

**About One of the Most Disputed Literary Cases of
the Seventies:
Elsa Morante's *La Storia***

Hanna Serkowska
(Warsaw University)

un vero poeta sceglierà di scrivere un romanzo, poniamo, sulle guerre di Algeria, o su Pia dei Tolomei, o magari sulla giornata del proprio gatto, il suo romanzo sarà, in ogni caso, assolutamente moderno, e impegnato, e umano, e reale; e offrirà alle generazioni presenti e future – oltre ai suoi significati incommensurabili anche una misura perfetta, e un ritratto intero.
(Elsa Morante, *Sul romanzo*)

The Seventies in Italy is the decade in the history of the Left- and Right-wing terrorism when chaos and violence followed the students' and workers' uprising of 68-69. These, were in their turn triggered by the decline of faith in economic growth as well as the prospects of the well-being of the people. On the cultural level, also, some important changes took place: Italy internalised the lessons of the avant-garde and, freeing itself from Benedetto Croce's dictatorship, started to discuss newly imported literary theories and methodologies (psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, structuralism). Members of the "Gruppo 63" found their way into universities, publishing houses and literary journals. The complicated political situation of this turbulent time literally muted many writers (years went by before – to borrow an expression of Calvino's – the tree of literature bore fruit again), and as a consequence the publishing industry underwent a deep reorganisation (capital consolidations, mergers, targeted advertising campaigns, record number of

copies sold), and had to rely for a while mainly on posthumous novels such as Umberto Saba's *Ernesto*, Salvatore Satta's *Il giorno del giudizio* or Guido Morselli's *Contropassato prossimo* and *Roma senza papa*.¹

Parenthetically speaking, the epithet "posthumous" perfectly fits to epitomise the decade. Elsa Morante's *La Storia* was among the few, non posthumous, bestselling books of the time. Given the background against which the novel appeared, little wonder sociologists of literature rushed to examine what was so particular about this single novel to assure it an overwhelming market success. Even when, following the general trend of the eighties, dozens of this type of novels were written and the critics turned to study the phenomenon, *La Storia* was either one of the texts not considered or it continued to be valued according to what its first critics once decreed. *La Storia* has not experienced to date a critical renaissance, and has benefited from the "recovery" of the novel (taking place in Italy during the eighties, as I mentioned) to a much lesser degree and still remains under-read to date. Moreover, let us recall, the critics viewed *La Storia* on one hand as a cynical cultural operation, programmed and performed entirely within the publishing business, on the other as an old-fashioned *elegia popolare*: unbearably pathetic and consolatory. It is hard to agree with most part of these statements, yet, in order to shed light on the novel's extraordinary success, one should not overlook the important factors which, from then on, came to contribute to a book's success, such as an enhanced interweaving of the creation of an artistic product and its placement on the market (Cadioli, 1981, pp. 153-54), or the various strategies of publishing houses ranging from upgrading the product, through marketing and publicity, to mechanisms

¹ See Alberto Cadioli (1981 and 1987), and David Forgacs (1993) for a detailed analysis of the situation.

enabling the text to appeal to different groups of readers. The latter, in particular, are of paramount importance to Morante's novel that sold well over 600.000 copies, and by this very fact challenged the claim, made popular by the Italian *Neoavanguardia*, that art excludes communication. The writer proved to be able to communicate, and, what's important, she took her message across to many different readers. Yet it was not a political manifesto, rather a sort of philosophical reflection.² *La Storia*, I dare say, was definitely a successful cultural operation, without any cynical overtones.

A legitimate doubt might rise at this point: how does it come about that a writer who cared only about the attention of the *happy few*, all of a sudden yearned to please the many? Perhaps by answering the question of *what* the author aimed at communicating, and considering *how* she intended to do it, bearing in mind that she chose a historical subject matter and turned to what some critics (such as Renato Barilli) thought as "obsolete narrative formulas", one may come closer to a solution of this enigma. I am therefore going to show that *what La Storia* had to convey was in fact little or indirectly related to the socio-cultural or the political context in which it was written. Secondly, I will see *how* the novel was written, pointing out some of its features which allow us perhaps to discuss it as an

² Morante surrendered part of the percentage receipts to which she was entitled, insisting to keep a book of 670 pages at a price of 2.000 lire, less than half the price for a book of this size. In accordance with this decision, Einaudi programmed a targeted "launch" of the book, selecting the month of June, preceding the months of mass summer readings. Once the book went to the bookstores, it was accompanied by advertising slogans: "Un grande romanzo. Una lettura per tutti. Prima edizione assoluta nella collana economica..."; "il nuovo attesissimo romanzo di Elsa Morante"; "670 pagine, 2.000 lire, tiratura iniziale 100.000 copie..." See Cadioli, *L'industria del romanzo*, pp.148-49.

early postmodern (or pre-postmodern) text.³ In *La Storia*, I would argue, the writer shows a different face from that of an epigone: that of a predecessor of what only after the *Name of the Rose*, by virtue of the so-called “Eco’s effect”, would be considered postmodern. Umberto Eco, himself one of the most severe detractors of Morante’s novels, in a conversation with Claudio Milanini admitted ironically (and his prophecy seems, ironically, to have come true): “Forse un giorno ci accorgeremo che era un romanzo apparentemente popolare, in realtà molto colto, molto metaletterario, chissà...”⁴

The questions at stake invite us to look for the writer’s attitude in respect of the “context”. To show that Morante was consistently and purposely not participating in public life, i.e. to illustrate her attitude of general not-belonging (which would confirm my claim)⁵ to the socio-political and cultural reality of her time, I will quote three letters written by our author. It is common knowledge that Morante refused to write articles, grant interviews, make comments on the current events. There are very few exceptions to this rule: some open letters of which very

³ The assertion that *La Storia* has some postmodern characteristics does not make of the Roman writer – too much indebted with the modernist idea of literature and of the artist – a postmodernist author. Most critics and scholars, in fact, consider such a claim as reckless and prefer, like Margherita Ganeri, to date back the postmodern Italian novel to Eco’s *Il nome della rosa*.

⁴ “Perhaps one day we will realise that *La Storia* is a very learned and intelligent novel, instead of a popular novel. Who knows?” [transl. HS]

⁵ Morante only worked for a short period of time for the radio, writing film reviews then read in radio broadcasts (“Cronache del cinema”) from February 1950 until November 1951, when she resigned after she refused to write a favourable review of the movie *Senza bandiera* produced by Elfo Film. On December 1, 1951 our author wrote an article entitled *La censura della RAI* in which she explained the motifs of her decision and published it in the weekly *Il Mondo* for which she thereafter worked for a few months as the columnist of “Rosso e Bianco”.

few were published, carefully edited and read in public and/or sent to the daily press in order to make public the issues raised in them. And the issues were, of course, literature and, more generally, art. No direct reference to politics, society or ideology as such.

One of the few open letters written and published is addressed to the judges who in 1968 condemned Aldo Braibanti (*Lettera aperta ai giudici di Braibanti*), a writer, a poet, and a philosopher, to serve nine years of prison for having expressed his ideas while teaching a class. It was published on July 17, 1968 in *Paese Sera*. The second one, also related to literature, dates back to 1976 and was first read during a conference entitled "Spanish culture now and then", subsequently sent to two major daily newspapers, *Il Corriere della Sera* and *L'Unità*.⁶ It was a protest against censorship in Spain by which *La Storia* had not been left unscathed. The third case I would like to quote, quite different from the two I have just mentioned, is a *Lettera alle Brigate Rosse* written on March 20, 1978 after Aldo Moro was kidnapped. Opposing the claim of Marco Belpoliti, according to whom the letter shows the writer as an intellectual, actively involved in political and social issues of the time (Belpoliti 36-41), I wish to build my argument of Morante's dissociation from the context on the fact that the text apparently referring to the most burning political issue of the time was in fact, on the writer's express intention, left unpublished. Who resorts to violence, kills or otherwise disrespects human beings, disrespects himself and is not different from fascists, roars Morante (indirectly accusing also the members of the Red Brigades); yet, in a gesture of self-alienation and distance towards politics, she never made this roar public. The letter was published posthumous in February 1988, in *Paragone*.

⁶ In both papers it appeared on the 15th of May, 1976 under the same title: *Intervento sulla traduzione in lingua spagnola di "La Storia"*.

These few letters are meaningful evidence that Morante never brought to suggest practical answers, or to point directions to her contemporary. She limited herself to generic and idealistic formulas of human brotherhood and of reciprocal respect. It is on this ground (and *La Storia*'s well known subject-matter confirms this claim), that I maintain that Morante professed a sort of utopian concept of revolution which in her idiolect – far from suggesting any practical action – had purely ethical connotations. Everything that exceeded the very scope of literature was not worthy of hers, the poet's attention.

Whereas, *La Storia* appears to me precisely a symptomatic example of Morante's over all relation with the present and past of the human world. I believe that from the start of her career, the Roman writer strove to free herself from any mandate and to disengage from all contingency, retreating to her fairy-tales chamber (*camera delle favole*),⁷ where she could measure herself not with contingency, but with the whole world in general like real poets do. She used to see something inappropriate in the intellectuals' or artists' direct involvement in any specific issue or action of their time, aspiring to create a work of poetry: universal, human, bringing no more than an indirect and generic context to the society and politics and at the same time conveying a vision and an idea of human history as such. I thereby intend to show that hers was a strategy of an intellectual convinced that writers ought to go against the current of their time so that they could have influence and meaning.

⁷ The expression "la camera delle favole" (a fairy-tales chamber) was used by Pier Paolo Pasolini when his friendship with Morante was on the wane, in a conference entitled "E.M." read in Aci in 1972. By referring to the fairy-tales chamber, Pasolini meant that Morante moved into her world without ever facing up to reality, without ever fighting real political battles.

Let us now take a closer look at Morante's reflection on history, without at the same time losing sight of *how* she projected to convey it, based on her 1974 novel, *La Storia*, which apparently reinstated the outdated novelistic formulas, and, by flirting with the market, attracted masses of unsophisticated readers.

Unreal history told by unreliable narrators

The attention of critics was often caught by Morante's idea that history is unreal (unreal meaning irrational, capable of disintegrating human conscience), resonating the thought of Giambattista Vico for whom history was a discipline unencumbered by Cartesian rationalism. History is unreal and so are its products: war, gas chambers, genocide. It is a scandal lasting for ten thousand years. The question asked several times by Ueseppe, asked imperfectly like his name, *pecché* (*perché*, why) remains unanswered in the book. Every effort to rationalise, to give history a meaning necessarily will be frustrated. And when there are no messages to remember and to convey, when we feel the imperative to accept history without meaning, things are really discouraging and cause anguish.⁸

Morante's refusal to take direct action outside of literature is also reflected in her choice of the narrative figures. In *La Storia* the task to tell is entrusted to several different instances, heterogeneous, partial, often mutually conflicting. There is an old fashioned omniscient extradiegetic voice, mocked (Günther does not know – but the narrator does – that he will die soon and keeps making plans for his thrilling African adventure; Ida does not know – but the narrator does – that Günther had not come to arrest her, etc.), showing the excessive knowledge of the

⁸ Another boy's mother will rebuke in Morante's last novel (*Aracoeli*, 1982) that there is nothing to be understood. Funny enough, this is exactly what Umberto Eco would come to preach in *Il pendolo di Foucault* fourteen years later ("non vi era nulla da capire", 508) making a "weak" statement regarding our claims towards history.

narrator and the disparity between the latter and the protagonists. There are several minor voices in the text, voices of secondary heroes who often tell one event based on their personal experience, without having knowledge even of the whole of their own life. There is Vilma – the most ingenious of Morante’s ideas concerning the narrator – a weird story teller who, instead of telling the past, tells – like a visionary – the future. Her Cassandra-like voice, warning the inhabitants of the ghetto against the Holocaust, is not heard, not because what she says is not likely to happen, but because she must not be obeyed if the prophecy is to come true. To sum up, there is not one single narrative figure claiming responsibility for the whole story. Viewpoints, dialects, and versions of history are multiplied for a specific purpose: we are lead to observe that just like history is not made by an external entity (Morante disputes the traditional Hegelian idea of history as a unitary ascending trend, thus defying the presence of a transcendental entity in history), here it is not told by one single narrator. None of these voices underwrites it all, guarantees its cohesion or grants it a meaning.

A multicode text

The part of my argument concerning the novel’s early postmodern (or pre-postmodern) character may benefit from observing that *La Storia* is a multicode text to the extent that it managed to orchestrate its reception by several different groups of readers.⁹ Among them, the mass readers to whom she

⁹ Although Gian Carlo Ferretti pointed out that the novel is open to two different types of reading (“sembra contraddittoriamente aperta [...] a due tipi di lettura opposti: uno passivo, tradizionale, patetico-consolatorio, e uno critico, polemico, insomma politico“, 217), the fact escaped the attention of other critics who did not notice the connection between the naïveté of the sentence put on the cover “uno scandalo che dura da diecimila anni” and the double-coding of the text.

whimsically dedicated her book (“Por el analfabeto a quien escribo”), those readers who could be attracted by the sentimental plot, by pathos, and mechanisms of consolation used by Morante, thereby catching the attention of traditional readers of popular fiction. The plot rests on a rather uneventful account of six years of life of a lad named Useppe and his mother Ida, an elementary school teacher, and the emphasis is put on the conflicting relation between macro- and micro-history. The contrast is used to highlight the type of characters cast: the defeated. Those who do not make history, but before they are forgotten and erased from history’s records, have to suffer its consequences. On a very basic level of reading, *La Storia* is an epos of the victims, a tearful story about the miserable life and death of a boy who lived without guilt and died without ever coming to know why. Useppe, in fact, managed to win the simple, “semantic” readers’ affection, along with their identification and compassion. To please this numerous category of readers, Morante stipulated with the publishers a very low price of the book, and also supplied a generic critique of political systems.

A very different group of readers was the young generation of the Left, the members of *Lotta Continua*, or the young ex-rebels, the ‘68 *ragazzini*, some of whom would later be disillusioned by the failure of the ‘68 movement and, suppressed by the policy of the Italian governments during the Seventies, get involved in terrorism. Here the question addressed – Morante’s being outside of all contingency – becomes pertinent again. In short, this latter group of young politicised readers recognised that *La Storia* was the tale of a progressive loss of faith in political action, metaphorically presented as “revolution”, that the novel condemned violence and terror whatever its goals. The word *revolution*, wrote Morante in *Lettera alle Brigate Rosse*, had been “raped and betrayed” (“stuprata e tradita”), was no longer capable of keeping its

authentic meaning, that is the meaning of a popular action to the end of creating a more worthy society. Violence had turned out to be self-destructive. Whoever aspired at being revolutionary in *La Storia* either turned out to make a vain speech using worn out formulas, or to be a drunk or a drug-addict (Giuseppe, Ida's father; Davide), if not changing sides (Nino) each time taking the flag of convenience.

A separate group of readers could have, but has not been to this day, the professional readers, literary critics, who could have noticed and appreciated at least the following: the novel's multiple codes, the fact that it was carefully programmed to speak to different categories of readers, its intricate combination of intertextual references, subtle irony in respect of both operations. But literary critics had many reasons to feel discouraged by Morante's public statements. In *Pro e contro la bomba atomica* she openly despised them as those whose only concern is literature, while a true artist is someone concerned with the whole world.

Playing with conventions and structures of genre

Apart from its multicode structure, another postmodern feature of the novel is its intertextuality. Five years prior to Calvino's merry depiction of a writer's impasse (the writer protagonist of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, can only rewrite or copy other texts), Morante gives a fine example of an ironic rewriting of the traditional generic modules, playing with the genre conventions of the historical novel and finding literary solutions which would be employed in the decade to come. While writing *La Storia* Morante was perfectly aware that it is not possible to write *ex novo*, without making a reference to, let's say *I promessi sposi* by Manzoni. Most historical novelists of the Italian twentieth century necessarily regarded Alessandro Manzoni, if not as a model, at least as a constant reference against which to measure oneself, to quote, to challenge, or,

more recently, to mock. E.g. Umberto Eco made his frequent references to Manzoni in *Il nome della rosa* directly, though ironically. Fewer perhaps wonder how Elsa Morante solved her “anxiety of influence”. By taking a closer look at the position of Morante with respect of Manzoni’s hypotext, we can see that Morante did more than merely re-proposing the traditional set of structural instruments of the old-fashioned historical novel. Her instruments ranged from a manuscript found or discovered, to the omniscient narrator, from reference to sources, to different devices meant to involve the reader. I will briefly comment on only one of the many instances of *La Storia*’s intertextual play: the ironic use of sources as misguiding and for the same reason challenging the notion of truth on which Manzoni was fixated.

Contrarily to Manzoni’s endeavours to unravel the relationship between truth and fiction and to present his fiction as historical truth, Morante claimed that historical texts are not different from other narratives. The writer creates a sense of distrust of history manuals, by separating historical accounts from the story of life and death of individuals. Whenever a reference to history and historical sources is made *inside* the chapters, directly or indirectly, different “sources” (photographs, official announcements, legal acts, decrees, news and local coverage) do not appear as trustworthy or reliable. They are disenchanted and put on the same footing with common textual representation. A funny example of how imprecise and unworthy of faith some historical sources are, is the episode telling the contents of a bilingual announcement in Pietralata, that states partisans were forbidden to shoot at the German troops on pain of being put before a firing squad. Ten partisans were caught and executed, reports the announcement. However, when the common grave was opened later on, there were eleven, instead of ten corpses in it. The eleventh was of an innocent biker, a passer-by shot by chance.

Morante's bestseller goes astray the definition of a traditional historical novel given by Umberto Eco in *Postille*. Historical protagonists reported by common encyclopaedias are not part of *La Storia*'s plot. The novel reveals the disparity between the official historical records and the marginal figures, simple individuals, who are part of History but do not possess it. The historical events, cast outside the chapters, form a sort of school manual of dates and related atrocities, presented in a chronological order, perhaps the only order possible. A definition better suited for Morante's book is Vittorio Spinazzola's term of an anti-historical novel in the sense that *La Storia* does not aim at charting relationships between the past and the present – whether in terms of opposition or of analogy – nor does it aim at teaching her contemporaries a “historical lesson”. History is not a field in which human action may bring us closer to a goal, preaches the Roman writer, rather it follows its own paths, and is not willing to go where we (or the *Sessantottini* for that matter) would like it to. It is not a coincidence that Useppe dies exactly in the very same moment in which he wishes to dissent for the first time. All rebellion (“revolution”), as all action, is purposeless and useless. And, it should be stressed again, there is no direct indictment of any specific political situation or ideology. *La Storia* is not a popular elegy, and the writer is not advancing a view of the poor (*vinti*) crushed by an external (historical?) evil. The protagonists are not unambiguously good. Good and evil coexist in Morante's novel like they coexist in the real world: this is why *La storia* should not be read as a condemnation of war, of any particular war, or as an epopee of its victims. Evil may rise at the heart of innocence: a baby-soldier rapes Ida, a female cat named Rossella eats the canaries, Davide fights against violence all his life but vents his anger and hatred on a German soldier kicking him to death. One cannot but agree with Amos Oz stating that “evil will be revealed here as an apolitical, a-historic force,

which flows perhaps from the very same springs as childlike purity. The Manichean placard dissolves into a subtle and compelling picture of the birth of evil and savagery out of the spirit of innocence.” (Oz 70). Out of the two ways contemplated in *La Storia* with respect to the “scandal of history”, distance or complicity, Morante chooses distance.

So how did Elsa Morante value the literature in the 1970s?

The question of the value of literature to Elsa Morante in the midst of the Seventies appears quite clear and easily settled. She definitely resisted the calling of politics, so disquieting and so pervasive at the time, and so escaped its effects which in many writers resulted in artistic impasse. She continued to write. And she continued to celebrate literature as the supreme human action, as the only means of expression, accessible to an intellectual and an artist, capable of preserving our integrity and entirety. *La Storia* tells a tale which is a representative sample of the universal human condition, human nature and history. It takes a poet, not a political activist, to speak up for all, speaking for each in particular. Individual answers thereby acquire universal validity.

Poets have a magnificent gift, wrote Umberto Saba, a friend of and a model for Elsa Morante: they cry and they laugh for all of us. Poetry alone has a revolutionary charge, a potential to increase the readers' vitality and to hope for future common awakening, said Morante. Only in this sense literature becomes politics. *La Storia* shows that the only *engagement* (to which Morante preferred the term “attention”) is aesthetical and ethical, and yet as such, or precisely as such, it gives consolation to common readers, while sketching a picture of an utopian anarchy to the politicised readers and to all the novel preaches that human history is a scandal (it is “unreal”) because evil and violence (as in the opening scene of rape) may rise at any time at the heart of innocence. Morante's message being timeless

turns out to be extremely timely. Moreover her search for new means of expression in *La Storia* makes her a forerunner of postmodern writers. Even though one could barely call Elsa Morante a postmodern writer with her emphasis on the primacy of poetry, yet *La Storia* definitely paved the way for many Italian (postmodern) historical novels of the eighties and nineties.

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