

21.

## TRANSITIONAL IDENTITIES

### The Other in the Works of Giorgio Bassani

*Cristina M. Bettin*

The outcast is a central theme in Bassani's narrative, which is set mainly in Ferrara, the small city in northern Italy where Bassani grew up. Ferrara played a crucial role in Bassani's work, as he explained in a 1979 interview:

Io torno a Ferrara, sempre, nella mia narrativa, nello spazio e nel tempo: il ritorno a Ferrara, il recupero di Ferrara per un romanziere del mio tipo è necessario, ineliminabile, dovevo fare i conti con le mie radici, come fa sempre ogni autore, ogni poeta. Ma questo «ritorno», questo «recupero», ho dovuto cercare di meritarmelo davanti a chi legge, per questo motivo il recupero di Ferrara non avviene in modo irrazionale, proustiano, sull'onda dei ricordi, ma fornendo di questo ritorno tutte le giustificazioni, le coordinate, oltre che morali, spaziali e temporali, anche per dare poi, per restituire oggettivamente il quadro linguistico e temporale entro il quale mi muovo.<sup>1</sup>

Space and time are important elements in all his novels, which are somewhat fictional, but somewhat realistic, especially in the use of historical events and geographical descriptions, such as those of Ferrara, with its streets, monuments, bars, and inhabitants, including the Ferrarese Jewish community. As a writer of the generation following the Fascist era, Bassani was greatly concerned with establishing a strong tie to a concrete reality<sup>2</sup> and finding a proper language that would «establish a link with reality in order to express authentic values and reveal historical truth»<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> In Dolfi 1981, 84-85.

<sup>2</sup> See the interview that Giorgio Bassani gave in 1978 at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York (Bassani 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Radcliff-Umstead 1985, 116-125.

Bassani's aim, as his companion Portia Prebys noted in an interview in 2000, following his death, was not to write sociological-anthropological novels, but rather to produce fiction that was fused with the reality of a specific period of time, particularly the life of Italian Jews, and especially Ferrarese Jews, before and during the Fascist regime<sup>4</sup>. This was the author's reality – what he had known and experienced as a Jew who was, as a consequence of the Racial Legislation of 1938, suddenly marginalized and considered to be the Other by the same society that had always regarded the Jews as equals without discriminating against them, just as it is described in the short novel *Gli occhiali d'oro*.

Memory then, at least Bassani's personal memory, played a crucial role in all his narratives, and has been crucial in depicting Italian Jews of that time. Some scholars, such as Marilyn Schneider and Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, see ambiguity in Bassani's use of memory. According to Schneider, Bassani used space as a metaphor of personal identity<sup>5</sup>, while according to Radcliff-Umstead, Bassani's static descriptions of city, street, houses, and rooms, symbolize a going back in time that presents the past as something fixed in memory<sup>6</sup>. Contrary to these views, in this essay I will demonstrate that nothing is fixed or static in Bassani's narrative.

The writer himself, in a 1979 interview, refers to his novels as a continued process of remembering and writing that arises from a recognition of the interrelatedness of past and present. This process will only end with the death of the writer: «Quindi niente ricerca del tempo perduto, è il mio tempo, la ricerca è solo un tentativo di andare indietro nel tempo per spiegare il me stesso di adesso, ma senza dimenticarlo [...] L'opera è in *progress*, perché io sono ancora vivo, continuo a vivere ancora»<sup>7</sup>. For Bassani, time was more than the nostalgic *recherche du temps perdu* (search for lost time) but rather the portrayal of a society that looked at the so-called minorities sometimes as insiders, and at, other times, as outsiders. Many scholars, particularly those of Marxist school, claim that there is an absence of political judgment and racial consciousness<sup>8</sup> in Bassani's work, as well as a lack of historical analysis, particularly in

---

<sup>4</sup> See the interview that Portia Prebys gave to Renzo Ricchi in 2000 on her life with Giorgio Bassani (Prebys 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Schneider 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Radcliff-Umstead 1987.

<sup>7</sup> In Dolfi 1981, 83.

<sup>8</sup> See Ferretti 1973, 250-279.

*Gli occhiali d'oro* <sup>9</sup>. However, as I have mentioned, his aim was not to write an historical essay or to judge the Italian society of the early thirties politically, but, rather, to raise social awareness for the benefit of people who were discriminated against. Bassani was the first writer to discuss the condition of categories of people, such as Jews, Gypsies and homosexuals, who were considered 'other' by the Fascist regime. With the exception of Bassani's novel *Gli occhiali d'oro*, no Italian fiction of that period dealt with these themes or drew parallels between groups who were discriminated against, such as Jews and homosexuals. The fact that Bassani deals with marginalized groups supports the notion that his narrative has a social consciousness rather than a racial one, as has been claimed by some scholars.

In her essay on Bassani, Mirna Cicioni suggests that minority and majority, or insider and outsider, are shifting concepts, and that at the time referred to in Bassani's writing, the (heterosexual) Jews and the homosexual (Gentiles) were insiders, part of the Fascist regime, conniving with it, while at other times they were outsiders <sup>10</sup>.

There is some truth in Cicioni's claims. I will, nevertheless, show in this essay that there are other points to be made about Bassani's novels, one of them being the way he has interpreted the concept of Other, not only in terms of outsiders or insiders, but also concerning difference as compared to the majority group. The Other is someone who is not like the rest. At the same time, the outsider, even if he or she is a person who does not belong to a particular group because he or she lives outside it, can be like the Other. In short, the status of outsider does not necessarily imply 'otherness'. Regarding someone as 'other' is often used to support an argument for exclusion, so that the excluded might end up looking at themselves as outsiders, but this does not mean that the two words mean the same thing. The Other is always in relation to 'us', and thus is a kind of insider. Consequently, it is necessary, in the context of this discussion, to reinterpret the concept of identity.

Many scholars from a variety of fields believe that cultural identity is something fixed and unchangeable, where people share the same history and ancestry. Yet this is an essentialistic view that does not take into account all the changes that have occurred and are still occurring in our society. I claim that it is necessary to replace this notion. As Stuart Hall aptly observes, «[c]ultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as

---

<sup>9</sup> See Oddo De Stefanis 1981, 85-89.

<sup>10</sup> Cicioni 1986.

of 'being'. It is not something which already exists transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities came from someplace, have histories. But, like everything else which is historical, they undergo constant transformation»<sup>11</sup>.

Through an analysis of Bassani's works, it is possible to demonstrate that our identities are always in transition and change over time. In short, what seems to determine the concept of 'otherness' is the historical period and the place in which the novels are set. This is because concepts, like preconceptions, change over time, working as dialectical processes with the social, cultural, and economic changes of the present reality. This fluidity of identity lends to Bassani's narrative uniqueness and originality; it is a kind of writing that goes behind modernism, not in terms of structure, but rather in terms of content and ideology, such as his interpretation of time and space.

In order to better understand the Other in Bassani's writings, we should briefly review the situation of Italian Jewry of his time within a broad historical context. Jews have resided in Italy since the time of the Roman Empire. Archeological evidence proves that Jews penetrated into southern Italy, including Sicily, during the third century B.C. from Palestine. The history of Italian Jews was never uniform, varying from region to region, since the establishment of the first ghetto, and has always been closely related to that of their gentile neighbors. With the Edict of Emancipation and, later, the political unification of Italy between 1860 and 1870, remarkable changes occurred not only in the political and economic spheres of several regions and cities, but in the Jewish condition as well. Prior to the unification, Italy had never had a homogeneous national culture, but rather various and different regional cultures, as well as people with different identities. The historical events that took place in Italy before and after the unification had both direct and indirect effects on the political status of the Jews and shaped not only their social-demographic characteristics, but also their perception of being Jews in a secular country such as Italy was at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, the state religion, Catholicism, had marginal importance in this regard. Other ideals were more central than religion. In Mazzini's terms these were *humanitarianism*, *love for the fatherland*, and *liberalism*. Italian Jews were no different from their non-Jewish compatriots and

---

<sup>11</sup> Hall 1990, 25.

believed in these ideals as Italians did. Sharing democratic and liberal values with the rest of Italian population helped the Jews to find their place within Italian society and led to their being accepted as equals. During the Risorgimento, Italian Jews felt not that they had been admitted to a pre-existing economic social and political system, but rather that they had created and were the co-founders, together with the other Italian patriots, of something totally new. Many Italian Jews, after the Emancipation, felt themselves to be truly Italian, and never perceived themselves as a foreign body within the nation.

From the time of the Unification (1861-1870), Jews took an active part in the political and public life in Italy. During Mussolini's first year in power, the position of the Jews remained ostensibly much as it had been before, and their place in Italian life was hardly affected. The Jews of Ferrara (the town where all except one of Bassani's novels are set) were no different from the rest of the Italian Jewish population in this regard. However, the legislation of the Racial Laws in 1938 changed everything, reducing the position of the Italian Jews to that of pariahs, beginning with discrimination against them in all the spheres of public life, and continuing to their deportation to concentration camps. The Fascist persecution affected not only the Jews, but also those who were considered different, including Gypsies and homosexuals.

The Jewish characters in Bassani's work and his accurate representation of Jewish life in Italy in the early nineteen thirties, including precise references to real places, names, and dates, lend to Bassani's novels a reality that goes beyond imagination. His works have become part of the collective memory and a mirror that reflects the Italian society and Italian Jewry of his time. The themes of otherness and exclusion/inclusion were always present in Bassani's work, since his early literary production. In 1956, he collected in the volume *Cinque storie ferraresi* five short stories, which won the Strega Prize for best Italian narrative.

In *Cinque storie ferraresi* Bassani describes the Ferrarese Jewish community and the dynamics of its sometimes conflictual relationship with the Gentile population. Most of the stories are focused on one character and set in the context of real historical events, such as the discrimination against Jews and the deportations that followed, first to Italian transit camps, like the one in Fossoli, and, later, to the extermination camps in Poland and Germany. Bassani's characters and the events they experience encourage readers to identify with them and their experiences, for example the marginalized others. In these stories the description of each life symbolizes the description of an entire group, such

as the marginalized Others. The first story in *Cinque storie ferraresi*, *La passeggiata prima di cena*, is the story of the union of two people from different socio-economic classes and religions: the simple Catholic peasant Gemma Brondi and the bourgeois Jewish doctor Elia Corcos. The story examines the social and cultural complexity of the relationship and the impossibility of mutual understanding, but, above all, stresses the theme of isolation. This isolation, as in all of Bassani's novels, is multifaceted, because if, on one hand, there is the isolation of the Jews from Italian society, on the other there is the isolation of the individual, like the Catholic Gemma, who was never accepted by Elia's family and friends because she was seen as 'other'. Another interesting aspect of this text is Elia's perception of his Jewish identity, which had marginal importance for him, as Jewish identity had for many Italian Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Stuart Hughes suggests, «Elia Corcos exemplified to perfection the residual ethnic consciousness of assimilated and universally esteemed Italian Jews»<sup>12</sup>. Although the story is based on fictional characters, the analysis of the main character, the Jewish doctor, is authentic and can be taken as a typical example of Jews in Italy at the time. Many Jewish men had married Gentile women and were secular, but in some ways also remained close to Judaism, in cultural and traditional terms, going to the synagogue for the main Jewish holidays, eating unleavened bread during Passover, and fasting on Yom Kippur.

Among the *Cinque storie ferraresi*, the story *Una lapide in via Mazzini*, first published in 1952, shows more than any of Bassani's works what it means to be 'other' or what it means to be considered 'other' even within one's own group, without being different, but rather, on the contrary, as one who has always been part of the group. This is the story of Geo Josz, the only survivor of a group of 183 Ferrarese Jews deported to concentration camps by the Germans in 1943, who returned two years later to Ferrara, just at the moment when a plaque containing the names of the fallen, including his own name, has been placed on the front wall of the synagogue. Geo's initial reaction is quite strange; he asks that his name be removed, insisting that everything should be as it was before the war. He dresses well and refuses to talk about what happened to him and to his family and friends in the concentration camp. In short, Geo looks for normality by trying to erase his past, but the

---

<sup>12</sup> Hughes 1983, 127.

question that arises is whether it is possible to cancel the past in this way, especially this kind of past, this trauma that is carried by every survivor. Can normality exist after the Holocaust, particularly for those who survived?

The answer that is implied in this novel, as well in other Bassani novels, such as *Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, is that it seems impossible to erase the past. On the contrary, it is our duty not to allow this to happen, because we must always remember. As Bassani wrote in *Laggiù in fondo al corridoio*, the last prose piece of the *Romanzo di Ferrara*:

Il passato non è morto [...] non muore mai. Si allontana, bensì: ad ogni istante. Recuperare il passato dunque è possibile. Bisogna, tuttavia, se proprio si ha voglia di recuperarlo, percorrere una specie di corridoio ad ogni istante più lungo. Laggiù, in fondo al remoto, soleggiato punto di convergenza delle nere pareti del corridoio, sta la vita, vivida e palpitante come una volta, quando primariamente si produsse. Eterna allora? Eterna. E nondimeno sempre più lontana, sempre più sfuggente, sempre più restia a lasciarsi di nuovo possedere.<sup>13</sup>

Geo is not able, then, to erase his past, and, after some time he changes completely, starting to wear his concentration camp uniform again, to talk a lot about what he had gone through, turning himself into a living memorial, in order to make the people, in this case Ferrarese society, remember. As a result of his behavior, Geo is no longer welcome among those in the surrounding society, including his Jewish fellows. No one helps him or has a kind word for him. On the contrary, he is now seen as a negative element by the same society that had previously accepted him as an equal. He is now someone who suddenly does not fit in anymore, who is not able to fit in, because now he is the Other.

In a society looking for normality, someone like Geo is an obstacle, and this story reflects the experience of many survivors after World War II. Primo Levi himself, as he wrote many times, at first had difficulty publishing his masterpiece *Se questo è un uomo* (1958). Following the war, many Italians, among them Jews, wanted to forget this traumatic event and avoided even talking about it. Now things have changed, and Italian literature is experiencing the opposite phenomenon, with the appearance of memoirs and autobiographies, but in Bassani's time, with the exception of Primo Levi, who dealt with his experience in Auschwitz, no Italian writer described Italian Jewish communities and the tragic

---

<sup>13</sup> Bassani 1998, 939.

consequences that the Racial Laws of 1938 had on Italian Jewry.

This phenomenon is also apparent in the last two stories of the *Romanzo di Ferrara*, *Gli ultimi anni di Clelia Trotti* and *Una notte del '43*. The story of Clelia Trotti revolves around a young Ferrarese Jew, Bruno Lattes, who returned to Italy in 1946, after immigrating to the United States, as some Italian Jews did, after the promulgation of the Racial Laws. Upon his return, Bruno attended the civil funeral of Clelia Trotti, an old friend of his, a Catholic socialist and retired schoolteacher who «had always kept her own spirit pure, and who had paid for it with year after year of poverty and lonely surveillance, and, after the outbreak of the war, with death in prison»<sup>14</sup>. She was a woman whose lover, a leader of the Socialist Party, left her, like the protagonist Bruno Lattes did, fleeing to the United States and leaving her behind with her dream of constructing a better society through the rebirth of a real socialism. This was an impossible task for Bruno, who was convinced that nothing could be done to shake Ferrara and Italy into changing the awful reality.

Both of the characters, Clelia and Bruno, who have been interpreted by several critics as representing Bassani himself, are in their own way isolated and imprisoned, as in the case of Clelia, with her unrealistic dreams that made both of them outcasts. This is the also the case of Pino Barilari, the main character of the story *Una notte del '43*. Barilari is a crippled witness of the massacre perpetrated by the Fascists, who, one night in 1943, killed eleven innocent citizens. Barilari, despite the public indignation of the population, refuses to testify, claiming, even to his wife, that he saw nothing, although he saw the massacre through the windows of his house. Marianne Shapiro observes that:

the reaction of the townspeople of Ferrara to the massacre must be examined in the light of a predisposition to passivity and confusion on the part of the entire society. The author in fact refuses to believe that society in its collective guilt could hope to regain lost strength by pointing a finger at those who carried out its silent commands. Bassani's protagonist, not the violence of the massacre itself, occupies stage center, and it becomes apparent that the crippled Barilari, concentrates in himself, aggravated by his particular inadaptability to society, the very tendencies of that society towards hopelessness and fatalism.<sup>15</sup>

I would add that the so-called Others are sometimes part of the majority and other times are not, as in the case of the characters of the novel *Gli*

---

<sup>14</sup> Hughes 1983, 132.

<sup>15</sup> Shapiro 1972, 36-37.



*occhiali d'oro*. *Gli occhiali d'oro* is set in Ferrara, and here, as in *Cinque storie ferraresi*, all of Bassani's themes are present, including solitude, isolation, Jewish identity, exclusion and the use of historical events.

Isolation and ensuing marginalization in *Gli occhiali d'oro* are doubled. On one hand, there is the isolation and the exclusion of the Jews from Italian society, and on the other hand there is the isolation of the individual. In *Gli occhiali d'oro*, a first person narrator (characteristic of many Bassani's novels) tells the story of Athos Fadigati, a homosexual doctor. At first Fadigati is well accepted by Ferrara's society.

Even after discovering his homosexuality, Ferrara's society tolerates him, because he is discrete and he does not cause any scandals. But when Fadigati falls in love with Deliliers, a young, good-looking university student, exposing his liaison publicly, the Ferrarese bourgeoisie can no longer tolerate the situation. Scandalized by this behavior, which is considered immoral, they ostracize and isolate him. As a consequence, Fadigati loses his patients and his reputation. As a consequence of his shame, humiliation, and public derision, followed by the criminal behavior of his young lover, who steals his money and other personal objects, Fadigati commits suicide.

The narrator, a Jew who has been expelled by his own group and isolated by society as consequence of the Racial Legislation of 1938, begins to feel that he has something in common with the doctor. What he has in common is the fact that suddenly he is considered by the Ferrara's bourgeoisie as an Other. But even before the application of the Racial Laws, the narrator isolated himself, like Fadigati. Here we see a doubling of isolation followed by exclusion, both self-imposed and socially enforced by the majority group. When the anti-Semitic campaign starts, the narrator remembers those first days like a nightmare. «Il senso di solitudine che mi aveva sempre accompagnato in quei due ultimi mesi diventava se mai, proprio adesso, ancora più atroce: totale e definitivo. Dal mio esilio non sarei mai tornato, io. Mai più»<sup>16</sup>. The «exile» of the character is represented at first by Bassani, voluntarily followed by mixed feelings, such as humiliation, anger, hate, and disappointment. Some of these emotions are not present in the tragic character of Fadigati. Fadigati feels shame and humiliation, but, as he says to the narrator, «[f]orse bisognerebbe essere così, sapere accettare la propria natura. Ma d'altra parte come si fa? È possibile pagare un prezzo simile?

---

<sup>16</sup> Bassani 1998, 313.

Nell'uomo c'è molto della bestia, eppure può, l'uomo, arrendersi? Ammettere di essere una bestia, e soltanto una bestia?»<sup>17</sup>.

Apparently Fadigati seems to accept his status as the Other. The question he poses to the narrator reveals his inability to completely accept his status as Other. Moreover, as the Other, like the Jewish narrator, he sees a difference between them. As he puts it,

«Il mio caso è diverso, l'opposto esatto del suo. Dopo ciò che è accaduto l'estate scorsa non mi riesce più di tollerarmi. Non posso più, non debbo [...] è proprio il caso di dirlo. Non c'è più niente da fare, per me [...]»<sup>18</sup>

The response of the other Other, the Jewish narrator, who refuses to accept this reality and his new status of Other as well as outsider is: «Che cosa dovrei fare? [...]. Accettare di essere quello che sono? O meglio: adattarmi ad essere quello che gli altri vogliono che io sia?»<sup>19</sup>.

Fadigati's answer is yes. The narrator should accept his 'otherness' and be like others want him to be. Since «essere quello che è la rende tanto più umano (non si troverebbe qui in mia compagnia, altrimenti!), perché rifiuta, perché si ribella?»<sup>20</sup>.

These are the differences between these two Others. If until now we have seen some parallels between the two characters, such as discrimination and public isolation, it is also possible to see, throughout the passages quoted above, what makes these two characters different: first, their acceptance of their difference and, second, their reaction to being different. In the case of the Jewish narrator, being an Other is not a choice, but rather a consequence of the discrimination of the Racial Laws. The Jewish narrator does not want to be an Other, but only a simple Italian Jew. As he asks himself, «può un italiano, un cittadino italiano, ammettere di essere un ebreo, e soltanto un ebreo?»<sup>21</sup>.

Of course he cannot. This is because the Jews of Ferrara, like other Italian Jews, were completely integrated into the Italian State. After the Unification of Italy, Italian Jews lived like the rest of Italian population, with the same rights and legal footing as everyone else. Italian Jews, as the Jewish narrator says, are not like other Jews, especially those from Eastern Europe, who never moved out of the ghetto.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, 300-301.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, 300.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

This is why it is difficult for him to accept his status of exclusion and ostracism by the society in which he lives and where he thought he was completely accepted.

What drives the narrator to this isolation is this unwanted exclusion. His behavior, then, is a consequence of being suddenly discriminated against because of his different faith.

For Fadigati, 'otherness' is completely different. Initially, before the change in his behavior with his young lover, Fadigati is accepted by Ferrara's bourgeoisie. The doctor's homosexuality is seen as 'eccentric', because he is one of them. Nevertheless, Fadigati knows that he is 'other', even when he still is an 'insider', and this acceptance is only superficial and based on the hypocrisy of the surrounding society. However, for him: «Ma era possibile durare indefinitivamente a vivere così, nella solitudine più assoluta, circondato dall'ostilità generale? Presto in ogni caso sarebbe venuto il momento che avrebbe dovuto licenziare l'infermiera, ridursi in un ambulatorio più piccolo, cominciare a vendere i quadri. Tanto dunque valeva andar via subito, tentare di trasferirsi altrove»<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, and this is one of the major differences between the characters, Fadigati accepts this situation with passivity and inactivity, because, as he says to the narrator: «Ma alla mia età... E poi, anche se avessi il coraggio e la forza di decidermi a un passo simile, crede che servirebbe a qualcosa?»<sup>23</sup>. Meanwhile, the response of the Jewish narrator is different, because he does not want to passively accept this discrimination and, as he puts it, «adattarmi ad essere quello che gli altri vogliono che io sia»<sup>24</sup>.

In conclusion, if, on one hand, we have the homosexual doctor, who relinquishes his right to be 'different' or 'other', we have, on the other, the Jewish narrator, who refuses to be 'different', because he is not. Thus, the parallels between these two characters can be found in the external factors contributing to discrimination against them more than in their behavior, which has been shown as different. As Bassani commented on the cinematic version of the novel: «the two find themselves together, and they understand each other because they are different, and yet similar [...] two outcasts, who derive their strength to stay together precisely from their marginalization, and who in fact sense that

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi*, 299.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, 300.

they are the same precisely because they are persecuted differently»<sup>25</sup>.

Their shock at suddenly being discriminated against and considered 'other' is also well illustrated in Bassani's late novel *Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, in the words of the Jewish narrator:

[io] al contrario ero nato e cresciuto in un ambiente perfino troppo disposto ad aprirsi, a mescolarsi con gli altri in tutto e per tutto [...] Mio padre, volontario di guerra, aveva preso la tessera del Fascio nel '19; io stesso ero appartenuto fino a ieri al G.U.F. Siccome dunque eravamo sempre stati della gente molto normale, noialtri, anzi addirittura banale nella sua normalità, sarebbe stato davvero assurdo che adesso, di punto in bianco, si pretendesse proprio da noi un comportamento al di fuori della norma. [...] Una delle forme più odiose di antisemitismo era appunto questa: lamentare che gli ebrei non fossero abbastanza *come* gli altri, e poi, viceversa, constatata la loro pressoché totale assimilazione all'ambiente circostante, lamentare che fossero tali e quali come gli altri, nemmeno un poco diversi dalla media comune.<sup>26</sup>

*Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini* is Bassani's best-selling novel and certainly his most famous. Its popularity was encouraged by the 1970 film adaptation, which won an Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film. The novel tells the fictional story of an aristocratic Jewish family of Ferrara: the Finzi-Continis. They are the first outcasts that the reader meets through the words of the narrator, as, visiting the Etruscan necropolis of Cerveteri, outside Rome, he remembers their tomb in the Jewish cemetery of Ferrara:

La tomba era grande, massiccia, davvero imponente: una specie di tempio tra l'antico e l'orientale, come se ne vedeva nelle scenografie dell'*Aida* e del *Nabucco* in voga nei nostri teatri d'opera fino a pochi anni fa. In qualsiasi altro cimitero, l'attiguo Camposanto Comunale compreso, un sepolcro di tali pretese non avrebbe affatto stupito, ed anzi, confuso nella massa, sarebbe forse passato inosservato. Ma nel nostro era l'unico. E così, sebbene sorgesse assai lontano dal cancello d'ingresso, in fondo a un campo abbandonato dove da oltre mezzo secolo non veniva sepolto più nessuno, faceva spicco, saltava subito agli occhi.<sup>27</sup>

However, this tomb does not belong to the Finzi-Continis of the narrator's story, who are Micòl and her family, because they, with the exception of Micòl's brother, Alberto, who died of an illness in 1942, will all

---

<sup>25</sup> As quoted in Parussa 2008, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Bassani 1998, 463-464.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, 323.

be deported and murdered in Germany. Nevertheless, like their dead ancestors, who even in the cemetery are isolated and different than the others Jews, the Finzi-Continis of the story live apart from the rest of the Jewish community of Ferrara. Micòl and her family live in a world of their own, in their aristocratic mansion, nicknamed the *magna domus*, with its vast garden, private library, servants, and tennis court, giving the impression that all the things they need are contained within the garden walls. Micòl and her brother Alberto are kept apart from other children; they do not study in public school, like the rest of the Ferrarese Jews, but rather with private tutors even when «[m]andare i propri figlioli alle scuole pubbliche era considerato in genere patriottico. Non mandarceli, disfattistico: e quindi, per tutti coloro che ce li mandavano, in qualche modo offensivo»<sup>28</sup>.

The Finzi-Continis, then, are considered outsiders and seen as different from the beginning of the story, even by their own community, which dislikes them, like the middle-class doctor, the father of the narrator-protagonist, who considers the Finzi-Continis too 'different' from the other Jews. Micòl and Alberto act, behave, and even speak differently:

Parlavano entrambi nello stesso modo: spiccando le sillabe di certi vocaboli di cui essi soli sembravano conoscere il vero senso, il vero peso, e invece scivolando bizzarramente su quelle di altri, che uno avrebbe detto di importanza molto maggiore. Mettevano una sorta di puntiglio nell'esprimersi così. Questa particolare, inimitabile, tutta privata deformazione dell'italiano era la loro *vera* lingua. Le davano perfino un nome: il finzi-continico.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps it is this Finzi-Continis language and the difference between the family and the rest of the Jews of Ferrara that so fascinates and attracts the narrator/protagonist, who wishes to be noticed by Micòl. Or perhaps it is the fact that Alberto and Micòl, even though they are Others or 'outsiders' in many ways, are also 'insiders', as we can understand from the narrator's words:

in primo luogo eravamo ebrei, e ciò in ogni caso sarebbe stato più che sufficiente. Tra noi poteva in pratica non essere successo mai nulla, nemmeno il poco che derivava dall'aver scambiato di tempo in tempo qualche parola. Ma la circostanza che fossimo quelli che eravamo, che almeno due volte all'anno, a Pasqua e a *Kippùr*, ci presentassimo coi nostri rispettivi genitori

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, 336.

<sup>29</sup> *Ivi*, 355.

e parenti stretti davanti a un certo portone di Via Mazzini – e spesso accadeva che dopo averne varcato la soglia tutti assieme, l'atrio successivo, angusto e mezzo al buio, obbligasse i grandi alle scappellate, alle strette di mano, agli inchini ossequiosi che per il resto dell'anno non avevano nessuna altra occasione di scambiarsi –: a noi ragazzi non sarebbe occorso niente di più perché ritrovandoci altrove, e, soprattutto in presenza di estranei, passasse subito nei nostri occhi l'ombra o il riso di una certa special complicità e connivenza [...] [S]oltanto noi, ebrei, [...] cresciuti nell'osservanza di un medesimo rito, potevamo renderci davvero conto di quel che volesse dire avere il proprio banco di famiglia nella sinagoga italiana, lassù al secondo piano, invece che al primo, in quella tedesca, così diversa nella sua severa accoglienza, quasi luterana, di facoltose lobbies borghesi.<sup>30</sup>

The Finzi-Continis and the narrator, then, share a sense of belonging that involves not only being a Jew or having one Jewish identity (which is a concept that is too general, since Jewish identity is multifaceted and concerns not only society), but the individual as well. Jewish life is the product of historical evolution. The criteria by which Jews identify themselves cover a very wide range and change over time. There are variations in Jewish identity that stem from peculiarities in the historical development of various communities, such as the Ferrarese Jewish community described by Bassani. In the case of the Finzi-Continis and the Ferrarese Jewish community, there was a shared collective memory, geographical and spatial, (the same city), temporal (the same time), and religious/cultural (the same rituals, the Italian, rather than Sephardi or Askenazi), the same synagogues, and, the same way of speaking (a dialect that was a mixture of Hebrew, Italian, and slang), which each community, Jews as well as Gentile, had and still has in Italy.

In order to understand the unique nature of Italian Judaism, and the reason why identities have always been transitional in Bassani's work, we must bear in mind that Bassani's novels, while fictional, are characterized, as I have mentioned, by the use of historical facts, places, and names. It is important to remember that Italian Jews, throughout the centuries, needed to adjust themselves to changes in the non-Jewish world due to the impact of political and social movements, of both a Jewish and a general character, on Jewish life. The political situation of Italy, which was constantly changing, also affected the Jews, who since 1516 were relegated to the ghetto. With the opening of the Ghetto, Jews become part of the political, social, cultural life of Italy, equal to

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ivi*, 341-342.

all other citizens. With the rise of Fascism, and the legislation of Racial Laws, Jews were again considered to be other and not accepted. For this reason, in accordance with their transitional status of sometime insider, sometime outsider, Jews always had to adapt themselves, to find their way to adjust themselves in this changing reality. Moreover, when the ghetto gates opened, many Jews left and moved into better neighborhoods, living side by side with Gentiles, sending their children to non-Jewish schools, and generally taking an active part in all the spheres of Italian public life. That is why the Jews, like other minorities, have, throughout history, at times been considered outsiders, and at others insiders.

The components of our identities are always in transition and never fixed, not only as Others perceived by society, but also as we perceive ourselves. The Finzi-Continis are a good example of the fluid nature of identity. At the beginning they are represented as outcasts, different than the other Jews, but with the edict of the Racial Laws of 1938 and the discrimination against them as Jews, they begin to change and to open their home, in particular the tennis court, to the Jews who have been expelled from the local tennis club. This change allows the narrator to visit the *magna domus* daily, to become a friend of the family, and to fall in love with Micòl, who rejects him and has an affair with the Gentile friend of his brother, Malnate.

The novel is filled with strong emotions, and the protagonist's unrequited love for the beautiful Micòl is a central element of the plot, demonstrating once again, as in all Bassani's novels, the power of the feelings of loneliness, rejection, and isolation, as well the death of the protagonists. Death and the decadent atmosphere are constantly present in the novel. From the start, there is a strong sense that something tragic is going to happen to the main characters (in fact, with the exception of the narrator, they die), and it is for this reason that the so-called Others, like the Finzi-Continis, evoke the empathy of the reader, who will find them now more 'human' and more like the other Jews of the Ferrarese community, since they will share the same tragic destiny of all the Jews who have been deported and murdered. Thus, what seems to determine the concept of otherness here is the historical context of the novel. History plays a crucial role in all of Bassani's work, and, cannot be separated from his narrative. It is impossible, in fact, to make a clear division between history and literature, since both disciplines are strictly connected one another. Bassani had the capacity to fuse history and literature in his writing, as Sergio Parussa observes:

[Bassani] bears witness to the past without renouncing the resources offered by imagination. It is a literature that includes historical facts without suppressing the subjective gaze on those facts, without denying that order not purely factual, not purely objective elements of writing – such as the author's gaze, the narrator's and the character's voices, as well as the readers' reaction – may also contribute to knowledge of reality.<sup>31</sup>

All of this makes Bassani's narrative distinctive and also very modern. His portrayal of Italian society and the Jewish world are still memorable and unique. Even now, Bassani remains the only one who depicted in detail Italian Jewish life during the years of the Fascist regime before the Holocaust, not only after it, as some other writers, such as Primo Levi, did. Throughout the corpus of Bassani's work, the uniqueness of Italian Judaism compared to the Judaism of other European countries is clear, but, most importantly, the Other is not a fixed category. Rather, the notion of what constitutes 'otherness' is in constant flux and is translated according to the social and political changes of any given time.

Bassani, as we can gather from some interviews that he gave to Italian magazines, never saw himself as a Jewish writer, but rather as an international and universal writer. Like many other Italian Jewish writers, such as Carlo Levi or Umberto Saba, Bassani always regarded himself first as Italian and then as Jewish. Thus, his narrative, although it is based largely upon Italian Jewry, in particular the Jews of Ferrara, goes behind this. What seems to interest him more is the representation of the Others, such as the Jews who have been discriminated against by the Fascist regime in 1938, but also other categories of people, like the homosexual doctor Athos Fadigati of the *Gli occhiali d'oro*, or the other characters of the *Cinque storie ferraresi*, not necessarily Jews, like the Gentile wife of the doctor Elia Corcos or the socialist Clelia Trotti, who are considered 'other' even if sometimes they were insiders and other times outsiders. This affirms that Bassani, in all his novels, had a social consciousness rather than a racial one. His attention as a writer was directed at all the marginalized categories of people. While the depiction of Italian Jewish life predominates in all this work, it is part of his concern with the marginalized, and he used it in order to suggest how discrimination against so-called Others, but above all, how our idea of discrimination and our concept of difference, can be fluid and subject to change.

---

<sup>31</sup> Parussa 2008, 128-129.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baldelli, Ignazio (1974). La riscrittura totale di un'opera da *Le storie ferraresi a Dentro le mura* di Bassani, *Lettere italiane* 26,180-197.
- Bassani, Giorgio (1956). *Cinque storie ferraresi*, Torino, Einaudi,  
(1958). *Gli occhiali d'oro*, Torino, Einaudi.  
(1960). *Le storie ferraresi*, Torino, Einaudi.  
(1974). *Il Romanzo di Ferrara*, Milano, Mondadori.  
(1978). Newsletter 57, Italian Cultural Institute, New York.  
(1998). *Opere*, Roberto Cotroneo (a cura di), Milano, Mondadori.
- Bettin, Cristina (2004). Giorgio Bassani, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 299, *Holocaust Novelists*, Sicher Efraim (ed.), Farmington Hills, Thomson Gale, 31-35.  
(2005). Identity and Identification: Jewish Youth in Italy 1870-1938, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 4, 323-345.  
(2007). Jews in Italy between Integration and Assimilation 1860-1938, *The European Legacy: Journal of the Society for the Study of Europeans Ideas* 12.3, 337-350.  
(2010). Reinventing a New European Identity: The Others in the Italian Society through the Analysis of Giorgio Bassani's novel *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, in *The European and the Other: the Stereotypification of the Non-European and the Frames of Nationalism*, Frenzo Henry (ed.), Malta, Malta University Press.  
(2010). *Italian Jews from Emancipation to Racial Laws*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bon, Alessandro (1979). *Come leggere «Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini» di Giorgio Bassani*, Milano, Mursia.
- Camon, Ferdinando (1973). Intervista con Bassani, in Id., *Il mestiere di scrittore*, Milano, Garzanti, 4-71.
- Cicioni, Mirna (1986). Insider and Outsider: Discourse of Oppression in Giorgio Bassani's *Gli occhiali d'oro*, *Italian Studies* 41, 101-115.
- Cro, Stelio (1977). Intervista con Giorgio Bassani, *Canadian Journal of Italian Studies* 1, 37-45.
- Dolfi, Anna (1981). *Le forme del sentimento: prosa e poesia in Giorgio Bassani*, Padova, Liviana, 84-85.  
(2003). *Giorgio Bassani. Una scrittura della malinconia*, Roma, Bulzoni.
- De Camilli, Davide (1980). Intervista a Giorgio Bassani, *Italianistica* 9, 505-508.
- Ferrari, Piero (2000). Ricordo di Giorgio Bassani, *Silarus* 40, 21-23.
- Ferretti, Giancarlo (1973). *Letteratura e ideologia: Bassani, Cassola, Pasolini*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 250-279.
- Guiati, Andrea (1999). L'ebraicità di Giorgio Bassani, *Cristallo. Rassegna di varia umanità* 41.1, 38-54.

- Hall, Stuart (1990). Cultural Identity and Diaspora, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), London, Lawrence & Wishart, 25.
- Hughes, Stuart (1983). *Prisoners of Hope: The Silver Age of the Italian Jews 1924-1974*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 114-162.
- Kroha, Lucienne (2000). Judaism and Manhood in the Novels of Giorgio Bassani, in *The Italian Jewish Experience*, Thomas P. Di Napoli (ed.), Stony Brook, NY, Forum Italicum, 185-197.
- Oddo De Stefanis, Giusi (1981). *Bassani entro il cerchio delle sue mura*, Ravenna, Longo.
- Parussa, Sergio (2008). *Writing as Freedom, Writing as Testimony*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press.
- Prebys, Portia (2002). *Giorgio Bassani: bibliografia sulle opere e sulla vita*, Firenze, Centro Editoriale Toscano.
- Radcliff-Umstead, Douglas (1985). Bassani: the Motivation of Language, *Italica* 62.2, 116-125.  
(1987). *The Exile into Eternity. A Study of the Narrative Writings of Giorgio Bassani*, Rutherford, NJ, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Ricchi, Renzo (a cura di) (2000). Giorgio Bassani tra verità e realtà: testimonianze di Portia Prebys, *Nuova Antologia* 2214, 169-176.
- Shapiro, Marianne (1972). The *Storie Ferraresi* of Giorgio Bassani, *Italica* 49, 30-49.
- Schneider, Marilyn (1986). *Vengeance of the Victim: History and Symbol in Giorgio Bassani's Fiction*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.