

6.

BARE LIFE ON VIA MAZZINI

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1.

Of the millions of people displaced by the Second World War, some 90 per cent of the survivors had returned home to their countries of origin within a year after the Allies declared victory. But among Jewish survivors, the proportions were reversed. Those who survived the camps were exceptions, and those who returned permanently to their countries of origin were the exceptions among the exceptions – under 10 per cent. Hence, as with the deportations, now with repatriation, one was faced with the «distinctiveness of the Jewish problem», in the words of Jacob Robinson, prefacing a report issued by the Institute of Jewish Affairs of the American Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress as early as November, 1946¹.

The author of the report, Zorach Warhaftig, offers two general headings, unequally weighted, as explanations for this exceptional recalcitrance: psychological trauma and fears of ongoing anti-Semitism. Analysis of interviews with Jewish DPs interned in Italy, for instance, showed that even among Jews from Poland – where it was already known some thousand returning Jews had been killed since the end of the war – psychological trauma was the preponderant explanation. Some 62 percent of these interviewees cited «psychological reasons resulting from tragic experiences *during the war*», rather than fear of anti-Semitism in the present (28 percent) as the motive for their resistance to repatriation. Wahrhaftig then documents debates in the newly-formed United Nations, and more particularly at the United Nations Relief and Rehabilita-

¹ Robinson 1946, V.

tion Administration (UNRRA), about how to respond to the post-war «Jewish problem» – an exception always understood as a problem. The upshot was the acceptance of a special status of «non-repatriability» or «irrepatriability» for Jewish survivors»². The exceptions among the exceptions, then, those few who were repatriated, and whose distinctive cases have received relatively little attention, warrant a special designation: RPs, I will say, ‘reappeared persons’.

Wahrhaftig summarizes the effect of psychological trauma by saying: «Many survivors are shocked at the prospect of returning to countries and cities where all their nearest kin and friends were so cruelly murdered» and he adds a note about psychic circumstance: «The single survivors of families and communities want to flee the places whose every house and stone is a reminder of the inhuman things done their nearest and dearest ones»³. To be precise, the survivors in the DP camps did not have to flee, since they were already abroad; but he may well be referring to those Jews who returned to their countries of origin without becoming «genuine repatriates»⁴, that is Jews who came in search of relatives and property and, disappointed, indeed fled to other countries, often making their way back to DP camps again. But whether virtual or actual flight, the effect of psychological trauma, Wahrhaftig urges, is the unbearable experience of the countries of origin as places of limitless commemoration and so interminable mourning: «every house and stone» a *lieu de mémoire*⁵.

Wahrhaftig’s characterization appears to derive from the language in which the non-repatriability of Jews was debated in the international arena. I cite several passages that he compiled, underlining a common element:

A resolution of the Association of Jewish Refugees from Germany in England of June, 1945: «To the Jews from Germany their former country is the *graveyard* of their families».⁶

Jan Stanczyk, Polish representative to the UNRRA council, «stated [...] that all Polish citizens of Jewish origin were welcome», according to Wahrhaftig, «but he understood that [now in Stanczyk’s words] ‘some would not return to areas regarded by them as *cemeteries*’».⁷

² Wahrhaftig 1946, 137.

³ *Ivi*, 134.

⁴ *Ivi*, 57.

⁵ Nora 1984.

⁶ Quoted in Wahrhaftig 1946, 137.

⁷ *Ivi*, 138.

A report to an UNRRA Special Sub-Committee on Displaced Persons, dated March 1946: «Certain United Nations governments have made clear that they are prepared to regard them [Jewish refugees] as a separate group and that they recognize their reluctance to return to areas which they regard as *cemeteries* where most of their friends and relatives are buried». ⁸

This language inverts the nationalist imaginary. One may recall Benedict Anderson's initial figure for the «imagined community»: the tomb of the unknown soldier as a well-marked national gathering place where perfect strangers from different parts of the country can feel nonetheless the relationship of a certain belonging to the tomb, the nation and consequently to each other ⁹. For the Jewish survivors, the names of the dead were all too familiar; what remained unknown was the tomb itself, when so many had been killed far from home, so many buried in unmarked mass graves, so many incinerated with no tomb at all. Thus, while references to national territories as cemeteries may convey the extent of the killing, cemeteries were precisely what was lacking for the RPs, even if other *lieux de mémoire* awaited at every turn. After the war, then, Jews formed an imagined community by bearing the names that they could not place.

2.

As Primo Levi crossed the Austrian border into Italy in October, 1945, on the brink of becoming an RP, he realized that the ordeal of the half-year since his liberation from Auschwitz constituted only a respite. «I mesi or ora trascorsi», he writes, «pur duri, di vagabondaggio ai margini della civiltà, ci apparivano adesso come una tregua, una parentesi di illimitata disponibilità, un dono provvidenziale ma irripetibile del destino» ¹⁰. The open question is whether such a truce will be followed by an extension of the peace or a renewal of the war, though it may be that the parenthesis cannot close and that a certain fate cannot but be repeated. Levi formulates this moment at the border in personal terms:

Di seicentocinquanta, quanti eravamo partiti, ritornavamo in tre. E quanto avevamo perduto, in quei venti mesi? Che cosa avremmo ritrovato a casa? Quanto di noi stessi era stato eroso, spento? Ritornavamo più ricchi o più poveri, più forti o più vuoti? Non lo sapevamo: ma sapevamo che sulle

⁸ Quoted in Warhaftig 1946, 138.

⁹ See Anderson 1991.

¹⁰ Levi 1987, 420.

soglie delle nostre case, per il bene o per il male, ci attendeva una prova, e la anticipavamo con timore.¹¹

To return, then, was to face a test, *una prova*, and to attest, to bear witness and also to give proof, first of all, for an RP, of one's own identity. The examination was also an accusation, and the return, in that sense, a response to a summons to appear, or reappear, before the law. The RP who takes the stand is not so much one who is able to *riapparire* as one constrained to *ricomparire*, as Giorgio Bassani declares in the opening words of his story, *Una lapide in via Mazzini*, from the cycle of his Ferrara tales, first published in 1956:

Quando, nell'agosto del 1945, Geo Josz recomparve a Ferrara, unico superstite dei centottantatré membri della Comunità israelitica che i tedeschi avevano deportato in Germania nell'autunno del '43, e che i più consideravano finiti tutti da un pezzo nelle camere a gas, nessuno in città da principio lo riconobbe.¹²

A trial awaits.

Alexander Stille took issue with those opening words that establish the narrative premise of *Una lapide in via Mazzini* in his account of five Italian Jewish families under fascism, including the Schönheit family from Ferrara, deported, like Geo, to Buchenwald. «Bassani's story is fiction», writes Stille with a journalist's commitment to facts: «five of the eighty-seven Jews deported from Ferrara returned»¹³. His principal interview subject from Ferrara, Franco Schönheit, introduces a different perspective:

«But there is a grain of truth in the Bassani story», Franco says. «Because nearly everyone was dead, we were like 'white flies'. It was so unusual for anyone to return that those who had been in hiding in Italy didn't know what to make of us. Why had these people survived? How had they survived? What had they done to survive?»¹⁴

So, like Geo Josz, Franco, his father Carlo and, by Stille's count, the other three deported Jews in post-war Ferrara did not so much return as reappear for questioning, and the questions, as Franco remembered them, implied an accusation that was made explicit in the testimony of Stille's report on the Di Veroli family of Rome. «Silvia and Giuditta

¹¹ *Ivi*, 421.

¹² Bassani 1998, 84.

¹³ Stille 1991, 344.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

were pained by the initial reception they received from the Roman Jewish community», Stille reports.

«They didn't treat us too well», Giuditta recalls. «They acted as if we must have done something bad to have survived. The Catholics all said, 'You poor things, how you must have suffered', but a lot of the Jews acted as if we had been used as whores by the Germans. I once heard a conversation in which one man asked 'Would you marry a woman who had been deported?' 'No', another answered. 'Neither would I', the first one said. That kind of thing hurt us a lot». ¹⁵

The charge was prostitution and the very fact of survival was taken as evidence for the prosecution.

Bassani does not relate Geo's journey from Buchenwald to Ferrara – neither as *tregua* nor as pre-trial discovery period. Instead, Geo arrives abruptly, and to those gathered on the Via Mazzini, his appearance seems to belie the claim to a reappearance. Bassani's narrator asks in the earliest published version of the text,

nell'uomo di età indefinibile, grasso al punto che sembrava gonfio, con un *kolbak* di pelo d'agnello sul capo rapato, e rivestito di una sorta di campionario di tutte le divise militari cognite e incognite del momento, chi avrebbe potuto riconoscere il gracile fanciullo di sette, o il nervoso, magro, spaurito adolescente di tre anni avanti? ¹⁶

His clothing and the language to describe it (underlining the loan word for his hat), form a *mélange* that disperses national identity. He does not

¹⁵ *Ivi*, 334.

¹⁶ Bassani 1956, 104. In Bassani's *Opere* (1998, 84), the description is truncated, eliminating any reference to Geo's clothing: «l'uomo di età indefinibile, enormemente, assurdamente grasso». See Piero Pieri, *Memoria e Giustizia* (2008), the most valuable and detailed study of both *Una lapide* and the whole of Bassani's cycle of Ferrara stories, for a comprehensive account of the textual variants between editions. (I will limit references to two editions, Bassani 1956 and Bassani 1998 to give some sense of the alterations in the text over time.) Pieri sees Geo as «grottesco e conformista» (97), «un ebreo borghese attaccato alla tradizione e pieno di boria» (93), and thus the centerpiece of a critique of the «debolezze e ambiguità della sua gente» (97), that is Bassani's people, the Jews of Ferrara, whose zeal to «tornare al rassicurante e protettivo perbenismo ebraico-borghese» (107) leads to «un'imperdonabile insensibilità storica» (94) that expunges the memory of the Holocaust. As will be clear, my reading proceeds in a different direction to different conclusions. Our accounts diverge at a point at the very outset of Pieri's discussion, where he describes Geo as «uscito senza danni psicologici apparenti» (85). I would underline «apparenti», distinguishing between that which appears (that which is apparent), and that which reappears. Also, where Pieri focuses on the pertinent context of political parties, the theoretical foundation of my discussion in the work of Giorgio Agamben leads to me to frame other political considerations.

seem to come, to have ever come, from any one place, from anywhere, from any here.

But if the multiplication of identities in Geo's derelict attire («biz-zarramente vestito», reads the early text)¹⁷ is a source of confusion, it is his body size that causes the gravest consideration. For his weight is not perceived as simple biology, but rather as a biopolitical inscription, read against the point of reference in the public way: the stories of the camps (and perhaps the photos published shortly after liberation) that tell of the skeletal remains of both the living and the dead. «Quel grasso suo», the narrator says in the early text, reporting the thoughts of those gathered on the Via Mazzini, «tutto quel grasso, li insospettiva», because it «contrastava singolarmente con quanto si diceva dei campi di concentramento tedeschi»¹⁸. Bassani revised the passage, but in texts both early and late the contradiction Geo posed between «la sua grassezza» and the image of the victims of the camps that had already formed on the streets of Ferrara led to mutually exclusive alternatives: «o che nei campi di concentramento tedeschi non si soffriva di quella gran fame che la propaganda sosteneva; o che lui era riuscito, e chissà a che prezzo, a godervi di un trattamento tutto speciale»¹⁹. In the realm of biopolitics, Geo's body, they conclude, either gave grounds for Holocaust-denial, or for the surmise that Geo (that Silvia, that Giuditta) was a collaborator, a Nazi whore. In either case, he is guilty, at least of perjury. His potential testimony is impugned.

3.

Geo's situation approximates that of the ancient Roman *devotus* in philosopher Giorgio Agamben's analysis of sovereign power and bare life, a particular and perhaps founding case of the *homo sacer*, the figure that Agamben highlights from Roman law²⁰. Agamben's example of the *devotus* is the warrior who, «prima di una battaglia si è votato solennemente agli dèi Mani e non è morto in combattimento»²¹. The explication of this figure is grounded in the Roman belief that the dead reappear in the form of the *larva*, «un essere vago e minaccioso [...] che torna con le sembianze del defunto nei luoghi da lui frequentati»²².

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, 112.

¹⁹ Bassani 1998, 101.

²⁰ Agamben 2005.

²¹ *Ivi*, 107.

²² *Ivi*, 109.

Funerary rites aim at the propitiation of the *larva*, transforming menace into protection; but since they are disrupted in the case where the corpse is missing (drowning at sea, for instance), a colossus, which is to say an image of the deceased, may be fashioned, thus enabling «lo svolgimento di un funerale vicario»²³.

It is in this context that Agamben raises the question, «Che cosa avviene per il devoto sopravvissuto?»²⁴. He responds:

il devoto sopravvissuto è un essere paradossale che, mentre sembra proseguire una vita in apparenza normale, si muove, in realtà, in una soglia che non appartiene né al mondo dei vivi né a quello dei morti: egli è un morto vivente o un vivo che è, in verità, una *larva*, e il colosso rappresenta appunto quella vita consacrata che si era già virtualmente separata da lui al momento del voto.²⁵

Like the effect of the funeral rite after death transforming the *larva*, the rituals of dedication to death transform the *devotus* into a tutelary figure while still alive, by separating out «consecrated life» from biological life (and biological death). «In quanto incarna nella sua persona gli elementi che sono di solito distinti dalla morte», Agamben goes on to say:

l'*homo sacer* è per così dire, una statua vivente, il doppio o il colosso di se stesso. Tanto nel corpo del devoto sopravvissuto che, in modo ancora più incondizionato, in quello dell'*homo sacer*, il mondo antico si trova per la prima volta di fronte a una vita, che, eccependosi in una doppia esclusione dal contesto reale delle forme di vita sia profane che religiose, è definito soltanto dal suo essere entrato in intima simbiosi con la morte, senza però ancora appartenere al mondo dei defunti. Ed è nella figura di questa 'vita sacra' che qualcosa come una nuda vita fa la sua comparsa nel mondo occidentale.²⁶

And its reappearance in the Via Mazzini. The Roman colossus may also have a Jewish name, the living statue of the golem, a human figure made from clay, which, by magical incantation and the inscription of the Hebrew word *emeth* (truth) on its forehead, could come to life to protect endangered Jews. The same golem could be rendered inanimate clay once again by erasing the aleph of the inscription, leaving only the word *meth*, or death. In *homo sacer*'s bare life the aleph, though legible still, is

²³ *Ivi*, 110.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ivi*, 110-111.

²⁶ *Ivi*, 111-112.

not vocalized, as it were. It has fallen silent: signifying still, without the force to speak the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The appearance or reappearance of bare life introduces just such a bare language into the world and the streets of Ferrara.

4.

When, in the course of his return from a short, impromptu and secretive flight from home, Mattia Pascal read in the local paper of the discovery of a decomposed body that had been identified as him – his absence being otherwise unaccountable – he received the news as a liberation in Luigi Pirandello's novel ²⁷. He was suddenly free of creditors, of a wife he didn't love and a mother-in-law he couldn't stand, in short, of all responsibilities; and he had cash in his pocket from his winnings at Monte Carlo, where, in truth, he had been since his disappearance. He took up a false name, and, lacking papers to secure a passport or even a bank account, he moved about within Italy: anywhere but home, anywhere that he would not be recognized. He was not the subject of the sovereign ban, since his wandering was self-imposed. And his new life was not bare life, and not only because he was at his ease. It was a life, a distinctly private life, outside the political realm altogether.

Mattia discovers, however, that life (*zoe*, biological life, strictly private life) is not free. Liberty is a political attribute. Concretely, he finds himself encumbered by his lack of public identity. A theft takes place from the room he rents under his false name, while he is occupied elsewhere in the house, ironically, in a phony séance. (This is no zone of indistinction between life and death, only conscious prevarication.) He could not resolve his *economic* problem – that is, at once financial and domestic, including a love element – without going public. And he could not go public without putting his feigned identity to death. As in the prior event, the decision about life and death – in his case fictitious life and fictitious death – is not a sovereign decision, but his own. So he feigns a suicide, which, as he reads again in the newspapers, becomes a matter of public record, and then he heads for home.

When Mattia returned from his self-imposed banishment to «la mia bella riviera, in cui credevo non dover più metter piede», he goes first to his brother's home. «Ma la gioja m'era turbata», along the road, he reports, not only «dall'ansia d'arrivare», but more particu-

²⁷ Pirandello 1921b.

larly, «dall'apprensione d'esser riconosciuto per via da qualche estraneo prima che dai parenti»²⁸. If there is a moment of *exposure* in his story, in Agamben's sense, it is here: he has already died as the private, even secretive Adriano Meis; but he is not yet ready to take up the public life of Mattia Pascal. The moment extends to his brother's threshold, where an unknown servant asks, «Chi debbo annunziare?» The answer is non-committal, and notably halting: «'Di... dite... ditegli che... sì, c'è... c'è... un suo amico... intimo, che... che viene da lontano... Così...'»²⁹. For a moment, then, he has no name that he can pronounce, no identity to stabilize the shifter and shifting, 'I'. He is a subject and yet not quite a subject. He speaks the stammering language of bare life.

The moment appears to pass quickly. Whoever 'I' may be, Mattia is made at home in a sitting room, and in this domestic setting, he recovers his speech when his brother arrives: «'Berto!' gli gridai, aprendo le braccia. 'Non mi riconosci?'»³⁰. There will be some momentary confusion as re-appearance seems to contradict fact, but the answer to Mattia's question is plainly, yes. In this private scene, he is recognized: «'Mattia! Mattia! Mattia!', prese a dire il povero Berto, non credendo ancora agli occhi»³¹. He will also be recognized subsequently by his mother-in-law, his wife, who thinks she is his widow, and her new husband, who, according to the law, cannot be her husband. The resolution of the complications of his wife's marital status will finally cast Mattia into the penumbra of inclusion-exclusion. Thus, the novel will end with his visit to his own grave and his reading of the inscription on his tombstone: «COLPITO DA AVVERSI FATI / MATTIA PASCAL / BIBLIOTECARIO / CVOR GENEROSO ANIMA APERTA / QVI VOLONTARIO / RIPOSA // LA PIETÀ DEI CONCITTADINI / QVESTA LAPIDE POSE»³². It is only the self-recognition that he achieves at the cemetery that allows him to give himself the new name of he who, in life, rests, if not in peace, then «volontario», in the grave thus indicated – he who has survived his dedication to his own death:

Io vi ho portato la corona di fiori promessa, e ogni tanto mi reco a vedermi morto e sepolto là. Qualche curioso mi segue da lontano; poi, al ritorno,

²⁸ *Ivi*, 266.

²⁹ *Ivi*, 267.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ivi*, 268.

³² *Ivi*, 292.

s'accompagna con me, sorride, e – considerando la mia condizione – mi domanda:

– Ma voi, insomma, si può sapere chi siete? –

– Mi stringo nelle spalle, socchiudo gli occhi e gli rispondo:

– Eh, caro mio ... Io sono il fu Mattia Pascal.³³

The decision to leave the life he had been living was his own, but not the conditions of his readmission. He returns to public life in these final lines, as he reads his name upon the *lapide*, but he finds that a place is reserved for him only insofar as the polis is everywhere a cemetery, a zone of indistinction in which he is simultaneously among the living and the dead. He reappears as bare life, he introjects bare language.

Bassani's story commences where Pirandello leaves off, when Geo reappears in the public way and undertakes to read a *lapide*, just then being mounted on the façade of the synagogue in the Via Mazzini. Bassani is scrupulous in withholding the details of life, death and survival in Buchenwald, which the author himself did not witness, but the crux of the reading lesson is learning that the name of the RP is necessarily *il fu Geo Josz*.

Bassani sets Geo's first words apart in parentheses, as if they were not yet words, not entirely speech but a murmur or babble that is a precursor to speech (like the confusion of his insignia). Geo has come upon a small crowd gathered on the Via Mazzini to watch a workman mounting a *lapide* inscribed with the names of the deported Jews of Ferrara, all of whom are presumed dead. The workman's labors are interrupted: «sentendosi toccare una caviglia ('Geo Josz?', diceva una voce beffarda) [...]»³⁴. Geo points up at the *lapide* and laughs amidst the bystanders, «di certo per guadagnarsi la sua simpatia», and then he begins again:

«Geo Josz?», ripeté.

Ricominciò a ridere. Ma subito, come pentito, e seminando il discorso di frequenti «prego» alla tedesca [...] si dichiarò dispiaciuto, «mi creda», di aver guastato ogni cosa con un intervento che, era pronto a riconoscerlo, aveva tutti i caratteri di una *gaffe*. Eh già – sospirò –: la lapide avrebbe dovuto essere rifatta, dato che quel Geo Josz lassù, cui in parte risultava dedicata, non era altri che lui stesso, in carne e ossa.³⁵

When Geo's voice moves from the private speech of his parenthesis to

³³ *Ivi*, 293.

³⁴ Bassani 1998, 87.

³⁵ *Ibidem*. The earlier text had specified that Geo spoke those words «indicando sempre la lapide» (Bassani 1956, 108).

the public ear, it begins by repeating itself, and hence, not so much appearing, as reappearing. It is a halting voice, incorporating the language of the sovereign power of the camps as a constant interruption, a stammering, a speech defect. It is, then, not so much a language, a native language, as a babble of languages, a *voce beffarda* mocking itself, mocking the potential of language to instantiate itself in speech. It is bare language.

Were Italy a cemetery, the *lapide* would be a tombstone, whose inscription would function as an index: *po nikbar, hic jacet*, here lies, at this very place, beneath this stone. The linguistic shifter (*po, hic, here*) would come to rest in the discourse of that indication and the purposes of commemoration would be served. But in the Via Mazzini, which is to say outside the graveyard but within the nation-as-cemetery, the *lapide* cannot complete this work. Geo himself, his arm raised, enacts the part of the index, but far from grounding the shifter (I am Geo Josz), his performance points out its impossibility. I, here, am that Geo Josz, there. I, who am speaking these words to you, am that Geo Josz, who is dead and cannot speak. He has reappeared to ruin commemoration. His testimony puts testimony on trial. It is spoken *come pentito*. It cannot be spoken otherwise.

5.

The shame detectible in Geo's first speech is also the crux of Agamben's analysis of survivor testimony after Auschwitz. Shame is a kind of speech defect for Agamben especially notable in testimony beset by what he calls «il paradosso di Levi»³⁶. «Lo ripeto», writes Levi in his essay *La vergogna*,

non siamo noi, i superstiti, i testimoni veri. È questa una nozione scomoda, di cui ho preso coscienza a poco a poco, leggendo le memorie altrui, e rileggendo le mie a distanza di anni. Noi sopravvissuti siamo una minoranza anomala oltre che esigua: siamo quelli che, per loro prevaricazione o abilità o fortuna, non hanno toccato il fondo. Chi lo ha fatto, chi ha visto la Gorgone, non è tornato per raccontare, o è tornato muto; ma sono loro, i «mussulmani», i sommersi, i testimoni integrali, coloro la cui deposizione avrebbe avuto significato generale. Loro sono la regola, noi l'eccezione.³⁷

Where the rule was extermination, survival was a privileged exception.

³⁶ Agamben 1998, 151.

³⁷ Levi 1987, 716.

Privilege might accrue to prisoners by dint of the grounds for their internment (criminals, for instance, in contrast to Jews), professional qualifications (perhaps a machinist or a tailor or a carpenter was worth keeping alive a little longer), language skills (to understand the orders in German), and group affiliation and organization (especially among political prisoners). Alternatively, the *zona grigia* of complicity might also confer «un trattamento tutto speciale»³⁸. Not all of the privileged survived, but for as long as privilege lasted, they were exempt from the final cause of the camps.

Agamben concludes from Levi's reflections that those who could speak were not complete witnesses and those who were complete witnesses could not speak. It needs be noted that this analysis neither intends nor effects a denial of the reality of the Holocaust. The survivors were eyewitnesses to the extermination of others. In a murder trial, the testimony of an eyewitness is not invalidated by the fact that the eyewitness was not murdered too. The survivors tell the truth and nothing but the truth, but they speak the whole truth only «per delega», according to Levi, in place of and on behalf of *i sommersi*³⁹.

Agamben is clear about the horror of the camps. In *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, however, his task is not that of the historian documenting policies and planning, brutality, suffering and extermination. Instead, he takes the precarious situation of the *salvati* as the exemplary occasion to examine a certain structure inherent in testimony – and perhaps more generally in all speech acts. This concern is consonant with Agamben's larger philosophical project, whose principal problematic is the disjuncture between the potentiality of language and its realization in speech acts. He finds this problem best delineated in linguist Émile Benveniste's discussion of shifters, words like «here», «now» and especially «I», whose only meaning is to refer to the speech act in which the word appears (for instance, «I» means only «the person who is saying 'I' in this sentence»). And Agamben returns to Benveniste repeatedly throughout his work, including *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*. Some of his readers have rejected the book for that linguistic turn, seeing the discussion as an instrumentalization of the camps and survivor testimony in the service of quite separate interests. I object to the objections. If post-war thinkers are not to take account of the camps, if their philosophical projects are not moved by the camps, as in the

³⁸ Bassani 1998, 101.

³⁹ *Ivi*, 717.

case of Agamben's teacher Heidegger, who are they? And if not now, when ⁴⁰?

What is distinctive about *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* within Agamben's oeuvre with respect to his consistent engagement with Benveniste is that in working through Levi's paradox, he comes to see that the fundamental disjuncture between language and discourse has the structure of shame. The cornerstone of this new construction of the relationship between human being and speaking being is an analysis of shame that Agamben finds in an early text by another student of Heidegger, philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. Drawing his key terms, subjectification (*soggettivazione*) and desubjectification (*desoggettivazione*), from Lévinas' *De l'évasion* (1935), Agamben argues, «Nella vergogna, il soggetto non ha, cioè, altro contenuto che la propria desoggettivazione, diventa testimone del proprio dissesto, del proprio perdersi come soggetto. Questo doppio movimento, insieme di soggettivazione e di desoggettivazione, è la vergogna» ⁴¹. Reading his own name on the *lapide*, Geo enacts this double movement. He overcomes his hesitation and emerges as a speaking subject, indeed a subject speaking in his own name (subjectification); on the other hand, the name in which he speaks is that of a subject who is no more (desubjectification). I am that I am not.

Agamben finds precisely the same paradoxical speech in the most exceptional of all camps witnesses, those who had been *Muselmänner*, the Muslims, in camp slang: those who were so extenuated by hunger, fatigue, and brutality that they could no longer exercise some of the most basic life functions. Levi exemplifies the state of the *Muselmann* by saying that they seemed unable to distinguish between the cold and a blow from a guard. The *Muselmänner* had entered a different grey zone, then, at the opposite extreme of camp privilege, a zone of indistinction between life and death, the zone of the barest life. To be a *Muselmann* was to be completely *sommerso*, indeed, already *annegato*. And yet some few survived their drowning, survived themselves, and bore testimony.

Agamben's work in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* may be read as an introduction to an archive of *Muselmänner* witnesses that he includes in the final pages of his book. Just prior to reciting their testimony, Agamben states:

⁴⁰ Leland de la Durantaye provides a valuable overview of the controversy (see especially 2009, 248-49) in the course of an excellent critical introduction to Agamben's oeuvre.

⁴¹ Agamben 1998, 97.

Nell'espressione *Io ero un musulmano*, il paradosso di Levi raggiunge la sua formazione più estrema. Non soltanto il musulmano è il testimone integrale, ma egli ora parla e testimonia in prima persona. Dovrebbe ormai essere chiaro in che senso quest'estrema formulazione – *Io, colui che parla, ero un musulmano, cioè colui che non può in nessun caso parlare* – non soltanto non contraddice il paradosso, ma, anzi, puntualmente lo verifica.⁴²

The *Muselmänner* who speak in the first person are neither *sommersi* nor *salvati*, or they are indistinguishably both at once. They have survived themselves. Such is the case of the reappearance of Geo Josz. Those who first see him on the Via Mazzini, and see that he is *grasso*, raise the charge of false witness. The narrator, however, observes more precisely that «Sembrava gonfio d'acqua, una specie di annegato»⁴³. *Una specie di sommerso salvato*. Geo is a complete witness.

6.

Psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron similarly characterizes shame as a contradictory condition, «structurante par certains aspects [...], elle est déstructurante par d'autres»⁴⁴. Thus, he emphasizes that the feeling of shame allows the individual to reestablish both psychic integrity and a place in the social world, but at a price: «L'individu se réunifie, mais comme sujet indigne»⁴⁵. Geo's nervous laughter, mocking himself as he speaks and for speaking, it may be recalled, was interpreted by the narrator as an effort to gain sympathy. Geo's first testimony effaces himself as one unworthy to be counted amongst the honored dead, but also one whose membership in the rolls of the living is not guaranteed. He would be re-membered, rather than remembered. It will be crucial to his re-integration – that is, his incomplete reintegration – that he is placed on the membership rolls of a private club in Ferrara shortly after his reappearance; and all the more crucial that when his re-socialization fails, he is dis-membered, as it were, expunged from those rolls and debarred from entering.

Tisseron's examination of «situations limites» including the case of camp survivors, articulates the experience of shame as a localized breakdown of the «enveloppe psychique» and its «capacité autocontenante»⁴⁶.

⁴² *Ivi*, 154.

⁴³ Bassani 1998, 87.

⁴⁴ Tisseron 1992, 57.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, 48-55.

The envelope may be breached from without by a surveillance that can gain access to secrets, or from within by an unmastered drive that finds its way to public expression. Bassani's Ferrara transposes the psychic envelope onto the cityscape, whose salient feature is the self-containing city wall to which the author referred when he collected his early stories under the title, *Dentro le mura* ⁴⁷. The figure of containment is familiar in Bassani's writing in his most famous work, the novel *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, where the wall surrounding the garden originally stands for class distinctions ⁴⁸. However, once the state of exception is declared and with it the promulgation of Italy's racial laws, the wall reveals its double nature. Built ostensibly to keep the lower classes out, it now walls Jewish difference in, constituting an impromptu and well-appointed ghetto to mirror the medieval ghetto of Ferrara hard by the city wall.

The ubiquity of residential segregation means that virtually all cities have always been constructed according to the logic of the sovereign decision, including within their space a zone of exception to which some group is banished to bare life ⁴⁹. From the perspective of sovereign power, the breaching of those walls is the occasion of shameful commingling (e.g., Nazi law ruled against *Rassenschande*, racial shame, sexual relations between Aryans and Jews). In the pre-war setting of Bassani's *Lida Mantovani*, Ferrara's city walls themselves become a duplicitous point of contact ⁵⁰. The trees growing atop the *bastioni* provide cover for clandestine couplings, including the sexual encounters between the working-class Catholic protagonist and her well-to-do Jewish lover. Lida is abandoned by her David, whose name recalls the biblical sovereign who casts an illicit gaze at Bathsheba – but not by Bassani. For his primary commitment is not so much to Ferrara's Jews as to those who have been subjected to the ban, and so to bearing witness to bare life.

Bassani is able to imagine the breaching of the walls that constitute the zone of exception from *dentro le mura*, that is as an exception to the exception in *La passeggiata prima di cena* ⁵¹. There he depicts the household of the Jewish Dr. Elia Corcos and his plebian, Catholic wife Gemma Brondi «in via Vittoria, nel cuore di quello che fino a non molto

⁴⁷ Bassani 1998, 7-211.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, 315-578.

⁴⁹ «Bare life is life in zones of exception», observes Guillermina Seri, elaborating on Agamben's analysis in Seri 2004, 83.

⁵⁰ Bassani 1998, 9-54.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, 55-83. Pieri also notes parallels between *Una lapide in via Mazzini* and *La passeggiata prima di cena* (see 2008, 97-99).

avanti era stato il ghetto»⁵². Their home has two approaches. On the one hand, «Per arrivarci da casa Brondi quando, s'intende, si fosse percorso il viottolo in cima ai bastioni ed evitato ogni possibile scorciatoia urbana,» Gemma's family would have a view of the countryside and finally enter through a garden⁵³. Patients and the doctor's Jewish relatives, on the other hand, namely, «Corcos, Josz, Cohen, Lattes o Tabet», approached from «via della Ghiara, col suo aspetto tranquillo e appartato, è vero, ma marcatamente cittadino» that contrasted so sharply with the *campagna* that nevertheless began «a non più di qualche decina di metri di distanza»⁵⁴.

Distinctions hold, and even prejudices; nevertheless the house admitted entry from both sides and suggests the possibility of a space of hospitality that would be a refuge against the sovereign decision and the experience of shame. It may also be recalled that communication across the garden wall of the Finzi-Contini likewise took the form of hospitality, both clandestinely and then openly. The erotic tension thus aroused is never favorably resolved for the narrator, who eventually suffers banishment from the ghetto-garden. The estrangement anticipates and may even be seen as the cause for his alternative fate: the Finzi-Continis will be deported to their death, as he would have been had he married Micòl. Instead, the narrator will survive, and precisely because he had breached the garden wall, he will take on the role of the survivor-witness, however incomplete. The space of hospitality is not proof against sovereign power. The Corcos-Brondi household appears to survive even Gemma's death, since her sister Luisa, «nel '26, era venuta a convivere con Elia e con [il figlio] Jacopo in qualità di governante di casa [...],» but not «la deportazione di entrambi [Elia e Jacopo] in Germania, nell'autunno del '43»⁵⁵ – and Geo along with them.

As a complete witness, Geo speaks from the perspective of bare life *dentro le mura*, but he also incorporates – this is the completeness – the extramural sovereign gaze. Thus, his first view of Ferrara in the story comes from a distance as he descended from the Brenner Pass in a military transport. He discovers a wall denuded of its trees, a bare city, as it were, as difficult for him to recognize as he himself will prove to

⁵² *Ivi*, 71.

⁵³ In the original text the Brondis avoided more particularly «le viuzze medioevali del centro», which is to say the ghetto itself (Bassani 1956, 83).

⁵⁴ Bassani 1998, 71-72.

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, 81.

be on the Via Mazzini upon his initial reappearance. In the early text, Bassani writes: «Ma era Ferrara – egli si era chiesto, e aveva chiesto, anche, al conducente seduto al suo fianco. [...] Dove erano i verdi, luminosi, antichi alberi che una volta si innalzavano lungo il crinale delle Mura smozzicate?»⁵⁶. The unwonted exposure effaces the distinction between city and countryside. The confusion is further reflected in the scene in the Via Mazzini, first, in the laborer who mounts the *lapide*, «contadino costretto a inurbarsi per colpa della Guerra», then in the man from a neighboring town, «che a Ferrara si trovava per caso», who stops to count the names⁵⁷. And above all, in Geo: more than his outlandish clothing, his bloated form of an *annegato* may be seen as an inside-out figure in the precise sense described by Tisseron: «je propose de comprendre le raptus de honte comme un mouvement de saillie à la périphérie du système psychique de contenus mentaux qui se trouvent ainsi exhibés, du sujet, contre sa volonté. Le corps peut intervenir comme témoin de cette saillie»⁵⁸.

7.

In examining the same report on shame by Primo Levi that is the point of departure for Agamben's analysis, Tisseron draws attention to the phenomenon that he explicates more generally under the heading of «La 'contagiosité' de la honte», namely, «le spectacle de la honte rend honteux celui qui y assiste, même s'il tente de s'en protéger immédiatement par des mécanismes comme la dénégation ou la projection»⁵⁹. The Russian soldiers who liberated Auschwitz felt shame, Levi recalls in *La tregua* and again at the outset of his *La vergogna*. Tisseron follows him closely in asserting that the prisoners learn to see themselves anew in the shame on the faces of the soldiers, recognizing their own shameful state of disorder (desubjectification), and at the same time identifying themselves (subjectification) with a society that condemns, rather than inflicts, that shame⁶⁰.

Geo's reappearance introduces much the same contagion. Already in the first moments on the Via Mazzini, and in the days and weeks to

⁵⁶ Bassani 1956, 110. The passage was omitted from the later version in Bassani 1998.

⁵⁷ Bassani 1998, 85-86.

⁵⁸ Tisseron 1992, 53.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, 38.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, 61-62.

come, the people of Ferrara are exposed to his bare life, and they are also exposed by his bare life. For not all societies condemn the states of exception that bring them shame. The *salvati* from the camps were «*Geheimnisträger*, portatori di segreti», as Levi says; but then he adds, «È meno noto e meno studiato il fatto che molti portatori di segreti si trovano anche dall'altra parte, dalla parte degli oppressori»⁶¹.

The people of Ferrara may have trouble recognizing Geo – a case of negation, following Tisseron's psychoanalytic approach to shame – but he has no trouble recognizing them. Only after Geo read his name aloud from the *lapide* does one man advance through the small crowd on the Via Mazzini, having now «riconosciuto perfettamente in lui Geo Josz»⁶². Geo replies, «'Con quella barbetta ridicola, caro zio Daniele, quasi non ti riconoscevo'»⁶³. Since there is no hesitation on Geo's part, «quasi» serves only to emphasize the intention, as well as the futility of his uncle's masquerade. Beards, it turns out, are everywhere on the male faces of Ferrara. The narrator explicates the context when he remarks on «le barbe di varia foggia e misura che la guerra, non diversamente dalle famose carte false, aveva reso d'uso comune»⁶⁴. Bearded men are men in hiding in plain sight on the streets of Ferrara.

In a passage eliminated from the final version of the text, the narrator interprets Geo's disapproval of their postwar appearance, inferring the «insofferenza acuta, profonda, che lui, Geo, aveva subito provato per ogni segno chi gli parlasse, a Ferrara, del passaggio del tempo, e dei mutamenti anche minimi da esso portati nelle cose»⁶⁵. But Bassani had reason for second thoughts. Rather than a superfluous mark of change from pre-war days – after all, one need only look at the fabric of the city to see ample signs of destruction – the beards arrested time. They extended the conditions of war beyond the time of war. They were out of place. Or so Geo himself commented on the *lapide*.

The *lapide* itself clearly registers the passing of time in its allusion to the events of the war, and furthermore, its placement on the façade altered the appearance of «'nostro caro, vecchio Tempio'», in Geo's words, from what it had been, to use his laconic expression, «'prima'»⁶⁶. But more particularly the nature of the alteration was, in his view, de-

⁶¹ Levi 1987, 656.

⁶² Bassani 1956, 115. The phrase is omitted from the text in Bassani 1998.

⁶³ Bassani 1998, 92.

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, 93.

⁶⁵ Bassani 1956, 115.

⁶⁶ Bassani 1998, 88.

rivative, «'un po' come se lei,» he told the workman, «'con quella faccia, con quelle mani, la obbligassero, che so, a mettersi lo *smoking*'»⁶⁷: a cosmetic change that, in its attempt to cover-up, made the disguised reality all the more flagrant.

The undisguised face, with all its natural defects, is only life; but the face that is discovered in its hiding place is the subject of biopolitics. Pirandello remarked in response to the critics of the inverosimilitude and inhumanity of such works as *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, where the author thought to have placed characters «in una penosa situazione, socialmente anormale, assurda per quanto si voglia»⁶⁸, that he exposed the reality of «difetti di quella fittizia costruzione che i personaggi stessi han messo su di sé e della loro vita, o che altri ha messo su per loro: i difetti insomma della *maschera* finché non si scopre *nuda*»⁶⁹. What is reserved for the domestic space of intimacy is life; what shows itself publicly is politics; but what *shows through* is bare life.

When Geo finished commenting on the incongruousness of formal attire to the face and hands of the laborer, he «mostrava le proprie, di mani, callose oltre qualsiasi immaginazione, ma coi dorsi così bianchi che un numero di matricola, tatuato nella pelle molliccia, come bollita, poco più su del polso destro, poteva esser letto distintamente nelle sue cinque cifre precedute dalla lettera J»⁷⁰. He exposes himself and his shame, but his exposure is contagious, and the beards he sees and sees through become a mark of the bare life around him.

Bassani provides a corroborating counter-example that perplexes Uncle Daniele. Geo has another uncle, Geremia Tabet, an old fascist. He wears a goatee in the fascist style of the pre-war era. It is the only beard that is not a cover-up, and so it is «l'unica barba in città che Geo tollerava»⁷¹. Daniele himself finds the unrepentant fascist inexcusable, but Geo comes to terms:

Il patto [...] era il seguente: Geo non avrebbe accennato neppure per allusioni ai trascorsi politici dello zio, e lo zio, dal canto suo, si sarebbe astenuto dal pretendere che il nipote si mettesse a raccontare ciò che aveva visto e patito in quella Germania dove anche lui, Geremia Tabet, salvo prova contraria – e questo dovevano pur ricordarlo tutti coloro che adesso pensassero di rinfacciargli qualche erroruccio di gioventù, qualche più che

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ Pirandello 1921a, VII.

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, IX.

⁷⁰ Bassani 1998, 88.

⁷¹ *Ivi*, 102.

umano sbaglio di scelta politica compiuto in tempi così remoti da ormai apparire quasi leggendari – aveva perduto una sorella, un cognato, e un nipotino amatissimo.⁷²

Namely, Geo's mother, father and brother. The pact offers refuge to Geo, who need not be a witness before Geremia; and to Geremia it holds out the invitation to be re-membered as one of the family, a recognition that the state of exception, as Agamben argues, had superseded distinctions such as leftist and rightist politics. In the generalization of that state after the war, all may have been reduced to bare life, all survivor-witnesses, however incomplete, all bereaved. The pact is ratified, then, as an explicit offer of hospitality: «in che cosa consistevano i progetti di Geo?» he wished to know and wanted to help; and if «Geo avesse voluto venire a stare per un po' di tempo lì da loro, una branda, che diamine, si sarebbe sempre riusciti a sistemargliela da qualche parte»⁷³. It is an offer to reestablish the *oikos*, the household economy, wresting it from politics, and to provide shelter in what would be, like the Corcos-Biondi home, a mixed dwelling, in this case a home in which proponent and victim of fascism commingled.

Geo did not accept. As if he were summoned *sub poena*, he was not free not to be a complete witness. The trial was not, after all, simply his own. And those around him deflected the shame that he exposed by transforming his damning witness into an enigmatic demand. Uncle Geremia asks about his plans, but most were more blunt: «che voleva Geo Josz?» What did he want of them? What did he want back? What reparations?

The most evident answer is inscribed in the cityscape as a restitution of property. Geo proceeds from the Via Mazzini to the grand house on Via Campofranco from which he and his immediate family had been deported. The building had become a fascist headquarters in the final years of the war and was now the headquarters of the Partisans Association. Assisted by Uncle Daniele, himself a former partisan, Geo is granted an interview with the Provincial Secretary. After two successive takeovers by law-making violence, does Geo's claim to property still stand? The Partisans' Association is in the place of the defendant, but its own Provincial Secretary will adjudicate. Under these conditions, Geo is not subject to the law, but to the logic of sovereignty. The decision is banish-

⁷² *Ivi*, 104.

⁷³ *Ivi*, 104-105.

ment to a room in a tower, with Daniele occupying a room just beneath, a mocking hospitality that makes Geo a guest in his own home.

Yet in the cityscape after Auschwitz, after Buchenwald, to consign Geo to the most remote corner of the house – an excluded insider, included outsider – is also to assign him a privileged gaze from on high. Bare life and sovereignty are conflated in a zone of indistinction. The narrator describes Geo's view:

[...] non usciva quasi mai di casa, passando presumibilmente ore e ore a guardare il vasto paesaggio di tegole brune, orti, e lontane campagne, che si stendeva ai suoi piedi [...].

At this point in the early text, Bassani inserted an emphatic parenthesis: «(un panorama immenso, ora che i fronzuti alberoni delle Mura non erano più là a limitarlo!)»⁷⁴. The description of Geo's view then continues:

[...] la sua presenza continua divenne in breve per gli occupanti dei piani inferiori un pensiero molesto, assillante. Le cantine di casa Jozs, che rispondevano tutte sul giardino, fino dall'epoca della Brigata Nera erano state adattate a prigioni segrete, sul conto delle quali anche dopo la Liberazione, si erano continuate a raccontare in città molte storie sinistre. Ma adesso, sottoposte al probabile, infido controllo dell'ospite della torre, non potevano evidentemente più servire per quegli scopi di giustizia sommaria e clandestina [...].⁷⁵

In Auschwitz, in Buchenwald, the prisoners «tenevano il segreto dei Lager stessi, il massimo crimine nella storia dell'umanità», Levi writes in the preface to *I sommersi e i salvati*⁷⁶. Aside from the polemic of the implied comparison (who shall judge which genocide will be the worst?), Agamben offers grounds to amend the observation. Since the rule of law had been suspended, the horrific actions of the camps were not a crime, but an indefinite state of exception, an indefinite state of law-establishing violence, whose end, however, was not the establishment of law, but the perpetuation of rule by sovereign decision. Nevertheless, the death marches and other efforts to dismantle the camps once defeat was imminent give ample evidence that even if the Nazis thought that extermination was a killing that was not murder (nor sacrifice), they anticipated a gaze from beyond the state of exception that would judge

⁷⁴ Bassani 1956, 119.

⁷⁵ Bassani 1998, 96-97.

⁷⁶ Levi 1987, 656.

their acts by the rule of law. Geo reinserts that perspective. He who had been banished from the realm of law at his deportation, embodies the gaze of the law upon his reappearance. Bassani makes the point more modestly and again in terms of real estate. When Geo comes and goes through the courtyard in the house on Via Campofranco, he makes the erstwhile partisans and current jailers feel like delinquent tenants in the face of the lawful landlord. But since they are still living according to the logic of sovereignty, what they expect from him is not a renewal of contractual right – a pact, as in the case of Uncle Geremia – but the sovereign decision of banishment, here figured as eviction.

It is the virtue of Agamben's analysis of the state of exception to find its structure in the mirror relationship between the sovereign and the *homo sacer*, the sovereign decision and bare life. In the logic of the complete witness, their two perspectives merge: exposed and exposing, exposing and exposed. In the topology of Bassani's cityscape – representing both the psyche and the state, as it did for Plato – «quella sorta di osservatorio»⁷⁷, from which, as unwanted guest, Geo opened the secret of clandestine justice (a contradiction in terms that speaks rather for the state of exception outside the realm of justice), is necessarily the site of his own secret, which is exposed in turn. A trapdoor separated his room from Daniele's and served Geo as sort of horizontal wall that admitted no communication beyond «qualche 'Uhm!', qualche 'Ma davvero?'» with which he cut off his loquacious uncle's conversation⁷⁸. But this wall, too, was ultimately breached one day when, in Geo's absence, Daniele climbed up into his room and discovered: «l'agghiacciante serie di fotografie di tutti i suoi morti – Angelo e Luce, i genitori, e Pietruccio, il fratellino appena decenne»⁷⁹. It was the scene of his barest life, and perhaps his deepest shame – a shame that Agamben is at pains to bracket, though Levi admits that it is so. It did not matter that the *salvati* knew that no guilt attached to them for the death of others, they felt shame nonetheless. (Agamben's point in this context is to remove the question of guilt and innocence from the discussion of shame.) They had taken someone else's place among the living; someone else had taken their place among the dead. All of the survivors were, in a different sense, RPs: replaced persons. Geo, too, must have felt that shame.

⁷⁷ Bassani 1998, 97.

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, 101.

⁷⁹ *Ivi* 102. The original text specifies that the photos covered the walls (Bassani 1956, 125).

Were Italy a cemetery, were there in Italy a cemetery for the deported who never reappeared, then Ferrara would have offered a place of public mourning where Geo might have been re-membered amongst bereaved fellow citizens. But instead, Geo finds himself obliged to construct a site of interminable and clandestine commemoration, a kind of asylum for melancholia. What did Geo want? In all the speculation that surrounded his reappearance, even after he had begun to frequent the streets again, begun again to sit in the public eye in the cafes and receive greetings, his original answer was overlooked. «Eh già – sospirò», speaking in the stumbling, bare language of his initial reappearance, «la lapide avrebbe dovuto essere rifatta»⁸⁰. It might well have seemed that he was asking for a straightforward emendation. In the zeal of the Jewish community of Ferrara to render a complete witness beyond their competence, they had marred the text of their memorial. Let them take out the chisel and begin again. But the inquisitive Uncle Daniele exposes a different reading. In his room on high, Geo had remade the necessarily incomplete testimony of the *lapide* – over-filled with names, over-exposed in the public way on the exterior of the Temple – as the complete witness that he hid from view, the unspoken testimony of his grief and his shame.

8.

Time passed. Geo's capacity for self-containment was reestablished, «Piano, piano lui dimagriva»⁸¹. He dons a new gabardine, but keeps his stories of Buchenwald to himself. And with him, the city seemed to recover: «Ogni cosa girava, insomma. Geo, da un lato; Ferrara e la sua società (non esclusi gli ebrei scampati ai massacri), dall'altro lato»⁸². Bassani might have stopped there, representing the reconstitution of the fundamental political distinction between private life and public life, *zoe* and *bios*, that frames the law, as though the camps led to the fulfillment of the emancipatory promise held out to Jewish generations before the war, *mutatis mutandi*: to be a complete witness at home and a man on the street. But Geo has reappeared to introduce bare life to Ferrara as the new and unending state of exception. He will not rest in peace, but rather Bassani has him painfully reverse the steps that brought him to his haunted house. He will put off his gabardine and dress himself

⁸⁰ Bassani 1998, 87.

⁸¹ *Ivi*, 106.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

anew in his initial motley. He will overturn his reticence and insist on telling one and all the gruesome experience of the camps; and he will disappear, suddenly, as he had once reappeared. He will re-disappear. He will dis-reappear.

The hinge upon which the narrative turns is another incident on the Via Mazzini. There were many witnesses, each incomplete. Accounts differ. They share in common a sense of the setting: dusk in the month of May; «schiere allacciate di belle ragazze» on their bicycles, «reduci da gite nella campagna suburbana, verso il centro della città»; and in the more fulsome language of the early text, the reappearance – «tornava a comparire» – of «la figurina ermetica del famigerato conte Scocca»⁸³.

The Count's notoriety was not simply due to being an old fascist, like so many others, including Uncle Geremia, but to being a paid informer of the Secret Police and the director of the Italo-German Cultural Institute in the years leading up to the deportation of the Jews of Ferrara. He reappeared in that May twilight, «uscito da chissà quale suo nascondiglio ad appoggiare la schiena contro la mezza colonna marmorea che aveva tenuto in piedi per secoli uno dei tre cancelli del ghetto»⁸⁴. For the narrator, it was a touching and an edifying scene: «Ebbene – pensarono tutti –, per qual motivo uno avrebbe dovuto rifiutare di commuoversi all'esibizione concreta di una simile allegoria, saviamente conciliante all'improvviso ogni cosa: l'angoscioso, atroce ieri, con l'oggi tanto più sereno e ricco di promesse?»⁸⁵. Enter Geo Jozs.

There was also agreement about the climactic moment of the drama played out on «[i]l piccolo paloscenico di via Mazzini»⁸⁶. There stood the «squatrinato patrizio ricomparso», occupying «uno dei molti posti d'osservazione a lui una volta abituali»⁸⁷. Geo approached along the Via Mazzini, «entrava senza sorpresa, col suo passo fiacco, dentro il campo visivo del conte Scocca», and then, «raggiungeva le guance incartapecorite della vecchia carogna rediviva con due ceffoni secchi, durissimi [...]»⁸⁸.

⁸³ Bassani 1956, 131-32. Compare Bassani 1998, 107, where, for instance, the Count did not «tornava a *comparire*» (emphasis added), but rather «tornava a stare [...]».

⁸⁴ Bassani 1998, 107.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ *Ivi*, 109.

From here, testimonies diverged. According to some, «il gesto di Geo restava immotivato, inspiegabile»⁸⁹, which is to say they saw no provocation on the part of the Count. Geo had simply paused as he walked along, «il tempo appena necessario perché gli fosse consentito aggrottare le sopraciglia, stringere labbra e denti, serrare convulso i pugni, borbottare qualche parola priva di senso»⁹⁰. For others, the Count was whistling, «una fischiatina oziosa e fortuita, insomma, che sarebbe quasi di sicuro rimasta inavvertita se il motivo al quale accennava fosse stato diverso da quello di *Lili Marlèn*»⁹¹.

Still others relate the following version, to which the narrator seems to subscribe:

[...] era stato il conte a bloccare Geo. «Ehi!», aveva fatto sottovoce quando se lo era visto addosso. Subito Geo si era fermato. E allora il conte sollevato a parlargli, cominciando con l'azzeccarne in pieno nome e cognome («Guarda guarda», aveva detto, «non sarai mica Ruggiero Josz, il figlio più grande del povero Angiolino?»): perché lui, Lionello Scocca, a Ferrara sapeva tutto di tutti, e i quasi due anni che aveva dovuto passare alla macchia, nascosto sotto falso nome [...] non avevano per niente annebbiato la sua memoria o attenuato la sua celebre capacità di riconoscere a colpo d'occhio una faccia fra mille.⁹²

It was said that there was some conversation, as the Count inquired about the deaths of Geo's father, mother and younger brother, and, by way of a circumlocution, congratulating Geo «di essersela cavata», as though he had dug himself out of the grave⁹³. The expression was not used in the early text, but the sense of an overly refined courtesy, amounting to a deliberate obfuscation, was even more apparent in the Count's characterization of the extermination of Geo's family as «orribili eccessi»⁹⁴. On his side, in this version of the events, Geo engaged in the conversation, «un tantino riluttante e imbarazzato, è vero, ma ad ogni modo rispondendo»⁹⁵. Perhaps one should say, with just a bit of shame reappearing. And then the two slaps.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁰ *Ivi*, 109-110.

⁹¹ *Ivi*, 110.

⁹² *Ivi*, 111. In the earlier text, Bassani emphasizes the Count's capacity to recognize faces by adding, «e si trattasse pure di un volto come quello di Geo, che a Buchenwald, non già a Ferrara, era diventato un volto d'uomo!» (1956, 137).

⁹³ Bassani 1998, 111.

⁹⁴ Bassani 1956, 137.

⁹⁵ Bassani 1998, 111.

The first two testimonies strongly imply their interpretations. In the first version, the report of an unmotivated act bespeaks the lack of an articulate will on Geo's part. He is portrayed as animal-like, turning on his victim «in uno scatto da belva»⁹⁶. He thus commits an act akin to the «violenza inutile» of the camps that Levi defines as «fine a se stessa, volta unicamente alla creazione di dolore; talora tesa ad uno scopo, ma sempre ridondante, sempre fuor di proporzione rispetto allo scopo medesimo»⁹⁷. Thus, as some of the bystanders reported in the early text, Geo's slaps could be likened to the act of a «vero squadrista». Alternatively, he had perhaps gone mad. To be a *sommerso salvato* was to harbor a lurking madness ever threatening to break out through the breaches of self-containment that were the result of trauma. The people of Ferrara, therefore, were simply judicious in inferring that his unspoken desires contained «pensieri e progetti ostili», as the early text stated explicitly⁹⁸. Either way, it would seem that Geo was *shameless* in his effrontery.

The position suffers, however, the weakness of interpretations of the camps that insist on the monstrosity, the deranged minds of the perpetrators, removing the acts of extermination from any human understanding⁹⁹. The interpretation imputes to the killers the inhumanity that they ascribed to Jews, rather than to explain the extermination as a human act with human motivation, that is with a logic, if not a law, of its own – the logic of sovereignty, for instance. The interpretation is especially troubling to those who hope to learn from history. In Geo's particular case gives grounds for a verdict of guilty for having failed to learn.

In the second version, witting or unwitting, an aggressive ploy or an expression of the political unconscious¹⁰⁰, the Count's whistling indicated that the war may have been over, but not Geo's exposure to the sovereign decision concerning which life is worth living. The Via Mazzini in which the Count, like Geo, made his reappearance only seemed an exception to the state of exception, insofar as it was entirely unscathed by bombardment. But this was like putting a tuxedo over a wound or masking genocide in a circumlocution. In fact, the allegory played out on the street was a repetition of the meeting of bare life and sovereign power as farce (literally, as slapstick). Bare life was now dressed, re-

⁹⁶ *Ivi*, 109.

⁹⁷ Levi 1987, 735.

⁹⁸ Bassani 1956, 112.

⁹⁹ Conscientious historians have objected. See, for instance, Bauer 2001.

¹⁰⁰ See Jameson 1981.

membered in the public sphere; sovereign power was now powerless. In this encounter, Geo's slaps are not only motivated, but justified. No more shame attaches to Geo than to those in the camp who eliminated an especially violent *Kapo* (a Fascist bully, a perpetrator of «useless violence»), in Levi's account: «Chi aveva il modo e la volontà di agire così, di contrastare così o in altri modi la macchina del Lager, era al riparo dalla 'vergogna': o almeno da quella di cui sto parlando, poiché forse ne proverà un'altra»¹⁰¹. Geo experiences something else in this version of the story: revenge.

Revenge, «inchiudando il misfattore al suo misfatto» in the words of survivor and philosopher Jean Améry cited by Agamben, serves the purpose of what he called «l'inversione morale del tempo» through which the criminal can «essere accostato alla vittima in quanto suo simile»¹⁰². But in this understanding, the original victim, in this case the RP, is absolved of guilt for an act of violence that is no crime, and the original perpetrator attains to innocence by dint of experiencing victimization. The position of Améry, Agamben argues, does not resolve the shortcomings of the interpretations of shame represented in the debate between Bruno Bettelheim and Terence Des Pres:

È come se le due opposte figure del sopravvissuto – quello che non riesce a non sentirsi in colpa per la propria sopravvivenza e quello che nella sopravvivenza esibisce una pretesa d'innocenza – tradissero, col loro gesto simmetrico, una segreta solidarietà. Esse sono le due facce dell'impossibilità per il vivente di tenere separate l'innocenza e la colpa – cioè, di venire in qualche modo a capo della propria vergogna.¹⁰³

As has been noted, Agamben proposes a theory outside the framework of innocence and guilt in his explication of the structure of shame as a simultaneous subjectification and desubjectification. The third version of the incident involving Geo and the Count, in which «per qualche minuto i due avevano continuato tranquilli a conversare» – if not, as the early text had it, «con molto affabilità» – may be seen in that light¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰¹ Levi 1987, 708.

¹⁰² Jean Améry, quoted in Agamben 1998, 93.

¹⁰³ Agamben 1998, 87. Freud, too, had considered repetition as an attempt to achieve a belated mastery to replace a traumatic passivity experienced by children at the outset of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but found it an insufficient explanation when faced with war neuroses, and found it necessary to go to the extremes of positing a death drive.

¹⁰⁴ Bassani 1998, 111; and Bassani 1956, 137.

While most who saw the unfolding of events that way found the scene all the more inexplicable, the narrator claims not to be perplexed. «Eppure, quando in difetto di indicazioni più sicure», he writes, «ci si fosse richiamati a quel senso d'assurdo e insieme di verità rivelata che nell'imminenza della sera può suscitare qualsiasi incontro, proprio l'episodio del conte Scocca non avrebbe offerto niente di enigmatico, niente che non potesse essere inteso da un cuore appena solidale»¹⁰⁵.

The special hour, set aside from the distractions of broad daylight, accounts for the revelation of truth – the reinscription of the effaced aleph – however absurd: «cose e persone [...] può succedere che a un tratto vi si mostrino per quelle che sono veramente, può succedere che a un tratto vi parlino [...] per la prima volta di se stesse e di voi»¹⁰⁶. But it is the sympathy of the heart that explains a procedure even more rare in the text. Overcoming his customary restraint, the narrator here proposes – perhaps projects – a reconstruction of Geo's thoughts as direct discourse: «Che cosa faccio qui con costui? Chi è costui? E io che rispondo alle sue domande, e intanto mi presto al suo gioco, io, chi sono?»¹⁰⁷. And, to recall once more the Talmudic dictum that served as the title of Levi's narrative of partisan life and subsequent reappearance, if not now, when¹⁰⁸?

The insistent first-person nominative pronoun in the narrator's reconstruction of Geo's voice recalls both the shiftiness of the «I» and the complexities of Levi's paradox as formulated by Agamben¹⁰⁹. Geo attains to the subject position of the «I» in that reported speech, but only to witness his own inescapable desubjectification. Geo cannot accept that he, a *sommerso salvato*, walks the same street, shares the same public space, with the Count, that they can both reappear on the Via Mazzini as symmetrical figures. And yet there he stands, as though fixed to the spot, unable to flee the untenable position. «Ciò che appare nella vergogna», Agamben recites from Lévinas, «è dunque precisamente il fatto di essere inchiodati a se stessi, l'impossibilità radicale di fuggirci per nasconderci a noi stessi, la presenza irremissibile dell'io a se stesso»¹¹⁰. The *Muselmann* who speaks as I only to bear witness to the

¹⁰⁵ Bassani 1998, 122.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁸ Pirke Avot 1.14. See Levi 1987.

¹⁰⁹ In the early text, the «I» was even more pronounced (Bassani 1956, 148): «Che cosa faccio, io, qui con costui?».

¹¹⁰ Lévinas quoted in Agamben 1998, 97.

impossibility of speaking as I is reflected in the *sommerso salvato* who hears with his own ears what he cannot, must not hear, an unrepentant fascist calling out his name, naming his dead, and referring demurely to 'excesses'. He strikes out in shame.

The words upon which such an understanding might be based are not spoken by Geo. Even the narrator points out that the supposed speech-act takes place in a moment of silence, «qualche momento di muto stupore»¹¹¹. Thus, the narrator quickly follows with an alternative scenario: «avrebbe potuto anche rispondere un urlo furibondo, disumano: così alto che tutta la città, per quanta ancora se ne accoglieva oltre l'intatto, ingannevole scenario di via Mazzini fino alle lontane mura brecciate, l'avrebbe udito con orrore»¹¹². The imaginary scene – a fiction within a fiction, or fiction to end a fiction – follows Geo back along the route of his regression toward his re-disappearance. He returns from the discursive speech in which the *salvati* give their incomplete testimony, to the bare language of the complete witness – that horrifying scream, the language that is only potential before the speech that is articulate, discursive act. And that bare language testifies, most fundamentally, that the breaches cannot be mended through which bare life came to expose a limitless shame and spread it throughout the city.

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¹¹¹ Bassani 1998, 122.

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