

11.

IN THE AFTERMATH

Modalities of Memory in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*

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Theodor Adorno's famous injunction that after Auschwitz there could be no more poetry was clearly not subscribed to by Bassani. In fact, in a re-interpreted Dantean reminiscence, he characterizes the poet as someone who has died and then returned to talk about it, just like Geo Jozs of *Una lapide in Via Mazzini*, who returns from Buchenwald.¹ Of course Bassani had not been to Auschwitz or Buchenwald, just like Dante had not been to hell, but that did create challenges for him that Dante did not have – the presence of actual survivors, such as Primo Levi, whose experiences he could not, and did not, presume to recall for them. Perhaps this challenge – that of creating a monument to the victims of a horrific experience without having had access to it – was one of the sources of his creativity and one of the reasons he did not choose to represent directly even the experiences that he did have, let alone those that he did not: like Dante, he chose to talk about the times he had lived through but, unlike the Florentine poet, he focused on the aftermath, something that concerned all – surviving victims, witnesses, persecutors, bystanders – and on the ways in which the traumatic past is inscribed in the present.

Sara Horowitz has argued that «the central issues in Holocaust historiography and literary criticism are not simply prompted by the fictionality of imaginative literature – they are already embodied as self-

¹ Says Bassani, in a late interview: «Geo Jozs è morto, è andato là donde non si torna, ha visto un mondo che soltanto un morto può aver visto. Miracolosamente torna, però, torna di qua. E i poeti, loro, che cosa fanno se non morire, e tornare di qua per parlare? Cosa ha fatto Dante Alighieri se non morire per dire tutta la verità sul tempo suo? È stato di là: nell'Inferno, nel Purgatorio, nel Paradiso, per poi tornare di qua» (Bassani 1991b, 1344).

critique in the imaginative literature»². My contention is that Bassani is among the writers who inscribed his work with a critique of memory, both as commemoration and as individual psychic process. The entire *Romanzo* foregrounds the workings of memory, with almost every act of representation mediated by recall. Each story, as it is told, also reflects directly or indirectly on the modalities of remembering and forgetting a traumatic past, and on the problems of representing it.

Because he was not himself a survivor of the camps, Bassani can in some ways be assimilated to the 'second generation' of Holocaust victims – those whose lives are tainted by their 'second hand' experience of the camps, primarily the children of survivors. Marianne Hirsch has discussed at length the issues related to second generation Holocaust representation, which she calls «post-memory» as opposed to memory³. However, Bassani does not belong to the second generation, but to the first; though he escaped deportation, he did personally live through the campaign against the Jews, the ostracism of the Race Laws, imprisonment for anti-Fascist activity and later the trauma of hiding and of knowing that the enemy is nearby and that capture is always a possibility. He did have contemporaries and extended family members who were deported. Moreover, he had to deal in the aftermath with the problems of making the transition back to 'normality'. Nonetheless, the limit-experience of the camps remained for him a haunting presence/absence, as a result of which some of the characteristics of «post-memory» can be found in his work as well.

«Post-memory's connection to the past is [...] not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation», says Hirsch⁴. As a result, frequently, for the second generation, «broadly available public images and narratives»⁵ deriving from photographs, from films, documentaries, newsreels provide the repertoire of second-hand images they draw on, consciously or otherwise. Bassani, as we shall see, is very well aware of the origin of these images, and repeatedly calls attention to it. «Images of murder and atrocity, images of bare survival, and also images of 'before' that signal the deep loss of safety in the world»⁶ are scattered throughout his writing, but always represented as

² Horowitz 1997, back cover.

³ Hirsch 2008.

⁴ *Ivi*, 107.

⁵ *Ivi*, 112.

⁶ *Ivi*, 108.

exactly what they are – prefabricated images. He also uses other types of iconic images and tropes – a plaque, a book, the Etruscan cemetery, a hunting expedition, an overheard anti-Semitic slur – to represent the ‘unrepresentable’. As we shall see, even the trope of maternal loss, which recurs frequently in both first and second generation Holocaust representation, is used at one remove by Bassani, signaling his precocious awareness of what has recently been suggested by feminist critic Claire Kahane: that it is to be seen as a screen memory which shields one from the horror of the nihilistic implications of the Holocaust ⁷.

1. COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Long before Pierre Nora coined the expression «le devoir de mémoire» and made the same point ⁸, Bassani intuited that monuments to the dead serve as much to occult as to commemorate, trials to exonerate as well as to condemn, and ‘martyrs’ sometimes to create mythologies where there is no basis for them. In the *Storie ferraresi* there are three stories that address memory as a voluntary societal process, as opposed to the vicissitudes of memory as involuntary psychic process. Two of these stories deal directly with the atrocities committed under Nazi-fascist rule: *Una lapide in via Mazzini* and *Una notte del ’43*. Although both protagonists are also victims and survivors (of different experiences), in these stories they are primarily witnesses whose testimony brings them into conflict with the community. One, Geo Jozs, a survivor of Buchenwald, is a witness only too willing to share his experiences, but he is unable to find a sympathetic ear, and even finds his account being doubted. At the other end of the spectrum is the pharmacist Pino Barilari. As the only person to have actually witnessed Carlo Aretusi give the order to execute the Jews and anti-fascists who had been rounded up for reprisals on that fateful day in December of 1943, he is called upon to testify at the trial of «Sciagura» in the days following the change of regime. When questioned, he refuses to acknowledge what he saw, thus allowing the perpetrator to go free.

In the first story, the plaque that Geo sees being affixed to the wall of the synagogue, with the names of Ferrara Jews who were deported, is

⁷ Kahane 2001, 163-164.

⁸ Nora 1984-1992.

not only a memorial in Bassani's estimation, but an instrument of foreclosure: an iconic representation of the veil that has been drawn on the past, exonerating the community from having to re-examine its own behaviour and its own changed position in the new post-war reality. In fact, when Geo arrives in town and sees his name carved in the stone, he protests, and ultimately brings to life the experience that the plaque is meant to lay to rest. The story begins on that note and ends with his disappearance. The citizens of Ferrara, Jews and Gentiles alike, did not want such a witness in their midst, and so he disappears, for all intents and purposes as good as dead, at least as far as Ferrara is concerned. *Una lapide in via Mazzini* contains the only reference to the actual experience of a deportee in the entire *Romanzo*. It is evoked retrospectively and by Geo Jozs himself, as he describes how his parents and his brother were taken from him. This is as close as Bassani comes to the Gorgon, well aware that he cannot lay claim to knowledge of that experience:

E lui, Geo, che cosa stava raccontando nel frattempo? Senza darsene per inteso, tornava magari a ripetere, tali e quali, le frasi che suo padre, prima di abbattersi sfinito sul sentiero che portava dal Lager alla miniera di sale dove insieme lavoravano, gli aveva mormorato in un soffio. Oppure, levando la mano, rifaceva nell'identico modo di cento altre volte precedenti il piccolo cenno d'addio che la madre [...] gli aveva indirizzato mentre veniva sospinta via, confusa nel gruppo delle donne. Oppure, con l'aria di esser sul punto di comunicare qualche importante novità, ricominciava con Pietruccio, il fratellino minore, seduto accanto a lui nel camion completamente buio che dalla stazione li stava trasferendo alle baracche, e a un tratto scomparso, così, senza un grido, senza un lamento, per sempre...⁹

In *Una notte del '43* the horror that is being covered up is represented by the cover of a book. Bassani does not recoil at the sight of the actual bodies lying on the ground after the shootings, and tells us that to count and to identify them «era stato necessario rivoltare sulla schiena coloro che giacevano bocconi e separare l'uno dall'altro quelli che, caduti abbracciandosi, facevano tuttora uno stretto viluppo di membra irrigidite»¹⁰. The immediate reaction of the citizenry is outrage, but there is no revolt: «E sembrerà strano che l'esecrazione pressoché unanime dell'assassinio potesse accompagnarsi immediatamente al proposito altrettanto diffuso di far buon viso agli assassini, di far atto di pubblica

⁹ Bassani 1991, 119-120.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, 200.

adesione e sottomissione alla loro violenza»¹¹. After the war, the knowledge that they had bowed to the intimidation of Sciagura and his cohorts haunts them, as do the images of the dead «come se l'immaginazione collettiva avesse bisogno di ritornare sempre là, a quella notte tremenda, e di riavere uno per uno dinanzi agli occhi i volti degli undici fucilati quali nel punto supremo il solo Pino Barilari li aveva avuti»¹². Barilari has been assigned, by the collectivity, the task of speaking out – of doing what they had been unable to do – and thus lifting the veil of hypocrisy with which they themselves had covered up the acts of the collaborators amongst them. He has also been assigned the task of making certain that a perpetrator is punished, thus absolving them of any responsibility for their own silent consent. In the weeks leading up to the trial, they give free rein to their fantasies about the witness who is to redeem their sins, wending their way from the outside, into Pino's room and finally to the book lying next to his bed on the night-table:

Fra gli altri libri c'erano anche *Le avventure di Gordon Pym* di E.A. Poe, in una edizione che mostrava in copertina un grande fantasma bianco, armato di falce, ergentesi a picco sopra una piccola scialuppa da baleniera. Senonché quest'ultimo volume non stava affatto dietro i vetri della scansia insieme coi rimanenti, bensì, capovolto, sul ripiano del comodino, accanto a un grosso album da collezionista di francobolli, a un fascio di matite colorate tenute dritte dentro un bicchiere, a un temperino da pochi soldi, a una gomma per cancellare mezzo consumata: posato in modo, cioè, il volume, che lo spettro della copertina, pur continuando a essere presente, a *essere lì*, fosse invisibile, non facesse più la minima paura.¹³

Edgar Allen Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) is a macabre adventure story that takes place at sea. Its protagonist is a stowaway who witnesses all sorts of horrors – violence, mutiny, massacres, cannibalism. That the book is the focus of particular attention and yet obstructed by so many objects that its frightening cover is invisible, is the narrative's way of indicating not only denial, but also the unrepresentability of the even greater horror that lay in wait for the deportees.

His cowardly refusal to identify the perpetrator has another side – Pino becomes a living monument to the past: unlike the plaque on the synagogue wall, which forecloses that past, Pino with his binoculars pointed at the site of the executions, murmuring imprecations at the

¹¹ *Ivi*, 201.

¹² *Ivi*, 209-210.

¹³ *Ivi*, 207-208.

passing citizens, enacts the refusal that this atrocity be buried.

Another story that addresses collective memory is *Gli ultimi anni di Clelia Trotti*. Here, Bruno Lattes is seen in Piazza della Certosa watching the belated heroine's funeral being given to the socialist Clelia Trotti in 1946. Presiding at her funeral is Mauro Bottecchiari, her one-time lover who had abandoned her and went on to opportunistically pursue a career under Fascism, while she languished in isolation under house arrest. Now her coffin has been unearthed so as to provide a local 'heroine' for the anti-fascist powers-that-be, among whom the turncoat Bottecchiari, who exploit her memory for their present purposes. Bruno Lattes, who was a witness to her solitude, now can only watch helplessly and cynically from the sidelines, as they re-write history and as the man who abandoned Clelia now eulogizes her.

With these stories Bassani confronts the post-war tension between the desire to move on and the need for the society to confront its responsibilities. Trials, while necessary, also serve to scapegoat individuals as a means of allowing societies to exonerate themselves without examining other forms of guilt such as passive (and even active) consent. Similarly, monuments and martyrs serve to set aside and repress difficult truths. Moreover, what is really needed, Bassani seems to be saying, is an *examen de conscience* on the part of all, not the sort that the society has been pretending to engage in – «[...] uno di quei tipici esami di coscienza collettivi, così frequenti a quell'epoca, attraverso i quali una società vecchia e colpevole tentava disperatamente di rinnovarsi»¹⁴ – but a real one.

2. THE ARCHAEOLOGY METAPHOR

It is this *examen de conscience* that takes place in the first-person trilogy, though this is not immediately apparent, and it is here that Bassani moves into the examination of memory as an individual process of recall fraught with tensions and ambiguities. The famous prologue to *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* is actually a problematization of the question of individual memory, through the figure of the Etruscan cemetery, which is also an archaeological dig.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, 132.

It was Freud himself who famously compared the process of mental reconstruction of the past to archaeology when he told the Wolf-Man that «the psychoanalyst, like the archaeologist in his excavations, must uncover layer after layer of the patient's psyche, before coming to the deepest, most valuable treasures»¹⁵. Our narrator is not a psychoanalyst, but as he gazes at the relics that fill the tombs of their ancestors – «zappe, funi, accette, forbici, vanghe, coltelli, archi, perfino cani da caccia e volatili di palude» – he tries to understand the meaning of the Etruscans' pilgrimages to these burial sites through his imagination:

E intanto, deposta volentieri ogni residua velleità di filologico scrupolo, *io venivo tentando di figurarmi concretamente ciò che potesse significare per i tardi etruschi di Cerveteri, gli etruschi dei tempi posteriori alla conquista romana, la frequentazione assidua del loro cimitero suburbano.*¹⁶

Thus, what is about to take place is an attempt to return the past to life, with all the limitations, and freedoms, of any reconstruction on the basis of a few select objects – here fragments of unearthed memory – examined out of context and eroded by time. What all this makes clear is that the work of reconstruction through memory is linked more, or at least as much, to affective processes as to objective reality. Freud claims that the house is the most suitable metaphor for the representation of psychic function since, with its many rooms, it provides a more accurate analogy for the temporal stratification of mental life than, for example, the city¹⁷:

The work of construction, or, if it is preferred, of reconstruction, resembles to a great extent an archaeologist's excavation of some dwelling-place that has been destroyed and buried or of some ancient edifice. The two processes are in fact identical, except that the analyst works under better conditions and has more material at his command to assist him, since what he is dealing with is not something destroyed but something that is still alive – and perhaps for another reason as well. But just as the archaeologist builds up the walls of a building from the foundations that have remained standing, determines the number and position of the columns from depressions in the floor, and reconstructs the mural decorations and paintings from the

¹⁵ My Recollections of Sigmund Freud, in *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man*, Muriel Gardiner (ed.), New York, Basic Books 1971, as quoted in Gay 1998, 171. On Freud and Archaeology see also Kuspit 1998 and Bowdler 1996.

¹⁶ Bassani 1991, 343 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Freud 1961, 19.

remains found in the debris, so does the analyst proceed when he draws his inferences from fragments of memories, from the associations and from the behaviour of the subject of the analysis.¹⁸

The home of the Finzi-Continis represents, I believe, just such a house: a house of memory. Just as the Etruscans visited the dead in their tombs and communed with them there in their memories, so the narrator communes with the Finzi-Continis in the reconstructed house, which he invests with his own desires, affects and hidden agendas. Accordingly, his description of the manor as it stands today not only makes reference to the different styles, and layers, created at various times, that have accumulated on top of each other, it also alludes to its 'repression', to the fact that it has been completely forgotten:

E tuttavia, per quel che si riferisce in particolare a casa Finzi-Contini, sebbene vi si acceda anche oggi da corso Ercole I – salvo, però per raggiungerla, dover poi percorrere più di mezzo chilometro supplementare attraverso un immenso spazio poco o nulla coltivato –; sebbene essa incorpori tuttora quelle storiche rovine di un edificio cinquecentesco, un tempo residenza o «delizia» estense, che furono acquistate dal solito Moisè nel 1850, e che più tardi, dagli eredi, a forza di adattamenti e restauri successivi, vennero trasformate in una specie di maniero neo-gotico, all'inglese: ad onta di tanti superstiti motivi d'interesse, chi ne sa niente, mi domando, chi se ne ricorda più? La Guida del Touring non ne parla, e ciò giustifica i turisti di passaggio. Ma a Ferrara stessa, nemmeno i pochi ebrei rimasti a far parte della languente Comunità israelitica hanno l'aria di rammentarsene.¹⁹

What's more, the description of the ruins of the house is marked, at the end, by what seems to be a direct allusion to the «mural decorations and paintings from the remains found in the debris» mentioned in the Freud passage cited above. Damaged by the bombardments of 1944, it is now occupied by homeless squatters:

i quali, allo scopo di scoraggiare ogni eventuale progetto di sfratto da parte della Soprintendenza ai Monumenti dell'Emilia e Romagna, sembra che abbiano avuto la bella idea di raschiare dalle pareti anche gli ultimi residui di pitture antiche.²⁰

Giardino is the most 'decadent' of Bassani's novels, and in a sense its degree of aesthetic elaboration can also be seen as a defence, since the

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Constructions in Analysis*, as quoted in Kuspit 1998, 138.

¹⁹ Bassani 1991, 350.

²⁰ *Ivi*, 351.

Finzi-Continis are the characters in his fictional universe who have come to the most horrid end. In fact their home, pillaged and in ruins, becomes a figure not only for a past that is no longer, but literally for the many homes emptied of their treasures by the Nazis, and often by the neighbours of the deported, who made sure nothing at all was left of their possessions. This is not an elegy to time past, but an attempt to keep at bay what is haunting the narrator – the unimaginable conditions of their lives after deportation.

3. LE DISCOURS DE L'AUTRE

«Le ruote ferrate dei trasporti avevano inciso a poco a poco, durante i secoli, due profondi solchi paralleli»²¹: in the Etruscan cemetery, the path created over the centuries by wheelbarrows becomes a figure for train tracks, with «ruote ferrate» and «trasporti» calling up images of Jews being deported in boxcars to the camps. This is the first of a series of iconic images of the unspoken event, too painful or too shameful or too difficult to speak of, which Bassani insinuates into the narration as the *discours de l'Autre*.

Another image is particularly striking: it concerns the narrator's failure in mathematics as a young boy at the end of middle school. His description of the sight of the failing mark posted on the bulletin board turns the visual memory of a childish narcissistic injury into a figure for a much more painful and de-humanizing experience, the physical branding of Jews upon their arrival at the camps: «Guardai da dietro una siepe di spalle ostinatamente voltate. La vista mi si annebbiò. Guardai di nuovo: e il cinque rosso, unico numero in inchiostro rosso di una lunga filza di numeri in inchiostro nero, mi si impresso nell'anima con la violenza e col bruciore di un marchio infuocato»²².

Later in the novel, while remembering a Passover meal that he left before it was over, he imagines the good-byes that must have taken place at the end of the evening. The imagined leave-taking turns into a scene that evokes cinematic sequences in which the SS break violently into the homes of Jews to round them up for deportation or immediate execution:

²¹ *Ivi*, 343.

²² *Ivi*, 375.

Poi ci sarebbe stata la scena ultima, quella degli addii. Già la vedevo. Eravamo scesi tutti in gruppo giù per le scale buie, come un gregge oppresso. [...] Senonché, improvvisamente, dal portone rimasto mezzo aperto, là, contro il nero della notte, ecco irrompere dentro il portico una raffica di vento. È vento d'uragano, e viene dalla notte. Piomba nel portico, lo attraversa, oltrepassa fischiando i cancelli che separano il portico dal giardino, e intanto ha disperso a forza chi ancora voleva trattenersi, ha zittito di botto, col suo urlo selvaggio, chi ancora indugiava a parlare. Voci esili, gridi sottili, subito sopraffatti. Soffiati via, tutti come foglie leggere, come pezzi di carta, come capelli di una chioma incanutita dagli anni e dal terrore...²³

By the end of this passage we seem to have slipped into the gas chambers themselves.

In *Gli occhiali d'oro* the very first chapter contains an unmistakable allusion to Dr. Mengele, the 'Angel of Death' who conducted medical experiments on concentration camp inmates. This image is evoked by the seemingly innocuous description of the waiting rooms of the physicians of Ferrara who, unlike Dr. Fadigati, do not take care to provide their patients with the amenities of a comfortable and elegant living room:

Dove erano, da Fadigati – non si stancavano mai di ripetere – le interminabili attese *ammucchiati l'uno sull'altro come bestie*, ascoltando fra le fragili pareti divisorie voci più o meno remote di famiglie quasi sempre allegre e numerose, mentre, alla fioca luce di una lampadina da venti candele, l'occhio non aveva da posarsi, scorrendo lungo i tristi muri, che su qualche NON SPUTARE! di maiolica, qualche caricatura di professore universitario o di collega, per non parlare di altre immagini anche più melanconiche e iettatorie di pazienti sottoposti a enormi clisteri davanti a un intero collegio accademico, o di laparatomie a cui, sogghignando, *provvedeva la Morte stessa travestita da chirurgo? E come poteva essere accaduto, come!, che si fosse sopportato fino allora un simile trattamento da Medio Evo?*²⁴

In addition to evoking images of prisoners huddled together like animals about to go the slaughter, and images of torture being listened to from adjoining rooms such as the ones to be found in films like *Roma città aperta*, the end of the quotation also suggests the question that underlies all of Bassani's work – how was it that the Jews did not react more forcefully and unambiguously to their persecution? *E come poteva essere accaduto, come!, che si fosse sopportato fino allora un simile trattamento da Medio Evo?*

²³ *Ivi*, 511.

²⁴ *Ivi*, 229 (emphasis added).

A similar image is to be found in the narrator's description of his thoughts after the beginning of the campaign in the press against the Jews, when he returns to Ferrara and meets up with his friend Nino Bottecchiari. As he recalls his fears at the time, images of Jews behind the gates of the ghetto morph into images again of concentration camp inmates up against the fences that we have seen in photographs and newsreels. This particular one refers to a widely-circulated photograph by Margaret Bourke-White²⁵ of liberated prisoners in Buchenwald:

In un futuro abbastanza vicino, loro, i goim, ci avrebbero costretti a brulicare di nuovo là, per le anguste tortuose viuzze di quel misero quartiere medievale da cui in fin dei conti non eravamo venuti fuori che da settanta, ottanta anni. *Ammassati l'uno sull'altro dietro i cancelli come tante bestie impaurite*, non ne saremmo evasi mai più.²⁶

These are the narrator's repressed thoughts. Moreover, when Deliliers finally leaves Fadigati at the beach resort after their final altercation, in this case a physical one in which his lover has beaten him, Fadigati's bruised face and broken gold-rimmed glasses bring up cinematic images of helpless Jews beaten in the streets by hoodlums, their violated dignity symbolized by the shattered lenses: «Ebbe un sorriso debole con la bocca storta. Aveva il labbro superiore piuttosto gonfio. Una doppia incrinatura attraversava la lente di sinistra dei suoi begli occhiali d'oro»²⁷.

4. THE TROPE OF MATERNAL LOSS

Marianne Hirsch cites as one of the characteristics of Holocaust post-memory the «trope of maternal loss and mother-child separation», since «trauma at its most fundamental has been defined as a break in the maternal object relation»²⁸. Another scholar, Claire Kahane, has suggested that this traumatic scene be approached with caution, that it is more, and less, than what it seems: «Doesn't the focus on that relation in traumatic narratives itself become a kind of screen, a cover-up for confronting the nihilistic implications of the Holocaust?»²⁹ she asks.

²⁵ Cited in Hirsch 2008, 113, in reference to a drawing in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.

²⁶ Bassani 1991, 311 (emphasis added).

²⁷ *Ivi*, 299.

²⁸ Hirsch 2008, 124.

²⁹ Kahane 2001, 164 as cited in Hirsch 2008, 124.

The trope of maternal loss first appears in *Gli occhiali d'oro* as a means of rendering the feeling that overcame the protagonist when he first returned to Ferrara on the eve of the passage of the Race Laws, when the campaign against the Jews was at its peak. Only by looking down on the cityscape and the Jewish cemetery from a raised vantage point does he manage to find some solace:

Guardavo al campo sottostante, in cui erano sepolti i nostri morti [...] mi sentii d'un tratto penetrare da una gran dolcezza, da una pace e da una gratitudine tenerissime [...]. Mi era bastato recuperare *l'antico volto materno* della mia città, riaverlo ancora una volta tutto per me, perché quell'atroce senso di esclusione che mi aveva tormentato nei giorni scorsi cadesse all'istante. Il futuro di persecuzioni e di massacri che forse ci attendeva [...] non mi faceva più paura.³⁰

In *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, the attempt to connect to Micòl is indeed described as an attempt to recapture the sense of oneness that characterizes the pre-oedipal mother-child relation, which is why it fails as the romantic relationship the young man thinks he wants. There are many instances of Micòl's 'motherly' attitude to the protagonist, but nothing is as telling as the protagonist's own dream about her. Before narrating the dream, he recalls a telephone conversation with Micòl, during which she described her room to him, and in particular her collection of Venetian glass objects, which she referred to as «làttimi» and which he immediately associates with «latticini»:

«Làttimi?» domandai. «Che roba è? Da mangiare?»

«Ma no, no» piagnucolò, inorridendo al solito della mia ignoranza. «Sono vetri. Bicchieri, calici, ampolle, ampolline, scatolucce: cosette, in genere scarti d'antiquariato. A Venezia li chiamano làttimi; fuori di Venezia *opelines*, anche *flutes*. Non puoi immaginare come io l'adori, questa roba. In proposito so letteralmente tutto. Interrogami, e vedrai.»³¹

In the dream, which seizes precisely on the similarity between «làttimi» and «latticini», he is in Micòl's room, now full of «roba da mangiare». Micòl herself has obviously become a maternal Eve, tempting the protagonist with her milk-derived products:

[...] giacché i làttimi non erano affatto gli oggetti di vetro di cui Micòl mi aveva raccontato, ma appunto come io avevo supposto, formaggi, piccole stillanti forme di cacio biancastro, a foggia di bottiglia. Ridendo, Micòl

³⁰ Bassani 1991, 304 (emphasis added).

³¹ *Ivi*, 452.

insisteva perché io provassi ad assaggiarne uno, dei suoi formaggi [...] uno tra quelli collocati più in alto [...].³²

So, too, in *Gli ultimi anni di Clelia Trotti* Bruno Lattes' relationship with Clelia is characterized as the search for a mother-child connection masquerading as a search for a new political identity. At the end of the story, Bruno realizes that he is not, and never will be, a Socialist: after all, if the search was for a political connection, the shoemaker Rovigatti, with whom he met several times before actually seeking out Clelia herself, could have provided it. What Bassani is telling us in this story is that Bruno is searching for a way to soothe the feeling of disorientation that he feels in the face of the Race Laws, and only an older mother-figure, like Clelia Trotti, can serve the purpose. In fact, in *Altre notizie su Bruno Lattes*, which appears in *L'odore del fieno*, the trope of maternal loss recurs in Bruno's mental associations at the funeral of his uncle, which returns him to the age of nine, to an occasion when he felt the absence of his mother, but could not understand where she had gone: «La guerra durava ancora. Il papà era al fronte. E la mamma? Dove era la mamma? Qualcuno, forse la zia Edvige [...] gli aveva raccontato che la mamma era partita per Feltre, dove avrebbe trascorso col papà una breve licenza. Ma Feltre? Dove era Feltre? E anzi, *che cosa era?»*³³.

In *Dietro la porta*, in which the narrator describes his gradual confrontation with the idea of his mother as a sexual being (only to have that awareness sullied by the anti-Semitic rantings of his Gentile classmates), the moment of awareness is described as an epiphany brought on by a photograph. He looks at the photograph and suddenly becomes aware that it inscribes the gaze behind the lens of the camera, that of his father, and thus his own exclusion:

Ritraeva me e mia madre nel '18, durante l'ultima estate di guerra. Magra come una ragazza, vestita di bianco, la mamma appariva inginocchiata accanto a me [...]. E mentre mi stringeva appassionatamente al seno, rivolgeva in direzione dell'obbiettivo un sorriso gioioso, intensamente felice [...] La fotografia era stata scattata da mio padre nel corso di una delle sue brevi licenze dal fronte [...]. Ma soltanto qualche minuto fa, guardandola, avevo compreso il reale significato di quel sorriso della mamma, sposa da appena tre anni: ciò che prometteva, ciò che offriva, e *a chi...*³⁴

³² *Ivi*, 460-461.

³³ *Ivi*, 920.

³⁴ *Ivi*, 730.

In *Gli occhiali d'oro* Fadigati, as if to comfort himself and to protect himself from the reality of the abuse he is enduring at the hands of the young people on the train, pulls out a photo of his mother:

Come l'aveva adorata – sospirava – la sua povera mamma! Intelligente, bella, colta, pia: in lei si assommavano tutte le virtù. Una mattina, anzi, e per la commozione gli occhi gli si inumidirono, estrasse dal portafoglio una fotografia che circolò di mano in mano. Si trattava di un piccolo ovale sbiadito. Ritraeva una donna in abito ottocentesco, di mezza età dall'espressione soave, senza dubbio, ma nel complesso piuttosto insignificante.³⁵

In both these cases the photos are used specifically because they are stand-ins for reality, as are dreams and metaphors: what we see in all the examples cited above is that even the trope of maternal loss is presented in such a way as to make clear its function as a stand-in for the loss of the feeling of safety in the world.

5. SHAME, GUILT AND RETICENCE

Il romanzo di Ferrara is also permeated by anxieties tied to the act of remembering itself. In *Gli occhiali d'oro* the narrator is so reluctant to identify himself as a Jew, that is to speak as a victim, that he does so only after he describes Fadigati himself coming out of the closet on the beaches of Riccione. One might say that he starts out as witness to Fadigati's situation and only gradually assumes the role of victim. References to memory abound in this novel, with the process of recall being continuously brought to the forefront as a process fraught with tension, ambivalence and even feigned uncertainty alternating with assertions of perfect memory. The insistence on dates, without these dates being explicitly connected to specific historical moments, functions as a sign of all that is NOT being said.

Reticence is also the result of guilt. Guilt at having survived and perhaps at not having done enough to help others survive. Shame at having allowed himself to be a victim – whether he had a choice in the matter or not. The story of the protagonist's doomed romance with Micòl, and of his failure to kiss her at the opportune moment, contains an unspoken truth: had he kissed Micòl and thus been able to actually

³⁵ *Ivi*, 255.

enter into a relationship with her he might have been able to extract her from the clutches of her family and escape with her. It is no accident that the unproffered kiss, meditated upon at length earlier on in the novel, returns in the epilogue, at the very end, as if he were returning her to the grave and sealing it. When he says that only a kiss, a real kiss, could have stopped her from speaking, what he seems to be saying is that such a kiss could have saved her:

Certo è che quasi presaga della sua prossima fine, sua e di tutti i suoi, Micòl ripeteva di continuo anche a Malnate che a lei del *suo* futuro democratico e sociale non gliene importava un fico, che il futuro, in sé, lei lo abborriva, ad esso preferendo di gran lunga «le vierge, le vivace e le bel aujourd'hui» e il passato, ancora di più, «il caro, il dolce, il *pìo* passato».

E siccome queste, lo so, non erano che parole, le solite parole ingannevoli e disperate che soltanto un vero bacio avrebbe potuto impedirle di proferire, di esse, appunto, e non di altre, sia suggellato qui quel poco che il cuore ha saputo ricordare.³⁶

By the same token, a real hand extended to Fadigati, instead of a door shut in his face at the height of his desperation, could have prevented him from committing suicide. This is how the end of the protagonist's last encounter with Fadigati is described:

Non appena fummo dinanzi al portone di casa, tirai fuori di tasca la chiave e aprii. La cagna mise il capo nella fessura, come se volesse entrare.

«Via!», gridai, «Va' via!»

La bestiola guai di spavento, rifugiandosi subito presso le gambe del suo amico.

«Buona notte», dissi. «È tardi, devo proprio salire.»

Ricambiò la mia stretta di mano con grande effusione.

«Buona notte... Stia bene... E tante cose anche per la sua famiglia», ripeté più volte.

Varcai la soglia. E poiché lui, sempre sorridendo e tenendo levato il braccio in segno di saluto, non si decideva ad andarsene (seduta sul marciapiede, anche la cagna mi guardava di sotto in su con aria interrogativa), cominciai a chiudere il portone.

«Mi telefona?», chiesi leggermente, prima di accostare del tutto i battenti.

«Mah», fece sorridendo un po' misterioso attraverso l'ultimo spiraglio.

«Chi vivrà vedrà.»³⁷

It is clear here that the invitation to telephone is not heartfelt, but a sim-

³⁶ *Ivi*, 610-611.

³⁷ *Ivi*, 321-322.

ple expression of politeness, meant to attenuate the young man's unease at wanting to get rid of Fadigati. His attitude toward the stray dog, who has attached itself to Fadigati in the street and with whose desire for affection Fadigati has identified in an earlier passage, clearly represents his true feelings. When Fadigati does indeed call, two days later, they make a tentative appointment to meet, again only as a way for the young man to get rid of him:

Preoccupato che mio padre e mia madre, di certo tutto orecchi, capissero con chi stavo conversando, mi limitavo a rispondere a monosillabi. Speravo anche, in questo modo, di indurlo ad abbreviare. Ma niente. Pareva che non gli riuscisse di staccarsi dall'apparecchio.

Era giovedì. Combinammo di vederci il sabato seguente. Lui mi avrebbe telefonato subito dopo pranzo. Se faceva bello, avremmo preso il tram, e saremmo andati a Pontelagoscuro a veder il Po. Dopo le ultime piogge il livello del fiume doveva essersi avvicinato di molto al segnale di guardia. Chissà che spettacolo! ³⁸

Fadigati never calls. The first paragraph of the following chapter clearly indicates how guilty the narrator feels about not having sought him out, as the dripping magnolia tree figures Fadigati drowning in the waters of the Po, with the same masochistic pleasure that the narrator has attributed to him all along:

Piove tutto sabato e domenica. Anche per questo motivo, forse, scordai la promessa di Fadigati. Non mi telefonò e nemmeno io gli telefonai: ma per pura dimenticanza ripeto, non già di proposito. Pioveva senza un attimo di tregua. Dalla mia camera, guardavo attraverso la mia finestra gli alberi del giardino. La pioggia torrenziale sembrava accanirsi particolarmente contro il pioppo, i due olmi, il castagno, ai quali veniva via via strappando le ultime foglie. Soltanto la nera magnolia, al centro, intatta e gocciolante in modo incredibile, godeva visibilmente dei rovesci d'acqua che la investivano. ³⁹

6. RESENTMENT AND THE TELESCOPING EFFECT

The third novel of the first-person trilogy from the perspective of after-effects of the Holocaust is the most interesting of the three, even though paradoxically it has often been characterized as having nothing

³⁸ *Ivi*, 326.

³⁹ *Ivi*, 327.

to do with it, since it is set in 1929. Marianne Hirsch points out that «[t]he bodily, psychic, and affective impact of trauma and its aftermath, the ways in which one trauma can recall, or reactivate, the effects of another, exceed the bounds of traditional historical archives and methodologies»⁴⁰. What is most interesting about this novel is that it describes how the past is effectively re-written in the face of subsequent events, how the Holocaust can inscribe itself on the recollection of past events so as to fuse with them to such an extent as to form a new 'memory'.

The story told here, of rivalry amongst a group of adolescent boys in the *liceo*, culminates in a scene in which the protagonist, hiding in a dark room, eavesdrops while his classmates besmirch him and his mother with sexual insults related to their Jewishness. The scene is engineered by Carlo Cattolica, whose name makes him clearly a representative of the Roman Catholic church, while the insults are pronounced by Luciano Pulga, who can be seen as a sort of Pontius Pilate because he is a projection of the Jewish self-hatred of the young protagonist. The protagonist is hiding in the next room under a crucifix, which identifies him with Jesus the Jew of Nazareth being betrayed by his friend to the Romans. However the next room, at this point, is also Auschwitz, because the insults to his sexuality as well as to his mother's reflect the anti-Semitic discourses of the period, the volume of which was turned up to the level of hysteria by the Nazi propaganda machine. The scene collapses and telescopes three distinct moments in history and three distinct scenes: 1929, when the event takes place in Cattolica's home, the moment of the Crucifixion, and the Holocaust. If we remember that 1929 is the year of the Lateran Pacts, which sees the end of the secular nature of the Italian state and Catholicism as the official and only religion of the nation, then the scene establishes a causal chain linking three moments in history across the centuries leading straight to the gas chamber.

This in and of itself does not however tell the entire story. The narrator opens the novel by speaking of an injury inflicted upon him many years ago, and which has not healed, to the point that it has now become a festering wound:

Sono stato molte volte infelice, nella mia vita, da bambino, da ragazzo, da giovane, da uomo fatto; molte volte, se ci ripenso, ho toccato quello che si

⁴⁰ Hirsch 2001, 104.

dice il fondo della disperazione. Ricordo tuttavia pochi periodi più neri, per me, dei mesi di scuola fra l'ottobre del 1929 e il giugno del '30, quando facevo la prima liceo. Gli anni trascorsi da allora non sono in fondo serviti a niente: non sono riusciti a medicare un dolore che è rimasto là come una ferita segreta, sanguinante in segreto. Guarirne, liberarmene? Non so se sarà mai possibile.⁴¹

In other words, the Holocaust has re-activated a past offence: what this means is that the injury inflicted upon him by his classmates has now been retrospectively invested with the injuries inflicted upon his people, and as a result he cannot let go of it. Would this adolescent experience have been dwelt upon with such tenacity had not the Holocaust intervened between the time of action and the time of narration to re-activate it? Has this experience been incorporated by subsequent events as even more traumatic than it originally was? This is left open-ended, but the question is posed. The last chapter opens with another reference to the adolescent wound, which has now become an untreatable ulcer: «L'ulcera aveva preso a suppurare in segreto, lenta, torpida immedicabile»⁴².

Published in 1964, this novel was written in the period shortly before the famous Auschwitz trials of 1963-64, when some sectors of the German public, indignant at being held responsible for something that had happened 'so long ago', were asking, quite vocally, when the victims would finally let go of their resentments⁴³. It may well be that *Dietro la porta* was written in response to this very question, especially if one considers the centrality of the image of the crucifixion, which comes up not only in the climax, but in an earlier episode that foreshadows it iconically: I am referring to the scene in which the young protagonist wanders into a local church, and finds himself drawn to a group of statues, which he at first mistakes for a group of actual persons:

Chi erano? Come avevo potuto rendermi conto non appena ero arrivato a distanza sufficiente, non si trattava di persone vive, bensì di statue di legno dipinto, scolpite a grandezza naturale. Erano per l'appunto quei famosi

⁴¹ Bassani 1991, 615.

⁴² *Ivi*, 732.

⁴³ Wood 1998, 259. At this time, «a wider debate was taking place in Europe about whether further judicial proceedings relating to Nazi war crimes should henceforth be subject to a statute of limitations. While the juridical outcome of this debate in Germany was the extension of the statute of limitations for major war crimes, [the prevailing] cultural climate [...] attributed to victims of Nazism an enduring resentment and avengeful desire for retribution».

Pianzùn d'la Rosa davanti ai quali da bambino [...] mi aveva condotto tante volte la zia Malvina, l'unica zia cattolica che possedevo. Guardavo anche adesso la scena atrocissima: il corpo livido e misero del Cristo morto, disteso sulla nuda terra, con attorno, impietriti in muti gesti, in mute smorfie, in lacrime che non avrebbero mai avuto né termine né sfogo di grida, i parenti e gli amici accorsi: la Madonna, san Giovanni, Giuseppe d'Arimatea, Simone, la Maddalena, due pie donne.⁴⁴

What Bassani seems to be saying here is that if the Jews were still being held responsible for the crucifixion of Christ two thousand years after the fact (as Signora Lavezzoli points out in *Gli occhiali d'oro* on the beaches of Riccione as she reads aloud from *Civiltà cattolica*) then Jews have the right to hang on to their resentments twenty years after an event that has traumatized all Jews, not only those who have been through the worst.

7. POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS

At the opposite end of the spectrum from he who cannot forget, lies he who cannot remember. This is the case of Edgardo Limentani, the protagonist of Bassani's last novel *L'Airone*. Like the narrator of the first-person trilogy, Edgardo has repressed many of his feelings about the days of persecution. However, in this novel Bassani departs from the retrospective and memorializing style, which indirectly shows traces of trauma, to focus explicitly on the after-effects of the past on the present-day life of his character.

We know that Edgardo Limentani is a survivor, a survivor who escaped to Switzerland just in the nick of time so as to be able to avoid being rounded up and deported. He has now returned to Ferrara, where he is trying, in vain, to settle back into normal life, but finds he cannot – something has changed and that something is his own ability to live in the here and now. This is the novel in which Bassani most clearly focuses on what has today come to be known as 'post-traumatic stress disorder' – the delayed and pervasive effects of the fear and dangers Limentani experienced during the escape and about which he has repressed his emotions.

It is this dogged refusal to admit and absorb the enormity of what

⁴⁴ Bassani 1991, 638.

he and other Jews have been through that prevents him from engaging in the mourning process that might make it possible to go on. Limentani is still so much in the grips of his experience of flight that he mechanically and compulsively re-lives it without even being aware of it. Depressed and desperate to shake off the feeling of unease and confinement he is suffering from, he decides to go hunting, for the first time since the passing of the Race Laws in 1938. There are many ironies in this decision. The first is that Jews, as every one except Edgardo Limentani seems to know, are not hunters⁴⁵, but Limentani has strayed so far from his Jewish roots, and identified so closely with the Italian landed classes, that he sees a hunting expedition as a totally fitting way to enjoy some fresh air and get out of the stifling atmosphere of his home and of Ferrara⁴⁶. The second irony of course, is that he himself is still feeling like a hunted animal. The hunter will become the hunted as Limentani unwittingly re-enacts his flight from Italy to Switzerland to escape the Nazi hunt for Jews. At the day's end he will take his own life after refusing to shoot any birds and recognizing himself in the struggling heron that his guide's precise aim brings down. But his suicide will take place only after he finally confronts, symbolically, a representative of his Fascist tormentors.

Edgardo Limentani's tale opens at the crack of dawn in his bedroom, as he prepares to set out on his day trip. Before leaving he stops momentarily in the ground floor apartment of the building caretakers, his family's faithful servants for over forty years. At first their small, familiar dwelling seems to provide a warm, womb-like refuge from the cold and hostile world: «Oh, se avesse potuto nonostante tutto restare là, al caldo della portineria, nascosto ai suoi di casa e a chiunque altro fino a sera! In cambio avrebbe dato qualsiasi cosa»⁴⁷. However, after the exchange of a few niceties, the elderly couple immediately seek his counsel and intervention in a family dispute centered around their daughter's shiftless husband, an unemployed Communist whom they suspect of beating her. Limentani's imagination immediately casts this marital relationship

⁴⁵ Bassani himself, in an interview, explains that he knew nothing about hunting and had to do extensive research to write the novel (Perché ho scritto *L'Airone*, *La fiera letteraria*, 14 November 1968, as quoted in Dolfi, 2003, 84-85).

⁴⁶ «Edgardo Limentani cerca disperatamente di tornare al mondo uccidendo gli animali come fanno tutti quanti i borghesoni della sua città. Anche lui cerca di fare altrettanto, ma non gli serve più, allora uccide se stesso» (In risposta [VII], in Bassani 1998, 1348).

⁴⁷ Bassani 1991, 764.

in a sado-masochistic light: «Glielo garantiva che fosse vero la faccia di lui, livida di rancore a stento contenuto, e quella di lei, anche di più, con quei suoi occhi da vittima predestinata e forse consenziente»⁴⁸. At this point his perception of his physical surroundings changes dramatically: «E adesso anche la cucina dei Manzoli era diventata di colpo inabitabile: un posto anche questo da cui bisognava sloggiare. E subito»⁴⁹.

From womb-like haven to «posto da cui bisognava sloggiare e subito». This choice of words, totally inappropriate in the present context, seems slightly enigmatic at first, but then it becomes clear that this perception is an interference, a residue of the time of persecution, when the Jews of Ferrara were being rounded up for deportation, and often had to leave their homes at a moment's notice. Not coincidentally the words are conjured up by the image of a 'consenting victim', the recurring motif which signals the presence of the haunting question about the possible passivity of the Jews in the face of their persecution. Later, as Limentani imagines himself attempting to speak to Irma's husband, the Communist, as the caretakers have asked him to do, «si sentiva invadere da una sorta di disgusto. Di disgusto misto a paura»⁵⁰. This too, given the intensity of the feeling, can only be a residue, displaced from the original object of his fear and loathing – the Fascists – to the Communists, who ostensibly represent the current threat to his well-being.

The extent to which his anger and revulsion vis-a-vis the Fascist collaborators has been suppressed is revealed when he makes a brief stop at the local inn in Codigoro. Its owner, Gino Bellagamba, was a Fascist militant not long ago:

Ricordava Bellagamba nel '38, nel '39, in divisa di caporale della Milizia [...]. Ricordava la sua grinta di allora, da bravaccio di campagna restituito al servizio attivo dagli avvenimenti, il suo sostare quasi permanentemente in piazza sul marciapiede dinanzi alla Casa del Fascio, le occhiate minacciose e sprezzanti delle quali anche lui, in quegli anni, come «giudeo», come «apolitico» era stato abbondantemente gratificato [...].⁵¹

He is quick to rationalize away his lingering anger and the difficulty of confronting Bellagamba today, as if the atrocities of the recent past had never taken place:

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, 765.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, 766.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, 769.

Però, a conti fatti, erano davvero tanto peggio i fascisti di prima del '43 in confronto ai comunisti di adesso? [...] Quanto a Bellagamba, magari era vero, come sosteneva Nives, che dopo il periodo badogliano, si fosse messo con quelli di Salò. Possibilissimo. Ad ogni modo se perfino i comunisti, che oggi erano i padroni assoluti a Codigoro, lo lasciavano stare e prosperare, per quale motivo avrebbe dovuto essere lui, proprio lui, a fare adesso delle storie? Fra l'altro si sa: la Nives aveva la mania di dare addosso ai compaesani. E ogni occasione le veniva buona.⁵²

When he knocks at the door of the inn at five in the morning in search of a place to relieve himself and Bellagamba asks «chi è?» Limentani's answer expresses the ultimate irony: «Amici, rispose piano»⁵³. In fact, he denies his right to any anger – «lui non ce l'aveva con nessuna persona al mondo, e con Bellagamba meno che meno»⁵⁴. However, when he finds himself face to face with the Fascist, in the closed space of his office, what the mind denies, the body speaks: «Col senso più che mai di trovarsi fuori del mondo, non sapeva da che parte incominciare. Prendere qualcosa nemmeno pensarci. Lo stomaco se lo sentiva chiuso come un pugno»⁵⁵.

As he makes his way up the stairs to the bathroom, he is struck by the newly-found prosperity reflected in the renovations the inn has undergone. He contrasts this with his own situation as a landowner-in-distress incapable of adjusting to changing times and to changing methods of agriculture, rather than focusing on his real status: a nervous Jew on his way to the enemy's toilet (Leopold Bloom?):

Un altro nei suoi panni, infischandosene delle minacce comuniste, un bel giorno si sarebbe presentato alla Montina con tanto di scorta dei carabinieri e avrebbe licenziato tutti [...]. Un altro. Perché lui no. Lui dava ragione alle banche, la Cassa Agricola di Ferrara compresa, pronte a concedere i loro finanziamenti a chicchessia, addirittura a un Bellagamba, ma non a certi «relitti del passato», come c'era caso di leggere perfino sopra giornali governativi tipo il *Giornale d'Emilia*. Gli bastava pensare a se stesso come agricoltore per rinunciare di colpo a qualsiasi progetto del genere e per riconoscersi un sopravvissuto.⁵⁶

The irony of course is that he is a survivor, «un sopravvissuto», but not of his agrarian past but of another past, as a Jew. Again, his body speaks

⁵² *Ivi*, 770.

⁵³ *Ivi*, 771.

⁵⁴ *Ivi*, 772.

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, 773.

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, 775-776.

the repressed emotions: «Ma niente, ancora una volta, niente: il ventre non voleva saperne di vuotarglisi. Nonostante ogni sforzo sentiva che neanche adesso ce l'avrebbe fatta, e che in ogni caso sarebbe approdato a ben poco»⁵⁷. The toilet paper in the bathroom consists of cut-up newspaper, bearing fragments of old headlines and articles. One of them reads «[...] SANGUE EBRAICO – A POLONIA D'OGGI» and speaks of continuing bloody persecutions of the Jews in Poland. In spite of all that he has been through he has difficulty believing it: «Possibile? Il tono dell'articolo gli sembrava eccessivamente enfatico. Chi l'aveva scritto certo esagerava. Alla base, però, qualcosa di vero doveva pur esserci. Diamine – sogghignò – non potevano mica essere tutte balle!»⁵⁸.

As he is leaving the inn, he notices that Bellagamba «assomigliava abbastanza al Mussolini degli ultimi anni»⁵⁹. He also notices that Bellagamba is becoming increasingly solicitous, but rationalizes away any unease and denies the reality of the situation: «Se non capiva male, voleva soltanto rassicurarlo, confermargli che non c'era nessun bisogno che continuasse a darsi pena per delle ombre, pure e semplici»⁶⁰.

Finally Limentani leaves Codigoro to continue to the area where he had arranged to be met by a guide. This is a particularly interesting aspect of the story since it seems to evoke the flight to safety during the worst days of the *Repubblica di Salò*. Almost all the Jews who fled to Switzerland employed guides, known as *passatori*. Some were Resistance fighters, some were smugglers, others were professional guides specialized in clandestine border crossings. Not all these crossings went well; in fact, many did not, for the guides could not all be trusted⁶¹. There is no reference to this aspect of the escape in the novel, but the trauma of this flight seems to lurk behind the meeting of Limentani and his guide. As soon as he sees him, Limentani immediately tries to ascertain whether or not he is a Communist, but manages only to learn that he had been a «partigiano combattente»⁶² before the Liberation. Unlike the Fascist Bellagamba, Gavino is taciturn, and this makes Edgardo extremely uncomfortable, and he imagines that he is being looked at with derision: «Quella vaga aria di scherno che gli circolava attorno agli zigomi ossuti non era forse più eloquente e deprimente di qualsiasi di-

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, 777.

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, 778.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, 782.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, 784.

⁶¹ Zuccotti 1987, 234.

⁶² Bassani 1991, 803.

scorso?»⁶³. When they finally settle into the boat from which they will be shooting ducks and other birds Limentani offers Gavino a rifle. At first he refuses, claiming that as a guide his only job is «andare in giro a raccogliere morti e feriti»⁶⁴, but then he relents.

It is the phrase «morti e feriti», which is part of the narrator's reported speech and not attributed directly to the guide, that suggests that the hunting episode we are about to witness is one in which the birds exist only as metaphors, as stand-ins for the victims of Nazi-fascist violence:

Per più di un'ora rimase così, seduto col fucile in mano a guardare gli uccelli arrivarli sopra la testa. Non sparava. Non tentò di farlo nemmeno una volta. A sparare, ad abbattere uno dopo l'altro gli uccelli che gli capitavano a tiro, era soltanto Gavino, da dietro il suo cespuglio. *Pam-pam. Pam-pam-pam. Pam-pam-pam-pam-pam. Pam-pam-pam-pam-pam.* [...] Il numero degli uccelli abbattuti da Gavino era salito in breve a una trentina. Accucciato dentro la botte, lui nel frattempo non faceva niente. Stava lì a guardare e basta.

Era un po' sempre come se stesse sognando.

[...]

Niente più gli appariva come reale. Gavino [...], la cagna [...]. Lui stesso, seduto in botte col fucile in mano come Gavino, però inerte, incapace di un solo gesto ... Vero e non vero, visto e immaginato, vicino e lontano: tutte le cose si mescolavano, si confondevano fra di loro. Perfino il tempo normale, quello dei minuti e delle ore, non c'era più, non contava più.⁶⁵

Limentani has clearly shifted from chronological to psychological time, to the time in which he has remained frozen, the time of persecution. When the heron of the novel's title, which he had spotted earlier, suddenly reappears, wounded and agonizing, Edgardo is mesmerized. His identification with the crippled bird, as it hovers between life and death for an entire chapter, is total:

Credeva che fosse morto e che la cagna si sarebbe avventata a raccogliarlo. Invece no. [...]

Benché ferito, benché indebolito dal sangue perduto [...] a un dato momento aveva pensato che gli convenisse comunque e subito «cambiare zona» [...] nascondersi là dentro, intanto, in attesa della notte ormai vicina. E dopo, dopo stare a vedere [...]. La terraferma a portata di gamba avrebbe significato una possibilità ulteriore di fuga, forse addirittura di salvezza,

⁶³ *Ivi*, 804.

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, 811.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, 817, 818, 819.

o magari, se non proprio la salvezza definitiva, la garanzia quasi sicura di farcela a resistere vivo per lo meno fino a domani.

[...] Ma come si illudeva! – gli venne all'improvviso da dirsi – [...] era chiaro, povero stupido, che se a pensare di sparargli non gli fosse sembrato a lui, di star sparando in un certo senso a se stesso, gli avrebbe tirato immediatamente. È così se non altro sarebbe finita.⁶⁶

It is clear that the hunting scene at a subliminal level functions for Edgardo as a re-enactment of Nazi-Fascist violence, perhaps the night recalled in *Una notte del '43*.

The proof of this is that on the way back to Codigoro he begins to feel as if he himself is being pursued: «Prendeva le curve facendo fischiare le gomme sull'asfalto: esattamente come se Gavino, la cagna, e tutto quello che i due gli ricordavano, venissero a distanza ravvicinata, addirittura lo tallonassero»⁶⁷. In the trunk of his car he is carrying the game, «un carico imbarazzante e schifoso»⁶⁸. As he enters Codigoro, «l'impressione che continuava a provare di essere inseguito, assurda, se ne rendeva ben conto, ma non per questo meno reale»⁶⁹ intensifies.

He pulls up to the inn as if in a trance, unaware of what he is about to do. Slowly the purpose of this return takes shape: here he will unload the game, as if confronting Bellagamba, finally, with the evidence of his past activities, the corpses of the hapless victims of his violence.

Mentre faceva manovra gli venne in mente Bellagamba. Forse Bellagamba la selvaggina avrebbe accettato di prenderla lui. [...] Scaricare le bestie morte dal bagagliaio, e poi portarle dentro (la luce del neon avrebbe reso l'operazione ancora più facile), diventava un lavoro da niente.⁷⁰

Of course none of this is clear to him, and he sits down at a table and discusses the meal he is about to order calmly with his host. However, he perceives Bellagamba differently this time: «Dal fondo delle orbite i suoi occhi azzurri stavano fissandolo smarriti, così almeno gli sembrava: con l'ansia, chissà perché, di un animale che fiuta il pericolo»⁷¹. During the meal, he is tormented again by the thought of his passivity at the hunt: «Un colpo solo, lui, nonostante la doppietta che aveva in mano,

⁶⁶ *Ivi*, 821, 822, 825.

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, 827.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, 828.

⁷⁰ *Ivi*, 829.

⁷¹ *Ivi*, 832.

non era mai riuscito a trovare la forza di tirarlo»⁷². Finally, when Bellagamba comes to ask whether the meal was satisfactory, Limentani finds the courage to confront the Fascist, in a manner of speaking of course:

Alzò una mano, gli fece segno.

Passando rapido fra tavolo e tavolo, l'altro accorse.

«Andiamo bene?», domandò con aria preoccupata, accennando al piatto. Inghiottì. Si asciugò le labbra col tovagliolo.

«Perfetto», rispose.

Non sapeva da che parte incominciare.

«Senta», disse alla fine. «Ho il bagaglio della macchina carico di bestie. Le vuole lei?»⁷³

Unaware of what is going on, Bellagamba brings up the possibility of having the heron stuffed and embalmed, even suggesting the name of a taxidermist in town that regularly performs this service for hunters. Then he goes on to ask Edgardo about his car – he had asked him about it earlier, offering to buy it from him. At first Edgardo, whose mind is clearly elsewhere, doesn't react, but then he remembers: «La macchina, certo. Come no. Invece che vendergliela, sarebbe stato quasi meglio regalargliela. Insieme con tutti gli uccelli che aveva in corpo»⁷⁴.

The idea of suicide, which has been subliminally taking shape in his mind all day, finally crystallizes when he stops in front of the window of the taxidermist mentioned to him by Bellagamba. Faced with a wide array of embalmed birds and animals, instead of finding them repulsive as he usually does, he suddenly sees them as occupying an enviable position:

Guardava ad una ad una le bestie imbalsamate, magnifiche tutte nella loro morte, più vive che se fossero vive [...] di una vita che non correva più nessun rischio di deteriorarsi, tirati a lucido, ma soprattutto diventati di gran lunga più belli di quando respiravano e il sangue correva veloce nelle loro vene, lui solo, forse – pensava –, era in grado di *capirla* davvero la perfezione di quella loro bellezza finale e non deperibile, di apprezzarla fino in fondo.⁷⁵

Just as Pino Barilari's physical paralysis in *Una notte del '43* is the figural representation of Pino's spiritual reality – emotional paralysis – so here

⁷² *Ivi*, 834.

⁷³ *Ivi*, 835.

⁷⁴ *Ivi*, 838.

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, 881.

the embalmed animals are the figural representation of Limentani's spiritual reality – that of the hunted animal frozen in time.

CONCLUSION

Long before memory and trauma became the common currency that they are today, Bassani was struggling with, and finding solutions to, issues of Holocaust representation that have since been identified and codified by contemporary theorists. By focusing on how the time of persecution lives on in the minds of those who experienced it, by showing that memory is susceptible to both conscious manipulation and to the vagaries of human desire and human foibles, that it involves inventing as much as documenting, forgetting as much as remembering, he keeps alive the memory of the Holocaust while assuring the integrity of his representation.

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