattle, she would suddenly fall silent, turn pale, with the impression that the world was spinning and dissolving around her" (*History*: 29).<sup>9</sup> At the inception of these episodes of vertigo, Ida would only emit a "little animal lament" (29).<sup>10</sup> Soon after them, however, she would enjoy "sweet, seemly repose" (29),<sup>11</sup> while her parents would bend their heads over her, resembling a sheepdog and a goat respectively. The animal imagery, positing the question of what is human (Umberto Saba and Primo Levi come to mind), already suggests the issue of race and exclusion. Ida, the little beast, protected metaphorically by those two animals, lives her childhood removed from society, inheriting her parents' sense of exclusion, especially her mother's: "As for her Jewish secret, she had explained to her daughter, from early childhood, that the Jews are a people destined, since time began, to suffer the indictive hatred of all other peoples; and that even during apparent periods of truce, persecution will always dog them, eternally recurring, as their prescribed destiny" (23).<sup>12</sup> Nora is obsessed with and frightened by the history of oppression of the Jewish people and is "the first victim of that obscure and negative entity incarnated by history that is always present throughout the novel" (Moretti, *Crises, Suffering and Breakdowns*: 423).

However, even before her mother's death, Ida has already lost her sense of protection. She starts to feel vulnerable when first her father and then her husband die: "After losing Giuseppe and Alfio one after the other, she found herself definitely exposed to fear; hers was the typical case of someone who had always remained a child, and was now fatherless" (*History*: 45).<sup>13</sup> According to Adriana Cavarero, the vulnerable person is always part of an asymmetrical relationship, in which the other can decide over her life or death, giving care or killing (*Horrorism*: 23). However, while Cavarero attributes this role to the mother, Ida's sense of

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protection seems to come from the only two men that do not scare her, which confirms the character's dependence and men's power over her.

Ida's relationship to the world remains one of inferiority throughout her life, because she never establishes any reciprocal rapport with anybody, continuing to live in a state of fear and awe. She is especially afraid of authority; for example, she fears the kind of power represented by three pictures hanging in the classroom where she teaches: Christ, Mussolini, and the King. Although the narrator uses irony to describe them, all three figures are awe-inspiring abstractions for Ida (*History*: 46). The tirade against Mussolini and Hitler, "two ill-starred counterfeiter" (46),<sup>14</sup> expresses the narrator's opinion and indignation and is totally external to Ida's consciousness: she, in fact, sees them as the symbol of absolute authority, the same authority which is also represented by Gunther's uniform. This contrast makes Ida's reaction even more conspicuous. Although for the narrator and for the reader Gunther is only a boy, as we will see, his aspect is enough to trigger in the woman the fear that is part of her emotional history.

Ida is afraid not so much for herself but for her son. Studies of fear have highlighted 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" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*: 65).<sup>15</sup> Ida's fear, however, is both anticipation and repetition. Nora was afraid for herself and for her daughter, whom she wanted to be baptized a Catholic, even before the racial laws were introduced. Ida inherits the same fear that her own son will be persecuted, as it is made clear in the scene in which she traces Nino's family tree in order to measure his Aryan part against the Jewish one (*History*: 67). Sara Ahmed also focuses on how emotions impress themselves on people's bodies and connect the future to the present: "Fear presses us into that future as an intense bodily experience in the present" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotions*: 65). The impression of fear on Ida's body is "an imperceptible but constant trembling of her hands" (*History*: 45).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, fear is a force that sometimes involves "taking flight, and other times may involve paralysis" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*: 65).<sup>17</sup> Here is the difference between Ida and Nora: instead of attempting to hide or escape as Nora did, Ida tends to comply with the law. For example, she reports herself for the census, donates her wedding ring to the homeland (unlike her mother, who never wanted to part from hers),<sup>18</sup> and teaches her pupils according to the Fascist scholastic programs (see, for example, *History*: 46 and 95). Moreover, although she is baptized Catholic, which gives her the legal right to work, she feels guilty for being a Jew that teaches in a public school: "Particularly at school, where she, a clandestine half-Jew, enjoyed the rights and functions due *Aryans*, she felt guilty, a usurper, a counterfeiter" (62 emphasis in the original).<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that the word "counterfeiter" has already appeared with reference to Mussolini and Hitler, but rather than reporting Ida's thought it expressed the judgment of the narrative voice. Unlike the narrator, the character can only judge (and condemn) herself, while respecting and fearing authority.

Thus, although fear and guilt are different emotions, in Ida they coexist, and even intertwine with shame.<sup>20</sup> When she has to report herself for the census, she

goes to the city offices "as timid and stunned as if she were on trial at the Palace of Justice" (58),<sup>21</sup> providing all the documents for her maternal and Jewish side and for her paternal and "Aryan" side:

Not a thing was lacking. And since she was *ashamed* even to open her mouth, along with this dossier, she also handed the clerk a page from a notebook where, in her own hand, she had written out her personal data. But a kind of *repugnance*, tantamount to a final little tribute, had made her omit any accent on her mother's maiden name. (58-59, emphasis mine)<sup>22</sup>

While shame can be 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" (Probyn, *Blush*: 3). This kind of fear leads Nora to escape (and maybe to commit suicide), precisely because she feels that "for her, in the entire globe, there was no place" (*History*: 52).<sup>23</sup> Ida, instead, is too passive to escape and does not fail to admit to her Jewish heritage, when she is directly asked about it.

However, the fact that Ida also feels "repugnance" perhaps requires a different reflection on shame that also considers disgust or revulsion. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, in which he analyses the literature of the survivors of Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben dedicates a chapter ("Shame, or On the Subject") to the inseparability of shame and sense of guilt and touches upon the link between shame and repugnance:

[S]hame does not derive, as the moral philosophers maintain, from the consciousness of an imperfection or a lack in our being from which we take distance. On the contrary, shame is grounded in our being's incapacity to move away and break from itself. If we experience shame in nudity, it is because we cannot hide what we would like to remove from the field of vision. (Agamben, *Remnants*: 105)

The reference to nudity is relevant to my analysis, because in *La Storia* the problem of race overlaps with the issues of the body and sexuality. As Katja Liimatta observes: "Like her Jewish heritage, the protagonist keeps her body in secrecy, because similar to the maternal name it represents something shameful that has to be hidden" (*Rape, Body, and Identity*: 222). This shameful attitude toward sexuality seems also to have been inherited from Ida's parents:

Iduzza was a virgin not only in her body but also in her thoughts. She had never seen an adult naked, because her parents never undressed in her presence; and she was extremely modest also about her own body, even when she was alone. Nora had informed her only that to procreate babies the man's body had to enter the woman's. It's a necessary operation, to which you had to submit dutifully, and it doesn't hurt too much. (*History*: 37)<sup>24</sup>

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While the body's nudity is a shame to always keep hidden, in this passage the sexual intercourse is presented as an obligation, thereby depicting women as victims of institutionalized rapes and relegating them in their role as mothers.

Ida's body "had grown up with her like an outsider" (91).<sup>25</sup> However, as Agamben argues, the impossibility of fully removing what is in oneself, this very intimacy with oneself, causes revulsion: "The predominant feeling in disgust is the fear of being recognized by what repulses us" (*Remnants*: 106). In Ida, this feeling concerns her own body (for which she feels ashamed to the point that she never even looks at herself naked), as well as her mother's name, in which an accent becomes a linguistic index, directly pointing, that is, to her Jewish origin:

"Almàgia or ALMAGIÀ?" the clerk inquired, examining her with an inquisitorial eye, authoritative and threatening.

She flushed, worse than a pupil caught copying an answer. "Almagià," she murmured hastily, "my mother was Jewish." (*History*: 59, emphasis in the original)<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, the object of Ida's revulsion – which will play a significant role in the rape scene – is her own Jewishness, which is as intimate as her own nudity. Shame, guilt and disgust – even abjection in Julia Kristeva's sense<sup>27</sup> – are one thing for her, who feels more and more impure as she learns the word "Aryan":

Ida learned that the Jews were different not only because they were Jews, but also because they were non-*Aryans*. [...] in her concept the Jews were opposed to the *Aryans* much as the plebeians to the patricians (she had studied history!). However, obviously, the non-*Aryans*, for the Authorities, were the most plebeian of the plebeians! For example, the baker's apprentice, plebeian by class, compared to a Jew was as good as a patrician, because he was Aryan! And if, in the social order, the plebeians were already like scabies, the plebeians of the plebeians must have been leprosy! (61, emphasis in the original)<sup>28</sup>

In her attempt at understanding her own identity, Ida resembles Morante herself, who was the daughter of a Jewish mother, and who later wrote: "I should be grateful to Mussolini. In 1938, by introducing the German racist laws he made me realize that I myself was a Jew [...] when the Germans took over Rome in 1943, I learned a great lesson, I learned terror" (quoted in Popoff, *Once Upon a Time*: 25). Stefania Lucamante has argued that in *La Storia* Morante addresses "the destiny of the disenfranchised," but "an intensely private aim was tied to her general intentions: by bringing together literary paths she had previously followed in intellectual isolation, she sought to investigate the roots of her own Jewishness" (*Forging Shoah Memories*: 154). In order to do that, Morante creates a character that possesses "the mysterious idiocy of animals" (*History* 21) and is excluded from humankind, but capable of "knowing" more and of identifying herself – later in the novel – with the Jewish community of Rome.

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As the above quotation from *La Storia* shows, it is only through the naïve and dichotomic language of elementary school pupils that Ida manages to conceptualize the anti-Semitic laws approved by Hitler and Mussolini, establishing a hierarchy of valuable lives (Aryan, non-Aryan, Jews), in which the bottom positions are occupied by the most powerless and vulnerable ("the plebeians of the plebeians"). In addition, it is worth noting that in the same passage Morante temporarily abandons the animal metaphors, which she uses to convey Ida's Otherness, and employs the metaphor of the disease (scabies, leprosy), selecting images that provoke revulsion and call for the Jews' exclusion from society.

After Ida realizes that Jews are like diseases in the social order, the idea that Nora's emotions can inhabit Ida's body reappears, and so does the animal imagery: at this point, indeed, "it was as if Nora's obsessions, swarming in disorder after her death, had returned to nest inside her daughter" (61).<sup>29</sup> This explains her horror and defencelessness in the rape scene, when the two parties remain engrossed in their emotional states without the possibility of negotiating them.

### Repulsion and Revenge

Critics have grappled with the interpretation of *La Storia*'s rape scene, especially because the narrator seems at times to sympathize with Gunther – defined as a nostalgic "humble soldier" (68) and "a beggar rather than an assassin" (69)<sup>30</sup> – and because of Ida's smile after the rape – explained as her body's response to an epileptic attack – that may add ambiguity to the scene. Given the representation of Gunther as a "sympathetic character" and the visionary language of the scene, for Lydia Oram, "Morante's representation transcends both a conventional reading of rape in the context of war as male violence against helpless female victims and an orthodox feminist reading of rape as an act of violence against a woman wholly bereft of agency" (*Rape, Rapture and Revision*: 412). I would agree that Ida's rape is very different from the representation, for example, of the rape of Mariulina and her mother, perpetrated by German soldiers later in the novel as an act of retaliation against members of the resistance, and the rape of Rosetta in Alberto Moravia's *La ciociara* (1957, translated as *Two Women*), committed by a gang of Moroccan soldiers depicted as brutal mass rapists. However, precisely the inclusion of other episodes of sexual violence in the novel and the abovementioned representation of both Nora's and Ida's sexuality testify to "Morante's concern for male sexual dominance," as Liimatta puts it (*Rape, Body and Identity*: 220).<sup>31</sup>

One interpreter who has looked specifically at the emotions at stake in this scene is Amoz Oz. In his book on beginnings in literature, *The Story Begins*, Oz dedicates a chapter to *La Storia*, in which he carries out a close reading aimed at understanding how hatred and violence can spring out from a young man's nostalgia and need for love. He outlines Gunther's trajectory from melancholy to murderous anger and then to a sort of childish tenderness. It is the confusion of languages, emotions and gestures characterizing the scene, according to Oz, that leads to an outburst of violence and to the rape in this "tragedy of errors" (*The Story Begins*: 80), where evil is born from innocence.

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Like Oram, Oz insists on Gunther's innocence, but while Oram considers the rape as a way to represent history as "both subjective/individual and collective" (*Rape, Rapture and Revision*: 412), Oz argues that the evil of the rape does not depend on external, historical factors, but it comes, instead, from the inside:

The horrors of history and the cruelty of establishment may be the remote cause for the characters' suffering, but the root of evil is not "external," it is not in the fat cigar-smoking capitalists and their fascist warmongering lackeys. A deep, ahistorical level of evil is revealed in the scene of the rape. It is a scene with only two characters in the room, a man and a woman, both of them good and simple souls. But one good soul suddenly inflicts pain and humiliation on the other good soul. (*The Story Begins*: 74)

I suggest that the complexity of this scene is the result of a combination of conflicts that are embedded in the emotional history of the two characters, especially Ida's. However, I insist that this history can never be decoupled from History, the collective history, which is an endless spiral of oppression, whose victims are the weakest: children, animal, Jews, and women (although men also are victims, besides being oppressors). Precisely because of the imbalance between Ida and Gunther, the affective possibilities of the two characters point toward opposite directions: while Ida's fear and disgust cause immobility and unconsciousness, Gunther's need for love turns into violent anger and revenge that take the shape of sexual assault. Moreover, although he is unaware of Ida's Jewish identity, Gunther is a Nazi<sup>32</sup> that rapes a Jewish woman and Jewish women were vulnerable to rape and sexual exploitation during the Holocaust.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, History cannot be considered only a "remote" cause for this encounter. The rape, in its turn, illuminates the power relations at the basis of the mechanism of collective History.

The emotional intensity of the scene is accentuated by the excursus in Ida's life prior to her encounter with Gunther, immediately after their eyes meet in the first chapter of the book, leaving them frozen in that moment until the account is resumed in Chapter 4. The instant in which the two characters first see each other is, in other words, separate from the scene in which the soldier accompanies Ida to her apartment. In the digression, the story of Ida's fearful and shameful existence and the story of her family are intertwined with the political history of the first half of the twentieth century, and especially of the war, as I have argued in the previous section of this article. Ida's fear is linked to the historical events of the racial persecutions, besides being inherent to her personality, which resembles that of a child.

The episode of the rape is an asymmetrical encounter in war in which the characters do not see each other for who and what they really are, but as the personification of their own fears or frustrations. The freeze frame, to use a cinematic term, of Ida staring at the soldier is particularly relevant for the development of the events: in the entire episode, her vision appears flawed, as Ida fails to see not only the young nostalgic man in need of some maternal comfort, but also the potential rapist who emerges when his emotional state changes. Throughout the scene, she only sees the soldier, metonymically represented by his

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uniform: "The fears besieging her prevented her from seeing anything of him except a German army uniform" (*History*: 68).<sup>34</sup> Even the body of the young man seems to disappear from her sight, obscured by the uniform, "which seemed stationed there, waiting for her" (68).<sup>35</sup> Ida will never see a person in Gunther, but only "a copy of the thousands of similar faces that multiplied to infinity the sole, incomprehensible face of her persecution" (68);<sup>36</sup> a symbol, in other words, of Germany, Nazism and the racial laws.

Because of the metonymic significance of his uniform, Ida reacts to the sight of Gunther not simply with diffidence (like Remo and the waiter in the tavern), but with revulsion (*ribrezzo* in Italian), a lexical variation for disgust (*disgusto*), which takes the soldier by surprise: "The soldier was offended, feeling the unknown lady's evident and extraordinary disgust was an injustice. He wasn't accustomed to inspiring disgust in women, and furthermore he knew (despite his earlier little disappointments) he was in an allied, not an enemy country" (68).<sup>37</sup> Disgust becomes a much worse offence than Remo's aloofness and suspicion, especially because it comes from a woman, who must occupy a lower level in the social hierarchy for Gunther. Indeed, the following simile compares him and Ida respectively to a kid and a persecuted cat. Expanding the metaphor, the narrator reports that even before meeting Ida, Gunther had desired the warm body not of a woman, but of "the first female creature who happened to come into that doorway (we don't mean just an ordinary girl or some little neighborhood whore, but any female animal: a mare, a cow, a she-ass!)" (18-19).<sup>38</sup> This attitude is profoundly ambiguous, because the young man would be ready to call "Mutter" any animal "with a barely human gaze" (19). Instead, ironically, he meets a woman who looks at him "with an absolutely inhuman gaze" (19).

Gunther only expects respect from the animal/woman Ida, and her expression of disgust offends him deeply. It is significant that disgust has been linked with the corporeal and animal parts of human beings. An aphorism by Walter Benjamin – discussed by Agamben in the aforementioned pages on shame and disgust – shows such awareness: "In an aversion to animals the predominant feeling is fear of being recognized by them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognized" (Benjamin, *One-Way Street*: 59; see also Agamben, *Remnants*: 106). Similarly, Martha Nussbaum emphasizes how "disgust is a strong aversion to aspects of the body that are seen as 'animal reminders' – that is, aspects of ourselves that remind us that we are mortal and animal" (*Anger and Forgiveness*: 48). However, Ida's conceptualization of her Jewish identity, as we have seen, deploys a metaphor of disease.<sup>39</sup> To quote again from Nussbaum:

Disgust [...] concerns an idea of contamination: it expresses an anxiety that the self will be contaminated by taking in something that is defiling. "You are what you eat," as the saying goes. And the "primary objects" of disgust are all "animal reminders": our own bodily excretions (sweat, urine, faeces, semen, snot, blood), which remind us of our commonality with nonhuman animals, and corpses, which remind us of our mortality and fragility. (*Political Emotions*: 183)

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While disgust implies boundaries, and issues of exclusion and inclusion (what one decides to eat), the image of leprosy summoned by Ida suggests fear of contamination brought about by her own Jewishness. It is no surprise, then, that she "did not see him so much as, in splitting of her personality, she saw herself, stripped now of every disguise, down to her private, half-Jewish heart, there before him" (*History*: 69).<sup>40</sup> Again, shame connected to revulsion evokes an image of nudity and unbearable intimacy with herself ("stripped now of every disguise"): the more Ida sees Gunther as an empty uniform, the more she feels her own nakedness.

As theories of emotion and affect have shown, no object is inherently fearful or disgusting. It is Ida's history of fear that justifies her inhuman first look at the soldier, who is metonymically the "face of horror" or a uniform that in its turn becomes a symbol of oppression: "The fear opens up past histories of associations (in the very rehearsal of childhood fantasies)" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*: 63). Since she had interiorized her mother's fear and shame, as we have seen, Ida's revulsion presupposes the disgust for a part of herself, that she feels as "impure" when she looks at her Jewish identity from the perspective of the racial laws.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Ida's, Gunther's emotional history does not involve the destiny of an entire people, but a history of male sexual domination. His nostalgia for two women – his mother and his prostitute – turns into anger at Remo's tavern, where he feels offended by the men's "distrustful, listless chill" (*History*: 17);<sup>42</sup> however, he decides to leave without seeking revenge for his offence. When slighted by Ida, his reaction is totally different: "In his mortification, instead of giving up, he insisted" (17).<sup>43</sup> Gunther's experience of Ida's apartment, with all the signs of Nino's energy, is a circus of emotions that range from "thirst for love" (*Oz, The Story Begins*: 72) to surprise and envy:

And in the meanwhile, the German's drunken thoughts did not concern races or religions or nations, but only ages. He was mad with envy and, to himself, he argued and silently stammered: "God-damn-it, the luck-y ones are still un-der the draft age – and – and they can enjoy their belong-ings at home – with their mothers! and the football! and the screw-ing and every-thing – everything! as if the war was on the moon and the planet Mars... grow-ing up in the worst luck... where am I any-way? What am I doing here? How did I get here?" (*History*: 72-73)<sup>44</sup>

Here the exclusion of History from the picture is more a wish than the depiction of reality. Gunther's envy is all but unrelated to the war. His very language and his hometown – together with his uniform – are the very symbols of the Holocaust. Thus, the next intense affective reaction in Ida occurs when she hears the name Dachau, which she does not know (at least not in a cognitive way), but her body somehow recognizes anyway: "However, at that innocuous and indifferent name, that wild, transitory migrant, now identified with her heart, leaped inside her. And flattering horribly in the distorted space of her little room, it begun to slam, in

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chirping tumult, against the walls that had no exit" (73).<sup>45</sup> The fears that had "nested" in Ida are now breaking loose.

Although the animal imagery extends here to Gunther, who resembles "a three-month-old kitten" (73)<sup>46</sup> while showing Ida a family picture taken in Dachau, this is not how the woman perceives him and her reaction is again one of disgust, an affective response to a name (Dachau) that will soon become inextricably associated with the Shoah. This is yet another element that reinforces the image of the soldier as the personification of the racial laws, hence Ida's repulsion, "as if she were facing a monster" (74).<sup>47</sup> In this moment, "to those eyes her gaze seemed the definitive insult. And instantaneously a tempest of anger clouded them" (73).<sup>48</sup> Neither gaze yields an accurate picture here, but they are both tainted by the characters' own beliefs. Thus, while Ida feels the inception of an epileptic attack similar to those she used to have as a child, her "No! No! No!" sounds like the ultimate rejection and offence to Gunther: "Without even taking off his uniform, caring nothing that she was old, he hurled himself on top of her, throwing her on that disheveled daybed, and raping her with rage as if he wanted to murder her" (74).<sup>49</sup>

### Making "the living and the dead equal"

Immediately after the violence, the gazes of Ida and Gunther finally meet: "Spontaneously, the boy raised his eyes toward Ida. And she met his tormented gaze, of an infinite ignorance and of a total awareness: both lost, the one and the other, in begging a single, impossible charity, vague also for him who asked it" (79).<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, "infinite ignorance" and "total awareness" coexist both in Ida and in Gunther, both childlike figures and both compared to animals in various moments of the narration. Finally, Gunther is also a victim of events larger than his private story. He is sent to Africa and dies three days after he has raped Ida leaving her pregnant. The latter will give birth to Useppe, embrace her Jewishness and survive the war. But the great evil of History will eventually kill the child and make her decide that "she no longer wanted to belong to the human race" (724).<sup>51</sup> From a "distance which makes the living and the dead equal" (522)<sup>52</sup> in the narration, Ida and Gunther appear to be on the same part in the asymmetrical war against History – that of the victims.

The two characters' shared destiny is apparent at the level of the novel's macro structure. In *La Storia*, the narrative of the rape is preceded not only by an excursus into Ida's life, by also by a number of paratextual elements. In the first epigraph of the novel, WWII is identified as an attack of governments on people ("There is no word in the human language capable of consoling the guinea pigs who do not know the reason for their death").<sup>53</sup> The second epigraph derives from the New Testament, one of the most important sources for Morante, and establishes that children are closer to God than adults ("... thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes...").<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in the chronicles that introduce each narrative segment, History is depicted as a struggle between the powerful and the powerless. Since a beginning is the establishment of a

contract between writer and reader (Oz, *The Story Begins*: 7), the many beginnings in *La Storia* may be considered, according to Oz, as several contracts between Morante and her readers. In the strictly narrative part, however, the struggle concerns only the poor and the oppressed: the young soldier, a boy more than a soldier, becomes the oppressor of the elementary school teacher.

Ida's vulnerability, the "idiocy" that makes her more similar to animals than to humans, the sense of guilt and shame deriving from her Jewish heritage, with the ensuing sense of disgust, and her undeveloped sexuality mark her as Other. Although her rape is different from the typical wartime rape, and the rapist is just another victim of history, the hierarchies of domination based on race and gender are very much at work in the scene. *La Storia* is, indeed, both "one of the most emblematic texts for the literary representation of the Shoah" (Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories*: 15) and the exposure of women's submission and men's supremacy.

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of Art. Ed. by Stefania Lucamante. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015. 53-65.

- <sup>1</sup> The novel was translated into English in 1977. All references to the English translation will appear in parenthesis in the text, while I will give the original version in the notes.
- <sup>2</sup> "Mentre una rabbia lo tentava a buttare all'aria il banco e i tavoli, e a comportarsi non più da alleato, ma da invasore e da assassino" (*La Storia*: 19).
- <sup>3</sup> "Another thing wrong with anger was that it was feminine. Such was the stereotype throughout classical antiquity. Anger was prominent among the passions that women and goddesses could not resist – though occasionally a fictional heroine succeeded in doing so. The critique of anger thus came to be, among other things, an instrument of male domination, and virtually no one is known to have stood up in any way for the possible justice of a woman's rage" (Harris, *Restraining Rage*: 406).
- <sup>4</sup> "Potenze" (*La Storia*: 8), "padroni della terra" (8-9) and "soliti poteri" (10).
- <sup>5</sup> "Colei però, al vedersi affrontata da lui, lo fissò con occhio assolutamente disumano, come davanti all'apparizione propria e riconoscibile dell'orrore" (*La Storia*: 20).
- <sup>6</sup> "Ida era rimasta, nel fondo, una bambina, perché la sua precipua relazione col mondo era sempre stata e rimaneva (consapevole o no) una soggezione spaurita" (*La Storia*: 21).
- <sup>7</sup> "[N]ei suoi grandi occhi a mandorla scuri c'era una dolcezza passiva, di una barbarie profondissima e incurabile, che somigliava a una procognizione. *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. Chiamerei quel senso – che in loro è comune, e confuso negli altri sensi corporei – *il senso del sacro*: intendendosi, da loro, per *sacro*, il potere universale che può mangiarli e annientarli, per la sola colpa di essere nati" (*La Storia*: 21).
- <sup>8</sup> For analyses of animal imagery in *La Storia*, see at least Concetta D'Angeli, *Leggere Elsa Morante*, especially chapter 4; Giuseppina Mecchia, *Elsa Morante at the Biopolitical Turn*; Christina Vani, *Talking Animals*; and Saskia Ziolkowski, *Morante and Kafka*. I would like to thank my reviewer for suggesting that Morante might have been inspired by the images of female animals in Umberto Saba's poetry.
- <sup>9</sup> "Verso il quinto anno di età, Idiazza fu soggetta per tutta una estate agli insulti di un male innominato [...]. Nel mezzo dei suoi giochi e delle sue chiacchiere infantili, le capitava all'improvviso di ammutolire impallidendo, con l'impressione che il mondo le si dissolvesse intorno in una vertigine" (*La Storia*: 28).
- <sup>10</sup> "Un lamento di bestiola" (*La Storia*: 28).
- <sup>11</sup> "Un riposo dolce e composto" (*La Storia*: 29).
- <sup>12</sup> "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" (*La Storia*: 24).
- <sup>13</sup> "Dopo la sparizione successive di Giuseppe e di Alfio, essa si trovava esposta definitivamente alla paura, perché il suo era il caso di una rimasta sempre bambina, senza più nessun padre" (*La Storia*: 43).
- <sup>14</sup> "Due sventurati falsari" (*La Storia*: 45).
- <sup>15</sup> Already Aristotle, in his account of the individual emotions and their objects that I quoted above, defines fear as "a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future" (*Rhetoric*: 81).
- <sup>16</sup> "Un tremito impercettibile ma continuo delle sue mani" (*La Storia*: 43).
- <sup>17</sup> We should here also recall Cavarero's distinction between fear and horror. "In horror," says Cavarero, "there is no instinctive movement of flight in order to survive, much less the contagious turmoil of panic. Rather, movement is blocked in total paralysis, and each victim is affected on its own" (*Horrorism*: 8).
- <sup>18</sup> "In spite of her patriotic conformity (unlike her timid daughter Ida) she had not wanted to part with it when the government had invited the people to 'give gold to the Fatherland' to aid the

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Abyssinian conquest" (*History*: 54). "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" (*La Storia*: 52).

<sup>19</sup> "Specie a scuola, nell'esercitare, lei, mezza ebrea clandestina, i diritti e le funzioni dovuti agli *Ariani*, si sentiva in colpa, come un'abusiva o una falsaria" (*La Storia*: 58).

<sup>20</sup> Martha Nussbaum, for example, writes that "guilt is a negative emotion directed at oneself on the basis of a wrongful act or acts that one thinks one has caused, or at least wished to cause. It is to be distinguished from shame, a negative reaction to oneself that has a characteristic, or trait, as a focus" (*Anger and Forgiveness*: 128). Despite this distinction, however, guilt and shame often appear connected, probably precisely because they are directed at oneself.

<sup>21</sup> "Vergognosa e tramortita come un'imputata al Palazzo di Giustizia (*La Storia*: 54).

<sup>22</sup> "Non ci mancava proprio nulla. E in più (vergognandosi fino d'aprir bocca) insieme con questo incartamento essa presentò all'impiegato un foglio di quaderno, sul quale per una identificazione immediata e muta aveva trascritto di sua mano i propri dati anagrafici personali. Ma una specie di ripugnanza, che valeva quale un piccolo omaggio estremo, le aveva fatto tralasciare ogni segno di accentuazione sul cognome della madre" (*La Storia*: 55).

<sup>23</sup> "Per lei, nell'intero globo, non c'era nessun posto" (*La Storia*: 49).

<sup>24</sup> "Iduza era vergine non soltanto nel corpo, ma anche nei suoi pensieri. Non aveva mai veduto nessun adulto nudo perché i suoi genitori non si spogliavano mai in presenza sua; e perfino del proprio corpo sentiva un pudore estremo, anche sola con se stessa. Nora l'aveva avvertita soltanto che per generare bambini l'uomo deve entrare col suo corpo nel corpo della donna. È un'operazione necessaria, a cui bisogna sottoporsi docilmente, e che non fa troppo male" (*La Storia*: 36).

<sup>25</sup> "Il suo corpo era cresciuto con lei come un estraneo" (*La Storia*: 83).

<sup>26</sup> "Almàgia o Almagià?" s'informò l'impiegato scrutandola con occhio inquisitorio, autorevole e minaccioso. Essa avvampò, peggio di una scolara sorpresa a copiare il tema. 'Almagià', mormorò affrettatamente, 'mia madre era ebrea!'" (*La Storia*: 55).

<sup>27</sup> 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" (*Powers of Horror*: 3).

<sup>28</sup> "Ida imparava che gli ebrei erano diversi non solo perché ebrei, ma anche perché *non ariani*. [...] [N]el 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 roagna, i plebei dei plebei dovevano essere una lebbra!" (*La Storia*: 57).

<sup>29</sup> "Fu come se le ossessioni di Nora, sciamando in tumulto alla sua morte, fossero venute a nidificare dentro la figlia" (*La Storia*: 57).

<sup>30</sup> "Soldatuccio" (*La Storia*: 63), "un mendicante piuttosto che di uno sgherro" (64).

<sup>31</sup> Liimatta notes that "all of Morante's female characters in this novel are subject to male power; [...] all of them [...] have all been subject to male violence in the form of rape" (*Rape, Body and Identity*: 220).

<sup>32</sup> Although Gunther is immature and not sure about his political belief, he is serving the Nazi regime: "At times he vowed he would perform superheroic acts, in honor of his Führer; and at the same time, he suspected the war was a vague algebra, thought up by the General Staff, which had nothing to do with him. At times he felt ready for any bloodthirsty brutality; at other times, during the journey, he brooded constantly, in bitter compassion, about his prostitute in Munich" (*History*: 16). "Un po', si prometteva di compiere azioni ultraeroiche, da fare onore al suo Führer; e, un altro po', sospettava che la guerra fosse un'algebra sconclusionata, combinata dagli Stati Maggiori, ma che a lui non lo riguardava per niente. Un po', si sentiva pronto a qualsiasi brutalità sanguinosa; e un altro po', durante il viaggio, ruminava continuamente un'amara compassione della sua prostituta di Monaco" (*La Storia*: 17).

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- <sup>33</sup> See, for example, Hedgepeth and Saidel (eds.), *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*. On the abuse suffered by women in the camps, see also Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories*.
- <sup>34</sup> "Le paure che la stringevano d'assedio non le lasciavano scorgere in colui nient'altro che una uniforme militare tedesca" (*La Storia*: 63).
- <sup>35</sup> "Uniforme che pareva appostata là in sua attesa" (*La Storia*: 63).
- <sup>36</sup> "Una copia delle migliaia di figure conformi che moltiplicavano all'infinito l'unica figura incomprensibile della sua persecuzione" (*La Storia*: 63).
- <sup>37</sup> "Il soldato risentì come un'ingiustizia quel ribrezzo evidente e straordinario della sconosciuta signora. Non era abituato a suscitare ribrezzo nelle donne, e d'altra parte sapeva (a dispetto delle sue piccole delusioni precedenti) di trovarsi in un paese alleato, non nemico" (*La Storia*: 63).
- <sup>38</sup> "Qualsiasi creatura femminile capitata per prima su quel portone (non diciamo una comune ragazza o puttanella di quartiere, ma qualsiasi animale femmina: una cavalla, una mucca, un'asina) che lo avrebbe guardato con occhio appena umano" (*La Storia*: 20).
- <sup>39</sup> This is because in Ida's view, as in Morante's, animal imagery is never diminishing. However, in the racial discourse Jewish people were often compared to animals, as shown by Primo Levi, among others.
- <sup>40</sup> "Più che vedere lui, essa, sdoppiandosi, vedeva davanti a lui se stessa: come denudata di ogni travestimento, fino al suo cuore geloso di mezza ebrea" (*La Storia*: 63).
- <sup>41</sup> However, Ida also feels a deep attraction to and connection with the Jewish community in other sections of the book.
- <sup>42</sup> "Freddezza svogliata e diffidente" (*La Storia*: 19).
- <sup>43</sup> "Mortificato, invece di desistere si accanì" (*La Storia*: 63).
- <sup>44</sup> "E nel frattempo, i ragionamenti sbronzi del tedesco non concernevano né le razze né le religioni, né le nazioni, ma soltanto le età. Era matto di invidia e dentro di sé discuteva tartagliando: 'Mannaggia, la for-tu-na è di quelli che non han-no ancora l'età di le-va – e – e possono godersi a casa loro le pro- pro-pro-prietà con – con le madri! e il pallone! e scopare e tutto quanto – tutto quanto! come se la guerra fosse nella lu-na o nel mondo Mar-te... La di-sgrazia è crescere! la disgrazia è cre-scere! Ma dove sto? Pper-ché sto qua, io? Come mi ci son trovato?'" (*La Storia*: 66).
- <sup>45</sup> "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" (*La Storia*: 68).
- <sup>46</sup> "Un gattino di tre mesi" (*La Storia*: 68).
- <sup>47</sup> "Come davanti a un mostro" (*La Storia*: 68).
- <sup>48</sup> "Lo sguardo di lei parve a questi occhi, un insulto definitivo. E istantaneamente una bufera di rabbia li oscurò" (*La Storia*: 68).
- <sup>49</sup> "E senza neanche togliersi la cintura della divisa, incurante che costei fosse vecchia, si butto sopra di lei, rovesciandola su quel divanetto arruffato, e la violentò con tanta rabbia, come se volesse assassinarla" (*La Storia*: 69).
- <sup>50</sup> "Spontaneamente, il ragazzo li levo` [gli occhi] verso Ida. E lei ne incontrò lo sguardo straziato, di una ignoranza infinita ed una consapevolezza totale: sperduta insieme, l'una e l'altra, a mendicare una carità unica, impossibile e confusa anche per chi la chiedeva" (*La Storia*: 73).
- <sup>51</sup> "Non voleva più appartenere alla specie umana" (*La Storia*: 647).
- <sup>52</sup> "Distanza che pareggia i vivi e i morti" (*La Storia*: 464).
- <sup>53</sup> "Non c'è parola, in nessun linguaggio umano, capace di consolare le cavie che non sanno il perché della loro morte" (*La Storia*: 1).
- <sup>54</sup> "... hai nascosto queste cose ai dotti e ai savi e le hai rivelate ai piccoli..." (*La Storia*: 1).