

## Talking Animals “Talking” with Animals in Elsa Morante’s *La Storia*

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### Abstract



In this essay, I explore the representations of spoken language by animals in *La Storia* by Elsa Morante. Furthermore, I seek to examine the ways in which humans, namely little Useppe, express themselves with animals and interpret what is said, but I also seek to discover what elements may predispose Useppe to be privy to code-sharing with these creatures of other species. While the interactions in this tragic novel are mainly between humans, it is worthwhile to consider the relationship between Useppe and birds, canines, equines, and felines. He acts as a type of intermediary between the species, though I venture to say that he shares more in common with animals than with humans: “Useppe rimaneva del tutto estraneo, e inconsapevole, come un cucciolo ingabbiato in una fiera” (Morante 458; “Useppe remained completely estranged, and unaware, like a puppy caged and put on display” [translation my own]), like a child raised amongst wolves. Since my research examines interspecies communication, I have used zoosemiotics as a starting point. My main focus, then, will be on how Morante successfully employs zoosemiotic notions to make the “spoken” as well as gesticulative communication of the animal reflect the animal’s temperament and emotional nature—even as a synecdoche for the archetype of the animal proper—and interpretable by the human interlocutor. That is, through implicit knowledge of zoosemiotics, these symbols are not just interpreted by Useppe but answered using a mutually decipherable code. In this way, Morante illuminates the profound relationships between humans and animals, relationships that are sustained due to the myriad means by which interspecies communication, compassion, and cooperation intersect and flourish in this novel.

*Keywords:* semiotics, zoosemiotics, Italian, Morante, animal, communication.

### Resumen

En este artículo, exploro las representaciones del lenguaje hablado por los animales en *La historia* de la escritora italiana Elsa Morante. Además, quiero examinar los modos en los que los humanos, el niño Useppe en particular, se expresan con los animales e interpretan lo que estos últimos les dicen, pero quiero también descubrir qué elementos hacen que Useppe esté predisposto a poder compartir códigos con criaturas de otra especie. Mientras que las interacciones en esta novela trágica son, en la mayor parte, entre humanos, es importante considerar las relaciones entre Useppe y algunos pájaros, caninos, equinos y felinos. Él actúa como una especie de intermediario entre las especies, aunque me aventuro a plantear que tiene más en común con los animales que no con los seres humanos: “Useppe rimaneva del tutto estraneo, e inconsapevole, come un cucciolo ingabbiato in una fiera” (Morante 458; “Useppe permanecía completamente extraño, e ignorante, como un cachorro enjaulado en una exposición” [traducción mía]), como un niño que fue criado por lobos. Ya que mis investigaciones examinan la comunicación interespecie, utilicé la zoosemiótica como punto de partida. Me concentro, entonces, en la manera en que Morante emplea con éxito unas nociones zoosemióticas para que lo que “dicen” los animales, tanto como con la voz como con las acciones, refleje el temperamento y la naturaleza emocional de estos—incluso como una sinécdoque del arquetipo del animal propio—y hace que el humano pueda interpretarlos. Es decir, a través de conocimientos implícitos de la zoosemiótica, Useppe no solamente interpreta estos símbolos sino que responde con un código

descifrable por él y los animales con los cuales se comunica. De este modo, Morante ilumina las relaciones profundas entre humanos y animales, relaciones que se sostienen a causa de los medios con los cuales la comunicación, la compasión y la cooperación entre especie se entrecruzan y florecen en la novela.

*Palabras clave:* semiótica, zoosemiótica, Morante, animal, comunicación.

*“Ulí, che dicono?”*

*“Che saccio! Quelli mica parlano la lingua nostra, quelli sono forestieri”.*

*[...]*

*“E che dicono? Eppetondo, eh? che dicono?”*

*“Che hanno da dí! boh!... Dicono: ciricí ciricí io salto qui e tu zompi lí! Te va bene?”*

*“No”.*

*“Ah nun te va bene! embè, ariccóntecelo tu, allora, quello che dicono”.*<sup>1</sup>

*La Storia* (Morante 189)

Bella, one of the canine characters introduced to the reader in the latter third of Elsa Morante’s historical novel *La Storia: Romanzo* (1974), often demonstrates the simplicity and the absolute presenthood of nonhuman animals<sup>2</sup>—what Rilke refers to as the infinite, deathless existence, “ungrasped, completely / without reflection—, pure, like [animals’] outward gaze” (Rilke 49), through which they see “Everything,” yet we see only “Future” or even “Worry.” Animals possess *now* as well as *forever* in their marvellous simplicity (Rilke 49), and on the timeline of their mortal existence, they exist everywhere simultaneously. It is relevant to place children and animals on the same playing field, so to speak, since it is not uncommon to see mirrored in animals the timelessness, innocence, genuineness, simplicity, and unfaltering honesty of young children. It is not surprising, reciprocally, that children would seek the kindred spirits of animals, all of whom coexist with angels, according to Irigaray, due to their purity (199). The narrator in *La Storia* observes this divine union in the seemingly shared demeanour of adolescent Nino and Blitz, Nino’s dog: “[Blitz]

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<sup>1</sup> “Ulí, what are they saying?”

“What do I know? Those ones, they don’t speak our language; they’re foreigners.”

[...]

“So, what are they saying? Eppetondo, huh? What are they saying?”

“What do they have to say? I don’t know!... They’re saying: tweet-tweet tweet-tweet! I jump here and you hop there! Is that good enough for you?”

“No.”

“Ah, it’s not good enough for you. Well, then: why don’t *you* tell us what they’re saying.” (All translations from Italian are my own.)

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this essay, henceforth, “animal” without the “nonhuman” qualifier will be employed to designate nonhuman animals, while “human” will denote human animals.

followed Nino everywhere, as though he were half of his soul”<sup>3</sup> (Morante 107). Morante’s choice to bring into communion Useppe, Nino’s younger half-brother, and the animals that he encounters is corroborated by Capozzi’s explanation that the author frequently uses children as protagonists in her stories. “In most instances it is through male alibis, especially young boys,” Capozzi explains, “that Morante has represented both the effects of excessive love and the anxieties of feeling neglected or rejected.” These youthful characters are essential to her opus because “she sees them as the custodians of fables, myths, idols, and heroes. They are also vulnerable to love, confused about death, always craving attention, and blessed with the necessary fantasy needed to communicate with nature,” as Useppe indubitably and heartbreakingly is (Capozzi).

My aim, in this essay, is to explore the representations of spoken language by animals in *La Storia*, but I seek also to examine the ways in which humans, namely Useppe, express themselves with animals and interpret what is said. Additionally, I am interested in exploring what elements may predispose Useppe to be privy to code-sharing with these creatures of other species. Ultimately, however, through these exchanges facilitated by code-sharing, my goal is to illuminate Morante’s demonstration that coexistence, cross-species friendship, and compassion are attainable when humans bend their ears and open their hearts to listen closely to the inner workings of the simpler, purer animal world of which they, too, are an inextricable part. While the interactions in this tragic novel are mainly between humans, it is worthwhile to consider the relationship between Useppe and avian creatures, canines, equines, and felines. Though the exchanges and moments between Useppe and adult, teenage, and (notably) pre-linguistic humans are rich with sentimentality and merit analysis, my focus will be on Useppe’s meetings and greetings with animals. He acts as a type of intermediary between the species, though I venture to say that he shares more in common with animals than with humans: “Useppe remained completely estranged, and unaware, like a puppy caged and put on display”<sup>4</sup> (Morante 458), like a child raised amongst wolves.

Since my research examines interspecies communication, I have chosen zoosemiotics as a starting point. The term “zoosemiotics” was coined and developed by Thomas Sebeok in 1963, and it studies the signs, symbols, and communication between and across various animal species; more formally, it has been defined as “the discipline, within the science of signs intersect[ing] with ethology, devoted to the scientific study of signalling behavior across animal species”<sup>5</sup> (Maran et al. 1). My main focus, then, will be on how Morante successfully

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<sup>3</sup> “[Blitz] seguiva Nino dappertutto, come fosse metà della sua anima”.

<sup>4</sup> “Useppe rimaneva del tutto estraneo, e inconsapevole, come un cucciolo ingabbiato in una fiera”.

<sup>5</sup> Malacarne, however, explicates zoosemiotics in more detail as dealing with “the rules of animal communication by using the theory of information (e.g. mathematic analysis of signals) and the theory of communication.” It is “situated between traditional ethology and sociobiology” and deals with three things: “1) the nature of communicative channels (visual, tactile, electric...) in relation with the

employs zoosemiotic notions to make the “spoken” as well as gesticulative communication of the animal reflect the animal’s temperament and emotional nature—even as a synecdoche for the archetype of the animal proper—and interpretable by the human interlocutor. That is, through implicit knowledge of zoosemiotics, these symbols are not just interpreted by Useppe but answered using a mutually decipherable code. In this way, Morante illuminates the profound relationships between humans and animals, relationships that are sustained due to the myriad means by which interspecies communication, compassion, and cooperation intersect and flourish in this novel.

“No species [...] can survive in isolation from other sorts of animals,” Sebeok says in his influential *Essays* (106). This is true of humans, who, essentially, are animals endowed with the talent and physiology enabling speech. This is especially true of individuals who exist in isolation from other humans, that is, figurative isolation from what is perceived to be normal: Useppe is not a normal boy, what with the mental and physical limitations imposed upon him by his *Grande Male*<sup>6</sup>, his genetics, and his vital growing years’ having been stunted by the devastations of the Second World War. Additionally, he is alienated from his brother, Nino, since Nino is frequently away, a large age gap separates the boys, and, finally, they do not share the same father. The boys’ mother, Ida, is raped by a German soldier named Gunther at the beginning of the novel, and Gunther (Useppe’s biological father) dies without Ida’s ever learning of his eventual fate; consequently the references to Useppe as a “bastard child” are not infrequent, nor are the instances underlining similarities between him, a mutt like Blitz the dog, and other animals:

“[...] Because Blitz isn’t by any means a wolf[,]” [Nino explains].

“Then what race is he?”

“He’s a bastard.”

The casual word shook Ida, who blushed immediately [...]. In turn, then, Nino understood her thoughts: [...]

“Of course! Even Giuseppe is a bastard. In this house, there are two bastards!” he deduced, rejoicing at his discovery. [...] <sup>7</sup> (Morante 104)<sup>8</sup>

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environment; 2) the meaning of a message in relation with the context in which it is emitted; 3) the ability of social species to construct symbolic languages” (qtd. in Radomska 74).

<sup>6</sup> His “Great Illness”—epilepsy, essentially—which consists of a “*Violenta crisi convulsiva con perdita totale della coscienza*” (“Violent convulsive episode with complete loss of consciousness”; Morante 463).

<sup>7</sup> “[...] Perché Blitz, di razza, mica è lupo”.

“E di che razza è, questo qui?”

“Razza bastarda”.

La parola casuale scosse Ida, che ne arrossì immediatamente [...]. A sua volta, allora, Nino concepì il pensiero: “Già! Pure Giuseppe è bastardo. In questa casa, ci stanno due bastardi!” ne dedusse, rallegrandosi moltissimo alla scoperta.

<sup>8</sup> Initially, Ida takes offense at this term and is scandalized by it. She uses it—or, rather, *bastardo* is used by the narrator—to refer only to Blitz and his interactions with other bastard canines. Later, however, namely toward the end of the story, Ida appears to reclaim the term, rendering it more endearing, when imagining the worst-case scenario of Useppe being taken away from her by the Nazis; she thinks of him as her *bastardello* or *bastarduccio* (the suffixes *-ello* and *-uccio* render the term an affectionate, diminutive one; Morante 462, 503). The word appears 16 times in the novel (thrice of which in the modified forms).

Nino understands from that point on that his little brother is different not just from him, but also from other human animals, and he rejoices in a strangely aloof manner.

Although Useppe’s mother and half-sibling positively adore him, Useppe is isolated from them due to their age differences and diverse life experiences—and yet Useppe actively rejects the company of other boys and girls his own age, preferring animals, and, more specifically, dogs as his sole, and soul, mates: “Those ones (the dogs) were, one could say, Useppe’s only frequenters. Neither friends nor companions of his own species—he no longer had anyone”<sup>9</sup> (Morante 494). Useppe stands apart also from the general Italian population who is jaded, dejected, and spiritually tired from the ravages of the war. Even Davide, also known as Carlo, an (ex-) anarchist soldier and friend of Nino’s, in his drug-induced garrulousness and candour, gushes to five-year-old Useppe, telling him that Useppe is the happiest little boy that he has ever met: “And yours is the happiness... of... everything. You are the happiest creature in the world. [...] You are too sweet for this world; you’re not from here. As people say, *happiness is not of this world*”<sup>10</sup> (Morante 520). Useppe is “not of this world,” or supernatural, one could say; in *this* world, such pure and all-encompassing joy does not and cannot exist—and is not natural—alongside violence and abjection. Davide, who has witnessed the unspeakable horrors of war, is in awe of this boy who, despite physically inhabiting the same world as he, can experience a joy that must certainly originate elsewhere; Useppe’s joy is otherworldly. As a result of his uninhibited felicity, Useppe can relate more closely to and commune better with his canine companions, as opposed to the members of his own species, and Morante mirrors Sebeok’s earlier certitude regarding the necessity of inter-species companionship in her demonstrations of Useppe’s intellectual and emotional intimacy with Bella and Blitz. Sebeok argues that “[e]ach species must live in a vast ecosystem which requires its members to coexist with a variety of neighbors on certain terms” (106), and such a coexistence cannot preclude the employment of reciprocated communicative expressions—a method of code-sharing, that is—to identify how the limited space on this earth can be shared. If a lion roars at a poacher, or a dog barks at a trespasser, those are *clear* signs, which need no further interpretation, to the human being invoking that audible sign.

In *La Storia*, the reader learns explicitly that Useppe possesses the uncanny ability—indeed, “otherworldly,” if one is to adhere to Davide’s appreciation of Useppe’s jovial nature—to comprehend the language of dogs and of other animals: “And maybe it was in those primitive duets with Blitz that he learned the language

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<sup>9</sup> “Costoro (i cani) erano si può dire i soli frequentatori di Useppe. Amici o compagni della sua specie, lui non ne aveva piú nessuno”.

<sup>10</sup> “E la tua è la felicità... di... tutto. Tu sei la creatura piú felice del mondo. [...] Tu sei troppo carino per questo mondo, non sei di qua. Come si dice: *la felicità non è di questo mondo*”.

of dogs. Which, along with other languages of animals, would remain a powerful acquisition for as long as he lived”<sup>11</sup> (Morante 110). Before this explication, however, the narrator insinuates that Useppe (when he is still pre-linguistic, crawling on all fours, and essentially sharing more characteristics with nonverbal quadrupeds than with loquacious bipeds) is privy to an awareness of and sensitivity to the inner workings of animals:

And maybe between the child’s eyes and those of the beast some kind of unexpected exchange took place, hidden and imperceptible. All of a sudden, the look on Giuseppe’s face underwent a strange change, one that was never before seen, which, however, no one noticed. A kind of sadness or concern went through him, as though a small dark curtain had fallen in front of him.”<sup>12</sup> (Morante 125)

He is an insider in the animal kingdom but is marked as an outsider in the human one (though no one, as far as the narrator betrays, is aware of this interspecies talent). In zoosemiotic terms, it can be said that Useppe possesses the extraordinary talent of being capable of deciphering animals’ codes and relaying a message in a code interpretable by his animal receivers. All messages or strings of signs, Sebeok explains, have to be:

generated by an emitting organism [...] and interpreted by one or more receiving organisms [...]. Messages have to be encoded in a form that the channel connecting the communicant can accommodate. For the message to have an impact the receiving animals must have the key for decoding it back into such a shape [...] that its biological makeup enables it to interpret. That is the reason why messages appear in coded form, and why the source and the destination must (at least partially) share either an inherited or a learned code, or, commonly, some mixture of both. (Sebeok 108)

Finally, Sebeok indulgently explains that,

[u]nderstandably, human being[s], in whose daily lives speech plays such a prominent part, tend to think of the vocal-auditory link as the paramount channel. Actually, however, the use of sound in the wider scheme of biological existence is rather uncommon: the overwhelming majority of animals are both deaf and dumb. (Sebeok 109)

He also cautions humans away from adopting “the layman’s traditional notion of the ‘five senses’,” since science has identified that there are others that far outnumber these simple five, with others yet to be discovered. “It has been known,” he clarifies, “that horses are capable of detecting movements in the human face of less than one-fifth of a millimeter” (Sebeok 111). I will come back to this notion later, when the curious case of Clever Hans is introduced.

Bella the dog appears to speak in a human tongue with Useppe. Her canine quality of being effortlessly distracted by new stimuli is reproduced verbally by

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<sup>11</sup> “E forse fu in quei suoi duetti primitivi con Blitz, che imparò il linguaggio dei cani. Il quale, insieme con altri idiomi di animali, doveva restargli un acquisto valido finché fu vivo”.

<sup>12</sup> “E forse fra gli occhi del bambino e quelli della bestia si svolse un qualche scambio inopinato, sotterraneo e impercettibile. D’un tratto, lo sguardo di Giuseppe subì un mutamento strano e mai prima veduto, del quale, tuttavia, nessuno si accorse. Una specie di tristezza o di sospetto lo attraversò, come se una piccola tenda buia gli calasse davanti”.

Morante: one need only introduce a new character into the scenario and Bella pounces on it, immediately forgetting the preceding object that captivated her keen interest and enthralled her. Here, she raves profusely about the beauty of those humans around her with Useppe, her interlocutor, and it is the individual beauty of each of her human companions that distracts her from each of the others:

“Let’s look, for instance, at my Antonio, the one from Naples... Without a doubt, the most beautiful of all is him! But my Ninnuzzu, he, too, it’s enough just to look at him: there is no one that exists that is more beautiful than he is!! [...]”

“And you,” she continued here, looking at him, convinced, “you’re still the most beautiful in the world. That’s for sure.”

“And my mom?” Useppe inquired.

“Her! No one has ever seen a girl more beautiful! And in Rome, everyone knows it! She’s an infinite beauty. Infinite!” [...]

Useppe laughed, satisfied, because, truly, he and the shepherd dog were completely in agreement when it came to the topic of beauties. Giants or dwarves, ragamuffins or sophisticates, decrepitude or youth, for him, it made no difference. And neither the crooked, nor the hunchbacked, nor the big-bellied, nor the ugly, to him they were no less attractive than Settebellezze [literally, Seven Beauties], as long as they were all equal friends and smiled.<sup>13</sup> (Morante 556-7)

Earlier in the novel, the narrator explains that Useppe, too, is blind to hierarchies: “Without a doubt, for him, differences with regards to age, to beauty or ugliness, to sex, to social status just did not exist”<sup>14</sup> (Morante 185). What is important here is not simply that Bella and Useppe are nonjudgmental with regards to physical qualities, abilities, or intelligence; rather, what is notable is that they embrace *every* human—without needing to take as little as a moment to ponder their feelings—as the indubitable epitome of beauty.

With that in mind, one can entertain the zoosemiotic perspective as an ethical one. Can humans learn to be open, welcoming, and tolerant of other humans by observing the communication amongst animals and with humans, and engaging in these exchanges themselves? Were it not for Morante’s adoption of zoosemiotic theory in her text, thus granting Useppe and his animal friends the mutual ability to communicate, the reader would be ignorant of this realm of the universe that beholds humanity as unspeakably beautiful. This is remarkable in a book whose principal backdrop is the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, which featured humanity committing unspeakable cruelty and violence, and

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<sup>13</sup> “Guardiamo a esempio Antonio mio, quello di Napoli... Senz’altro, il più bello di tutti è lui! Però Ninnuzzu mio, lui pure, basta vederlo: uno più bello di lui non esiste!!” [...]

“E tu”, essa qua riprese, mirandolo convinta, “sei sempre il più bello di tutti al mondo. È positivo”.

“E mamma mia?” s’informò Useppe.

“Lei! S’è mai vista un’altra ragazza più bella?! Eh a Roma lo sanno tutti! È una bellezza infinita. Infinita!” [...]

Useppe rise soddisfatto, perché invero su questo argomento delle bellezze l’accordo fra la pastora e lui era completo. Giganti o nani, straccioni o pàini, decrepitudine o gioventù, per lui non faceva differenza. E né gli storti, né i gobbi, né i panzoni, né le scòrfane, per lui non erano meno carini di Settebellezze, solo che fossero tutti amici pari e sorridessero [...].

<sup>14</sup> “Senza dubbio, per lui non esistevano differenze né di età, né di bello e brutto, né di sesso, né sociali”.

it is, therefore, unsurprising that Davide should be puzzled by Ueseppe’s complete joy (see above). Thanks to zoosemiotics, the community that it engenders, and the bridges between species that it creates, beauty beheld by animals can still coexist with humanity’s most shameful actions.

We can recall Bella’s reaction to verbal stimuli, too, at the mere mention of the word “*gatta*” (“female cat”) in Ueseppe’s improvised poem, even in the absence of any felines: “At the word ‘cat’, Bella perked up her ears and emitted a humorous bark, interrupting his poem”<sup>15</sup> (Morante 632). Cats are not the clichéd enemies of humans, but they are to dogs, so Bella’s attention is immediately stolen when the word “*gatta*” is uttered, distracting Ueseppe from his recitation and Bella herself from listening to the poem. Another example of the distracted nature of the dog is Bella’s effort to divert Ueseppe’s attention from a traumatizing experience that had just befallen him. Ueseppe himself is very easily distracted: “Every tiny event distracted his glance; otherwise he remained quiet, with eyes rapt, as though his mind were drifting away”<sup>16</sup> (Morante 458). Bella recounts a vaguely recalled story from her past. Though ignorant of most of the details of the puppies that she bore, Bella is thrilled and proud to talk about her offspring:

“One time, I had puppies [...]. I don’t know how many there were,” she continued, “I don’t know how to count. [...] Anyway, there were many, and each one was more beautiful than the next one. [...] When I looked at one of them, he was the most beautiful; [...] then I would lick another one of them, and meanwhile yet another one would stick its muzzle out amidst the others, and indubitably each one was the most beautiful. Their beauty was infinite; that’s the truth. Infinite beauties cannot be compared.”

“And what were their names?”

“They didn’t have names.”

[...]

“And where’d they go?”

“Where?... I don’t know what to think about this. From one moment to the next, I looked for them, and they were no longer there. [...] I looked for them again, I waited for them for who knows how long, but they never came back.”<sup>17</sup> (Morante 556)

This tender excerpt makes evident the parental pride that Bella once possessed, even though she has not ascribed any individuality to her pups; but it also

<sup>15</sup> “Alla parola ‘gatta’ Bella drizzò gli orecchi e fece un abbaio umoristico, interrompendo la poesia”.

<sup>16</sup> “Ogni minimo evento distraeva i suoi sguardi; o altrimenti se ne stava quieto, con gli occhi assorti, come se la sua mente si allontanasse”.

<sup>17</sup> “Io, una volta, avevo dei cagnolini [...]. Non so quanti fossero, di numero”, seguitò, “io non so contare. [...] Insomma, erano tanti, e uno più bello dell’altro. [...] Quando ne guardavo uno, il più bello era lui; [...] poi ne leccavo un altro, e frattanto un altro ancora spuntava di mezzo col muso, e indubbiamente ognuno era il più bello. La loro bellezza era infinita, ecco il fatto. Le bellezze infinite non si possono confrontare”.

“E come si chiamavano?”

“Non ebbero nome”.

[...]

“E dove so’ iti?”

“Dove?... su questo, io non so che pensare. Da un momento all’altro, li cercai, e non c’erano più. [...] Li ricercai, li aspettai chi sa quanto, ma non hanno fatto ritorno”.

demonstrates the simplicity and the absolute presenthood of the animal. This is why Bella cannot differentiate between the pups of one litter or another; she is fundamentally present either in acknowledging their presence or their absence. But she *does* have memory; nevertheless, she is blissfully ignorant of the future.

While Bella appears to assume the role of a supportive human companion more than that of a dependent canine whenever she is speaking (except when the narrator explains her forgetfulness as well as her “*accenti canini*” [“canine accents”]), there is a certain animal or childlike naïveté that Morante allows to filter through the animal speech and the passion that Bella exudes, and the dog’s exuberance regarding the undisputed beauty of each human recollected enthralls her, locking her into the present moment. Aesthetic beauty, as Morante demonstrates, is appreciated not just by humans, but by animals as well. And, like Bella the dog and all animals, Useppe, too, lives primarily in the present moment; analogous to Bella with the crisis of having her litter removed from her, Useppe has no recollection of his “*accessi*” (“seizures”) due to his “*Grande Male*” (“Great Illness”): “He slept for almost the entire day, but at around noon, for a brief interval, he got up. He neither remembered nor knew anything about his attack (these attacks, the doctors would explain to Ida, *are not experienced by the patient*)”<sup>18</sup> (Morante 464).

In “Zoosemiotics as a New Perspective,” Radomska opens with a quote by Ludwig Wittgenstein: “If a lion could talk, we would not understand him” (Wittgenstein in Radomska 71). She then quotes a student of Wittgenstein’s, Vicki Hearne, a poet and dog- and horse-trainer, who says of Wittgenstein’s lion,

The lovely thing [...] is that Wittgenstein does not leap to say that his lion is languageless, only that he is not talking. [...] The reticence of this lion [...] is not the reticence of absence, absence of consciousness, say, or knowledge, but rather of tremendous presence[,] [of] all consciousness that is beyond ours. (qtd. in Radomska 71)

This is reminiscent of when Useppe suddenly realizes that silence, in fact, is as significant as words, tweets, or barks. After a bird’s repetitive sing-song, interpreted by Useppe as a variant of “It’s a joke it’s a joke it’s all a joke!”<sup>19</sup> (Morante 509), Bella settles down on a patch of grass and dozes off; Useppe, meanwhile, is struck by the symbolic weight of the silence left behind by the bird, who had flown away:

The silence, once the song’s interval had concluded, had grown to such fantastic proportions that not only his ears, but his whole body listened to it. And Useppe, in listening to it, experienced a surprise that might have perhaps frightened an adult man, who is subject to a mental code of nature. But [Useppe’s] tiny organism,

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<sup>18</sup> “Dormì quasi l’intera giornata, ma verso mezzogiorno per un breve intervallo si ridestò. Della propria crisi non ricordava né sapeva niente (queste crisi — spiegheranno a Ida i dottori — *non vengono vissute dal soggetto*)”.

<sup>19</sup> “È uno scherzo / uno scherzo / tutto uno scherzo!”

instead, accepted the surprise as a natural phenomenon, even if it had not been discovered until that very day.<sup>20</sup> (Morante 510)

The silence is rife with significance interpreted not just by the brain, but by the entire body (see below for more on nonverbal communication, specifically the story of Clever Hans). The quiet created by the bird’s silence could be understood only by the child—and not the adult human, weighed down by the unwieldy baggage of experiential knowledge—who unselfconsciously opens himself up to the vulnerability of communion with these creatures; with these animals who are totally unlike him, Useppe now possesses a common code: “The silence, in reality, spoke! Rather, it was made of voices, which, in the beginning, came out rather confused, blending themselves with the tremor of colours and shadows, until finally the double sensation became a single one”<sup>21</sup> (Morante 510). Indeed, Useppe experiences the sound of silence with his ears (“era fatto di voci”) as well as his eyes (“[il] tremolio dei colori e delle ombre”) until, finally, the *doppia sensazione* felt by both senses combined to form a single sensation interpretable by the whole body (Morante 510).

The question of significant and symbolic silence invokes Calvino’s *Palomar*, wherein Palomar muses about the possibility of the pauses between the blackbirds’ whistles’ being more profoundly meaningful than the whistles proper: “And what if the meaning of the message were to be found in the pause and not in the whistle? If it were in the silences that blackbirds speak to each other?”<sup>22</sup> He adds, quite remarkably, “The whistle would be, in this case, just a punctuation mark, a formula like ‘over and out’”<sup>23</sup> (Calvino 27). As Bolongaro expounds, “[t]he birds have taught Palomar and the reader that silence is a part of language[,] not opposed to it” (116). As the study of zoosemiotics proposes, nonverbal gestures—whether intentional or unconscious—hold as much, if not more, semantic weight as verbal expressions, like in the Clever Hans scenario described subsequently.

What is equally relevant when examining human-animal communication is the projection of expectations onto the other—namely the human’s onto the animal. Such was the case with “Clever Hans.” Clever Hans was a horse who, in the early 1900s, demonstrated a talent for responding correctly to queries (of arithmetic and other intellectual questions) posed by his trainer, Wilhelm Von

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<sup>20</sup> “Il silenzio, finito l’intervallo della canzonetta, s’era ingrandito a una misura fantastica, tale che non solo gli orecchi, ma il corpo intero lo ascoltava. E Useppe, nell’ascoltarlo, ebbe una sorpresa che forse avrebbe spaventato un uomo adulto, soggetto a un codice mentale della natura. Ma il suo piccolo organismo, invece, la ricevette come un fenomeno naturale, anche se mai prima scoperto fino a oggi”.

<sup>21</sup> “[i]l silenzio, in realtà, era parlante! anzi, era fatto di voci, le quali da principio arrivarono piuttosto confuse, mescolandosi col tremolio dei colori e delle ombre, fino a che poi la doppia sensazione diventò una sola [...]”.

<sup>22</sup> “E se fosse nella pausa e non nel fischio il significato del messaggio? Se fosse nei silenzi che i merli si parlano?”

<sup>23</sup> “Il fischio sarebbe in questo caso solo un segno di punteggiatura, una formula come ‘passo e chiudo’”.

Osten. After Hans’ supposed genius had been studied by a varied team of researchers, it was discovered that he was not as intelligent as Von Helm had thought, though he was certainly clever: unbeknownst to the trainer, when Hans approached the correct answer (demonstrated through the horse’s tapping his hoof), Von Osten’s anticipation was palpable to the equine via small movements in Von Osten’s face. Thus, the horse could predict how to respond correctly (see Johnson, and Rosenthal in Sebeok<sup>24</sup>). This is noteworthy because evidence of this type of exchange is present in Useppe’s interactions with Bella and Blitz and even the birds, when the reader wonders whether Useppe is truly *hearing* enunciated words emitted from their mouths or if he is anthropomorphizing these creatures as children are wont to do. Of course, Useppe, estranged as he is from humans but welcomed and adored amongst animals, communes with these animals for solace as well as for simple companionship, and he unwittingly projects his innate desires onto the creatures in his company. Just as Von Osten and Hans’ other interlocutors managed to inadvertently project their communicative desires and anticipations onto the cunning horse, Useppe receives the support and companionship that he earnestly seeks from his animal friends. Irigaray, in fascinating anecdotes about her moments spent with birds, explains that animals, in her experience, have been

[c]apable of perceiving a call where human beings hear nothing, and of providing a comforting presence where more rational arguments would have neither appeased nor healed the suffering or distress. Where a human body or affectionate gesture would not have been able to have the simplicity of an animal presence. As pure as that of an angel, Rilke claimed. Or that of a child? Who feels, also the danger or the trial that the other is going through. (Irigaray 199)

A particular moment underlines Useppe’s *understanding* and *hearing* spoken language by Bella—who poses not just as a loyal companion but also as a maternal figure<sup>25</sup> (since Ida, as the narrator explains, is progressively deteriorating due to the travails of age, paranoia, and stress [Morante 474]): “But my Ninnuzzu [...], there is no one more beautiful than he!!’ It was the first time in which Ninnuzzu’s

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<sup>24</sup> Once Hans and his behaviours began to be studied by a team consisting of “a circus manager, a veterinary surgeon, two prominent German zoologists, two educators, and two psychologists of recognized ability—Professors Nagel and Stumpf” (Johnson 664), it was determined that “[t]he horse was simply a channel through which the information the questioner unwittingly put into the situation was fed back to the questioner” (Rosenthal in Sebeok 67). Thus, Von Osten and other questioners of Hans demonstrated a “self-fulfilled prophecy”: “Hans’ questioners, even skeptical ones, expected Hans to give the correct answers.” Thus, their anticipated response “was reflected in their unwitting signal to Hans that the time had come for Hans to stop his tapping. The signal cued Hans to stop, and the questioner’s expectation became the reason for Hans’ being, once again, correct” (Rosenthal in Sebeok 67-8).

<sup>25</sup> “[E], da questo medesimo giorno, Useppe ebbe due madri. Bella difatti [...] s’era presa, per Useppe, d’un amore diverso che per Nino. Verso il grande Nino, essa si portava come una compagna schiava; e verso il piccolo Useppe, invece, come una protettrice e una sorvegliante” (“And from that very day, Useppe had two mothers. Bella, in fact [...], for Useppe, was taken by a love that was different from the one she felt for Nino. Toward big Nino, she acted as a slave companion; for little Useppe, instead, she was a protector and a watcher”; Morante 474).

name had been *pronounced* between the two of them”<sup>26</sup> (Morante 556; italics my own). Other instances clearly elucidate Useppe’s discourses with Bella, with specific words like *traduzione* (“translation,” or, rather, the lack of a need for one, since Useppe can understand canine speech), *discorso* (“conversation”), or *pronunciare* (“to pronounce”), like in the above example. In the following excerpt, Bella fulfills her role both as mother and devoted companion, and Morante includes other vocabulary items (in italics) that connote code-sharing between the two creatures and indicate humanlike speech:

Meanwhile, there in the entrance, with a *tiny voice* that was tinged with panic, he did nothing but *repeat* to her: “Bella... Bella...” and nothing else, while she continued to hold a *conversation* of love with him that to foreigners would have sounded a bit like: “Ggrui grrruui hump hump hump,” the *translation* for which (superfluous for Useppe), however, would be: “Now, only you remain for me in this world. And no one can ever separate us.”<sup>27</sup> (Morante 474)

Fusco notes that Sextus Empiricus (160 AD–210 AD), Greek philosopher and physician, takes the dog as a particular example when he discusses animals. She explains that Sextus reflects on anthropocentrism in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, wherein he entertains the very real possibility that “even if we do not understand the so-called unreasonable voices of animals, it would not be completely absurd to think that they converse amongst themselves without our understanding them”<sup>28</sup> (Sextus in Fusco 33). Indeed, this phenomenon is comparable to the incomprehensibility of languages foreign to us, which may appear to our ears as a single, uninterrupted sound and for which we would need a translation, yet “[it] is entirely possible that, *from the point of view of the animals* and of barbarians, it is a real language”<sup>29</sup> (Fusco 33–4). To the ears of all except Useppe and Bella (and other canines), Bella’s “words” are meaningless, primitive barbaric utterances. Fusco emphasizes, however, the linguistic and semantic leeway that Sextus attributes to the canine species, indicating that, although the sounds of dogs may be incomprehensible to most human beings, they do contain a variety of sounds rife with significance, even if we are ignorant of this meaning:

We hear them emit a given voice when they want someone to distance themselves, another when they yelp, another when they are hit, a different one when they are wagging their tail with joy. In sum, if one were to pay attention to this fact, he would identify a great variety of voices [...] and in [dogs] and in other animals

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<sup>26</sup> “Però Ninnuzzu mio [...], uno più bello di lui non esiste!!’ Era la prima volta che il nome di Ninnuzzu veniva *pronunciato* fra loro due”. (italics added).

<sup>27</sup> “Intanto, là nell’ingresso, con una *vocina* che sapeva di pánico, lui non faceva che *ripeterle*: ‘Bella... Bella...’ e nient’altro, mentre lei gli andava tenendo un *discorso* d’amore che all’orecchio degli zotici suonerebbe appena: ‘Ggrui grrruui hump hump hump’ ma del quale la *traduzione* (superflua per Useppe) sarebbe: ‘Adesso, al mondo mi rimani tu solo. E nessuno potrà mai separarci’”. (italics added)

<sup>28</sup> “Anche se non comprendiamo le voci degli animali, così detti, irragionevoli [...], non sarebbe del tutto assurdo pensare che essi discorrono tra loro senza che noi li comprendiamo [...]”.

<sup>29</sup> “È del tutto plausibile che *dal punto di vista degli animali* e dei barbari esso sia un vero e proprio linguaggio”.

according to different circumstances, one would conclude, ostensibly, that animals, so-called unreasonable, also take part in uttered speech.<sup>30</sup> (qtd. in Fusco 34)

It must be noted, however, that it is not only the voice or speech of dogs that is comprehensible to Ueseppe. On several occasions in the novel, Ueseppe is startled that he understands the *cantilena* (“sing-song”) of birds perched in trees outdoors:

They began a dialogue set to music. More than a dialogue, really, theirs was a little song, comprising a single sentence that the two of them took turns saying back to the other, alternating with jumps on two branches, one lower and one higher, and signalling each refrain with vivacious movements of their little heads. This consisted of a total of a dozen *syllables*, sung over two or three notes—always the same ones, save for imperceptible caprices or variations—with liveliness at an allegretto tempo. And the *words* (very clear to Ueseppe’s ears) said exactly this: [...] *It’s a joke it’s a joke it’s all a joke!*

The two creatures, before flying away once again into the air, repeated this little song of theirs at least twenty times, certainly with the intention of teaching it to Ueseppe.<sup>31</sup> (Morante 269; italics of *syllables* and *words* my own)

Possibly the avian dialogue is a result of the problem that Shell addresses, inherent to the study of bird sounds proper, concerning “the charge of mindless parroting—or sound-making without linguistic meaning. Birds of some species,” he explains, “are indeed very good at imitating bird sounds of other species. (Mockingbirds—*mimus polyglottos*—brilliantly mimic the notes of other birds [...])” (96). Their song might, in truth, be nothing but “*mere esteriorizzazioni di un istinto*” (“mere externalizations of an instinct”; Fusco 26), an instinct mirrored and replicated “almeno una ventina di volte” (“at least twenty times”) in this particular scene. When Ueseppe first hears this litany and then hears it again, in slightly varying forms (see Morante 509–510), on later occasions, it is never sung by mockingbirds, but usually by simple swallows or sparrows. Though she attributes more depth to their singing than Shell does, Irigaray explains that whenever she would return to an oft-visited wilderness locale in her own life, “as soon as I arrived there, scarcely out of the car to raise the barrier, a bird would whistle, one of those birds that imitates a human voice so well you can be fooled. I was tricked each time, turning around to thank whoever was welcoming me” (Irigaray 197). Their song was familiar to her, like the intimate *ritornello* (“refrain”) of the birds in Ueseppe’s

<sup>30</sup> “Noi li udiamo emettere una data voce quando vogliono allontanare qualcuno, un’altra quando urlano, un’altra quando sono battuti, un’altra differente quando scodinzolano di gioia. Insomma, se uno fissasse la sua attenzione a questo fatto, riscontrerebbe una grande differenza di voci [...] e in questo e negli altri animali secondo le differenti circostanze, talché ne concluderebbe, verisimilmente, che gli animali, così detti, irragionevoli, partecipano anche del discorso esternato”.

<sup>31</sup> “[I]ncominciarono un dialogo musicato. Più che un dialogo, veramente, la loro era una canzonetta, composta di un’unica frase che i due si rimandavano a vicenda, alternandosi a salti su due rami, uno più basso e uno più alto, e segnando ogni ripresa con gesti vivaci della testolina. Essa consisteva in tutto di una dozzina di *sillabe*, cantate su due o tre note — sempre le stesse salvo impercettibili capricci o variazioni — a tempo di allegretto con brio. E le *parole* (chiarissime agli orecchi di Ueseppe) dicevano esattamente così: [...] *È uno scherzo uno scherzo tutto uno scherzo!* Le due creature, prima di rivolarsene via nell’aria, replicarono questa loro canzonetta almeno una ventina di volte, certamente con l’intenzione di insegnarla a Ueseppe [...]”.

company is to him, such that the narrator suggests that the birds repeat it in order that Useppe should learn it from them—so that he, too, might be familiar with their code, and as though this lesson were an initiation and acceptance into their world. Bella appears to have an ear trained to the semantics of this music and is already fluent in its code: when Useppe, noticing Bella’s demeanour in response to the avian chant, warily (since, on a previous occasion, he asks another human, Scimò, if he recognizes the birds’ song and is swiftly dismissed) asks Bella if she likes the song, Bella responds vivaciously: “She moved her tongue and raised half an ear, as though to say, ‘Anything but! And how could I not?!’”<sup>32</sup> (Morante 509). Here, evidently, her actions speak louder than her words, but it is noteworthy that code-sharing of whatever type—verbal or nonverbal—is enabling the effortless communication between Useppe and Bella.

“But real animals don’t talk,” Shell proclaims in his essay on speaking (and stuttering) animals in fiction. “It is true, of course,” he continues, “that many human beings talk to animals and also treat their supposedly dumb animals—their pets—as flesh-and-blood ventriloquists’ dummies that seem to speak back to them” (Shell 85). “Seem” would be the key word in his declaration, and, of course, *La Storia* is a piece of historical fiction, but there is ample evidence in the book that Useppe, by the narrator’s explications, is actually *hearing* the enunciations of the birds and dogs: “*pronunciare*” (“to pronounce”), “*dialogare*” (“to dialogue”), “*cantare*” (“to sing”), “*chiacchierare*” (“to chat”) are used to indicate such phenomena, but it should be noted, also, that these words are used as often as “*abbaiare*” (“to bark”), “*mugolare*” (“to whimper”), “*cantare*” (“to sing”), and “*brontolare*” (“to mutter”), to mention only a few, with regards to the sounds made by the animals. Nonetheless, it is highlighted on many occasions that there is nary an instance wherein Useppe necessitates a translation<sup>33</sup>—and, even so, “[i]t is impossible to paraphrase or find a single word to translate the sounds made by animals,” Sebeok maintains. “Even the transmutation of certain categories of human nonverbal messages into linguistic expression is, at best, likely to introduce gross falsification [...]” (Sebeok 52). In this way, Useppe, who has always had a unique relationship with the animals in his vicinity, is privy to the essence of the animals’ thought processes and never misses a single nuance or inflection; the poetry of their existence is never lost to him in translation. Sapir, referring to symbols and signals commonly seen in human life (including train horns and lights, smoke signals, etc.), explains that “one cannot make a word-to-word translation, as it were, back to speech but can only paraphrase in speech the *intent of the communication*” (qtd. in Sebeok 52; italics my own).

One cannot help but wonder what the true significance is, if any, of Useppe’s ability to comprehend and feel the thoughts and sentiments, respectively, of the animals around him. Are they really speaking to him—or, rather, are they really

<sup>32</sup> [A]gitò la lingua e alzò mezzo orecchio, per intendere: ‘Altro che! e come no?!’”

<sup>33</sup> See Morante 474.

speaking *only* to him? Maybe these animals, like Useppe, wish to reach out to all human beings but, rather than harbouring an unfortunate inability to *express* themselves across species, their code is simply not understood by humans. Or, finally, like Useppe, perhaps these animals—Bella and Blitz, the *scherzo* birds, the “*vavàlli*” (“horses” [*cavalli*], as mispronounced by an infant) that Useppe meets—are the sole fortunate guardians of the inherent beatific purity of the world to which cynical adults are deaf and blind. Useppe and the animals appear to inhabit a world of their own and, unbeknownst to them, they possess an almost divine capacity to communicate that transcends the human realm, the ability to hear the flowing essence of the world, and they all but shout for the adult world to listen. Heidegger says that, “[o]f all the beings that are, presumably the most difficult to think about are living creatures”—that is, animals—“because on the one hand they are in a certain way most closely akin to us, and on the other they are at the same time separated from our ek-sistent essence by an abyss” (qtd. in Calarco 19). By the end of the novel, Morante demonstrates how Useppe, despite his indomitable spirit, succumbs to the tragedy of human mortality, unable to make his voice heard across the abyss separating him and the animals from the rest of humankind.

Describing the vocal patterns and the healing, restorative powers of an avian companion, Irigaray eloquently describes a bird’s song as “[going] from the low to the high-pitched and shrill, from the high-pitched to the low, not without pausing on certain tonalities, raising the breath without ever cutting it from its corporeal site, from the intimacy of the flesh” (Irigaray 198). This vocal capacity, whether it contains a communicative goal, is simply aesthetically expressive, or is a “*mera exteriorizzazione di un istinto*” (“mere externalization of an instinct”), is a deeply ingrained part of the bird. It is visceral. “How to respond to their call,” Irigaray beseeches human readers, “[i]f not through becoming the delicate friends they want us to be? By listening to their instruction as well. Calling to love by singing” (198). As for humans, can it be said that their mode of expression is superior? Irigaray insists that we must look to animals as wise guides:

We pass from submission to a language founded on abstract argumentation to mute compartments where there is a dominator and a dominated. [...] Birds seem more advanced than we are in the amorous dialogue, and could serve as our guides at least a part of the way, if we keep still to listen to them. (198)

As Morante has poignantly demonstrated in *La Storia*, and as Sebeok has earnestly elucidated in his zoosemiotics, the coexistence of species is necessary to human as well as animal sojourns on this planet, and this coexistent nature is also mutually enriching. Though Useppe’s years on Earth were few, he is amongst the only human characters in *La Storia* (save for Nino, perhaps) privy to diverse and multifaceted experiences, the fruit of his cross-species friendships. Though he suffered critically due to malnutrition, the *Grande Male*, and social rejection, Useppe is arguably the character who lived the most complete and fulfilling life in this story. Perhaps in the supportive, indulgent, and patient relationship between

Useppe and his animal friends lies a message of compassion and thoughtfulness that Morante intends to convey to human readers—or perhaps therein she delivers an urgent invitation to listen more closely, with our whole bodies and, perhaps, souls, to *all* of the creatures with whom we share our space.

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