



Elsa Morante and the Posthuman Trauma in *History* (1974)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64959/enjp.vol.1.issue2.1.w.008>

Abstract

This article offers a posthumanist reading of *History* (*La Storia*, 1974) by Elsa Morante, situating it within its socio-historical context and current debates on trauma, subjectivity and ethical interdependence. Rather than a traditional historical narrative, the novel emerges as a radical inquiry into the coherence and anthropocentrism of historical discourse. Focusing on Ida Ramundo, a half-jewish schoolteacher living in Rome during the Second World War, and her son Useppe, born from the rape by a German soldier, the novel foregrounds human vulnerability and the limits of narrative in addressing historical suffering. Drawing on posthumanist thinkers such as Braidotti, Agamben and Haraway, the article argues that Morante anticipates posthuman ethics by dissolving the notion of the sovereign subject. Useppe's short, fragile life critiques modernity's failure to protect the most vulnerable; the dog Bella further disrupts human-nonhuman hierarchies, embodying grief and agency, and reinforcing the novel's anti-speciesist ethos. Morante's stripped-down style, refusal of catharsis and inclusion of historical documents challenge the boundaries between fiction and testimony, aligning with Cathy Caruth's vision of trauma as an inaccessible form of historical knowledge. Ultimately, *History* emerges as a counter-narrative to triumphant historiography, advocating a moral of presence, care and shared precarity.

Key Words: Elsa Morante, History, posthuman, trauma, precarity

Introduction

Entanglements: Journal of Posthumanities

A Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Journal

Website: www.entanglements.in

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E-ISSN: 3107-488X

Received: 23 May 2025

Revised: 14 June 2025

Accepted: 12 July 2025

Published Online: 31 July 2025

Elsa Morante's *History*, first published in 1974, is widely regarded as a landmark of 20th-century Italian literature (Gioanola 331), combining epic narrative with an ontological exploration of trauma. Set during and immediately after the Second World War, it follows the life of Ida Ramundo, a half-jewish schoolteacher living in Rome with her two sons Nino and Useppe, the latter born from a rape perpetrated by a drunk German soldier, Gunther, a member of the Nazi militias stationed in occupied Rome. Far from being merely a historic chronicle, *History* (*La Storia* in its original Italian title) is an ontological investigation of suffering, trauma, loss and, most notably, of the erosion of human agency in the face of overwhelming historical forces. Within the broader framework of global war and, more specifically, of jewish genocide and the atomic bomb — two key themes extensively examined by Morante in many of her writings, as in “Pro o contro la bomba atomica” (“For or Against the Atomic Bomb”, published in 1965, starting from a lecture delivered by the writer first in Turin and then in Rome) — this novel can be fruitfully read through the lens of posthumanism, a theoretical approach that destabilises anthropocentric assumptions and interrogates the boundaries between human and nonhuman, subject and object, life and death.

Following Herbrechter and Callus (2012), Morante's *History* can therefore be read as a proto-posthumanist work in the sense of preceding formal posthumanist theory by decades, not as a direct influence, but as a text that retrospectively resonates with key concerns later elaborated in the field. Such a reading acknowledges the risk of anachronism, but also allows for a productive critical framework through which to revisit *History* as a novel that anticipates, with striking perceptiveness, many of the ethical and ontological questions that would later become central to posthumanist discourse. This interpretation aligns primarily with critical posthumanism, particularly in the lineage of Braidotti's and Haraway's feminist theories, rather than object-oriented ontology; its emphasis lies in ethical relationality, affective vulnerability and the decentering of human exceptionalism within embodied historical contexts. In line with this analysis, central to Morante's skilful narrative construction is the figure of the main character, Ida, whose personal trauma – the rape perpetrated by the German

soldier – blends with the collective trauma of war and persecution and manifests as a dissolution of selfhood. In the opening pages of the novel, Morante depicts the protagonist's experience of sexual trauma through a raw and unadorned language, devoid of euphemism or circumlocution:

Yet this new, inexplicable refusal of hers (no – the only response she had given him that day) struck the soldier's confused rage like a signal of rebellion, as though she had committed some immense transgression. Unexpectedly, the bitter tenderness that had humiliated him with its martyrdom since morning erupted into a ferocious will: "...make love!...MAKE LOVE!..." he shouted, repeating, like a child's outburst, two more of the four Italian words he had prudently learned at the border. And without even removing his uniform belt, indifferent to the fact that she was an older woman, he threw himself on her, pushed her down onto the unkempt cot, and raped her with such violence as if he meant to kill her. (69)

Likewise, Ida's little son, Useppe, symbolizes purity and innocence, ultimately crushed by the weight of history: Useppe dies at the end of the novel because of his fatal epilepsy, barely six years old. As Morante writes in *History*:

In the dim little hallway, Useppe's body lay stretched out, arms wide open, as always in his falls. He was fully dressed, except for his little sandals, which, left unbuckled, had slipped off his feet. [...] During this final hour of his unspeakable struggle with the Great Evil, in truth Useppe, there in the hallway, had collapsed again and again, from one seizure to another, almost without pause... (646)

His death thus comes to embody, in its starkest form, the impossibility of innocence in the face of historical atrocities and the inescapable violence of modern science and technology — a symbolic annihilation of the very idea of protected childhood. In this final passage, Morante's narrative voice renounces any rhetorical elevation or dramatic crescendo, choosing instead a tone of quiet devastation: the description unfolds with a restrained, almost matter-of-fact clarity, which renders the scene all the more

harrowing. The child's body is not romanticised, but observed in its minute, unheroic details, so that death doesn't appear as a rupture; this subdued stylistic register refrains from embellishment or interpretation, in line with Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement" (2001).

Expanding the novel's critique of the autonomous human subject, Morante also introduces a nonhuman perspective that destabilises human exceptionalism and affirms moral principles of shared vulnerability across species: through the subtle integration of animal presence — most notably Bella, the Ramundo family dog — Morante anticipates the posthumanist critique of the autonomous subject and gestures toward an alternative ontology grounded in affective entanglement, mutual care and existential fragility. '*Affective entanglement*', here, refers to the complex web of emotional, embodied, and cross-species relations that bind living beings together beyond linguistic or rational structures, foregrounding interdependence and the permeability of individual boundaries.

The Socio-Historical Context of *History*

Morante's literary masterpiece was published in a period marked by intense political turbulence and profound philosophical introspection in postwar Italy, a nation still reeling from the unresolved legacies of Fascism, the economic devastation of the Second World War and the disillusionment that followed the collapse of utopian promises tied to the Resistance and the postwar Socialist republic. As Michela Ponzani brilliantly analyses in her recent work *Processo alla resistenza italiana* ("Trial of the Italian Resistance"):

Former partisans, brought to trial for actions related to the War of Liberation (judged as acts of common criminality), or for episodes of post-insurrectional violence, and likewise political or trade union militants, arrested during strikes or public demonstrations, within a climate of anticommunist demonization [...]
(17)

In this cultural and social contexts, where the moral legitimacy of inherited historical

paradigms was being radically interrogated as Italy was transitioning from monarchy to republic, Morante's novel intervenes as a powerful counter-discourse, because it radically refuses the teleological coherence of history as a progress, choosing instead to focus on the fragmented and intimate lives of the commoners whom history habitually marginalizes, that is the poor, the vulnerable and the voiceless. In this sense, in line with Hayden White's (1987) insight that the structure of narrative fundamentally conditions our understanding of history, Morante's deliberate rejection of consolatory plot conventions positions her treatment of history as a deliberate disruption of its conventional narrative logic. Morante frequently employs the adjective *povero/povera* ("poor") throughout the novel in reference to Ida, Useppe and Bella, imparting a sense of frailty, marginality and suffering. However, there is a single moment in which this term is transfigured, that is when the narrative shifts to the perspective of the child Useppe, who, unaware of the surrounding horrors of war, invests the world with a naïve sense of innocence. In his gaze, the word "poor" loses its weight of sorrow and becomes stripped of its tragic gravity, revealing a suspension of pain in the midst of military devastation:

That world and its people, poor, breathless and contorted by the grimace of war, appeared to Giuseppe as a singular and manifold phantasmagoria, one whose likeness could scarcely be captured even by a description of the Alhambra of Granada, or the gardens of Shiraz, or perhaps not even of the Earthly Paradise itself. (122)

Yet Morante's project resists the temptation to synthesize human suffering into a cohesive ideological framework: rather than seeking to redeem history through narrative, she exposes storytelling's limits in the face of overwhelming historical trauma. In line with Morante's main theoretical interests, the novel opens with a sharp and intense epigraph drawn from the testimony of one of Hiroshima's nuclear bombing's survivors: "there is no word, in any human language, capable of consoling the guinea pigs who do not know why they are dying" (*History* 1). This quotation, placed in a *positio princeps* with respect to the entire narrative, not only reframes the

reader's expectations from the outset, but it also signals the true epistemological and ethical orientation of the entire work. *History* does not purport to explain, justify or redeem suffering: on the contrary, it bears witness to its irreducible senselessness, inviting the reader not into a space where language itself falters and meaning dissolves in the face of mute and inarticulate suffering. From a linguistic standpoint, a similar phenomenon occurs in *La Serata a Colono* ("The Evening at Colonus"), Morante's reworking of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, set in a psychiatric hospital in the aftermath of the Second World War. In this theatrical piece, Antigone, once the classical heroine of natural and sacred law, has now become an inarticulate young girl, unable to speak with clarity or insight: here too, then, the violent irruption of twentieth-century history has rendered communication impossible, emptying existence of meaning and stripping away the very possibility of consolation. Morante's portrayal of Ida and Antigone echoes what Lyotard (1983) calls "le différend", a French term used to design a conflict between parties that cannot be equitably solved because the rules of discourse necessary to adjudicate the claim are themselves unavailable, or because no shared language exists for its resolution. In both cases, speech breaks down in the face of historical violence, revealing the limits of storytelling in representing human life.

In this regard, *History* finds profound resonance with posthumanist critical paradigms, which similarly reject anthropocentric models of intelligibility and instead emphasise the opacity of modern trauma, the non sovereignty of the human subject and the ethical imperative to attend to that which eludes our comprehension. Posthuman knowledge, as Rosi Braidotti contends (2019), requires a profound shift in perspective: one that views the human not as a sovereign agent, but as a species embedded in larger ecological and multispecies networks and accountable for the violence enacted in the name of its supposed supremacy. Likewise, Morante's narrative ethic, deeply attuned to the precarity of human and nonhuman life alike, invites a mode of reading that is not predicated on mastery or understanding, but on a form of listening to the fractures that traverse the lives of those — the fragile and inadequate — crushed beneath the weight

of history.

Ida Ramundo: The Fractured Subject

The main character of *History*, Ida Ramundo, is at the heart of Morante's posthuman exploration, anticipating the subsequent reflections of posthumanist thought concerning the alienation of the human being brought about by modernity and by increasingly impactful technology. Ida resists the traditional heroic or tragic paradigms of literary subjectivity; instead, she is presented as a fragmented, passive and oftentimes deeply irrational being, whose life is governed by fear and secrecy (Mavjee 25). Her Jewish identity is something she hides, not for strategic reasons, but out of a visceral, somatic panic; Morante depicts Ida's fear not only as psychological, but also as an embodied feeling: it manifests in accidental and uncontrollable tremors, long silences and frequent dissociative states. Following her violence by Gunther, she becomes a vessel of trauma, incapable of asserting agency or reclaiming narrative control (LaCapra 41):

As always upon waking, only a shadow of memory remained to her of the episode, nothing more than the initial sensation of a confused assault, lasting but an instant. In truth, her recollection contained a complete gap, from the moment the young man had begun kissing her face and whispering *carina carina*, to the earlier moment, just before, when he had shown her the photograph. (*History*, 69-70)

Her passivity, however, should not be read as moral failure; rather, it represents the condition of a subject who has been utterly dispossessed by history. In posthumanist terms, Ida is no longer a sentient and logical human being, but a "creatura" ("creature"), a term frequently used by the narrator to refer to Usepe, too. This poignant Italian term, derived from the verb "creare", that is, "to bring into the light", and resonant with both teleological and biological connotations, signals her degradation from a state of civilization to a feral condition of nature, from person to object, as Agamben cleverly states in his *Homo Sacer* (33), but it also opens up the possibility of rethinking

subjectivity outside the frameworks of autonomy and control. As a creature, Ida is vulnerable, dependent and exposed, all qualities that render her ethically significant from a posthumanist point of view.

Ida's personal collapse, however, mirrors a broader historical disintegration, as Morante extends this condition of dispossession to an entire humanity crushed under the weight of twentieth-century catastrophe. The experience of the world war, the persecution and genocide of the Jews through the inhuman mechanism of concentration camps and, from a more global perspective, the experimentation of the atomic bomb with the tragic events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, led Morante to construct a Roman universe populated solely by the defeated, swept away by the merciless force of history as it breaks violently and uninvited into their lives. The degradation of Ida's human condition and the fracturing of her selfhood as a result of multiple traumas — not least the rape she suffered at the hands of the German soldier — suggest a reading of Morante's novel as a forerunner of the posthumanist perspective, which would shortly thereafter ignite within the academic fields of literature, philosophy and psychology.

A significant and precursory *reductio ad nihil* of history and its meaning can be found in another one of Morante's works, a theatrical piece entitled "Canzone clandestina della Grande Opera" ("*Clandestine Song of the Grand Opera*"), included in her miscellany *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* ("*The World Saved by Children*"), published in 1968:

And when scholars patiently labour/ to assemble the various accounts into a coherent whole,/ arranging them in order like the fragments of a codex/ or the installments of a serialized novel,/ the result is invariably/ a disjointed and utterly confused composition/ full of [...] the dead returning, having forgotten they are dead,/ [...] an absurd, maimed, incoherent, ramshackle text/ [...] neither comedy nor tragedy nor parody nor farce. (214)

The "Grand Opera" is none other than history itself, denounced by Morante as "the scandal that has lasted for ten thousand years", as indicated by the subtitle of the very

first edition of the 1974 novel *History*.

Useppe and the Ethics of Innocence

Useppe, the child born from rape, embodies an innocence that is both unadulterated and doomed. He is depicted with an almost mythical purity, a being of light in a world of darkness, that is Rome during Jewish persecution and Nazi occupation. Yet his vulnerability is absolute: he is epileptic, uncomprehending of the violence around him because of his young age and ultimately destroyed by the very forces of history he cannot fathom. Morante intentionally invests his character with an aura of sanctity, but not in a sentimental or idealised way; rather, Useppe's life functions as a critique of a world in which such innocence cannot survive anymore. Examples of little Useppe's imaginary, fable-like and transfiguring gaze, so explicitly at odds with the totalitarian, persecutory and war-torn world around him, are scattered throughout the novel:

One might say, judging by his laughter, by the constant lighting up of his little face, that he did not see things confined within their usual appearances, but as multiple images of other things, endlessly shifting. Otherwise, one could not explain how the miserable, monotonous scene the house offered him each day could provide such ever-changing and inexhaustible delight. Even shapes that generally provoke aversion or disgust evoked in him only attentiveness and a transparent wonder, just like any other. (*History*, 120)

Useppe's death, like his brief life, is devoid of justice or redemption: it is a death that reiterates the novel's initial epigraph, a meaningless annihilation that eludes explanation. From a posthumanist perspective, Useppe's short existence problematises any attempt to ground ethics in rationality, merit or agency. His suffering is a call to responsibility precisely because it cannot be justified or understood; in this sense, Useppe is not a symbol but a symptom, a manifestation of the failure of humanism to account for the most fragile lives. Following the discovery of Useppe's dead body, Morante describes the immediate reaction of his mother:

And after bolting the door in the entranceway, she began, in silence, to run through her little rooms, crashing into the furniture and walls with such violence that she bruised her body. It is said that, in certain crucial states, people see flash before them — at incredible speed — all the scenes of their life. Now, in the stunted and dim-witted mind of that little woman, as she rushed headlong through her tiny apartment, there also spun the scenes of human history (*History*), which she perceived as the manifold coils of an unending murder. And today, the latest to be murdered was her little bastard Useppe. All of History and all the nations of the earth had conspired toward this end: the slaughter of the little child Useppe Ramundo. (*History* 647)

In this powerful convergence of the personal and the historical, Ida's grief breaks down the boundaries between individual loss and collective catastrophe: her delirious sprint through the apartment becomes a visceral indictment of a civilization that, rather than protecting its most vulnerable, systematically sacrifices them. Useppe's death is not merely a private tragedy, but the ultimate proof of a world order built on violence, where innocence is not spared, but is in fact its most expendable victim.

Such collapse opens the way for a reading of Morante's narrative as a site where knowledge itself is transmitted through embodied emotion rather than rational discourse. Rebecca Walker (2024) reads *History* through the lens of emotional epistemologies, describing Useppe's own view of the world as shaped by pre-linguistic affects that emerge "prior to the mediating process of language" and structure his experience of reality as affective and epiphanic rather than symbolic. This reading supports the idea that Morante conceives affect not merely as an emotional reaction, but as a mode of knowing and relating to the world. Similarly, Stephen Ahern (2024) defines affect as a "force manifested in bodies" that crosses the aesthetic, ethical and political dimensions of narrative experience. His framework reinforces a posthumanist understanding of Morante's characters, both human and nonhuman, as affective agents whose vulnerability and responsiveness are embodied rather than discursive.

In reframing Morante's key novel *History* through the lens of posthuman trauma, this

reading complicates and expands current critical paradigms: rather than simply reiterating the familiar emphasis on the dissolution of sovereign subjectivity or the narrative inaccessibility of trauma, *History* foregrounds a different way of depicting human suffering and loss. Useppe's death, portrayed as bodily and historically situated, invites a rethinking of trauma literature beyond the psychic and linguistic models dominant in posthuman theory; in this sense, Morante's novel invites a reconceptualisation of trauma that is both grounded in bodily experience and is attentive to the multiple temporalities through which trauma unfolds. Instead of viewing trauma solely as an unrepresentable event, as dominant in much posthumanist and psychoanalytic theory, *History* depicts forms of suffering that are immediately and materially lived, particularly through vulnerable bodies, like Ida's or Useppe's, who suffer from epileptic seizures (called by Morante "il Grande Male", *the Great Evil*); at the same time, however, this novel acknowledges the difficulty of fully capturing such experiences in language. This simultaneous attention to the *immediacy* of physical pain and to the fragmented nature of its narrative processing suggests a more complex, layered temporality of trauma: in this way, Morante's work offers a refinement of posthumanist trauma theory, as it shifts the focus from abstraction to embodiment, from an ideal unreadability to the historical realities through which trauma is enacted and endured, following Kaplan's (2005) and Balaev's (2012) theories.

Bella: Animality and Posthuman Kinship

One of the most radical aspects of *History* is its treatment of the animal. Bella, the cheerful dog who accompanies Useppe, Nino and Ida in their daily ventures and all the way through the most tragic turning points of the twentieth century, is not merely a tacit companion but an active participant in their emotional and existential world. Throughout the entire novel, Bella's thoughts are conveyed through direct speech, as though the dog were a fully sentient human being. Morante portrays Bella as a being endowed with profound empathy towards the events unfolding around her and, in particular, the experiences of her three owners. In the pivotal scene of *History*, already mentioned several times in this study, namely the tragic death of Useppe, Bella enters

into a state of deep emotional resonance with Ida's despair:

For the dog was there, looking at her with a mournful sorrow, filled with animal compassion and also with a kind of superhuman commiseration, which said to the woman: "But what are you waiting for, poor thing? Can't you see that there's nothing left for us to wait for?" (646)

Bella's presence disrupts the human-centric orientation of the narrative and introduces a different modality of relation, one that is affective, non-verbal and embodied. The dog's long-lasting loyalty, her understanding of Useppe's seizures and her own suffering after his death suggest a form of consciousness that defies the Cartesian distinction between human and animal. In the words of philosopher Donna Haraway, who has thoroughly investigated the relationship between species in her *When Species Meet*:

Species [...] The Latin *specere* is the root of all things here, with its tones of "to look" and "to behold". [...] Looking back in this way takes us to seeing again, to *respecere*, to the act of respect. To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem. [...] To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect [...]. (17-19)

In this regard, Morante aligns with posthumanist thinkers like Haraway herself, who in her works advocates for a "companion species" model of interdependence, a framework that redefines human-animal relations as co-constitutive and grounded in mutual vulnerability and affect rather than domination, or like Justyna Stępień (2022), who in her recent essay discloses human-non human animal entanglements. Bella is not a symbol of loyalty or fidelity, but a creature in her own right, with her own experiences of grief and attachment. Her death, following that of Useppe, is not anecdotal nor fortuitous but ontologically significant: it marks the collapse of a fragile ecosystem of care and affection that had momentarily resisted the cruelty of history. Bella, too, is thus a victim of history, swept away like Ida, Useppe and Nino by the

tragedies of the contemporary world. Bella's death, in particular, stands in extreme dissonance with the treatment she receives throughout the novel: she is put down without the slightest trace of humanity by the Italian authorities when Ida, having lost Usepe, descends into madness. Bella, likewise, loses her mind, precisely because she is a subject endowed with her own agency. Her rage following the loss of her little companion, a grief utterly unrecognised by the world beyond the Ramundo household, a world devoid of any form of interspecies empathy, ultimately leads to her death:

The following day, the newspapers reported the incident as a local news item: *Tragic Scene in the Testaccio District – Mother Driven Mad While Watching Over the Body of Her Child*. And the article concluded: *It became necessary to put down the animal. [...] Bella developed a ruthless and bloodthirsty ferocity against the strangers who, having forced the door, had entered the small flat on Via Bodoni to carry out their legal duties. [...] On her own, she managed to frighten an entire squad of men, at least two of whom were armed with regulation weapons. None of them dared face her directly. And in this way, she kept the promise she had made to Usepe on the day he returned home: They'll never be able to separate us again, in this world.*" (*History*, 646-647)

The inclusion of Bella not only exemplifies posthuman entanglements between species, but also extends the ethical horizon of posthumanism itself: if much of posthuman theory has thus far focused on decentering the human and foregrounding the agency of nonhuman actors within systems of knowledge and power, Morante's depiction of Bella moves a step further, as it attributes to a nonhuman creature not only affective depth and inter-subjective presence, but also ethical and memorial intentness. Bella's grief is not an allegory, but it is rather a testimonial act: her affective response to Usepe's death is presented without sentimentality, yet granted ontological status within the complex narrative of the novel. This move urges a reconsideration of posthuman morality, not simply as a critique of anthropocentrism, but as a proper call to acknowledge that the suffering of human beings such as animals is not incidental

nor symbolic; instead, it plays a real and meaningful role in the course of history, and must be therefore taken into serious consideration as part of our moral and historical understanding. In doing so, Morante may be said to gesture toward a non-anthropocentric ethics of witnessing that remains little theorised in contemporary posthumanist scholarship, anticipating by nearly fifty years recent theoretical and philosophical turns, such as Richardson's *Nonhuman Witnessing* (2024).

Language, Narrative and the Limits of Representation

Morante's narrative style itself enacts a posthuman morality: she avoids modernist language experimentation and instead adopts a deceptively simple, almost childlike tone that mirrors the perspective of Useppe. The narrator frequently breaks into digressions, inserts historical timelines and includes apparently trivial details; this mode of narration destabilises the boundaries between fiction and documentation, emphasizing the mutual penetration between the lives of the Ramundo family and the events of capital-H History.

In this narrative refusal of aesthetic closure, Morante's style becomes itself an ethical gesture. The language of *History* resists the consolatory function traditionally associated with literature: there is no catharsis, no final revelation, no arc of redemption; on the contrary, Morante insists on the irreducibility of suffering: her refusal to aestheticise pain aligns with posthumanist critique of representation, which cautions against the assimilation of trauma into coherent narrative forms. *History* bears witness without claiming to explain and, in doing so, it completely respects the otherness of the suffering it depicts. As Cathy Caruth explains in her *Unclaimed Experience* 18, "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat difficulty, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence". Nonetheless, while Morante shares Caruth's insight into the elusiveness of traumatic experience, *History* complicates this framework by situating trauma not only in the realm of psychic rupture but also within a dense historical continuum: Caruth emphasizes trauma's resistance to conscious registration at the moment of its

occurrence; Morante, however, portrays suffering that is both historically situated and immediately experienced, particularly through the bodies of innocent creatures such as children and animals. In this sense, *History* does not merely suggest that trauma escapes narrative capture, but it also suggests that trauma is lived in real time, with corporeal consequences. The novel thereby challenges the abstraction that can underlie psychoanalytic accounts, grounding the inaccessibility of trauma in the concrete violence of everyday history.

In light of Caruth's assertion that trauma becomes legible only through its very inaccessibility, the figure of Bella acquires a paradigmatic significance within *the novel*. Bella embodies Morante's challenge to anthropocentric narrative logic: depicted as a sentient being capable of grief, her suffering after Ueseppe's death resists rationalisation and narrative closure, while her execution highlights the institutional violence the novel refuses to sentimentalise. In this sense, *History* aligns with Caruth's theory by constructing a narrative that respects the opacity of trauma, not only human trauma but also that which extends to nonhuman lives, which likewise bear the mark of history's devastations; Bella's silent, inarticulate mourning, culminating in her destruction, serves not merely as a tragic subplot, but as a radical gesture of narrative humility: an insistence that literature, like history, may bear witness without possessing the authority to explain.

Through Ueseppe's inarticulate suffering and Bella's mute grief, Morante's *History* can be considered in implicit dialogue with other literary works that draw attention to marginal forms of perception and suffering and interrogate the narrative and ethical limits of representing vulnerability. In *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (1953), Anna Maria Ortese stages a similar collapse of linguistic and moral frameworks through the eyes of a child whose naive joy is extinguished by the bleakness of urban poverty; as with Ueseppe, perception in Ortese is affective and radically dissonant from the adult world, rendering the child's experience in sharp contrast with the misery that surrounds her. A comparable disruption is also carried out in Lev Tolstoy's *Kholstomer: The Story of a Horse* (1886), which recounts the

suffering of a horse from the animal's own point of view; like Bella, Tolstoy's horse bears silent witness to the cruelty of human history, which renders animal life disposable while refusing to grant it narrative dignity. In both cases, animal consciousness is not a metaphor but a proper testimony, as it marks the outer limit of narrative and logical representation. By placing *History* alongside these texts, we begin to glimpse a wider international literary tradition that refuses to glamorize suffering and instead asks how literature might attend, without appropriating, to the fragile lives that history silences.

Towards a Posthumanist Ethics

Ultimately, *History* can be read as a foundational text in the articulation of a posthumanist morality, as it challenges the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous, rational subject and instead foregrounds dependence, fragility and relationality. In line with Herbrechter's definition of "posthumanism" as a paradigm grounded in "interrelatedness of human and nonhuman forms of agency" (2012), in crafting her characters Morante pursues precisely this aim, seeking to deeply intertwine the thoughts, emotions and actions of the novel's protagonists. Ida, Useppe and Bella are all "creature" ("creatures") in the fullest sense of the word: they are beings who suffer, who love, who die and whose lives matter not because of what they achieve, but because of their capacity to feel and to be affected.

This notion of "*creatureliness*" recalls the etymological root of *the above-mentioned word "creatura"*, that which is created, finite and dependent. In this sense, Morante's characters resist the humanist glorification of autonomy and instead embody a condition of shared exposure and precarity, akin to what Judith Butler would later describe in her *Precarious Life*. The ethic that emerges from *History* is thus not grounded in human exceptionalism but in a shared susceptibility that transcends species, categories and hierarchies: in this way, Morante offers a vision of community that is not structured by inclusion or exclusion, but by coexistence, mutual care and affective resonance across ontological categories.

Even Morante's style itself reflects this ethic: the language of *History* bears

witness without aspiring to resolution, while also respecting the opacity of grief, the irreducibility of suffering and the silences that exceed narrative form. This approach once again aligns closely with Caruth's insight that trauma becomes legible only in its very inaccessibility, and that history can be grasped only through the impossibility of fully perceiving it as it occurs.

In this ethical framework, the reader, too, is called by the author to an alternative mode of engagement, not to master or romanticize what is told, but to sustain attention, to bear witness of the tragic events that are unfolding and to remain present before forms of life that elude integration into normative or classical categories of meaning. *History*, in this light, may be read as an anticipatory gesture toward a literary and ethical paradigm capable of responding to the crises of the present: in a world increasingly shaped by technological and political forces, Morante's novel remains a powerful reminder of the moral imperative to attend to the most fragile, most exposed and most radically *other* lives.

Conclusion

Elsa Morante's main novel, *History*, is a rigorous critique of historical violence and an existential inquiry on the condition of being human in a world that renders suffering meaningless. Through the shattered subjectivity of Ida, the ephemeral innocence of Useppe and the affective companionship of Bella, Morante constructs a narrative that prefigures many of the central concerns of posthumanist thought, such as the loss of meaning following the experience of the Second World War, the fragmentation of the self in the aftermath of trauma induced by unprecedentedly destructive technologies — above all, the atomic bomb — and the critique of human supremacy over other species, which are shown to be equally capable of empathy and equally vulnerable to the violence of history. Morante's literary masterpiece thus invites us to reconsider the foundations of modern ethics, not merely as a set of rational principles, but as an embodied, affective and interspecies response to vulnerability. In doing so, *History* not only memorialises the forgotten victims of history, but also offers a radical reimagining of what it means to be a *creatura* in the modern world.

By focusing on the narratively marginal, yet theoretically central figure of Bella, and by reading Useppe not only as a mere trope of innocence but mainly as an exceptional interruption to the logic of history, this article proposes a recalibration of posthumanist trauma studies. It argues that Morante's *History* not only participates in the critique of sovereignty and representation, but actively contributes to its (re)formulation by anticipating immediate suffering, multi-species ethical communities and the narrative strategies necessary to sustain both. In line with this view, Baelo-Allué (2022) has situated trauma as an embodied, relational phenomenon that transcends the human, occurring in "co-evolving" multispecies networks; likewise, Ferrándes-Sanmiguel et al. (2024) call for frameworks that affirm interdependent agency across humans, animals and environments. In this light, Morante's *History* not only aligns with posthumanism, but it subtly reorients it, giving voice and agency to marginal bodies that destabilize human-centric narratives and demand new methodological approaches, while also demonstrating that it can be read not merely as anticipating posthumanist theory, but as simultaneously inaugurating and reshaping its core principles and concerns.

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Notes

Every translation from an Italian text (*History* by Morante) into English present in this article is my own work.

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