

19.

THE FUTILITY OF RECOLLECTION

Taxonomy, Temporality, and Tomb Goods in *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*

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Naturalist Alexander von Humboldt writes to his brother of the first days of his visit, together with Aimé Bonpland, to the coast of Venezuela:

Wie die Narren laufen wir bis jetzt umher; in ersten drei Tagen können wir nichts bestimmen, da man immer einen Gegenstand wegwirft, um einen anderen zu ergreifen. Bonpland versichert, dass er von Sinnen kommen werde, wenn die Wunder nicht bald aufhören.¹

We encounter in this taxonomical ecstasy a specifically human joy. We need not be Platonists, dividing reality at the joints², to understand the dynamic of collection and division, to understand taxonomy as that which «distinguishes us from our animal ancestors»³, as *Kultur*. Then are the racial laws of the twentieth century the florescence of taxonomy or have they poisoned it forever, despite its necessity for conceptualization?

Reading Giorgio Bassani's *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, we are continually made aware of the play of taxonomies and come to understand this novel as subversion of taxonomy. The narrator of *Il giardino* cannot be named, and his unnamedness is wholly intentional. He narrates as a refusal of taxonomy, since above all his voice cannot be subjected to it. Certainly the most striking feature of *Il giardino* is its ontological mix

¹ «Like fools we ran around; in the first three days we could not classify [anything], since one always threw away one object to seize another. Bonpland was sure he would lose his mind should the wonders not soon cease». (Humboldt 1800, 13; translated by Lucia Lermond.)

² Plato, *Phaedrus* 265E (1976), 276.

³ Freud 1961, 36.

between the level of the narrative and that of the character⁴. By rendering impossible a sorting of the narrative voice in terms of text and character, the work as a whole undoes the racial laws that made the Shoah possible. That this is of course an impossibility we, as the author, already know. Writing is not an instrument to resurrect the dead, has not the power to transgress that boundary⁵, nor even to comfort the living, indeed memorializes utterly the «inutilità di ogni commemorazione»⁶.

Bassani, as every author, has the power of life and death in narrative, to keep alive or to kill. *Il giardino* displays this power as the power to expand and contract time. These temporal dilations and compressions further take on spatiality⁷. Time past, like the dead, is gone, but space can become its analogue. *Il giardino* becomes the tomb of the homeless dead, perforce an empty tomb, since the characters for whom Bassani built it are themselves creations of the author, whatever poignant echoes they sound of lived persons or of the many millions of lived dead.

The most obvious engagement with taxonomy is the drawing of distinctions among different sorts of Jews and their grouping together as Jews. The narrator's father sorts and groups together: «gli ebrei – sefarditi e aschenaziti, ponentini e levantini, tunisini, berberi, yemeniti, e perfino etiopici [...]» (330). This difference in identity is reflected also in the historical research of Professor Ermanno on «le varie cosiddette Nazioni nelle quali era divisa nel Cinque e Seicento la Comunità veneziana, la Nazione levantina, la ponentina, la tedesca, l'italiana» (400). The narrator queries what «Jew» means (341), discussing the various rites or schools (342), his family and the Finzi-Contini participating in the same until the latter's restoration of the Spanish school temple (413), from which they then return to the Italian (374, 413). «Piuttosto ridicolo», declares Micòl Finzi-Contini, «continuare a fare tante distinzioni» (414), after the racial laws. Yet the narrator's father in his attempt to accommodate to the not yet too far progressed racial laws argues that the Jewish deaths not permitted to be announced in the *Padano* were two old women, one not even Ferrarese (372).

⁴ For a different reading of the mixed narrative voice in *Il Giardino*, see Radcliff-Umstead 1987, 117.

⁵ For my earlier treatment of this topic, see Blumenfeld 1999.

⁶ Bassani 1998, 572. Henceforth, all references to *Il giardino* will be placed in parentheses in the body of the text, directing the reader to the complete works, *Opere*, edited by Roberto Cotroneo in 1998 (Bassani 1998).

⁷ Bassani himself writes of a sort of permeability of time and space in *Laggiù, in fondo al corridoio*. See Bassani 1998, 939.

Another strong taxonomical trajectory is both classical and most appropriate to a *giardino*: the taxonomy of plants. We first encounter a listing of trees in the narrator's history of tomb and house: «tigli, olmi, faggi, pioppi, platani, ippocastani, pini, abeti, larici, cedri del Libano, cipressi, querce, lecci, e perfino palme ed eucalipti [...]» (326). A further listing takes place as the narrator projects himself forward to the burning of the trees in the winter of Stalingrad (352). Micòl expresses horror at her friend's ignorance of botany and begins to introduce him to Italy's native trees and to «rarissime piante africane, asiatiche, americane che soltanto uno specialista sarebbe stato capace di identificare» (407). The races of trees, botanical *differentia*, are noted also in the narrator's account of his last visit to the grounds of the garden (574). Botanical difference is even thematized in the crucial discussion of the Emily Dickinson poem, with the protagonist substituting «il muschio» for Micòl's «l'erba» (450-451).

The activity of listing and typing remains continual in *Il giardino*. Types of marble are listed and types of architectural model (324). Antique weapons are listed (362). Snacks on a tray and containers of drinks on a trolley and the drinks themselves are listed (391-392). Certainly Micòl's homage to the *Skiwasser* in its varieties is a taxonomy, with the addition of grapes «il particolare contributo dell'Italia alla santa e nobile causa dello *Skiwasser*, ovvero di esso più esattamente, la particolare 'variante italiana, per non dire ferrarese, per non dire ... eccetera eccetera'» (392). Alberto lists names and titles of musical compositions for consumption (445) or types of tobacco for the pipe (461). The narrator recounts the menu of his first meal at the Finzi-Contini, concluding with a list of fruits and nuts (466). The various forms of Micòl's luminous glass *lattimi* are listed: «Bicchieri, calici, ampolle, ampolline, scatolucce» (423). The identification by brand names too feeds the theme of taxonomy (it is not simply that usually the Finzi-Contini have the best quality objects): the Underwood typewriter, the Philips gramophone (445), the Omega wristwatch (467), the possibly Westinghouse elevator (500). Even the dog Jor in all his tutelary carnal presence is classified by «razza» (356): Great Dane. Finally, Communist Giam-piero Malnate is disturbed by his inability to sort the Finzi-Contini, declaring them socially a «nodo curioso, assurdo, di contraddizioni insanabili» and averring almost a preference for the «truci agrari 'normali'», implying that «le sottigliezze, le complicazioni, le distinzioni infinitesimali, per interessanti e divertenti che siano, a un dato punto basta, anche loro debbono terminare» (551), willfully refusing to re-

sort or calibrate his ideological taxonomy, prefers that which does not challenge its adequacy.

Taxonomy is challenged in *Il giardino* by the temporal strategies of the narrative voice in its power to hold the characters back from death, to project beyond their deaths, to precipitate them into the void placelessness of mass death. We have already encountered an instance of this in the narrator's listing of trees that will be cut down as firewood in the winter of '43, a temporal as also a geographical displacement by the reference to Stalingrad (352). *Già, adesso, mai*, and *più* as deictics are never aligned. The Finzi-Contini tomb «già si mostrava pressappoco come è adesso» (325). Professor Ermanno does not smile at his mother's portrait «né quella mattina, né mai» (473-474). The narrator recalls a day of study at the Finzi-Contini home where he wishes that «neve e gelo non si sciogliessero più, che durassero eterni» (470). And the winter of '38-'39, months then experienced as «sospesi al di sopra del tempo», he remembers now (and what time is when?) «a più di vent'anni di distanza» (439). Suddenly, the narrator dislocates by comparing his room-to-room exchanges with Professor Ermanno to those with the prisoner in the cell next his in the spring of '43 «per il bisogno di sentire la propria voce, di sentirsi vivi» (476)⁸. In and out of imagined times and spaces, the narrator moves his characters and his readers. A conversation with his father is described by the narrator: the father «parlava come se io e lui fossimo già morti, [...] da un punto fuori dello spazio e del tempo» (565), which recalls to us the cicadas and the boy's bicycle wheel rotating more and more slowly «ancora in cerca del punto di immobilità» (352), and the Epilogue's seal of words that marks the silencing of Micòl by the «vero bacio» (578)⁹ that was not to be. The kiss, the words, that were not to be are visited retrospectively by the narrator (419).

In arguably the most forceful temporal dislocation of the novel, the narrator observes his family at the Passover table who «di lì a qualche anno sarebbero stati inghiottiti dai forni crematori tedeschi» (478), having already seen the Passover table as like that Kippur table prepared «per Loro, i morti famigliari» (478), buried but present. Here quite palpably is the permeability of narrator/character, whom to this point we

⁸ It is not possible to fail to align this with the dead pair of the Dickinson poem, side-by-side, who speak, but are finally silenced.

⁹ Emphasis mine. The reading of this kiss is closely tied to interpretation of Micòl: free spirit, maternal figure, seductress? For key interpretations of Micòl, see Schneider 1974 and Farnetti 2006.

have largely called the narrator. Viewing the «poveri visi» (478) of his bourgeois family, he argues:

[...] certo non lo immaginavano che sarebbero finiti così, né io stesso lo immaginavo, ma ciò nondimeno già allora, quella sera, [...] anche se li sapevo tanto ottusi di mente, tanto disadatti a valutare la reale portata dell'oggi e a leggere nel domani, già allora mi apparivano avvolti della stessa aura di misteriosa fatalità statuaria che li avvolge adesso, nella memoria.¹⁰

The «fatalità statuaria» refers us to stone tombs, stone monuments, to the gravestones studied by Professor Ermanno (400), when violently a cold wind blows as the Passover guests disperse, an event imagined and not experienced by the narrator («Già la vedevo» [479], he writes), and rather than statuary the silenced guests become «come foglie leggere, come pezzi di carta, come capelli di una chioma incanutita dagli anni e dal terrore...» (480).

«Che ora era?» (490), queries the narrator/character. Neither can we the readers tell time, since we are moved by the narrative voice from psychic space to psychic space as the protagonist moves through the discontinuous geography of the Finzi-Contini house (443). A double-perspective is always in play, within and outside time, a fused perspective of narrator and character¹¹, with always the omniscience *ex post facto* of the writer that inscribes the reader, holding us to the letter of the text.

A final temporal strategy should be noted. It is a stylistic feature of all Bassani's novels, a parenthetical discourse that wraps phrase within phrase, dilating the narration, constantly interweaving the strands of the story. In the context of *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, however, this stylistic choice signifies forcefully the narrator's attempts to hold his characters back from death. We might almost say that the narrator impedes the narrative to hold Micòl back from death. We could examine, for example, the visit to the synagogue in Part I, Chapter IV, where line by line we see Bassani's practice, as in the interjected remarks half in Venetian dialect, half in Spanish (344), as in the description of the *sefarim* (345-346), as in the lighting of the candelabra (346-347), as in the analysis of Professor Ermanno's pronunciation of the prayers in Hebrew «filtrata attraverso la duplice distinzione della cultura e del cetò» (348).

¹⁰ Bassani 1998, 478-479.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Bassani himself considered the temporal levels distinguishable. This is a major criticism made by him of Vittorio De Sica's adaptation of *Il giardino*. See Bassani 1984.

Here too we might well mention Bassani's continual revisions of the text of *Il giardino*. Revision is the attempt at intimacy with history, in Bassani's powerful phrase «tornare al mondo»¹², but also an estrangement, since movements *ad infinitum* of words to the world. The more readers study the textual variants¹³, the more deeply they participate in a practice that seeks truth in representation, to find in their commitment to the text new levels of alienation.

If the ontological strategy of Bassani's narration entails the subversion of taxonomy by temporal and spatial dislocations and implications, what can be said of the Etruscan tombs of the Prologue, their tomb goods, and the continuity of life with death that they represent? Malnate exclaims, «gli oggetti non sono che oggetti» (537)¹⁴, but the narrator, visiting Cerveteri, describes the tomb goods as «fidati oggetti» (320). He then goes on to list them: «zappe, funi, accette, forbici, vanghe, coltelli, archi, frecce, perfino cani da caccia e volatili di palude» (320). *Il giardino* raises repeatedly the status of things. Alberto Finzi-Contini, contrasting himself with Malnate, finds life sufficiently irritating without being surrounded by confused and irritating furnishings, objects, calling them «questi nostri muti e fedeli compagni di camera» (447). We have considered under the category of taxonomy many lists of things. The narrator lists the things in Professor Ermanno's study, calling them «una incredibile congerie di oggetti disparati» (472). Micòl describes her room, listing its contents, especially her precious *lattimi* (423-425). Micòl collects *lattimi*, seeing no contradiction, as the narrator points out (424), to her dictum «[a]nche le cose muoiono» (418). The carriage, which to the narrator «sembra nuova» (417), should be permitted to die, like the canoe, drawing its conclusions from its lack of function (418). Early on in the novel, the narrator's father has inveighed specifically against the collecting of the Finzi-Contini: «La verità è che a furia di far collezioni, di cose, di piante, di tutto, si finisce a poco a poco col voler farle anche con le persone» (375). The narrator dreams Micòl's *lattimi* as cheeses, white, dripping, edible (432)¹⁵, but they are

¹² In Un'intervista inedita [1991] (Bassani 1998, 1347).

¹³ See Rinaldi 2006 for an attentive reading of the textual variants in *Il giardino*. On visits in January 2009 and 2010, through the gracious help of Professor Silvana Onofri, I was able to read, at the new center of the Fondazione Bassani at the University of Ferrara, the digitalized section of the manuscript of *Il giardino* and to take away 49 pages for further study.

¹⁴ Cfr. the room of Malnate, 447.

¹⁵ Cfr. the narrator's «Che roba è? Da mangiare?», 423.

in fact *làttimi* glass and closely connected to the singular («solitario» [487]) oracular chalice, the divining champagne glass, which garrulous earlier, refuses to reveal the future to him (487-490). Micòl, who avers her abhorrence of the future (578), is foreclosed to him, will not live to be aged by ten years, as he perceives her in the carriage house (417). She belongs to «il caro, il dolce, il *pio* passato» (578), and like her *làttimi* «scarti d'antiquariato» (423) will become with her family the refuse of history.

At Cerveteri, little Giannina becomes guide to her elders, «in qualche modo [li] teneva per mano» (320), and though we can contrast her with all the famous guides to the underworld, she actually is best seen in the role of the youngest at the Pesach table, the youngest who questions, calling forth the interpretation of history. At Cerveteri, little Giannina refuses a taxonomy that distinguishes between the recent and the ancient dead. She declares, «mi fai pensare che anche gli etruschi sono vissuti [...] e voglio bene anche a loro come a tutti gli altri» (320).

We have tried to explore in *Il giardino* the relations of time, persons, things, the necessity and danger of collections, the futility and task of recollection that Bassani has made his own. At Cerveteri the narrator compares «le tombe a cono» (321) to the German bunkers scattered across Europe «invano» (321) but also to the «abitazioni-fertilizi dei viventi» (321), the then living Etruscans whose «pensiero» and «pazzia» (321) the narrator feels still surrounding the tombs. They believed that *there* nothing would change, filling their tombs with all those goods that made *life* «bella e desiderabile» (321). However vain the desire for a resting place, these tombs and tomb goods stand radically in contrast to the piles of shoes, eyeglasses, hair, sorted by kind, objects of some measured value, the remains of peoples distinguished as valueless. Bassani's narrative engages and subverts taxonomy. At the quick of human identity is the capacity to distinguish. That impulse issues easily, as we have seen, in genocide – and with difficulty issues in literature.

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