

5.

REMEMBERING AS A WAY TO FORGET

Giorgio Bassani and Holocaust Commemoration

Nancy Harrowitz

Forgetting the extermination is part
of the extermination itself.
Jean Baudrillard¹

In the work of Giorgio Bassani, the concepts of remembering, forgetting and commemorating are developed in provocative and unique ways. Indeed, he develops his own theories about how cultural memory works, and potentially fails, long before the relatively recent critical interest in this topic. It is my contention that Bassani, even in his early writings commencing in the 1950s, anticipated the concern that only much later went into the development of theories regarding the nature of Holocaust commemoration and the task of cultural memory. In order to illustrate Bassani's critical precociousness on these very contemporary issues, I will discuss two texts of his: first, the prologue to his well-known novel, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, published in 1962, and second, a story of his entitled *Una lapide in Via Mazzini*, of 1952.

In the space of just a few pages, the prologue succeeds in raising complex issues central to how and why commemoration functions within the context of the Holocaust. Bassani explores the mechanisms of how we remember a very remote past with the memory of a recent and painful past and, in the end, puts the notion of commemoration itself into question. I will look at the ways in which Bassani treats these issues in the prologue to *Il giardino* as a point of reference and as a contextualization for the earlier story of his that was published ten years before. In examining the strategies that Bassani uses to set up memory and commemoration in opposition, what emerges is a hostile interaction

¹ Redhead 2008, 93.

between the two that ultimately makes a strong statement on the complex relationship between the history of the Jews in Italy, the Holocaust, and Italy's Fascist past.

The action of the prologue takes place in contemporary time, and the novel that comes after stands essentially as a flashback to an earlier personal history, one that is inextricably intertwined with the history of the Shoah in Italy. As the catalyst for the narration of the novel, Bassani makes it clear that this is a history that should not be forgotten.

The prologue begins with the tale of the narrator who goes out with friends and their little girl for a typical Sunday excursion near Rome on a rather gloomy afternoon. At the end of the day, the driver makes an impulsive decision to visit a site of Etruscan burial tombs and mounds situated near a small town, an area of countryside that the narrator likens to an enormous cemetery. As they approach the tombs, Giannina, the small girl, asks her father why it is that these ancient tombs are not as sad as new ones. Her father responds that «Gli etruschi, vedi, è tanto tempo che sono morti [...] che è come se non siano mai vissuti, come se siano *sempre* stati morti»². Yet the child, after hearing this bit of morbid logic, responds in the following way, «Però, adesso che dici così [...] mi fai pensare che anche gli etruschi sono vissuti, invece, e voglio bene anche a loro come a tutti gli altri»³.

Through focusing on this question of absent mourning, the narrator establishes that the child is the one who has properly prepared the adults to visit the site. Indeed, traditional roles are reversed through these both wise and precocious comments.

The beginning of the prologue contrasts these dearly departed who, according to the father, are without mourners and seem to have always been dead, and those who are more recent in our collective or personal memory. The little girl instructs us as to how we can reanimate mourning for the remote past by simply becoming aware that these deceased were indeed at one time, for someone, a *dear* departed. Her remarks become a veritable prescription for commemorating, for bringing back the past in an active, reflective way. As memory that takes the form of an act, commemoration is a material practice designed to remember and to mourn or celebrate, such as monuments, plaques, and ceremonies. The prologue thus presents a crisis in which commemoration is immediately challenged as eminently forgettable, that eventually tombs become

² Bassani 1998, 320.

³ *Ibidem*.

tourist sites for Sunday excursions and that it is only through a dynamic gesture of reflection that co-memoration, remembering together as a community, may be activated.

At the end of the prologue, as he meditates in the car on the way home, the narrator brings us around to the question of a much closer memory, the recent departed and the ongoing task of commemoration with these words:

Ma già, ancora una volta, [...] io riandavo con la memoria agli anni della mia prima giovinezza, e a Ferrara, e al cimitero ebraico posto in fondo a via Montebello. Rivedevo i grandi prati sparsi di alberi, le lapidi e i cippi raccolti più fittamente lungo i muri di cinta e di divisione, e, come se l'avesse addirittura davanti agli occhi, la tomba monumentale dei Finzi-Contini [...].

E mi si stringeva come non mai il cuore al pensiero che in quella tomba, istituita, sembrava, per garantire il riposo perpetuo del suo primo committente – di lui, e della sua discendenza –, uno solo, fra tutti i Finzi-Contini che avevo conosciuto ed amato io, l'avesse poi ottenuto, questo riposo. Infatti non vi è stato sepolto che Alberto, il figlio maggiore, morto nel '42 di un linfogramuloma; mentre Micòl, la figlia secondogenita, e il padre professor Ermanno, e la madre signora Olga, e la signora Regina, la vecchissima madre paralitica della signora Olga, deportati tutti in Germania nell'autunno del '43, chissà se hanno trovato una sepoltura qualsiasi.⁴

These pages set up crucial questions about the recurrence of memory and the act of commemoration that will be implicitly and explicitly asked throughout this text, and that form the impetus for memory work throughout other Bassani texts as well. The repetition found in «ma già, ancora una volta», «io riandavo con la memoria», «rivedevo», and «mi si stringeva come non mai il cuore», establishes that there *was* a before, there were other times, that this exercise in memory is an oft-repeated moment, truly at the center of the commemorative mode in which the notion of an active, repetitive memory is indispensable.

The prologue also juxtaposes public memory with private memory, which within any practice of commemoration are two very different types of events. The burial tombs of the Etruscans have become a public domain: a place that has been emptied of its memorial content through the passing of time and has instead become a site for Sunday excursions. Through time, those tombs have become cenotaphs, empty tombs that are supposed to function as a reminder for what should or

⁴ *Ivi*, 322.

could lie within. Yet even though public memory and private memory are juxtaposed as quite different, the narrator's private memory about the Finzi-Contini that is about to follow ultimately takes on a very public face, as it engages the question of the Holocaust in Italy and the lives that it touched.

When the prologue moves from the Etruscans to the narrator's musings about the Finzi-Contini and their fate, it becomes clear that in this episode, memory work is done initially through psychological exercise, not through visual yet ultimately static spaces such as tombs or monuments. Bassani's theory regarding memory and its relation to physical sites is played out through the comparison between the Etruscan burial tombs which they visit, and the tomb of the Finzi-Contini, which does not need an actual physical visit to reanimate the loss for the narrator. The physical tomb of the Finzi-Contini is there, but it is not its direct viewing or actual physical presence that animates memory, it is instead the thought of it that functions as the impetus.

Telling us that the tomb was erected to guarantee the repose of its creator and his progeny, the narrator's message is clear: a cemetery or tomb is only as good as its assurance of a restful site for its *cari scomparsi*, the dearly departed, and for the survivors for whom the *scomparsi* are indeed *cari* in their memory. In other words, a burial site is only as good as it is remembered.

If a tomb is only as good as its function, that of a resting place, then what is the status of an empty tomb, the cenotaph? The cenotaph is a constant reminder of that which is missing, and has become a trope that represents the murdered and unburied dead of the Holocaust. Bassani is adopting the figure of the massive, yet mostly empty Finzi-Contini tomb in a similar fashion. The tomb of the Finzi-Contini has but one occupant from the narrator's generation of Italian Jews who experienced the Holocaust. In comparison to the fate of the rest of his family, he may be secure in his repose, but at a heavy price: convalescence and a premature death from illness. The other deaths, especially Micòl's, stand in stark contrast as premature and outside any natural order, caused as they were by Nazi murder. Their deaths are represented by the figure of the missing cenotaph: they are no longer individual, but rather folded within the mass murder of six million Jews.

The narrator's comments on the unknowability of a burial site or even the existence of a burial for Micòl and the others are set within the framework of the Finzi-Contini garden as a *locus amoenus*, a pleasant place. Yet it is a *locus amoenus* that has suffered a double displacement:

the destruction of the family implies the destruction of the garden as well as the uselessness of the family tomb in the context of the Holocaust. Bassani locates this crisis within a lexicon of tombs, cenotaphs, and lack of burial, thereby creating a discursive space between the garden and the relatively empty tomb, the lack of burial for Holocaust victims, the death of this family, and by extension, the attempted destruction of Italian Jews. The crisis is magnified through the juxtaposition of the Etruscan tombs, whose empty condition is a natural function of time, and the almost empty tomb of the Finzi-Contini, for whom time has not passed in sufficient quantity to allow for the natural order of life, dust to dust. The narrator directly compares these two types of tombs as the impetus for the very story he is about to tell.

Often in Bassani's work, a hostile interaction between memory and commemoration functions as a comment on the relationship between the history of the Jews in Italy, the Holocaust, and Italy's Fascist past. Bassani's work considered as Holocaust literature raises many questions: what is the role of commemoration in this text and other texts, and by extension, in and for the Holocaust? How does commemoration interact with the narrator's nostalgia and with history? What, in the end, is being memorialized in the novel: is it the fate of the fictional characters that stand in for the fate of those real Jews of Ferrara who were deported and killed, or is it instead the destiny of an older way of life? I refer to the rapid post-unification emancipation of the Jews and their mythologized seamless integration into Italian society, that Bassani thematizes in some of his earlier stories.

Bassani raises this subject throughout *Il romanzo di Ferrara*: in fact, quite often in his writing, the myths surrounding Jewish integration in Italy after 1860 are posited as the root of the trouble for Italian Jews before and during Fascism⁵. The benevolence that was perceived by post-unification Italian Jews resulted in a way of life in which most Italian Jews felt fully invested in the new Italian nation. The ensuing and somewhat misplaced belief in *la patria* finally came to an abrupt end during Fascism as the Jewish community had their Italian identities torn away from them by the very *patria* in which they had invested their trust since 1860.

In *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, Bassani sets up commemoration, history and memory as partners that can powerfully interact if, as the

⁵ For a further discussion of this topic, see Harrowitz 2011.

little girl in the prologue says, we remember that the subjects of history were once alive, so that we become «fond of them». In this novel, Bassani asserts that memory is a condition of the narrator's existence. Memory is the genesis of the text, and commemoration the literature of memory, presented as its logical consequence. Commemoration functions as the result of the presence of the narrator, his memory of events, and the story he tells about those events. Commemoration is thus an outcome of personal and public history, and is shown as a powerful positive force.

These concepts are, however, placed into energetic crisis in a lesser-known work of Bassani's, his story *Una lapide in Via Mazzini*. Published in *Botteghe oscure* in 1952, this extraordinary tale also explores memory and commemoration, but within a very dissimilar context and with markedly different results. Departing in significant ways from *Il giardino* in its exposition of thematic concerns regarding the Holocaust in Italy, the story radically contradicts the implied continuity of history, memory and commemoration that Bassani constructs in *Il giardino*. It also more openly disputes any benign mythology of the post-unification integration of Italian Jews, presenting instead a harsher reality regarding the acceptance or tolerance of Jews in Ferrara before, during and after the war, a theme that is prevalent in the other Ferraresi stories as well.

Una lapide in Via Mazzini is the story of the only survivor of the one hundred and eighty three Jews deported from Ferrara in December 1943, according to Bassani's fictional numbers. The lone survivor, named Geo Josz, shows up one day unannounced and unexpected, in August of 1945, several months after the end of the war. The narrator of the story uses a voice that is not Geo's, but rather one that moves back and forth between various sentiments of the non-Jewish inhabitants of Ferrara and between first and third person. The narrative tone holds the reader's view of the survivor at arm's length by shifting from descriptive to judgmental to outraged, and back again. What is particularly noteworthy about this strategy is that the multiple points of view are not sympathetic to Geo: they do not hold Geo's interest at heart, and rarely express any moment of sympathy or compassion for him. Bassani himself describes the importance of the narrator in his stories in the following way:

Chi ha letto *Le storie ferraresi*, si sarà reso certamente conto che il personaggio più importante, forse di tutto il libro, è proprio la figura, dissimulata

è vero ma non per questo meno presente, dell'io narratore, poeta, giudice e storico.⁶

Geo is viewed through the lens of the town of Ferrara, with the guilt, resentments, hostility and denial of the immediate postwar period. In the case of *Una lapide*, the narrative voice represents the status quo, unwilling to be shaken up or disturbed, reluctant to engage in painful memory. The narrator, whom Bassani designates as all-important, thus sets up the discourse as being against Geo and what he represents from the very beginning. This animus directed towards a Holocaust survivor is a surprising departure from what the reader expects. And it is no accident that the hostility begins with the very first paragraphs of the story. Geo's arrival stirs up what the townspeople would much rather leave alone: the complicity of Fascism in the Holocaust, the murders of Jews and others committed in a public square just before the deportation, and the continued postwar existence of Fascists in the town, living a normal life as if nothing had happened.

The story has two beginnings, the first one jumping ahead of the chronology and serving as a thematic prologue. We immediately become aware of a spoken style, reflecting a narration that will continually move back in forth in time, reading almost like a parody of someone telling a story who cannot keep the tale chronologically organized. Bassani makes clear the hostility of the townspeople on the first page, as the narrative voice reads that Geo

[...] provenisse ben vivo nientedimeno che dalla Germania di Buchenwald, Auschwitz, Mauthasen, Dachau, eccetera, e soprattutto che lui, proprio lui, fosse sul serio uno dei figli del povero signor Angelo? E poi, anche ammettendo che non si trovasse di fronte a un trucco, a una mistificazione, che insomma nel gruppo di ebrei cittadini avviati verso i campi di sterminio nazisti un *Geo* Jozs potesse esserci effettivamente stato, dopo tanto tempo, dopo tante sofferenze toccate un po' a tutti, e senza distinzione di fede politica, di censo, di religione, di razza, costui, proprio adesso, che cosa voleva? Che cosa pretendeva?⁷

The tone, as well as the content of these comments, is quite disturbing as doubt is cast both on Geo's identity and on the truth of his story. The comments also attempt to homogenize suffering during the war into an all inclusive category that equals the suffering of the townspeople un-

⁶ As quoted in Ferretti 1976, 64.

⁷ Bassani 1998, 84-85.

der the very Fascism that many of them supported, to Geo's deportation, horrendous existence in a concentration camp, the atrocities that he witnessed, and the death of his entire immediate family. Geo's very *reappearance* in the city, precisely the word used by Bassani as if to underline his former status as a citizen there, is taken as a puzzle, perhaps even a deceit, and certainly as an affront.

The second beginning takes a question of historical accuracy and literally throws it in the face of commemoration, creating the crisis that lies at the heart of the story. Geo arrives at the site of the synagogue. There he finds a young workman, a self-made mason who is putting the finishing touches to a plaque commemorating the loss of many of Ferrara's Jews to the Holocaust. A small crowd of citizens has gathered to watch the plaque being erected, and the narrator reports their thoughts and comments. Geo touches the mason on the ankle to get his attention, and is rewarded with a hard stare in return. He points out the problem with the plaque: that is to say, that his own name is on it. Suddenly we have too many victims: the commemoration is established as unreliable, its accuracy put into question.

Geo's name is a presence on the plaque that at this moment upstages his physical attendance, as he is put in the awkward position of having to stand there and insist on his own corporeal reality, on his very survival. This moment becomes emblematic for the text, as we slowly discover during the story that the Ferraresi citizens that Bassani describes would, quite frankly, prefer a dead Jew that can be commemorated or forgotten in silence rather than a live one, whose presence and voice will be a constant reminder of their moral failings and their denial.

The narrative voice then changes to represent Geo, as the narrator reports what he has evidently said to the mason and the small group standing there:

[...] 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. A meno che, però – [...] a meno che la commissione delle onoranze, accettando il fatto come un suggerimento del destino, non avesse addirittura rinunciato all'idea di una lapide commemorativa, la quale – e sogghignò – pur offrendo il vantaggio indubitabile, posta in quel luogo di intenso passaggio, di farsi leggere quasi per forza, avrebbe avuto il grande torto di alterare in modo sconveniente la facciata così onesta, così alla mano, del «nostro caro, vecchio Tempio» [...].⁸

⁸ *Ivi*, 87-88.

Geo's suggestion that the plaque be taken down entirely, the error in its message viewed as a sign of destiny, seems quite mysterious. Why would a Holocaust survivor want to eliminate the commemoration of the Holocaust's victims? What does Geo's attitude towards this commemoration say about what commemoration itself means or how it is used?

After this scene, Geo continues his attempted re-integration into his hometown. After discovering that his family home has been taken over by first the Fascists and then the partisans, basement rooms turned into prison cells, he moves into an attic room at the top of the house while he waits almost a year for the partisans to move out. He wallpapers his room with pictures of his murdered family members, and paces the room at night, using the vantage point of the height of the top of the house to look out and observe any activity in the surrounding area, which makes the partisans very nervous.

He goes to visit an uncle of his, Geremia, who was a devoted Fascist up until the time of the expulsion of the Jews from the party after the racial laws. Geremia, in fact, still wears the beard favored by the Fascists. Geo seems to bear no grudge against this uncle for his former Fascism; in fact, it appears throughout the story that Geo is more interested in honesty than in partisanship.

There are two more central scenes in the story. In the first, Geo runs into a Fascist spy and informer, Count Scocca, on a public street, whistling a favorite Nazi tune, and Geo slaps him twice on the face. We as readers are in the position of fully understanding this action, as the man was an informer and undoubtedly responsible for deaths and torture due to his actions. But the narrative voice reports perplexity on the part of the Ferraresi, anger towards Geo's action, and speculation as to his motives, as if his reasons were not both crystal clear and eminently comprehensible. The narrator also reports three different versions of the story told by purported eyewitnesses and spread throughout the town, as if to say, events themselves will be distorted, changed, and any 'true' version of the story must necessarily be in dispute, depending on the desires and perspective of whoever tells the story. Once again, the notion of history as factual is challenged.

After this watershed event, Geo no longer remains silent on the topic of his murdered family. He begins to frequent the former Fascist cafe in the town square with his pictures of family and shows them to anyone who will listen to his stories. Some listen at first, and then stop, others try to get away from him entirely. He begins to wear again the tattered clothing in which he returned many months before, making the state-

ment that he is first and foremost a survivor, a witness, by profession, precisely because his experiences have not become part of the history of the town that ultimately has betrayed him twice.

In another moment that illustrates the townspeople's desire to forget at any cost, a new dance hall is constructed in August of 1946, one year after Geo's return. The narrator says in a sarcastic moment that is quite revealing of the duplicitous attitude found in the town, «Scom-paginata dalla guerra, e ansiosa di avviare con ogni mezzo la tanto auspicata e auspicabile ricostruzione, la società cercava di riprendersi. La vita ricominciava, grazie a Dio. E quando ricomincia, si sa, non guarda mai in faccia a nessuno»⁹.

The dance hall is built at a distance of only three hundred feet from the spot where partisans were executed in 1944. Geo arrives at the inaugural evening dressed in the rags in which he had returned home, and shows his murdered family's pictures to everyone he can, even grabbing people by the lapels to make them stop and look, with an attitude between imploring and threatening. Eventually he chases them all off the dance floor as they try to get away from him, and he is deeply resented for ruining their evening. The story ends as Geo mysteriously disappears, never to be heard from again. It would appear that he has finally given up on Ferrara, as Ferrara has so obviously given up on him, and on an honest reckoning of the past.

We must at this point ask what commemoration means in the context of a Holocaust survivor whose hometown does not want him, and perhaps never wanted him. Why would Geo be so against commemorating the fate of his own family and other Ferraresi Jews? Can commemoration be a detrimental act? Aren't we always instructed that memory, turned into physical or tangible signs such as monuments, historical documents, testimony or literature, is key in the lesson of 'never forget', which then implies 'never again'? One of the principal goals of the memory of the Shoah is a call for awareness that, viewed optimistically, could lead to prevention. The institutionalization of memory, another way to view memory's tangible forms, is also meant to lead to an understanding or knowledge of those historical conditions that produced genocide¹⁰.

⁹ *Ivi*, 117-118.

¹⁰ There is now a considerable body of criticism on the topic of memory work and the Shoah; for example, Langer 1995 and Young 1993 and 2000, among many others. These discussions include considerations of memorials, narration, and testimony.

This positive and optimistic view of commemoration is precisely that which Bassani challenges in this story. The reason that Geo is so offended by the plaque has little to do with the fact that his name is on it, and everything to do with his deep, intuitive understanding of how that plaque will function within the postwar Ferrarese society to which he has returned.

When Geo comments that the plaque «avrebbe avuto il grave torto di alterare in modo sconveniente la facciata così onesta del ‘nostro caro, vecchio tempio’»¹¹, we may read this as code for the position of the Jews in Ferrara vis-à-vis emancipation and integration. The old Temple that he describes is from the ghetto period, built in 1485. Unlike other major Jewish communities in Italy, the Jews of Ferrara did not build a beautiful new synagogue in celebration after emancipation. The ‘honesty’ of the humble old synagogue strongly suggests a hastiness in the rebuilding engaged in by other Jewish communities. Geo’s language proposes that the celebration of the end of oppression came too quickly, that oppression did not end with the unification and that Italian Jews were willingly blind to the antisemitism surrounding them, even as great civic opportunities presented themselves. As the cynical narrator might comment, what was there to celebrate, really?

The word «façade» to describe the outer appearance of the temple can be read figurally as well as literally: the façade, the pretense, of a truly accepted Jewish minority in Italy with full civil rights that are not eroded by prejudice. And here its useful to think about the difference between a *tolerated* minority and one that is *accepted*. To tolerate means, for example, to «endure, sustain (pain or hardship); to bear without repugnance; to allow intellectually, or in taste, sentiment, or principle; to put up with». To accept, on the other hand, means to «take or receive (a thing offered) willingly, or with consenting mind; to receive (a thing or person) with favour or approval»¹².

With regards to the plaque’s value as a stand in for memory, Geo also seems to understand that a plaque can just get dusty, and not be read any longer, as Bassani wrote in an earlier version of this story. As James Young has said, «once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember»¹³.

¹¹ Bassani 1998, 88.

¹² Oxford English Dictionary.

¹³ Young 2004, 276.

Commemoration itself requires a group or communal involvement. Not only is commemoration a material practice, in which some sort of act is performed to turn memory into commemoration, whether it be the writing of literature or the construction of a monument, it also must be with someone else, in other words *co-memorate*, to remember with others. Geo is isolated because he is the only returning survivor, and because he is the only one willing to seriously engage the past in order to understand the present. For him, the plaque cannot mean commemoration, because the townspeople of Ferrara are quite simply not willing to remember.

Pierre Nora's two categories of memory are useful in the context of this story in order to further elucidate the differences between Geo's attitude towards the past and those of the townspeople, and the role of the plaque in that conflict. In Nora's theory, history creates *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory; but he articulates also a second concept, that of *milieux de mémoire*, environs of memory. Bassani's Ferrara is a site of memory, in which memory of Fascist activity, of deportations of the Jews, the massacre in the town square, collaboration with the Nazis, harsh treatment of the Jews even before the Racial Laws of 1938 that deprived Italian Jews of their civil rights, is either suppressed, altered, or denied by the townspeople.

The character of Geo, instead, is attempting to create an environs of memory, where memory would take an active role and not be subjected to distortion and falsification. Within the environs of memory, memory work can take place, in other words the effort to recover memory that has been falsified by historical pressures and by the subject position of who is doing the remembering – particularly relevant in the case of this story.

For Geo, therefore, the plaque is inappropriate, and in fact counterproductive, on several counts, as it cannot co-memorate if there is no willing community to engage. At the same time it can relieve the community of the responsibility of memory by virtue of its very presence. It represents the community's lack of honesty about the past by shifting the responsibility to remember onto the plaque; as if to say, that's enough, we don't have to think about those unpleasant occurrences anymore and we can go on with our distorted, falsified version of events in which we accept no responsibility for the past. And finally the plaque would also continue the façade of an accepted status of Jews in Italy, as if Italy had nothing to do with the Holocaust, and materially interfere as well with the honesty of the decision not to build a new synagogue

after the emancipation, which would have signified that the emancipation was far more complete than it was.

The irony of a monument that is created to commemorate the Holocaust is that it is an object *constructed* to commemorate *destruction* ¹⁴. When all of this is taken into consideration, Geo's harsh response to the presence and very idea of a plaque on the synagogue places his perspective squarely within the parameters of theories of memory and its manipulation that were discussed decades after Bassani wrote this story.

Memory work is what Geo is attempting to perform after his return home: for *him*, through remembering those family members and talking about them, and memory work for the *community*, as he tries to get the townspeople to face their past and their complicity. Memory work attempts to uncover the strategies that lie behind the revision of history, the convenient myths, and find the truth. This is what makes the Ferraresi uneasy and hostile in Geo's presence, as the narrative shows us how deeply they are entrenched in their revisionary strategies.

But who actually performs the memory work? Is it Geo, the narrator who does the reporting of opinions, or is the burden on us as readers to put two and two together? According to Young, that plaque can easily do the work of memory for us, stand in for the memory work that is not being done. But Young also comments, «To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them» ¹⁵.

Why is Geo so outraged about the dance hall built near the site of a massacre, but feels like the plaque is useless or worse than useless? The contrast between his reaction to these two events tells us much about what Bassani is after in this story. Within the economy of the story, the massacre of the partisans is in some ways even more disturbing than what has happened to Geo because it reflects the bloody and bitter civil war between Italians, between Fascists and Antifascists. These murders happened right there, in Ferrara. The memory of this event cannot be brushed off or allowed to become dusty, because it is local and indigenous, both Italian and Ferrarese, an episode that happened within the walls of Ferrara and by extension within the walls of Bassani's fiction.

¹⁴ For more on this topic, see Young 2007.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, 181.

Any attempt to exculpate will not work – somehow murder on a foreign soil is much more abstract, and can be further abstracted, i.e. Geo's starvation edema must mean something else; those ovens of Buchenwald do not seem real. But for Geo, this is a bloody outrage that cannot be denied, to go *this* far is *too* far even for the long-suffering Geo: his limit has finally been reached.

When Geo finally leaves Ferrara for good after several years of this willing blindness, the townspeople wonder why he couldn't have just been more patient. Their reaction is a monstrous parody of the legacy of history: if you just wait long enough, people will forget, and you should forget too. Everything about this story attempts to throw memory, commemoration and their relation to history into crisis.

By the end of the story, Geo's intuition about what lies behind the mounting of that commemorative plaque on the synagogue has proven to be correct. The plaque breaks down that message of fondness for the dead that Giannina has theorized in the prologue to *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*. Ultimately, it becomes clear that the citizens of Ferrara have indeed put up the plaque to be able to forget what was written upon it.

As Bassani engages questions of historical memory and commemoration in this text, looking at the question of fiction as the venue for these types of considerations becomes a significant concern. Susan Suleiman comments that «of all the categories in our lives, those of fact and fiction, with their various literary equivalents such as a memoir or novel, remain very strong – despite our theoretical sophistication about the constructed nature of representation, and even of perception»¹⁶. Elie Wiesel, in the introduction to his 1986 book, *Legends of Our Times*, explores the meaning of fiction and its relationship to truth and falsehood. He recounts a scene in which he meets a rabbi who came from his hometown and goes to visit Wiesel after the Shoah, in his new home in Israel. Wanting to know what young Elie is doing with himself, the rabbi is very disappointed to learn that Elie has become a writer rather than following in his famous grandfather's footsteps and becoming a rabbi in line with family tradition. Furthermore, he protests that all writing is not equal: he asks questions about the kind of writing Elie does, wanting to know if he is telling the truth or is he writing lies, which is what he understands fiction to be.

¹⁶ Suleiman 2006, 33.

«So you tell stories? [...] About things that happened?» «Yes», [Wiesel] answers, «about things that happened or could have happened». «But they did not?» «No, not all of them did. In fact, some were invented from almost the beginning to the end [...]. Some events do take place but are not true; others are – although they never occurred». ¹⁷

Wiesel makes a powerful argument for what we might call ‘truthful fiction’, a category he has explored to good effect through his career through many of his novels ¹⁸.

Wiesel’s framing of fictive stories and their relationship to truth provides a way to understand the powerful connections that can exist between historical events and the literature that attempts to represent them. His concept of a narrative truth that lies outside the boundaries of testimony speaks eloquently in support of powerful fictive writing like that of Giorgio Bassani. Moreover, the issue of the responsibility borne by texts and their authors looms large in this discussion, as explicated in Wiesel’s powerful essay *A Plea for The Dead*. There Wiesel addresses even more directly the role of those who would confront the Shoah; as he says,

I should envy those scholars and thinkers who pride themselves on understanding this tragedy in terms of an entire people; I myself have not yet succeeded in explaining the tragedy of a single one of its sons, no matter which. [...] Answers: I say there are none. Each of these theories contains perhaps a fraction of truth, but their sum still remains beneath and outside what, in that night, was truth. ¹⁹

In this essay, Wiesel maintains that the asking of questions rather than the posing of answers is the only fruitful approach that might possibly lead us out of the abyss. The telling of stories that ask pertinent questions and that do not proffer easy answers is precisely Bassani’s method and how his texts arrive at their deeper significance and their power.

Bassani’s stories did not happen exactly as they are written, but they could have, and they tell a compelling story of Ferrara and its Jews. Nostalgia for the past, no matter how problematic the past actually turns

¹⁷ Wiesel 1968, VII-VIII.

¹⁸ This is of course not to suggest that Wiesel has only engaged in the writing of fiction: his nonfiction testimony *Night* remains his most powerful and best known work. For an insightful discussion of the role of memory in Wiesel’s fiction, see Geoffrey Hartman 2006.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, 181-182.

out to be, is a focalizing lens in Bassani's work. It does not, however, obfuscate his rich historical narrative that commemorates as it tells the story of individual negotiations with a society that ultimately betrayed its Jewish citizens, a betrayal that resulted in the deportation and death of some and the persecution of many. Does Bassani have a certain moral authority in his texts that deal with the Shoah in Italy, despite their fictional status? I would reply in the affirmative, on two counts. Bassani was a strongly identified Jewish writer who himself felt the brunt of the racial laws. Second, he chose to engage very directly and unflinchingly an uncomfortable past.

Giorgio Bassani's work is increasingly timely today, in at least two major respects. The first is his unflinching examination of pre and post-war Italian society, its uneasy and resentful attitude towards its own Fascism, and the relationship of these attitudes to the subsequent creation of myths about Fascism that are still being touted today²⁰. The second is the contribution he made to Holocaust literary studies, through his critically precocious exploration of cultural memory, and of commemoration. Bassani's writing insists that looking to the future must include a careful and honest appraisal of the past.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bassani, Giorgio (1991). *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, 2 voll., Milano, Mondadori.
(1998). *Opere*, Roberto Cotroneo (a cura di), Milano, Mondadori.
- Fabre, Giorgio (2004). *Il contratto: Mussolini editore di Hitler*, Bari, Dedalo.
(2005). *Mussolini razzista: Dal socialismo al fascismo: la formazione di un antisemita*, Milano, Garzanti.
- Ferretti, Gian Carlo (1976). *Letteratura e ideologia: Bassani, Cassola, Pasolini*, Roma, Editori Riuniti.
- Harrowitz, Nancy (2011). Parallel Nationalization, in *New Reflections on Primo Levi: Before and After Auschwitz*, Millicent Marcus and Risa Sodi (eds.), New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 31-43.
- Hartman, Geoffrey (2006). Elie Wiesel and the Morality of Fiction, in *Obligated by Memory: Literature, Religion, Ethics*, Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (eds.), Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 107-116.

²⁰ For more on this topic, see Fabre 2004 and 2005.

- Langer, Lawrence (1995). *Memory's Time: Chronology and Duration in Holocaust Testimonies*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Redhead, Steve (ed.) (2008). *Jean Baudrillard Reader*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Suleiman, Susan Rubin (2006). Do Facts Matter in Holocaust Memoirs?: Wilkomirski/Wiesel, in *Obligated by Memory: Literature, Religion, Ethics*, Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (eds.), Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 21-42.
- Wiesel, Elie (1968). *Legends of Our Times*, New York, Schocken Books.
- Young, James (1993). *The Texture of Memory*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- (2000). *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- (2004). Teaching German Memory and Counter-memory: The End of the Holocaust Monument in Germany, in *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes (eds.), New York, Modern Language Association, 274-285.
- (2007). From The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning, in *Theories of Memory: A Reader*, Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead (eds.), Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 177-184.