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Forget-me-not: Giving Voice to Memory in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar* and Elsa Morante's *La Storia*

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Among the many, intertwining motifs spanning the volumes of Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*, the repeated reference to forget-me-nots is not one that leaps off the page to the reader. Its presence in Xanther's seizure in *Volume 4: Hades* speaks to larger notions of memory of tragedies such as the Armenian Genocide, or even the chronomosaic timelines present in Danielewski's earlier novel, *Only Revolutions*. This paper, while exploring notions of memory through Adriana Cavarero's theory of the narratable self, will argue that their root is in Elsa Morante's 1974 novel *La Storia*, which centers on a Jewish mother and her son, both epileptic, in Rome during World War II. Yet, while both works utilize their characters' epilepsy as a way to better acknowledge the suffering and tragedies occurring around them, Morante's articulation of the crushing wheel of history differs from the more hopeful presentation Danielewski provides. Through her epilepsy, Xanther instead emerges as a character who highlights the importance of giving voice to others, especially those unable to speak for themselves.

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“For the illiterate to whom I write” — Elsa Morante, dedication to *La Storia*¹
 “Protect yourself and never treat lightly the true nature of your burden: we are weak
 and we are cursed” — (Tian Li, *TFv5* 817)²

Within the sprawling narrative of Mark Z. Danielewski’s post-modern serial novel, *The Familiar*, the reader is presented with arguably the central character, Xanther Ibrahim, a 12-year old girl who, after rescuing a cat about to be swept away in a torrential Los Angeles rainstorm, progressively becomes more and more intertwined with the cat in surprising ways. This so-called “entanglement” (*TFv5* 133) presents itself negatively through Xanther’s diagnosed epilepsy, a condition that feeds into the narrative throughout the five published volumes. The memory of her previous seizure—taken place mere months before the onset of the narrative in *TFv1*—at the funeral of her birth father, Dov, is further paired with the first appearance of Xanther’s childhood name for her condition, “Mister Woder Do,” an anagram for the eventual name of the cat, Redwood (*TFv1* 254),³ while the seizure that occurs in *TFv4* happens during her most prolonged physical separation from the cat. It is within the visually arresting pages of that second seizure that the following words appear on the page: “Maudits, les noms qu’Adam donna / Le monde emmêlent / De myosotis” (“Cursed, the names that Adam gave the world tangled by forget-me-nots,” *TFv4* 552, translation mine).⁴

This peculiar phrase, hidden visually within the page and rendered in a different language than the primary one of the text, nonetheless points to two elements that are consistently at play within *The Familiar* as a whole, particularly expressed in the figure of the forget-me-not flower: the meaning of names and the function of memory. In addition to being referenced throughout *TFv4*, the forget-me-not flower, Myosotis, bears increased prominence in the series as it is the official symbol of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, an event evoked frequently in the chapters

¹ “Por el analfabeto a quien escribe.” All citations of *La Storia* are from *History*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). Citations of the Italian are from Elsa Morante, *La Storia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995).

² All citations of *The Familiar* are from: Mark Z. Danielewski, *Volume 1, One Rainy Day in May* (New York: Pantheon, 2015), *Volume 2, Into the Forest* (New York: Pantheon, 2015), *Volume 3, Honeysuckle & Pain* (New York: Pantheon, 2016), *Volume 4, Hades* (New York: Pantheon, 2017), and *Volume 5, Redwood* (New York: Pantheon, 2017). Volumes are referenced according to the notation presented in the series itself: *TFv1* = *The Familiar* volume 1 (*One Rainy Day in May*).

³ Even the metaphorical description Xanther’s mother, Astair, provides of her epilepsy hints at this reality: “By a creature which (shapeless except for claws and teeth ((long claws (everywhere)) (long teeth (everywhere))(which because it did not kill Xanther (but only cruelly seized her, shook her, and released her)))) had come to take on a peculiarly perverse character: sadistic (in cruel play) and affectionate (in the pleasure it apparently took)” (*Ibid.*)

⁴ It is not presently known who says these words or where they came from, given the pages of Xanther’s seizure contains dialogue from other chapters.

focused on the Armenian-American taxi driver Shnorhk Zildjian.⁵ While Xanther's seizures and the memories of the Armenian Genocide are but some of the traumas, both personal and cultural, that loom over the narrative proper, the particular concentration of the forget-me-not suggests a deeper meditation within the series on the importance of memory and of giving voice to those who have none. This readily rings true in the case of Shnorhk, whose narrative arc over the first five volumes sees him assist his professor friend preserving witness testimonies of the Genocide. For Xanther, on the other hand, the French phrase given during her seizure points to her privileged position in navigating questions of memory. In this regard, the authorial choice to have Xanther afflicted with epilepsy (or at least epilepsy-like symptoms due to a greater force, i.e. the cat/Redwood) is not necessarily surprising. As presented specifically within *The Familiar*, Xanther's seizures arrest her rational faculties, disrupting thought and the power of memory to recall the event:

It's the same at the start of every seizure, also what she remembers at the start of every seizure, just like she remembers now that all this now that's upon her now she will hardly remember later, if there is a later, there's never a guarantee of a later ...
(TFv4 542)

If these are some of the faculties that have traditionally been used to distinguish humans from animals, then the epileptic state blurs that dimension, putting Xanther in closer affinity to animals, a trait that develops over the course of the series, thereby enlarging the ethical field suggested in the nexus of epilepsy and trauma. The absence of memory in these episodes entails the necessity of another to tell the story of those moments to Xanther, creating a vulnerable conception of self for her which, together with an increased connection to the animal world, make Xanther unique among the characters in the series: she is consequently able to see others for who they are and, in particular, to give voice to their pain and to their selves.

Yet this ethical imperative is not unique to *The Familiar*. In 1974, the Italian author Elsa Morante published the novel *La Storia* (trans. *History/The Story*, the Italian is ambivalent), which tells the story of the half-Jewish widow Ida Ramundo and her two sons, Nino and Useppe, in Rome during and after World War II. Spanning the years 1941-1947, the novel encapsulates the entire life of the younger child Useppe, beginning with Ida's rape by a German soldier that leads to Useppe's conception, and ending at

⁵ Lusine Kharatyan, "Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide and Its Public Perceptions: Preliminary Observations." (2015): accessed March 29, 2021, <https://ge.boell.org/en/2015/04/23/commemoration-100th-anniversary-armenian-genocide-and-its-public-perceptions-preliminary>.

Useppe's death from an epileptic seizure, a victim, according to Morante, of the larger "History of economic power and politics."⁶ The shared epilepsy of Ida and Useppe emerges as a condition that blurs the distinction between human and animal in these characters. Just as for Xanther, though, this is always told to them by another and, in conjunction with Ida's Jewish heritage, reveals a focus on the idea of the narratability of the self as central to these characters' navigations of the larger historical traumas that unfold around them. In recent years there has been an increased focus in the critical literature on the animal and biopolitical dimension of *La Storia*. As fruitful as this work has been, the epilepsy of the characters has been undervalued in these estimations, and this attribute deserves to be re-evaluated in light of questions of memory or, more properly, the narration of memory.

Both *La Storia* and *The Familiar* are unique in focusing on main characters who are epileptic and in using their condition as a way of removing them from the natural order.⁷ Through their innate suffering, they stand in a privileged position to see the respective sufferings of those around them on a deeper level. Ida and Useppe in *La Storia*, as witnesses to the unfolding of World War II in Rome and the deportation of the Roman Jews, are more susceptible to the horrors and trauma around them, perpetuated by historical forces larger than they are. Useppe in particular, as a young child, is unable to rationally comprehend what he observes and internalizes the pain without an interlocutor to give it meaning. As seen through the lens of the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero's notion of the narratable self, this lack of voice is precisely what precipitates his tragic death. On the other hand, while afflicted with the same condition as Ida and Useppe and sharing a similar mediation of what that condition means, Xanther in *The Familiar* provides an alternative, as she is told what happens to her. In this regard, Morante's novel serves as a necessary counterpoint to Danielewski's serial endeavor: it articulates the same ethical imperative but showcases what can come from a different approach by acknowledging the other and telling their story. For not only is Xanther, at the conclusion of the first season of five volumes, still alive, quite contrary to Useppe and even Ida at the end of *La Storia*, but through the navigation of personal and collective trauma she emerges as a girl who not only inherently recognizes the suffering of those around her but also the need to protect, to give a name and a voice to others, and to let the forget-me-nots not be forgotten.

⁶ Lucia Re, "Utopian Longing and the Constraints of Racial and Sexual Difference in Elsa Morante's *La Storia*," *Italica* 70.3(1993): 362.

⁷ The use of epilepsy in various metaphorical ways is of course not exclusive to Danielewski or Morante. The most recent extensive analysis is Eleana Vaja, *Epilepsy Metaphors: Liminal Spaces of Individuation in American Literature 1990–2015* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), although her focus leaves out both authors here in question.

The Trauma of Narration in *La Storia*

Given the vast size and scope of Morante's novel, it is important to take a step back and recognize the novel's structure, which further informs the presentation of the Ramundo family that is at stake in this discussion. Each section of the book is introduced by a macro-summary of the year that is then presented in the narrative proper of the work, starting with 1900–40, and proceeding yearly until the narrative's conclusion in 1947, and a final historical precis spanning 1948–67, the year of the novel's publication. These sections, which share the same narrator as the rest of the novel, chronicle the large-scale historic events occurring in those time periods. From the beginning, they posit a distinction between the larger global forces ("power") and the common individual who is powerless in the face of those forces ("servitude"), what Morante refers to as the "well-known, immobile principle of historical dynamics" (3).⁸ These sections deliberately contrast with the micro-narration of the Ramundo family, emphasizing them as exemplary of the latter category, in servitude to the vicissitudes of History, poignantly stated in the novel's last words given in present tense: ". . . . and History continues" (555, ". . . . E la Storia continua," 656).

The overarching structure of the novel should be immediately evocative to readers of Mark Z. Danielewski. Danielewski's second novel, *Only Revolutions*, tells the story of Sam and Hailey as they journey together through American history, with each page containing in the margins, apart from the narrative proper, what is referred to as a chromosaic: an unfolding of historical events in each time frame, but told in snippets of quotations and historical data in a true post-modern mosaic form rather than Morante's concise precis of events. In a Q&A in the "*Only Revolutions* Book Club" in October 2018, I had the occasion to ask about the link between *La Storia* and *Only Revolutions*, as well as the notion of "speaking for those without a voice," to which Danielewski replied: "[Morante's] ghost haunts *OR* as you know [...] other ghosts haunt its many paths. The path of granting voice to those without voice is one way toward a greater understanding of good (linked O's)."⁹ While the particular significance of this connection to *Only Revolutions* can only be gestured to here, Danielewski's response reveals the author was aware of Morante's work in the composition of *OR*, which undoubtedly bears on the composition of *The Familiar* as well, and keeps our overarching question of voice in *The Familiar* and *La Storia* in the forefront.

⁸ "Nothing very new, in the great world. Like all the centuries and the millennia that have preceded it, the new century also observes the well-known, immobile principle of historical dynamics: power to some, servitude to others" (3).

⁹ Only Revolutions Book Club Facebook page, accessed October 31, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/OnlyRevolutionsBookClub/permalink/340896399820345/>.

Returning to Morante's novel, this framing marks the duration of the diegesis proper, the life of Useppe Ramundo, from conception to death, but also within the first section ("19**") which allows a retrospective narration of his mother, Ida, a digression that occurs just after establishing the scene that culminates in Ida's rape and Useppe's conception. This formal structure lends coherence between the characters of Ida and Useppe, emerging in their Jewish heritage and their shared epilepsy, which in turn inform a complex navigation of human memory, particularly in moments of trauma. Rather than manifesting as discrete characteristics, Morante's presentation of those moments shows them as related (we could almost say "entangled" as per *The Familiar*) and more deeply enmeshed in the novel's focus than has been acknowledged by critics.

Tellingly, the knowledge of Ida's Jewish heritage comes from an explicit evocation of maternal heredity: "Nora Ramundo née Almagià was, as her maiden name indicates, Jewish [...] however, she didn't want anyone to know, and she had confided only in her husband and in her daughter, under a solemn oath of secrecy" (19). Ida not only learns of her Jewishness from her mother, but she learns of it as something that should be kept secret, as something shameful and that will make her suffer if known ("As for her Jewish secret, she had explained to her daughter, from early childhood, that the Jews are a people destined, since time began, to suffer the vindictive hatred of all other peoples," 20). The fact that this perspective of Jewishness was conferred on Ida "from early childhood" reveals its determinative nature on Ida's self-perception. As Ida grows up and eventually marries, she never discloses that she is Jewish to her husband (cf. 30), following her mother's oath. And when the Italian racial laws, the *Leggi razziali*, are promulgated—reproduced verbatim at the onset of a chapter (cf. 46)—and those perceptions begin to pervade the world around her, Ida's mother's preoccupation manifests further in Ida, inducing paranoia when she must present herself to the registry. At that point, says the narrator, "it was as if Nora's obsessions, swarming in disorder after her death, had returned to nest inside her daughter [...] Her racial secret seemed buried, once and for all, in the files of the Registry; but she, knowing it lay recorded in those mysterious tombs, was still afraid some news of it might filter to the outside, branding her—but especially Nino!—with the mark of the outcast and the impure. [...] She felt guilty, a usurper, a counterfeiter" (49). Through the changing social tides, Ida's Jewishness—and particularly her mother's perception of what that means—begins to impinge on her identity, compounded with maternal preoccupation for her firstborn, Nino, leading to a graphical interjection into the novel of Ida's "hand-drawn" genealogy of Nino, tracing who of his forebears was Jewish, so she can ascertain if he is Jewish enough to be subject to the laws.

The importance of this presentation of Ida becomes clear if we look at Morante's novel through the lens provided by Adriana Cavarero, an Italian philosopher and founder of the feminist philosophical community "Diotima." In her work *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, Cavarero argues that the unique identity of a person, "who" they are, is not something expressible in the typical terms of Western philosophy—which focuses on the "what" of a person—but rather can be known through the narration of their life-story. Every individual is a "narratable self," meaning that "we are dependent upon the other for the narration of our own life-story, which begins from birth."¹⁰ To put it simply, every person comes into the world as a unique self in the event of birth, but that we cannot know the uniqueness of "who" we are on our own, just as we must be told of our own birth, lacking memory of the event. This theory posits all people as relational: we always exist in relation to others, but we lose our own sense of unity through the passage of time, leading to the desire for our lost unity which comes in the form of our life-story, but that this life-story must always be told by another.¹¹

The significance of all this in relation to Ida emerges on several fronts. First and foremost, the story that Ida's mother tells her of her Jewish heritage informs her perception of herself, transferring what might otherwise have been a part of her—a "what" in Cavarero's formulation—into a fundamental element of her identity, a part of "who" Ida is. As such, this makes Ida increasingly susceptible to broader perceptions of Jewishness that emerge around the promulgation of the Racial Laws and inform her paranoia and perception of the identity of her first-born son. This is in fact used by Morante to bolster Ida's paralyzing fear at the sight of the German soldier, Gunther, who ends up raping her during an epileptic seizure.¹²

Yet, on the other hand, Cavarero's general formulation puts into relief the overarching structure of the novel as well. As Paul Kottman elucidates in his introduction to the English translation of *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero's focus on the unique identity, the "who," of a person through their life-story, emerges from the

¹⁰ Paul A. Kottman, "Translator's Introduction," introduction to *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), ix. It should be noted that Cavarero's study was an important interlocutor in the composition of Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005).

¹¹ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 17–31.

¹² "And so, it's finally clear why the poor woman [...] greeted the encounter with that humble soldier at San Lorenzo like a nightmare vision. The fears besieging her prevented her from seeing anything of him except a German army uniform [...] She thought she had arrived at the terrible rendezvous preordained for her since the beginning of the world" (*History*, 54).

failure of not merely Western philosophy but also Western politics: “Philosophy’s failure to name ‘who’ someone uniquely is [...] indicates, for instance, the extent to which traditional philosophy and politics responds to universals, rather than to unique persons and their interaction.”¹³ In contrast, Cavarero postulates a new sense of “politics” drawing on Hannah Arendt as starting from the interaction of people with each other. Given Morante was more than likely familiar with Arendt’s work, Arendt’s notion that “every individual life can eventually be told as a story with a beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history”¹⁴ becomes further suggestive regarding the novel. The structure of *La Storia* puts the universals of history—portrayed in the macro-histories that bridge each section—in direct contrast with the individual stories of the Ramundo family, encapsulating the whole life of Ida as well as that of Usepe.

This background is necessary to qualify the initial description of Ida and will help us elucidate the elements that bear consideration in relation to Danielewski’s *The Familiar*. As Ida first appears, the narrator states that she has remained “a little girl, because her chief attitude towards the world had always been and still was (consciously or not) one of frightened awe” (18). This estrangement precipitates her presence at the human-animal boundary:

And in her great dark almond eyes there was the passive sweetness of a very profound and incurable barbarism, which resembled foreknowledge.

Foreknowledge, actually, is not the best word, because knowledge had nothing to do with it. Rather, the strangeness of those eyes recalled the mysterious idiocy of animals, who, not with their mind, but with a sense in their vulnerable bodies, ‘know’ the past and the future of every destiny. I would call that sense – which is common in them, a part of the other bodily senses – the *sense of the sacred*: meaning by *sacred*, in their case, the universal power that can devour them and annihilate them, for their guilt in being born. (18)¹⁵

¹³ Kottman, “Translator’s Introduction,” ix.

¹⁴ Quoted in Kottman, “Translator’s Introduction,” x.

¹⁵ “E nei suoi grandi occhi a mandorla scuri c’era una dolcezza passiva, di una barbarie profondissima e incurabile, che somigliava a una precognizione.

Precognizione, invero, non è la parola più adatta, perché la conoscenza ne era esclusa. Piuttosto, la stranezza di quegli occhi ricordava l’idiozia misteriosa degli animali, i quali non con la mente, ma con un senso dei loro corpi vulnerabili, «sanno» il passato e il futuro di ogni destino. Chiamerei quel senso - che in loro è comune, e confuso negli altri sensi corporei - il *senso del sacro*: intendendosi, da loro, per *sacro*, il potere universale che può mangiarli e annientarli, per la loro colpa di essere nati” (*La Storia*, 21). Emphasis in the original.

This dense passage operates on several levels that need to be considered. In articulating this boundary between the animal and the human at which Ida seems to dwell, as Simona Porcelli has shown, Morante subtly conveys an important element on the linguistic level that is unfortunately lost in the English translation. Morante states that *precognizione*—etymologically connected with the Italian *conoscere*, “to know”—as expressing a sense of “knowing” with the mind is incorrect. Instead, Ida “knows” in a bodily sense just like the animals, utilizing the verb *sapere*, which, in its Latin root, means “to taste” or “to taste like.”¹⁶ Through this description, there is an innate element to Ida’s body, her physical being, that is more connected to the animal world where she “knows” innately that something beyond her can erase her.

In recent years, scholars have seen Morante’s choice to express this understanding of Ida’s as “il senso del sacro” (“the sense of the sacred”) as reverberating with the biopolitical work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and his work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. As Giuseppina Mecchia elucidates, “Modernity, according to Agamben, inserts the bare life of all human beings into the political scene only in a negative manner, as that which can be taken away, an innovation best exemplified by the massacres of the two World Wars and the Holocaust.”¹⁷ The sacred expressed by Morante resonates with the same meaning as in Agamben, postulating Ida as “outside” the normal human operations of the world, leaving her vulnerable to the universal power of History, a force ever capable of taking away her life.

Yet while there is certainly value in pursuing the biopolitical valence in Morante’s presentation of Ida and the novel as a whole, it also risks transporting the interpretive gaze to a macro level, ignoring the particularity of the character and her condition, elements which have already been seen to be fundamental to the very nature of the novel. Rather, this vulnerability of Ida is represented as imprinted in her very being through the life-story others have given her, and present in a genetic level in two ways: her Jewish heritage and her epilepsy. On a narrative level, both features emerge in the same digression from the events of 1941, presenting them as interrelated characteristics of Ida, as becomes clear in the introduction of her epilepsy: “Toward the age of five, for a whole summer [Ida] was subject to attacks of an unnamed disease [...]. In the midst of her games and her childish prattle, she would suddenly fall silent, turn pale, with the

¹⁶ See Stefania Porcelli, “Narrating Intensity: History and Emotions in Elsa Morante, Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante.” (New York: CUNY Academic Works, 2020), 95, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/3825.

¹⁷ Giuseppina Mecchia, “Elsa Morante At the Biopolitical Turn: Becoming-Women, Becoming-animal, Becoming-Imperceptible,” in *Thinking Italian Animals. Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, ed. Deborah Amberson and Elena Past, (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 135. Mecchia provides the most thoroughly analysis of Morante’s relationship to the philosophers of biopolitics, particularly Agamben, whom she knew personally.

impression that the world was spinning and dissolving around her. In response to the questions from her parents, she would scarcely give a little animal lament” (24). Here the linguistic register still maintains the animalistic dimension evoked in the “senso del sacro,” but later on the narrator specifies the lack of memory of these events: “no notion remained in her of the frightful exile and return, as if they were events expelled from memory” (25). Like the question of her Jewish identity, these episodes are ones that Ida is unable to perceive or understand, holes in her experience of herself that must be patched by another. Yet here the response of her parents varies:

For her own part, even later, she believed she had suffered a common fainting-spell, without realizing the theatrical phenomena that had accompanied it. And her parents preferred to leave her in this ignorance, warning her, however, never to tell anyone how she was subject to certain attacks, so as not to compromise her future as a young lady. Thus, in the family, there was now another scandal to keep hidden from the world. (25)

By proceeding to leave their daughter ignorant of the extent of her condition, Ida is unable to have a complete picture of herself and these events. No medical diagnosis is ever provided—the most specific terminology is *male*, or “illness”—and the medical treatment sought by her father of “simple soothing-syrup cure” has the additional effect of “a slight somnolence and dulling of the senses” (27). As an additional parallel to her Jewishness, her father’s initial suspicion is that “he himself, in his very seed, might perhaps have tainted his daughter’s blood through his abuse of alcohol” (25). This set up is especially telling, as it is at the onset of a similar seizure-type event that Ida is raped by the German soldier, making her incapable of resisting, but also reinforcing the weight of the sentiment behind the “senso del sacro.” Ida’s sheer unawareness, her lack of cognition, of the condition that afflicts her emphasize her intrinsic vulnerability, a feature that any modern reader would connect to the vulnerability of her Jewish heritage in the historic setting of the novel.¹⁸

Given the way these features have already been seen to build generationally, it should be no surprise that their greatest culmination in the novel comes through the character Useppe, Ida’s son conceived during her rape. Like his mother, Useppe is afflicted with the same illness, although to a greater degree—it is after all what ultimately claims his life at the novel’s close—but Useppe bears a markedly different

¹⁸ Stefania Porcelli identifies this same general sense of exclusion through the animal imagery consistent through the presentation of Ida’s illness; cf. “As if He Wanted to Murder Her:’ Fear, Disgust, and Anger in *La Storia*’s Rape Scene,” *Close Encounters in War Journal* 1 (2018): 68.

relation to the historical events that unfold around him. As a child, and perhaps out of a sense of maternal care, Useppe remains ignorant, or rather uninformed, of what occurs around him as the continued events of World War II unfold. This extends as well to an overall almost prelapsarian perception of the world: “Without doubt, for him there existed no differences of age, or of beauty and ugliness, or sex, or social station” (159). Even Useppe’s linguistic space is not predicated upon difference, but focused instead on familiarity, which in fact is presented as a natural familiarity, not just among objects, but even to Useppe himself. Not only does the narrator portray this as a normal stage of linguistic development, but rather as a new poetic language outside the dominion of History and of Logos.¹⁹

This general perception has led critics to view Useppe as either a Christ-like figure or even as a scapegoat of History, and while these readings have merit, we must still take into account what we have seen as having been a crucial aspect in the identity formation of Ida and how that ultimately bears on Useppe and his own sense of place in what unfolds.²⁰ Rather, what is important for our discussion is that Ida’s refusal to inform Useppe of both his Jewish heritage, and what being Jewish in 1950s’ Rome signifies, as well as his epileptic condition contribute to his lack of awareness of his own identity, removing him from what would be the common social relations of his age, and further precipitating his death.

This is most evident in Useppe’s own experience of death, which progresses in scale and intensity, and always in the presence of either his mother or his brother, but never with an understanding of what he has seen. The first such scene is the death of the family’s first dog, Blitz, when their initial apartment complex is destroyed in a bombing. Blitz is literally “lost” (146) together with a sequence of household objects, his death is brought about by a totalizing destructive force, a History that destroys per chance, killing an animal and remnants of a family history. Young Useppe, at this point less

¹⁹ “One of the first words he learned was *ttars* (stars). However, he also called the lightbulbs in the house *ttars*, and the derelict flowers Ida brought from the school, the hanging clusters of onions, even the door knobs, and later also swallows. Then when he learned the word *wallows* (swallow) he called *wallows* also his underpants hanging out on a line to dry. And in recognizing a new star (which was perhaps a fly on the wall) or a new wallow, he burst out each day in a magnificence of laughter, filled with contentment and welcome, as if he were meeting a member of the family” (104). See Lucia Re, “Utopian Longing and the Constraints of Racial and Sexual Difference in Elsa Morante’s *La Storia*,” 369.

²⁰ Cf. Stefania Porcelli, “Narrating Intensity: History and Emotions in Elsa Morante, Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante,” 87: “The character of Useppe has been understood as a Christological figure. Useppe is assaulted by the evil of History and neither demands explanation, nor loses his innocence because of this offensive. He is also the innocent victim of all the evil suffered by the others. Concetta D’Angeli has studied extensively the influence of Simone Weil on Morante and theorized that Useppe’s suffering—deriving from history and accumulating in his body—corresponds to the mechanism of scapegoat: Useppe takes upon himself evil without losing his own innocence [...]. His body will indeed ‘absorb’ more pain every time he witnesses violence.”

than two years old, is exposed to death, uncomprehending of what has occurred and calling repeatedly, “Biii! Biiii! Biiiii!” (146). The sole explanation he receives is from an elderly woman at a nearby tavern where Ida and Useppe take momentary refuge from the trauma. The woman, after first acknowledging the common mortality of all living things (“Ah me, humans and animals, we all have to die,” 147), proceeds to lie to Useppe that Blitz has essentially turned into an angel with dove wings: “‘Don’t cry, kid, your dog’s sprouted wings. He’s turned into a dove and he’s flown up into the sky.’ In saying this, she raised her palms and imitated the flutter of wings. Useppe, who believed everything, suspended his weeping, to follow with interest the little movement of those hands” (147.).

Yet, while the death of Blitz might be Useppe’s first overt experience of death, the more telling is instead a parallel set of experiences that happen at Rome’s Tiburtina Station. Prior to Blitz’s death, one of Useppe’s first times ever leaving occurs when his older brother, Nino, takes him to the station, which is deserted except for one figure:

The only visible traveler, on any of the few trains waiting there, was a calf, looking down from the open platform of a car. It stood there calmly, tied to an iron bar, barely sticking out its helpless head (its two little horns, still tender, had been torn out); and from its neck, on a string, hung a tiny medal, like a tag, on which the last stage of his journey perhaps was written. None of that information had been given the traveler; but in his broad, moist eyes you could sense a dark foreknowledge. [...]

Giuseppe was also observing the calf. And perhaps between the child’s eyes and the animal’s there was some unforeseen exchange, subterranean and imperceptible. All of a sudden, Giuseppe’s gaze underwent a curious change, never seen before, which, however, nobody noticed. A kind of sadness or suspicion crossed his eyes, as if a little dark curtain had been drawn down (108).

This episode can be seen relative to the prior account of the “senso del sacro” seen in Ida: the novel’s narrator relates the calf’s quiet foreknowledge and recognition of its impending death. All three spectators react differently. Nino is unaware. Blitz gives a “soft drawling whimper,” a shared animal understanding. Useppe on the other hand is still new to the world and sees in a way similar to his mother. As such, he is able to empathize and understand instinctually his own “sense of the sacred,” rather than understanding rationally. As Stefanie Porcelli notes, “the description of the animal has a prophetic tone and points to the impossibility to rebel against a gratuitous violence.”²¹ This is the first, strong instance that denotes Useppe’s connection with

²¹ Porcelli, “Narrating Intensity: History and Emotions in Elsa Morante, Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante,” 70.

animals, an element that becomes increasingly central throughout the course of the novel, amplified above all in the sheepdog Bella who, near the end of Useppe's life, becomes a sort of surrogate mother to the child while Ida works.

The episode of the calf contrasts with one of the most striking episodes of the novel: the deportation of the Roman Jews from Tiburtina. Only a year later in Useppe's life, Ida is out running quotidian errands with her baby when she proceeds to follow a woman she knows, becoming increasingly focused on the effort and entering Tiburtina Station, where they see "perhaps twenty cattle-cars" (208) full of Jews, awaiting their fate. Contrary to the calf's silent resignation, the sounds here are overwhelming and discordant: "babies' cries overlapped with quarrels, ritual chanting, meaningless mumbles, senile voices calling for mother; others that conversed, aside, almost ceremonious, and others that were even giggling. And at times, over all this, sterile, bloodcurdling screams rose; or others, of a bestial physicality, exclaiming elementary words like 'water!' 'air!'" (209). Ida becomes caught up in the drama of what she witnesses: the acquaintance she had followed was Jewish and searching for her family, and, despite the known future that awaited them all, sought to join her family locked in the train cars. Eventually, however, Ida notes some "deep and cadenced blows" that she mistakes for the train preparing to depart before realizing it was Useppe's beating heart:

The child was quiet, huddled into her arms, his left side against her breast; but he held his head turned to look at the train [...] And as she peered around to examine him, she saw him still staring at the train, his face motionless, his mouth half-open, his eyes wide in an indescribable gaze of horror.

"Useppe..." she called to him, in a low voice.

Useppe turned at her summons; the same stare, however, remained in his eyes, which, even as they encountered hers, asked her no question. There was, in the endless horror of his gaze, also a fear, or rather a dazed stupor; but it was a stupor that demanded no explanation. (210-11)

While there are clear parallels in the scene of the calf and the deportation—the use of cattle-cars, the deliberate reversing of the bestial screams of the Jews and the calf's silence—Useppe's reactions to these events are not equal, nor should they be seen as parallel. Rather they represent a progression, an increased internalization of the horrors of what he sees. Just as Nino provides no comment to the child regarding the calf, Ida here does the same. She recognizes the gravity of what she sees, and through her own identity given by her mother's stories of Jewish oppression and childhood affliction, she feels the same stupor as Useppe. But she is able to place it, to acknowledge the

historic circumstances that have precipitated this moment, even if it is ultimately a maternalistic reaction that causes her to leave the scene. Useppe has no such context, historical or personal. To him it is a horror that he internalizes; it impinges on who he is, without his knowledge. There is certainly something to Concetta D'Angeli's and Stefania Porcelli's reading here that the violence Useppe witnesses takes hold in him, transforming him physically through the manifestation of his epilepsy.²²

The importance of this element is highlighted by the fact that the pivotal moment of the deportation scene is not the deportation itself, nor Ida's reaction, but rather Ida observing Useppe's horror. As Porcelli notes, "The narrator, however, doesn't want to attach a definition to this feeling: human language is not capable of consoling the victims of History's atrocities, therefore Useppe's pain will never be precisely defined through the language of reason."²³ Yet, considering our discussion regarding Cavarero's narratable self in the novel, this is precisely the problem that remains unacknowledged critically. Ascribing the appropriateness of not putting to language the pain experienced by Useppe and those he sees suffering ignores its importance for Useppe's sense of self. This kind of experience of trauma, and the lack of narration from his mother and brother, allows his greater connection to the animal world. It also makes the maternal role the dog Bella takes towards the novel's close more telling, as she and Useppe are shown to converse (for example, cf. 471–72), and thereby Useppe gains more knowledge of the world through the animal perspective she provides, particularly as at this point in his life the child has eschewed attending school.

While it is this lack of knowledge that precipitates the growing severity of Useppe's seizures, leading to his death, Morante's choice of narration of these moments brings into greater relief the value of the narratable self in the work as a whole. The final section of the novel recounting Useppe's last days begins by drawing this immediately to attention:

So some may think it is now useless to narrate the rest of Useppe's life, which lasted a little over two days more, since the end is already known. But it doesn't seem useless to me. All lives, really, have the same end: and two days, in the brief passion of a kid like Useppe, are not worth less than years. Allow me, then, to stay a bit longer

²² Stefania Porcelli, "Narrating Intensity: History and Emotions in Elsa Morante, Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante," 87, and Concetta D'Angeli, *Leggere Elsa Morante: Aracoeli, La Storia, E Il Mondo Salvato Dai Ragazzini* (Roma: Carocci, 2003), 113. See also Conni-Kay Jorgensen, *La Visione Esistenziale Nei Romanzi Di Elsa Morante* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1999), 81–82.

²³ "Narrating Intensity: History and Emotions in Elsa Morante, Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante," 79. This, of course, echoes one of the novel's epigraphs: "There is no word in the human language capable of consoling the guinea pigs who do not know the reason for their death."

in the company of my little kid, before coming back alone to the secular life of the others. (528–29)

The explicit first-person interjection of the novel's narrator—implied variously throughout the novel to have been witness to the events of the Ramundo family—highlights the ultimate importance of a single life, even one so brief as Useppe's, in the larger turnings of History. Both the history of the Ramundo family and History must be considered. Porcelli is correct in saying “this history can never be decoupled from History, the collective history, which is an endless spiral of oppression, whose victims are the weakest: children, animals, Jews, and women (although men also are victims, besides being oppressors).”²⁴ Part of the what we could almost call the moral of *La Storia* then is the importance of acknowledging History writ-large and the devastating personal effects of ignoring it. The historical precis sections before each chapter serve to keep History at the forefront, for us as readers to contextualize what is happening to the Ramundo family. Yet ultimately, the novel is seeking to do what Ida failed to do, to tell the story of Useppe. The narrator's note stating Useppe's imminent death remains ultimately melancholic, because it conversely acknowledges a reciprocal failure: Useppe dies as a victim of the horrors he sees, horrors that could not be put into language but that impinge on his entire being. The novel's narrator provides his story to acknowledge the individual, to put into words “who” Useppe Ramundo was, an act that was never granted to him by anyone else. The implicit question that hangs over the novel as it ends and yet “History continues” (555) is then: had someone else—Ida, his brother Nino—provided that narration to Useppe, would he have died?

The Familiar Self of Narration in *The Familiar*

These questions of narrativity and memory that surround the characters in *La Storia* persist in Danielewski's *The Familiar* even though mediated through a different historical moment. While these questions in fact emerge variously throughout all nine of the novel's central characters, they present most clearly in two characters in particular: Xanther and Shnorhk, although Xanther will be our principle focus here. Yet before turning to her more fully, let us first recognize the unique ways in which questions of what is narratable come into play on the formal level of the novel, aspects which then inform the particular representations of memory that will be our focus.

For anyone who has read the first volume in the series, *One Rainy Day in May*, one of the most jarring moments is assuredly the narrative interjection that defines the

²⁴ “As if He Wanted to Murder Her:’ Fear, Disgust, and Anger in *La Storia*'s Rape Scene,” 73.

so-called Narcons or “Narrative Constructs” that emerge as unique voices within the narrative proper—ostensibly the actual source of narration—subject to particular rules or parameters within the series as a whole, and bracketed by their own unique symbol, entirely original to the novel, that has yet to be decoded (*TFv1* 563–78). As complex formal inventions, the Narcons challenge normal rules of narrative, disrupting categories of point of view by suggesting additional sources of voice as external yet intrinsic to the individual protagonists, but which also feed into the utility of the signiconic in the work as a whole. They are a vital element of the overall fabric of *The Familiar* that distinguishes it from other novels, one which reinforces a notion of the narratable self as at play in the series. This is clear in their implication in the narrative process itself but further registers as the Narcons discuss their programmatic limits: “As the old Narcons put it: ‘There is not space in the universe to tell the universe to the universe. Therein lies the peculiar beauty and sadness of stories: to tell it all without all at all’” (*TFv1* 568). While phrased as a negative, the sentiment nonetheless conforms with Cavarero’s thesis that an awareness of the self, of “who” one is, comes from the telling of stories. Yet the negative does more than just that; it presents an impossibility that subtly prepares the reader for a potential exception, which will emerge in Xanther.

We see this clearly in one type of Narcon interjection in the narrative proper of the novel. There are occasional moments in which the Narcons interrupt to provide additional information about a tangential character who has momentarily entered the predominant narrative space of the work. What is notable about these passages is what they express: the life-story of the character. Take for instance the young woman who almost has a sexual rendezvous with Luther near the end of *TFv3*. This flash-forward, given by one of the Narcons to separate it from Luther’s voice, recounts enough of her life to express a sense of “who” she is, a sense of identity that is not fully known to her because, as Cavarero would remind us, she has yet to hear her own life-story: “She will tighten her grip on her son’s hand and he will yelp and ask her why she did that and she won’t know. She won’t remember when she’d forgotten herself completely” (*TFv3* 741).

These moments, while short in length and seemingly small in their overall significance, reinforce a notion of identity deriving from Cavarero as operative in the series. In this regard, the questions of story and narrative that permeate *The Familiar* also become ones of memory. On one hand, every volume plays with various timescales of memory, each beginning with an “Astral Omega” section set in various epochs of the early universe, and after the “ratings” page a chapter concerning early human civilizations hundreds of thousands of years ago. On the other hand, in what can be seen as the more traditional narrative of the novel, there is Xanther’s mother’s,

Astair’s, memory of her daughter’s most recent seizure graphically puncturing the story (Figure 1).

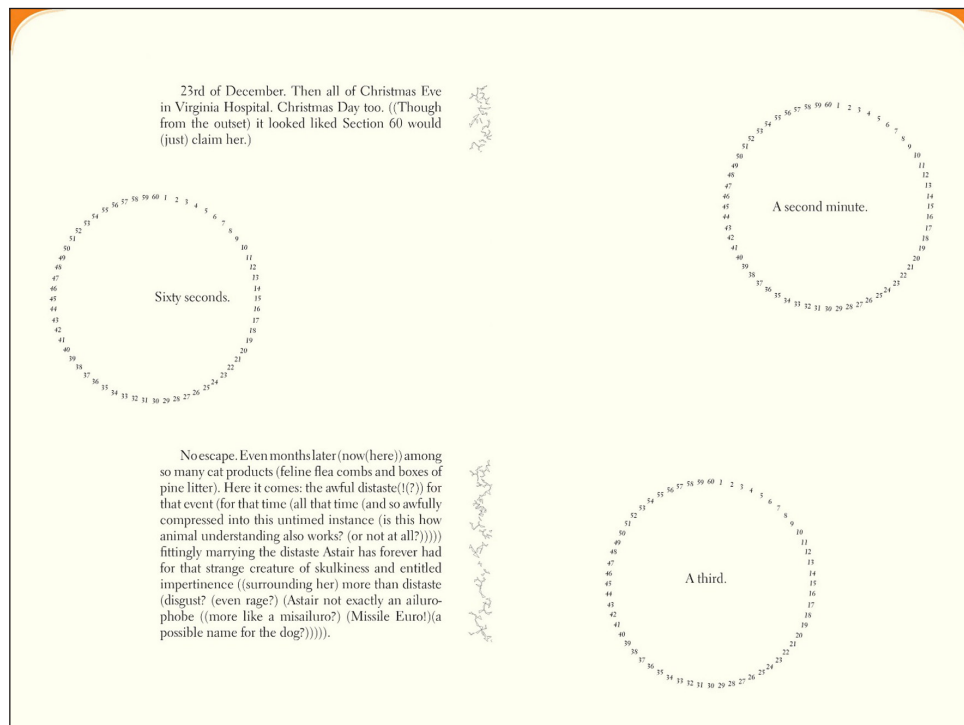


Figure 1: Astair remembering Xanther’s seizure (TFv1 242-43).

The peculiarity of personal memory that needs to be remarked on is that it is always an auto-narration: it is intrinsically colored by the retrospective gaze and meaning that has been attached to it.²⁵ The signiconic representation of the passing minutes that characterize Astair’s recollection of Xanther’s seizure does not accurately represent her experience of that traumatic moment as a mother; it is instead her husband, Anwar, who had timed the seizure and shared that duration of “five minutes and thirty-two seconds” afterwards (TFv1 251).

Astair later intuits while delving into her new thesis project on identity: “Because isn’t it true that even just remembering re-informs the memory? Remembering is never passive. And how we remember what we were shapes who we will become” (TFv3 588). As Cavarero would remind us, the personal experience of memory is what makes us aware of ourselves as unique and narratable: “Every human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a *narratable self*—immersed in the spontaneous

²⁵ Cavarero, 33–4.

auto-narration of memory.”²⁶ What Astair here is missing—although I’d argue that Danielewski recognizes she is wrong—is the necessity of the narration to come from outside, from another. It is in fact here that the resonance of Cavarero’s work with *The Familiar* becomes explicit, as Cavarero continues:

In other words, in personal experience, the narratable self is at once the transcendental subject and elusive object of all autobiographical exercises of memory. Subject and object are, moreover, ambiguous terms. It is enough to say that each one of us *lives him or herself* as his/her own story, without being able to distinguish the *I* who narrates it from the *self* who is narrated. We are thus left with a kind of *circular memory*, which simply appears, in perfect and total familiarity. This is why we have defined the narratable self as something *familiar*. The Greek meaning of the word *oiketes* does indeed suggest that the self makes her home, so to speak, in the narrating memory – the inalienable dwelling of her *living her/himself, remember herself*. ... [The narratable self] is not a *fiction* that can distinguish itself from *reality*. It is rather the familiar sense [*sapere familiare*] of every self, in the temporal extension of a life-story that is this and not another. This can also be formulated as a general principle: To the experience for which the *I* is immediately, in her unreflecting sense [*sapere*] of existing, the *self* of her own narrating memory – there corresponds a perception of the other as the *self* of her own story.²⁷

There is much that is said in this passage. To unpack a little, Cavarero is stating that the act of memory allows every individual to be aware of themselves as having a personal story and thereby of being a narratable self, but that the auto-narration of memory does not fully present that self, the unique identity and “who” of the person. As before, Cavarero pulls away from the language of “subject” and “object” to separate from traditional philosophical categories, and in doing so is able to suggest that, because the unique identity can never be known autonomously without the narration of one’s life-story by another, memory enables a person to recognize their own uniqueness as “familiar” even if not explicitly known. Yet Cavarero extends this even further, consistent with her recognition of the reciprocity of human existence, by generalizing this awareness as an awareness of the other possessing a unique self. To put it simply, my auto-narration of my own memory makes me aware of having a unique self, that this self exists—is *familiar*—properly in the narration given by another, and by knowing that about myself, I am aware that everyone else has a similar, unique self that exists in

²⁶ Cavarero, 33–34, italics in the original.

²⁷ Cavarero, 34.

narration. To be clear, this is not a rational notion of the intelligibility of the self, as is expressed through Cavarero's use of the Italian "sapore," literally "taste," which, as translator Paul Kottman explains, focuses on a corporeal knowledge of oneself rather than an intellectual one.²⁸ It is in this way, through a corporeal understanding of oneself as unique and possessing a story, that we can recognize how each person we meet has their own, unique story.²⁹ This is ultimately the issue of Astair's remarks about memory ("And how we remember what we were shapes who we will become," *TFv3* 588): she is viewing the construction of identity in an isolated individual, failing to account for reciprocal nature of human interaction and how that plays into the formation—or rather the recognition—of the self. Astair's unawareness of this is rather characteristic of her, and it puts her in marked contrast to her daughter, Xanther, to whom we shall now turn.³⁰

We have already addressed that Xanther is, like Useppe and Ida in Morante's *La Storia*, epileptic, or at least subject to epilepsy-like seizures. Yet for Xanther, she views her epilepsy together with other physical characteristics—her glasses/vision, acne, etc.—as a marker of negative difference in the economy of adolescence, such that she has been the subject of bullying for much of her life and has had to relocate to different schools a number of times.³¹ Her susceptibility to the school bully calling her "Twitch" (*TFv2* 577) becomes clear through Cavarero's thinking, as Paul Kottman elucidates in his discussion on "linguistic vulnerability": "this vulnerability—by opening us to be hurt, or affected, by 'what' we are called—might even be that which gives us the sense, through the pain or shock we feel, that what we are called does not correspond with who we feel ourselves to be."³² Xanther does not view her sense of self, her "who," as something that is defined by her epilepsy; as such, her being bullied is reductive and damaging to her sense of self.

Yet following Cavarero I'd argue that epilepsy, by making her vulnerable, conversely also makes her more open to perceiving the uniqueness of others, a marked difference from the representation of the condition that Morante employs in *La Storia*. From the first

²⁸ Kottman, xxviii n. 39: "The word *sapore* is phonetically close to *sapere* [knowledge], but the emphasis falls, instead, on an experience that one has of being familiar with oneself *bodily* rather than intellectually. One *senses* oneself to be oneself unreflectively, rather than knowing oneself to be oneself through reflection."

²⁹ Cavarero, 35. Cf. Kottman, xvi

³⁰ Take, for example, her proposed new research subject: "I might further define, and so refine, my subject by exploring in particular how individuals grant themselves access to themselves through the mediation of an animal: the alterity of the self becoming familiar but only in the company of the tacit" (*TFv2* 425-6).

³¹ See *TFv1* 128: "Because there was no question (by its constant threat (and constant terror)) epilepsy served as a constant reminder of how much different Xanther was from her sisters and parents (and almost everyone else)."

³² Kottman, xx.

volume in the series, Xanther's awareness of this uniqueness is marked by the "animal game" she plays with her mother in identifying people they see as animals: "Both Astair and Xanther knew how to see beyond seeing and play with the nature of the character no one can see in stillness" (TFv1 237-38). A marked shift occurs, however, after she rescues the cat, in what emerges as a prominent feature of her "entanglement" with the cat, in that she starts to name animals. This starts minimally at the end of TFv1 with a spider ("Adelaide," TFv1 735), and becomes particularly prominent throughout TFv3, where in a span of a few pages Xanther names squirrels, a hummingbird, a praying mantis, a raccoon, skunks, and crows (TFv3 320-22), yet finds herself at a loss when confronted with a dead mantis ("'I've no idea what his name is,' Xanther frowns," TFv3 321).

Rather than a base nominalism, names and naming function differently for Xanther, in a way more aligned with Cavarero's notion of the narratable self. Earlier in the series, Xanther acknowledges "because for some reason naming is a big thing for Xanther, because, like, they promise to keep things still or at least steadier" (TFv1 188). For her young mind, names represent a recognition of the "who," and her naming of animals reveals a connection with animals that was already implicit in her epilepsy much as it appeared in *La Storia* for Ida and Useppe.³³ Even her inability to name the dead mantis aligns with Ida's "senso del sacro," as particularly evidenced when Xanther encounters the killing machine at the veterinary clinic in TFv2: "Three things Xanther understands at once: The First Thing = The Fear Here. The biology behind all that fights to continue, now, here, usurped by the terror of what biology allways [sic.] predicts" (TFv2 365). As the passage continues, it becomes clear that this is not a mere recognition of animal life but a condition she identifies with: "The Third Thing pushes Xanther to the very back, especially as outside barks and hisses keep rising, especially because The First Thing + The Second Thing = her" (TFv2 365).

The significance of this becomes clearer in parallel moments that happen at the beginning and end of TFv3, *Honeysuckle & Pain*, which will inform our understanding of the evocations of the narratable self and memory that are central to *The Familiar* as a whole. In her first section in the third volume, while driving home, Anwar hits and kills a squirrel with their car. As Xanther examines the dead creature, a whole page is taken up by a signiconic representation of death lingering in the air as visible blooms of scent (Figure 2). The only word present in these blooms is "Death," paired with an hourglass symbol common in computers to denote waiting or loading. The image is meant to

³³ This is not to say that Xanther has a mature understanding of the power of names, but the blind spot there emerges largely around the naming of the cat and, in a similar fashion, herself. She asks her parents at one point, "If you had called Freya me and me Freya would she be the epileptic? I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. That's an awful thing to say" (TFv4 710).

represent what Xanther sees and what, we can presume, she likely saw with the dead mantis as well. Her inability to name these creatures emerges from only seeing them after their life-story has come to a pass. All she can see is death.

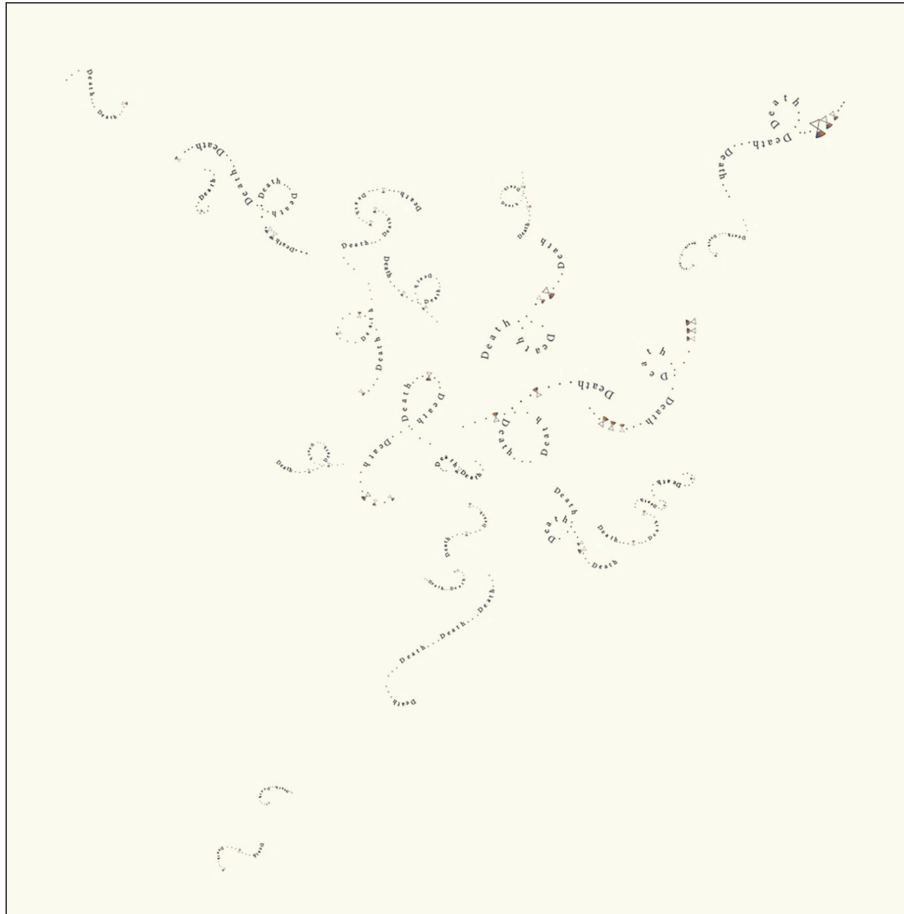


Figure 2: Xanther's vision of the dead squirrel (*TFv3* 89).

This perception is markedly different from the episode that concludes the volume, Xanther's encounter with the lioness, Satya. While again featuring the presence of Danielewski's signature signiconic style, but contrary to the stagnant moment and image of the dead squirrel, Satya is shown in no less than four images, interspersed with normal narration. She is a presence Xanther senses before she sees, released from her cage in what Xanther initially presumes is the onset of a seizure. The lioness stalks forward towards her, gradually increasing in size in the images (**Figure 3**), before emerging as a two-page spread (*TFv3* 826-27). Satya's image is composed of phrases, varying across her entire form, phrases that change from the initial spread to the second when she growls (**Figure 4**). Just like the dead squirrel, the images represent

what Xanther sees, down to the swirling honeysuckle around Satya's body. The phrases are Satya's life-story, a story that Xanther can recognize, allowing her to acknowledge the unique identity of the lioness: a mother, trapped in captivity and separated from her child. And Xanther perceives and utters her name, as no one else ever does in the narrative. Xanther recognizes her pain, the physical scars on her body and the emotional scars of separation from her cub, and, in telling her to run, gives her grace (*TFv3* 839–41).

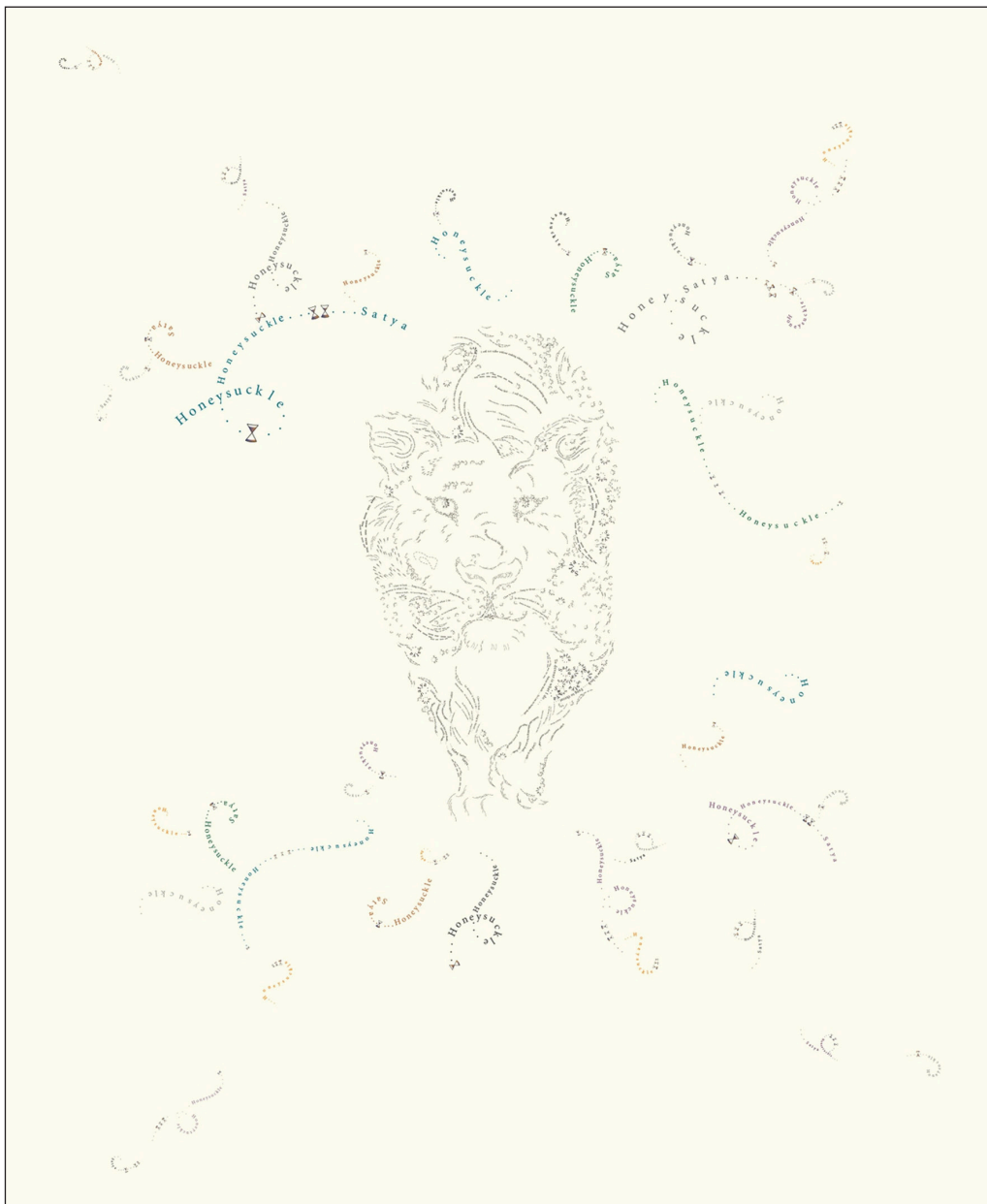


Figure 3: Satya approaching (*TFv3* 822).

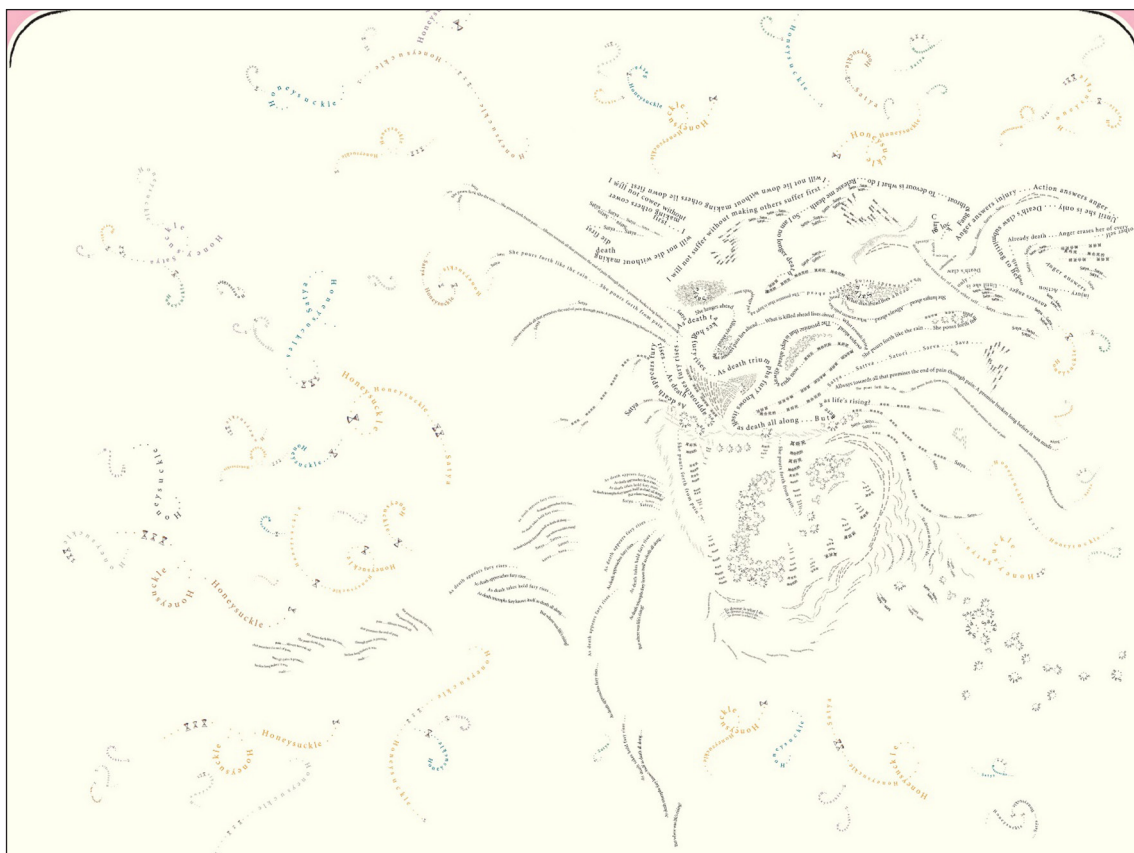


Figure 4: Satya growling (TFv3 833).

In this way, the signiconic conclusion of *Honeysuckle & Pain* reinforces the idea of Xanther as being able to glimpse the identity of these animals, as being able to recognize their being, their suffering. To take this further, what the Satya episode provides us is a key to understand what is at play in this notion of “naming” that has been discussed regarding the animals. It can be easy to assume this to be an act of power or control by humans over the animal world, over creatures incapable of giving their name in our language. Yet the signiconic representation of Satya reveals her name as a part of her, something that Xanther senses in the physical form of the lioness, consistent with Cavarero, but furthermore that the name is truly only a part of her, a proper sign of her unique identity. The rest of the text that composes the image of Satya presents various other aspects of the lioness, features that extend beyond physical characteristics of her as an animal. As such, the lioness is not just the name “Satya” but rather a unique individual, a uniqueness expressed in her physical form, a uniqueness that emerges from being alive. The dead squirrel encountered earlier in the volume, while still possessing a physical form, is no longer alive and thereby does not present a life story

to Xanther. To put it in Cavarero's terms, the squirrel's story is over, and as Xanther never truly saw the squirrel alive, she is unable to intuit the animal's name and its story. As such, these episodes reveal that Xanther's "naming" is truly a recognition of the uniqueness of the individual creature, akin to the Narcons' interjections of the life stories of tertiary characters.

By properly understanding this notion of naming at play in *The Familiar*, it is now possible to grasp the significance of the forget-me-not mentioned in the introduction of this paper. On a formal level, each one of the five volumes in the series employs a consistent motif of a different flower, both linguistically and through an entr'acte image spread. Given that *TFv3* concludes with Xanther's encounter with Satya, lending prominence to the significance of the name, it is rather suggestive that *TFv4*, *Hades*, consistently evokes the forget-me-not and thereby the importance of names.³⁴ The flower is referenced numerous times explicitly, but also several times through the nicknames "scorpion grass" and "mouse ears." Among these, there are three moments where it assumes more significant narrative importance. The first is in *TFv4*'s rawrgl spread where it appears in a number of haikus supposedly written by Hopi:

- 1) loss needs memory
love belongs to something else
forget-me-nots sway
- 2) know eden - know christ
petals this blue need neither
nor do yellow stars
- 3) forget-me-nots thrive
what is pain to a flower?
what is blue to blue?
- 4) you become your name
love that matters needs no name
forget-me-nots die
- 5) mice ears twitch with songs
of long-lost forget-me-nots
soon the cat will come (162-63)

Despite their relative obliqueness, the five haikus maintain some of the Western cultural understandings of the flower: its naming as "forget-me-not" because in Eden

³⁴ As a point of reference, here are the full pairings. *TFv1*: asters; *TFv2*: goldenrod; *TFv3*: honeysuckle; *TFv4*: forget-me-nots; *TFv5*: yarrow.

it had remained unnamed and asked to be named, as well as its medieval symbolism of faithfulness in love. Beyond that, however, the fourth haiku in particular reinforces the connection of name and identity, with an ever-present question of memory in the flower's name itself. The second haiku appears again in the entr'acte on *TFv4* 684-85, this time written in Biblical Hebrew, flipped as in a mirror: "Myosotis thriving / what is pain to a flower? / to blue what is blue?"³⁵ The literally mirrored appearance in the volume's entr'actes, formal divisions of the text, highlights the flower's primacy in the intervening pages; it is in the pages between the haikus on *TFv4* 162-63 and the flower entr'acte on *TFv4* 684-85 that Xanther's sole seizure within the diegetic time of the series occurs (*TFv4* 538-52).

As was acknowledged at the outset of this paper, this seizure begins with an evocation of the absence of memory: "It's the same at the start of every seizure, also what she remembers at the start of every seizure, just like she remembers now that all this now that's upon her now she will hardly remember later, if there is a later, there's never a guarantee of a later ..." (*TFv4* 542). The diction is particularly distinct: three uses of *remember(s)*, three uses of *now*, and three uses of *later*, interlinked within each other. The blurring of time here at the onset of the seizure prepares the reader for dizzying signiconic echoes of text present in Xanther's "experience" of the seizure, words and phrases from earlier and later in the series repeated, blurred, in a variety of visual techniques. It is here that we get the aforementioned French phrase, notably its sole appearance in the series so far: "Maudits, les noms qu'Adam donna / Le monde emmêlent / De myosotis" ("Cursed, the names that Adam gave the world tangled by forget-me-nots," *TFv4* p. 552; **Figures 5 and 6**). The significance here remains the question of naming. As was seen with Satya in *TFv3*, naming with Xanther becomes a short-hand for the recognition of the familiar life-story of each individual, and the naming serves as the narration of that self. While it is impossible to say how this concept would evolve over the course of the series, its centrality here in *The Familiar* as well as in the tangential short story "Love is Not a Flame" is unmistakable.³⁶ Nonetheless, the evocation of the forget-me-not together with the signification of names in a moment where Xanther, mid-seizure, is effectively without memory highlights how these elements remain indelibly linked.

³⁵ Translation by Vincent Scellini from "THE FAMILIAR (VOLUMES 1-5) Reading Club", <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TheFamiliarBookClub/permalink/504866333225661/>. Accessed October 15, 2021.

³⁶ Mark Z. Danielewski, "Love is Not a Flame" (2019), November 30, 2021. <https://www.markzdanielewski.com/digital-downloads/p/markzdanielewskiloveisnotaflame>.



Figure 5: Conclusion of Xanther's seizure (TFv4 552-53).

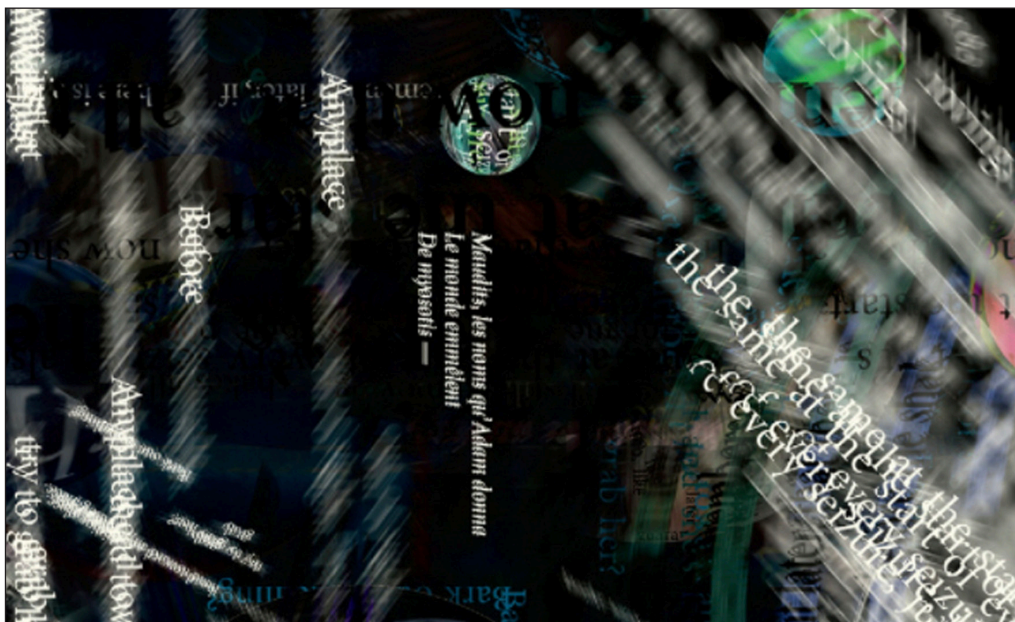


Figure 6: Close-up of French phrase in Xanther's seizure (TFv4 552).

While the full interpretation here remains ambiguous within the context of the unfinished series, it bears on the return to the question of naming later in the novel, where Xanther learns that her own name came sometime after she was born, and thereby remarks while thinking of her cat, “So I came into this world without a name too?” (TFv4 709). Astair’s response of “You already had a name, we just had to find it” (TFv4 710) gestures again to Cavarero, who views the birth of the individual as the emergence of their uniqueness and unity: “Within the scene of birth, the unity of the newborn is materially visible and incontrovertible through its glaring [*plateale*] appearance. As a result, the newborn absolutely cannot be defined as discontinuous because time is not yet there, even if it begins to pass.”³⁷ In this regard, Danielewski, through the conversation of Astair and her daughter Xanther, further presents the name as a manifestation of a person’s uniqueness. Xanther’s response, however, is telling: “I, like, so want to believe that, but sometimes I think that’s all backwards, like, uh, isn’t it *not* us that makes our name but the name that’s making us?” (TFv4 710, emphasis in the original). This appears as one potential interpretation of the “cursed” notion of names from Xanther’s seizure, an opposing view to Cavarero’s understanding of the narratable self that could be best understood as a strict nominalism, an idea of naming as power that fixes an identity. In a way this should not be surprising for Xanther, given her linguistic vulnerability as to her own identity and her epilepsy. Rather, this act of questioning further underscores how Cavarero’s theory serves as a key interpretive tool for the series: Xanther proceeds to try to name her cat again and acknowledges that the cat’s identity is more than a sum of individual characteristics like having fur, teeth, and closed eyes. That the reverse of attempting to name the cat what he is not also fails merely underscores the point that naming is not nominalism in the text.

Ultimately, instead, Xanther does not name the cat, just as she did not name the lioness Satya or the menagerie of animals encountered in her backyard. She uncovers the name when she meets the cat’s previous owner, Tian Li, and, in a sense, recognizes what the cat actually is. Xanther’s first utterance of the name catches everyone by surprise, including the reader who sees it as an effaced word in the text (TFv5 338), long before the cat’s name is fully and properly uttered in the text at the end of the volume:

³⁷ Cavarero, 38.

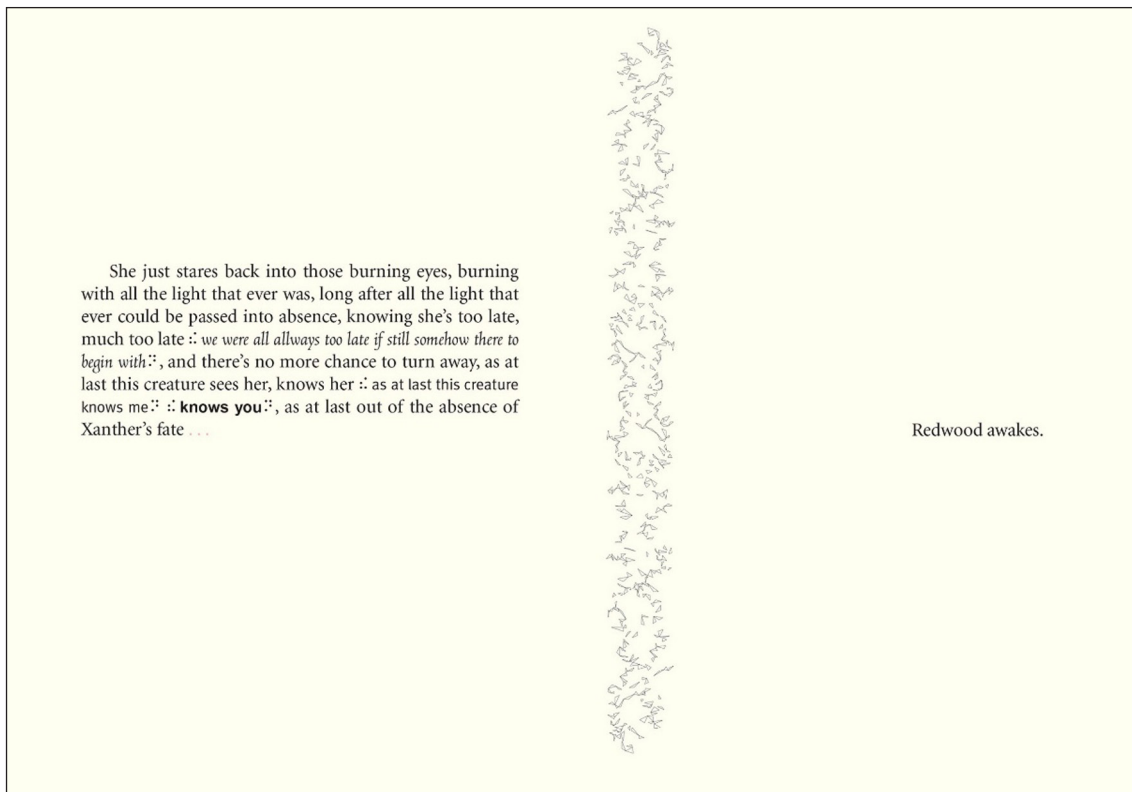


Figure 7: Reveal of the cat's name (TFv5 830-31).

It is telling that Xanther is able to identify the name and thereby uniqueness of the cat when, at last, the cat opens its eyes and sees Xanther. It is the same reciprocity that is important for Cavarero, a reciprocity seen earlier as well when Satya stares at Xanther and Xanther stares back (TFv3 838).

The importance of this reciprocal recognition for *The Familiar* as a whole emerges through the scattered image of the forget-me-not. As Tian Li says to Xanther: “Weakness you can command. Power you cannot. Protect yourself and never treat lightly the true nature of your burden: we are weak and we are cursed” (TFv5 817). Xanther views herself as weak, a product of her condition and the lack of control she has over her own self as a result. In a similar way, the “senso del sacro” that Ida Ramundo in Elsa Morante’s *La Storia* understands, through her own epilepsy and from her Jewish heritage, is a recognition of herself as “weak,” of being subject to powers greater than her that can always, at any time, “annihilate” her (*La Storia* 18). Yet the oppression of History presented in Morante stands starkly in contrast with *The Familiar*. While Xanther may be “weak” and “cursed” per Tian Li, that position affords the opportunity to see and to recognize the other. As we have seen, the focus on naming, and in particular

on naming animals, is about recognition, about giving space to the other. Both the Satya episode and the final reveal of the cat's name in *TFv5* occur with reciprocal acts of seeing: it is not just seeing the other but being seen by the other. That reciprocity, so important in Cavarero's thought, is central in these moments. Moreover, it is this feature that counters the notion of naming as one of exerting power over the named, because Xanther is similarly vulnerable to Satya and Redwood in those moments. This is fully evident in Tian Li's comment and demonstrates the fundamental significance of being weak in the universe of *The Familiar*: it allows one such as Xanther to see the other, to always remember the forget-me-nots: the animals, the weak, those discarded by History. The prevalence of the flower in *TFv4*, even during an epileptic seizure where Xanther lacks memory, underscores her unique position of being able to see and to recognize, her own "sense of the sacred."

This is not to say that the oppressive historical forces of *La Storia* are absent from *The Familiar*, nor that they somehow matter less. They are still very much at play, witnessed most tellingly in the overarching story of Shnorhk Zildjian and his friend Mnatsagan, a professor who is documenting witness accounts of the Armenian Genocide. Shnorhk's chapters are full of that collective trauma, and many of those chapters contain epigrams referring to the tragedy. This trauma is still felt by those characters, and it links to a personal tragedy for Shnorhk: the death of his daughter. The varied evocation of the forget-me-not flower always gestures to that trauma as well, given its use as a commemorative symbol of the Armenia Genocide. A telling dialogue occurs between these two characters about the nature of what Mnatsagan is doing:

"How well we see beyond ourselves depends first on how well we see ourselves. And seeing well I am coming to believe has less to do with what our eyes demonstrate on behalf of light and more to do with what our words compose on behalf of life. Though even so, while language is the greatest meaning of the world, it will never be the meaning of the world."

Mnatsagan takes a deep breath. Falls into silence.

"Please." Shnorhk coughs. "Finish what this is on your mind."

"I respect why you refuse to speak Armenian despite speaking it so blissfully. [...] These voices I live with are the burden of the grave. You know what I mean. I miss your melodies. Your playing restores me. If not for her, then will you spare just a few notes for me? Even one note would do." (*TFv3* 371-72)

These words resonate with what we have seen regarding Xanther. Names for her gesture beyond language to the essence of who the other is. Languages and their meanings are an overt preoccupation of the series, a fact readily gleaned from the inclusion of the

Narcons and through the very notion of the signiconic but explicitly stated by Xanther's father, a character ever concerned with language ("existence itself is *always* semantic," *TFv3* 168). This dialogue between Mnatsagan and Shnorhk employs the same dual scales seen in Morante—the necessary intersection of personal history and History writ-large—as Mnatsagan meditates on his ethical task as scholar and chronicler of the Armenian Genocide: "And through it all never forget the most humanitarian question of all: how to confirm and address what is a communal history without at the same time forfeiting the individuality which no group ever has the right to lay hold of and reduce" (*TFv3* 369). From here the professor pivots to his friend, who has foregone his native language and playing his *duduk*, a traditional Armenian musical instrument, due to the tragic death of his daughter. Mnatsagan asks Shnorhk to engage in a different kind of language, one without words, one that can be of pain or of joy, of memory or of hope. Even if language "will never be the meaning of the world," there are ways to speak that, as Mnatsagan so eloquently puts it, that are "on behalf of life" (*TFv3* 371). While Useppe was shaped and killed by the traumas he saw and the absence of language to give them meaning, Xanther conversely, to the same extent that Mnatsagan here hopes for his friend, is able to see and acknowledge the other. To give them a name. And by giving a name, she gives a voice to who they are and lets them not be forgotten.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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