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WAITING FOR THE PAST AND NOSTALGIA FOR THE FUTURE

Memory, Judaism, and Writing
in *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*

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During the summer of 1999, the American artist Mark Dion undertook an original and fascinating artistic enterprise. With the help of a team of volunteers he combed the foreshores of the Thames River in London and collected a wide variety of objects that the river had left on its banks at low tide: whole and broken glass, precious artifacts and cheap pottery, ancient fossils and plastic bottle caps. All the finds from the Thames digs were carefully cleaned, classified, and arranged in a large wooden cabinet put on display, in the fall of the same year, in the Tate Modern gallery.

The *Tate Thames Dig*, as the installation was finally called, was the result of an artistic process that utilized principles and methodologies of late nineteenth century scientific disciplines. It combined elements of archeology, detection and taxonomy. It imitated their impulse to collect, classify, and preserve material fragments of the past as tangible proofs of an idea of history as progress. For the nineteenth century sensibility, the neat and linear organization of fragmentary details – fossils on display in a museum of natural history, primary linguistic roots along the branches of a genealogical tree of languages, or clues in a Sherlock Holmes' murder investigation – were proof that history could be interpreted as a linear succession of events leading up to a world of increasing complexity and completeness. In Dion's project, however, all these principles and conventions are inverted to reveal a more personal idea of history as memory. In his cabinet, unlike the nineteenth century museum showcase, objects are not scientifically classified, but

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are displayed in arbitrary and subjective arrangements. His is an interactive installation that invites viewers to browse and make personal discoveries and free associations. What counts are not just the objects on display, the amount of knowledge and information that they may convey, but the relationship between the objects and the viewers. When the viewers open up one of the cabinet's doors, or pull out one of its drawers, they are faced with startling and enigmatic collections of curiosities: shards of precious and cheap pottery, bits of colorful broken glass, scraps of paper, metal and plastic bottle caps, shells, fossils; and while their gaze passes over all these remnants of the past, they may try mentally to reassemble these fragmentary objects, think of the people who handled them, feel surrounded by voices of lost lives, and realize that the large wooden cabinet in front of them is not just a museum showcase, but a repository of loss. Now their gaze is no longer the gaze of a nineteenth century scientist. They are neither archeologists, nor detectives, nor taxonomists, nor historians, whose common goal is to infer from a collection of fragmentary old things a faithful image of the past and to interpret it as a step in the progress of civilization. Their gaze rather resembles the backward gaze of the witness who visits the past to gather and reconnect its remains in the hope that his act will rescue the past from oblivion, change our perception of the present, and build a possibility for the future. What both artist's and viewers' gestures evoke is not so much a nostalgic fusion of past and present or a scientific reconstruction of the past but rather the repetition of an act of remembering in which the past is salvaged from oblivion by means of its re-actualization in the present.

From this perspective, Dion's art is more reminiscent of another nineteenth century discipline, psychoanalysis. In psychoanalytic treatment, the recovery of fragments of one's own personal history is not a nostalgic pilgrimage to the dear places of one's own past nor a faithful reconstruction of the image of one's own childhood, but the patient and painful work of unearthing and interpreting lost memories with the final goal of better understanding one's own present. Freud liked to compare the work of the psychoanalyst to that of the archeologist; he said that both ought to uncover layer after layer of the patient's psyche before reaching the deepest and most valuable treasures. In the late 1890s, he became an art collector, and his study, at 19 Berggasse in Vienna, rapidly filled with statuettes of ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman gods. His discipline, though, like Dion's art, was never pure archeology. Unlike the mute and mysterious ancient Egyptian sculptures that crowded his

study, the dreams, traumas, and lost memories that Freud tried to uncover in the subconscious are not mere specimens of the past. Like the debris in Dion's project, they were concrete attempts at rescuing the past from the fury of the waters and bringing it back into the flux of time. They belong at the intersection of past and present. They are past history made alive in the present.

History as active memory is also central to Jewish thought. It has often been noted that Judaism, unlike other ancient civilizations, is characterized by a profound sense of history and by an understanding that institutions evolve within precise historical circumstances¹. Nonetheless, as Yosif H. Yerushalmi has noted in *Zakhor*, there has been no proper Jewish historiography until very recent times². In fact, Jewish commentators of the Scriptures have often shown a certain indifference towards historical accuracy and have juxtaposed events that happened in remote historical times as if they were contemporary. Unlike the modern conception of history, in which memories of the past are organized in a chronological chain of events linked by strict relations of cause and effect, within the Jewish conception of history, historical events are often translated into models of behavior. Instead of translating memory into history, as Stefano Levi Della Torre notes, Judaism translates history into memory³. The Exodus from Egypt into the desert, the destruction of the idols, the establishment of a pact between humans and God are past events retold again and again so that they become paradigms of behavior in the present. During the Passover Seder, the repetition of the words from the Haggadah and the symbolic food assembled on the table, reminders of the Biblical story of enslavement and liberation, become vehicles for the transmission of memory from one generation to the next. Here what counts most is the act of remembering the past and its re-actualization in the present.

In this act of remembering, history becomes the repetition of an attempt to salvage the past, to rescue its remnants and bring them back into the flow of time in the hope that they get a second chance, another possibility. In psychoanalysis, through interaction between analyst and patient, through the recollection and the interpretation of the patient's dreams, something from the past is salvaged and the present is changed. Similarly, in Dion's art, the process of gathering fragmentary objects

¹ See Momigliano 1975.

² Yerushalmi 1982, 16.

³ Levi Della Torre 1994, 42.

from the sand and arranging them in a museum cabinet, as well as the interaction between the objects and the viewer, are more important than the final art work on display. All these gestures, the religious, the scientific, and the artistic – the ritual lifting of a piece of unleavened bread at Passover, the retelling of a fragmentary dream and its interpretation, the gathering of debris from the banks of a river – share a common framework. All, in the encounter between past and present, give a central place to the human subject: not the objective and detached observer of nineteenth century science, but an involved viewer whose gaze makes this encounter possible.

The main hypothesis of this essay is that, in Giorgio Bassani's works, and in particular in *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, it is possible to retrace the steps of this encounter between past and present, of this idea of history as memory. I will discuss my hypothesis by focusing on the process of formation of the narrative subject through the analysis of two modes of gazing, two different ways of looking at the past, represented respectively by the novel's narrator and by the character of Micòl Finzi-Contini.

As such, my examination will unfold in two parts. In the first part, through an analysis of *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, I will discuss the construction of the narrator's Jewish identity as a response to Fascism and anti-Semitism, as a choice of life in response to a collective death drive; here belonging to Judaism takes on the form of a feeling of memory, the emotion of being part of the history of a group. In the second part, I will show how, in Bassani's works, the preservation of Jewish memories does not simply consist in narrating Jewish stories, but rather in sharing a way of remembering the past which is central to Jewish history and thought: the idea of history as memory, as an attempt at salvaging the past and changing the present.

Giorgio Bassani dedicated a considerable part of his literary work to narrating the life of the Jewish community of Ferrara during the Fascist period and the Second World War. While reading the cycle of his stories that begins with *Cinque storie ferraresi* (1956) and ends with *L'odore del fieno* (1972), readers often encounter the same characters and the same settings, find the same streets and squares, hear the same voices, and become part of a contained literary world filled with internal references and echoes; at the same time, they find themselves in front of a microcosm that takes on meanings that extend beyond the small northern

Italian city and its Jewish community. Significantly Bassani gathered five of his novels and five of his short stories in a collective volume entitled *Il romanzo di Ferrara*: the tale of a particular small city written in a literary form, the novel, that was conceived for a large, general readership.

In a brief review article written in 1974 for the magazine *Il Tempo*, Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote that Bassani's literary works, as well as his inspiration to write, were the result of the author's nostalgia for the world of the middle class ⁴. Since he was Jewish, Fascism banned him from a world to which he was deeply connected. Deprived of the freedom of being bourgeois, the bourgeoisie appeared to him in a nostalgic light, as a lost condition and a world to regret. According to Pasolini, Bassani's writing is a nostalgic *nostos* to the heavenly places from which he was exiled.

Although we agree with Pasolini's interpretation that Bassani's writing is characterized by a profoundly nostalgic tone, in this essay, we contend that Bassani's nostalgia pertains to something larger than the bourgeoisie, inasmuch as Ferrara, its middle class, and its Jewish community also represent the general passing of time, the past, and what is lost of the past. Similarly, Bassani's detailed accounts of the life of the Jewish community of Ferrara, as well as his narrator's recovery of a historical and cultural sense of Jewish identity, are not so much consequences of persecution and exile as active responses to it; not so much a nostalgic pilgrimage to the dear, lost places of one's own past, as a sentimental journey that, through narrative, tries to bring the past back to life.

In the fourth chapter of *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, the narrator describes the link between himself and the young Finzi-Continis, and between himself and Judaism, as a type of intimacy:

Per quanto concerne me personalmente, nei miei rapporti con Alberto and Micòl c'era stato da sempre qualcosa di più intimo [...]. Qualcosa di più intimo. Che cosa, propriamente?

Si capisce: in primo luogo eravamo ebrei, e ciò in ogni caso sarebbe stato più che sufficiente. Tra noi poteva in pratica non essere successo mai nulla, nemmeno il poco che derivava dall'aver scambiato di tempo in tempo qualche parola. Ma la circostanza che fossimo quelli che eravamo, che almeno due volte all'anno, a Pasqua e a *Kippùr*, ci presentassimo con nostri rispettivi genitori e parenti stretti davanti a un certo portone di via Mazzini [...]: a

⁴ Pasolini 1999, 1990-1994.

noi ragazzi non sarebbe occorso niente di più perché ritrovandoci altrove, e soprattutto in presenza di estranei, passasse subito nei nostri occhi l'ombra o il riso di una certa speciale complicità e connivenza.⁵

This is far from the stereotypical opposition between Judaism as a religion of law and Christianity as a religion of the heart. In the narrator's words, in fact, Judaism immediately presents itself as an intimate, indefinite emotion of complicity and connivance, as a feeling of silences, smiles, confidential nods, but also of ritual and family. It is the emotion of a single person who finds his individuality in discovering that he is part of a family or group with its own language, rites and history. In comparison with this emotion, the bureaucratic, legal or administrative aspects – that is whether or not one is registered as a member of the Jewish community of Ferrara counts for almost nothing:

Che fossimo ebrei [...] e iscritti nei registri della stessa Comunità israelitica, nel caso nostro contava ancora abbastanza poco. Giacché cosa mai significa la parola «ebreo», in fondo? Che senso potevano avere, *per noi*, espressioni quali «Comunità israelitica» o «Università israelitica», visto che prescindevano completamente dall'esistenza di quell'ulteriore intimità, segreta, apprezzabile nel suo valore soltanto da chi ne era partecipe, derivante dal fatto che le nostre due famiglie, non per scelta, ma in virtù di una tradizione più antica di ogni possibile memoria, appartenevano al medesimo rito religioso, o meglio alla medesima Scuola?⁶

The words «Jew», «Jewish community», and «Hebrew university» lose their meaning if separated from the intimate, secret emotion of sharing with others the same collective memory, the same rituals, the same school.

In these pages, Judaism is not described as an identity, but as a sense of belonging. It does not have the rigid and immutable character of a concept defined by an external, often hostile gaze. It is rather the feeling of a single person who sees himself as a part of a history that is larger than himself, of a collective history whose origins are older than any memory. Moreover, what the narrator is talking about in this passage is not only the affirmation of a generic belonging to Judaism, but also the more precise affirmation of belonging to its various schools – in particular, to the Italian school of Judaism which, at the levels of religiousness, rituals and social extraction, is so different from the German or Levantine schools. Thus in the microcosm of Ferrarese Judaism,

⁵ Bassani 1998, 341.

⁶ *Ivi*, 341-342.

through the narrator's gaze, the reader perceives the macrocosm of the Jewish Diaspora with its differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, the differences between Italian, German and Levantine schools, between assimilated and orthodox, between the Hebrew of the rabbis, the half-Venetian, half-Spanish dialect spoken by the Herrera – «alti, magri, calvi, con le lunghe facce pallide ombrate di barba, vestiti sempre di blu o di nero» – and the Italian of the Finzi-Continis – with their «golf e calzettoni color tabacco [...] [le loro] lane inglesi e tele gialline»⁷ of the type worn by country gentlemen. «E tuttavia, pur così diversi com'erano», the narrator remarks, «io li sentivo fra loro profondamente solidali»⁸. In the small Ferrarese synagogue of the Italian school, the remains of a millenarian history pass before his eyes, one that in its extraordinary variety and its solidarity is a lesson in unity and multiplicity for the individual.

Thus, through a gradual process of differentiation, the individual begins to take shape, inasmuch as he is a member of a community, a memory within which an infinity of others are distinguishable, none of which counts by itself for its specific differences, but all of which count for the generative process of distinction which allows them to exist. Differentiation is a central aspect of Judaism: it descends directly from the idea of divine transcendence, from the notion that the divine and the human are always separate. The universe, animals, human beings and all that is created are born through differentiation. In Genesis, God's first act is precisely a sign of differentiation, a separation of unformed matter and the void that open up before him, a separation of light from darkness, of the waters above from those below, the seas from the emerging lands. Through this process of differentiation between groups and individuals, and of complicity between groups and individuals, the individual discovers his own subjectivity not as an idolatrous identification, or as a conflictual opposition, but as part of a collective history.

The rest of this essay will therefore be dedicated to the analysis of this process of formation of individuality. As we shall see, in *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, this formation takes place through two modes of gazing. There is a nostalgic gaze and a compassionate one: one which threatens the subject's wholeness, the other that protects it through the construction of a relationship between the other and the group. These

⁷ *Ivi*, 345.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

are two ways of looking at the past that will bring us to the Jewish idea of history as memory that informs the pages of the novel.

At the moment of solemn benediction, when all children are gathered beneath the paternal *tallith* as beneath so many tents, the narrator turns to look at the Finzi-Continis who are on the bench directly behind him. Through the holes and tears wrought by the years in the fragile cloth of his *talèd*, the narrator sees Professor Ermanno pronounce the words of the *beruba* and returns the smiles and the curiously inviting winks that Alberto and Micòl send him through the holes in their father's prayer shawl. Under paternal guidance, beneath the limits of the tent, the contours of subjectivity and the sense of belonging to a collective history take shape.

In the scriptures and in myth, a backwards glance is often the sign of the violation of a pact. One such violator who comes to mind is Lot's wife who in Genesis 19.26 looks back at Sodom and Gomorrah in flames beneath the rain of sulfur and fire, or Orpheus who breaks the pact established with Hades that he will not turn around to look at Eurydice until she has left the underworld: he turns to see if his beloved is following him and loses her forever. For their transgressions Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt and Orpheus is dismembered and scattered by the Furies. These are subjects who have been scattered by the force of nostalgia for the past, or by a desire of identification with that which has been left behind, or by a form of curiosity that reifies and scatters. As if that backward glance were a threat to the subject's integrity.

The narrator of the Finzi-Continis is also continually looking back: «Al solito mi ero voltato a guardare»⁹. But the tallith, the paternal embrace, limits and protects him. It signals the limits of one's subjectivity, preventing the subject from being scattered and from disappearing in a desire to identify with the world, in the doing and undoing of oneself. As the shining surface of Perseus' shield allows the hero to confront the Medusa's gaze – by reflecting it – without being turned to stone, the threading of the paternal cloak filters the narrator's curious glances around the room, revealing his urge to satisfy an innate desire to be other than himself: his impulse is to identify himself with the richness and refined culture of the Finzi-Continis, with the delicate, sing-song, intoned voice of Professor Ermanno, with his clear pronunciation of Hebrew, or with the religious zeal of the Herrera brothers – all of whom

⁹ Bassani 1998, 346.

are so different from his «grossolano e ‘assimilato’»¹⁰ father and from the anonymous mass that fills the little synagogue in Ferrara. But here, in Bassani, we are no longer on the terrain of myth, we are in historical time. What is being described is not an individual heroic feat but an ordinary, collective practice, a ritualistic gesture repeated throughout the centuries by which life, through the affection and guidance of a father for his son, is defended from the temptation of a complete identification with the other and from a spontaneous relapse into indistinctness.

The subject in Judaism, as Stefano Levi Della Torre reminds us in *Mosaico*, is both collective and individual. On the one hand, the minyan is prescribed – the quorum of ten adult males from whom the community is built. On the other, the tallith is prescribed – the liturgical cloak that circumscribes and isolates, within the community act, the space of the single person, his gathering and his personal relationship with the Torah¹¹. In Bassani too, the subject takes shape in the tension between the individual dimension and the collective one, between the definition of subjective impulses and the construction of a relationship with the collectivity, understood first of all as the memory of a common history. It is precisely this second way of gazing that I drew attention to, a second glance backward, but one whose purpose is to preserve memory.

Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini is truly a space of memory. The intricate geography of trees, paths and canals that cross it, just as the labyrinthine structure of the *magna domus*, where every corner recalls a moment of the past, are almost a spatial translation of the complexity of memory and of the Biblical imperative to remember the past:

And thou shalt repeat [these words] when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thine house, and on thy gates. (Deuteronomy 6.7-9)

Even space carries the signs of memory. And everything in the Finzi-Contini house religiously recalls the past. For this reason the garden and the villa are filled with «venerande testimonianze»¹², that is to say, they abound with memories that one cannot and must not forget. For

¹⁰ *Ivi*, 465.

¹¹ Levi Della Torre 1994, 45.

¹² Bassani 1998, 500.

example there are the old, luxurious objects that are preserved with the greatest care by the gardener Perotti: the dark blue brougham, «dalle grandi ruote gommate, le stanghe rosse, e lustro tutto di vernici, cristalli, nichelature»¹³ in which Alberto and Micòl Finzi-Contini go to school, or the house's antiquated elevator, «tutto lucidi legni color vino, scintillanti lastre di cristallo adorne di una M, di una F, e di una C elaboratamente intrecciate»¹⁴. These precious old objects not only represent the wealth that surrounds the Finzi-Continis, but they also allude indirectly to the recent history of Italian Judaism. In their capacity as signs of the standing that the family has achieved in the last hundred years, these objects tell the story of the rapid integration of the Jews into Italian society after the emancipation of 1848. Their preservation is a way of guarding the memory of an era of great hopes and great social changes. In addition, perhaps, these same objects, in their closed and inviting character, preserve an indefinable memory of the ghetto experience:

Essere preso alla gola dall'odore pungente, un po' soffocante, tra di muffa e di acqua ragia, che impregnava l'aria racchiusa in quell'angusto spazio, e avvertire d'un tratto un immotivato senso di calma, di tranquillità fatalistica, di distacco addirittura ironico, fu una cosa sola.¹⁵

One even breathes the same stagnant, comfortable air – slightly oppressive and protective – in the villa's old garage, where a strange and pleasant odor floats, a mixture of gasoline, oil, old dust, citrus («l'odore era proprio buono – disse subito Micòl, accorgendosi che tiravo su col naso. Anche a lei piaceva molto») ¹⁶. Or again in the dining room that looks onto the park: it is intimate, separate and buried «come l'oblò del *Nautilus*»¹⁷; or again in Professor Ermanno's office, that is a narrow little room crammed with an incredible quantity of books and the most varied objects.

Preserved in Professor Ermanno's office, however, are not only the traces of a recent history, the vague and indefinable memories of a life in the ghetto and the unequivocal signs of the conquest of freedom; he tries to preserve a specifically Jewish memory as well. Among the professor's books stand out a collection of volumes on Jewish antiquities and two small works on the history of the Venetian Jews: the one con-

¹³ *Ivi*, 339.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, 499.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, 415.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, 467.

tains all the inscriptions of the Jewish cemetery of the Lido, gathered together and translated; the other is on the Jewish poetess Sara Enriquez Avigdor who lived in Venice in the first half of the seventeenth century. The garden and the *magna domus* of the Finzi-Continis thus present themselves as spaces in which an ambivalent memory is reflected: on the one hand they reflect the desire to integrate into Italian society, to leave the past behind; on the other they reflect the desire to resist a complete assimilation, to preserve a memory of the past and of Jewish history. They express the Jewish freedom described by Vladimir Jankélévitch in *Ressembler et dissembler*: the desire to resemble others and adapt to the culture of a majority, and, at the same time, the desire to preserve a sense of religious or cultural difference; the human freedom to be at once equal and different, oneself and something other than oneself¹⁸.

Professor Ermanno's decision to have the little Spanish synagogue in via Mazzini restored at his own expense must be read in this light. In 1933, Mussolini made political changes to increase the number of people registered in the Fascist party. Even in the small Jewish community of Ferrara, notes Bassani, the number of people registered increased to ninety percent. Professor Ermanno and the Finzi-Continis, however, did not register. Instead he has an old synagogue restored, one which for at least three centuries was used as a storeroom rather than for worship. The small Spanish synagogue in via Mazzini, as well as the professor's collection of books on Jewish antiquities, and his whole house, pregnant with memories, represent a small acts of resistance to Fascism and a call to the Jewish community of Ferrara not to allow the integration into Italian society, which had begun with the Risorgimento, to translate, under Fascism, into a complete assimilation and a total cancellation of Jewish memory.

But the figure that more than any other represents memory in *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* is Micòl. As a foreshadowing of her approaching end, Micòl doesn't love the future, «ad esso preferendo di gran lunga 'le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui', e il passato, ancora di più, 'il caro, il dolce, il pio passato'»¹⁹. This religious sense of time, the idea that of a *sainted* past that conceals the possibility and impossibility of the present, is precisely the distinctive key to her character. For Micòl, «pii pellegrinaggi»²⁰ are long walks to the places of her childhood, to

¹⁸ Jankélévitch 1984, 44.

¹⁹ Bassani 1998, 578.

²⁰ *Ivi*, 409.

the corners of the garden where one can still make out the remains of a past life. These places, objects, and situations transmit less a sense of nostalgia for the past or the idea that revisiting it may lead us to a different future as they do the idea of a liberation of a past that has remained hidden, unexpressed, forgotten or simply dormant: a small launching point hidden amongst the thick vegetation where Alberto and Micòl left for long canoe trips when they were children; the Perottis' colonial house where they stayed to eat extraordinary non-kosher bean soups; the garden wall against which a ladder generally leaned, which they used for their brief flights from the paternal house. These were three small transgressions whose remains – the launching point, the colonial house, the garden wall – bear witness to all of the possibilities that have remained unexpressed in the past. Like Benjamin's angel of history, pushed towards the future by a storm that it is unable to oppose, and with its face turned towards a past in ruins, Micòl lifts her gaze from a future that she cannot know and turns it pitifully onto the ruins of the past, on the catastrophe of objects, places and situations which still preserve, in their abandonment and in their being remains of something which is no longer, a ray of light of all the possibilities of life that were interrupted in the past, of all that which could have been and did not become²¹. It is not simply a question of a nostalgic re-evocation of the past. For Micòl, as well as for Bassani, memory is an active recollection in which the remains of the past are restored, making possible a different development of the present and another possibility for the future.

Precisely because of her sensibility with regard to the past, Micòl escapes the nostalgia for old things; she escapes from memories of a time gone by, from the antiquated memories that seem to surround the Finzi-Continis. She does not like the dark blue carriage that is used for special occasions, the brougham that the coachman Perotti continues to polish like new, and which Micòl thinks should be left to sink into oblivion. «Anche le cose muoiono, caro mio», Micòl says to the narrator, «e dunque, se anche loro devono morire, tant'è, meglio lasciarle andare»²².

Where her friend Malnate, who believes in the future and progress, would see a necessity, Micòl sees only a pile of ruins. But they are ruins which in their state of abandonment can reveal the traces of a forgotten or dormant life. The dark, oblong outline of the canoe, for example, in

²¹ I am of course referring to Walter Benjamin's ninth thesis on the concept of history. See Benjamin 1996, IV, 392-393.

²² Bassani 1998, 418.

its loss of function, in its capacity as a leftover of history – now nothing more than a «bigia sagoma oblunga e scheletrica», – reveals the life that passed through it, through the gaze that snatches it from the past: «Guarda invece là il sandolino, e ammira, ti prego, con quanta onestà, dignità, e coraggio morale, lui ha saputo trarre dalla propria assoluta perdita di funzione tutte le conseguenze che doveva»²³.

For this reason too, perhaps, Micòl is a passionate collector of *lât-timi*, that is cups, goblets, flasks, bits of glass of every type that could have become precious objects, but that were instead thrown out and forgotten. And now, lined up on the shelves of her room, they emanate the weak, milky light of a past that has not been expressed but that never completely died.

At other times, Micòl's gaze lingers on the trees in the garden, on «i grandi, i quieti, i forti, i penserosi' [alberi]»²⁴ that she can recognize and name one by one. Even in the trees, Micòl sees the remains of an archaic, dormant past, a suspended and immobile life that is waiting to be reawakened. The seven *Washingtoniae graciles*, the beloved desert palms with their «tronchi bruni, secchi, curvi, scagliosi»²⁵, remind her of the seven hermits of the Thebaid, dried by the sun and by fasting, or seven St. John the Baptists, feeding only on locusts. Micòl seems to call upon the trees to speak as if she were trying to take nature out of its silence, out of the muteness and deep sadness in which, as Benjamin writes, nature finds itself after the Fall²⁶. And perhaps it is for this same reason that Micòl's speech is woven with fragments of literary and artistic quotations – from Mallarmé to Baudelaire to Debussy – as if language were a way to salvage other suspended discourses that were never finished, of which only a broken, spread-out memory remains, an anthology of quotations.

On the other hand, Micòl's temporal dimension is the present, as her vitality and uneasiness demonstrate. Micòl is an active, uneasy character, animated by a strong will to preserve and affirm life at times when life seems seriously threatened. The «caro terremoto»²⁷, as her father calls her, finds the time to look after everything. She takes care of her studies and the general management of the household, her own learning

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ivi*, 408.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Benjamin 1996, I, 73.

²⁷ Bassani 1998, 98.

and her family. And despite the forms of discrimination introduced by the racial laws that exclude Jews from the professions, she nevertheless goes to Venice to write her thesis on Emily Dickinson and then graduate. Her Italian translation of a poem by Dickinson tells of a dialogue between two lives that tenaciously resist silence and death as far as they are able. «Da tomba a tomba, come due congiunti / incontratisi a notte, / parlavamo così; finché raggiunti / l'erba ebbe nomi e bocche»²⁸.

But of course Micòl's vitality is incomplete. Her gaze also transmits an awareness of the precariousness of the future. Despite the loving care of the gardeners who bind them in straw every year, Micòl does not know whether her beloved *Washingtoniae graciles* will survive the cold winter of 1938. And in the foggy days that the winter promises, when the circle of discrimination slowly tightens around the Finzi-Continis, Micòl looks past the panes of the window, she stares out at the horizon, she pushes her gaze beyond the treetops, onto the roofs of the houses, the towers of the castle, onto the marble of the Duomo of Ferrara. But the thick fog of history blocks her view.

All the same, despite the tragedy of history, Micòl's vitality is in some sense opposed to Fadigati's melancholy, it is opposed to the waters of the Pontelagoscuro in which the doctor drowns²⁹, and into which, at times, the narrator himself would like to let himself fall. Her vitality is a paradoxical form of hope in contrast to the impulse to self-annihilation that the doctor represents. «[P]er me in realtà non c'era più speranza, nessuna speranza», says the narrator as he looks at himself in the opaque water of the kitchen mirror and he imagines that a hurricane is about to scatter his little family that has gathered to celebrate the first evening of Pesach, to scatter it «come foglie leggere, come pezzi di carta, come capelli di una chioma incanutita dagli anni e dal terrore...». «Ma chi può mai prevedere?»³⁰ he adds. And in fact the phone rings, Alberto invites him to visit the Finzi-Continis and, after a happy bike ride through the deserted streets of Ferrara, he distinguishes Micòl's familiar outline on the threshold of the *magna domus*: «la sua figurina bruna incisa su uno sfondo di luce bianchissima»³¹ which rekindles hope, despite the historical period.

²⁸ *Ivi*, 450. This is a translation of the Emily Dickinson poem that opens «I died for beauty».

²⁹ In *Gli occhiali d'oro*, *ivi*, 314.

³⁰ *Ivi*, 480.

³¹ *Ivi*, 482.

Of course the narrator's hope will prove vain. The future will present itself to him precisely as a storm that scatters lives. «What we call progress», Benjamin writes, «is *this* storm»³². History for Micòl, and for Bassani, is not progress; it is neither the naive, optimistic history of the narrator's father, nor Malnate's utopia, whose future Micòl abhors, but the paradoxical history that, by turning its back on the future, sets its gaze on the ruins of the past, on the remains of all that could have been and was not, and by looking at them, gives them a possibility. In her gaze there is more than a passing resemblance to the Jewish idea of history as memory, remains and possibility, history as a construction of hope. It is an idea of history that informs Bassani's own writing.

When the narrator, as a Jew, is expelled from Ferrara's municipal library, Professor Ermanno puts at the young man's disposal his personal library so that he might finish his thesis. It is the last days of the winter of 1939 and the garden of the Finzi-Continis, all white, «sepolto sotto una coltre di neve»³³, appears to the narrator as an anchor to hang on to in order to stop the inexorable flow of time:

Il cuore abitato da un oscuro, misterioso lago di paura, mi aggrappavo alla scrivanietta che il professor Ermanno aveva fatto collocare per me sotto la finestra di mezzo del salone del biliardo, come se, così facendo, mi fosse dato di arrestare l'inarrestabile progresso del tempo.³⁴

It is in this context that the narrator receives a gift from the professor containing the two short works on the history of the Venetian Jews that the professor had worked on in his youth. The two texts are mentioned several times in the novel. The first time is when the narrator and the professor are taking a walk around the tennis courts and talking about Italian culture and ancient Jewish remembrances – the walk and the conversation almost seem to be an apotropaic wall against the *new* that is advancing, represented by the tennis courts. «Aveva sempre in serbo per me le copie dei suoi lavoretti storici veneziani, non me ne dimenticassi!»³⁵, the professor reminds him several times as he guides him along the row of bedrooms and corridors that lead to Alberto's room. And it is finally here, in the large, warm, silent parlor of the Finzi-Continis house, where the professor, both loving and respectful, showers him

³² Benjamin 1996, IV, 392-393.

³³ Bassani 1998, 469.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ivi*, 443.

with sympathy and admiration for his tenacity in his work:

Mi guardava con occhi ardenti, brillanti: come se da me, dal mio futuro di letterato, di studioso, si aspettasse chissà che cosa, come se contasse su di me per qualche suo disegno segreto che trascendeva non solamente lui ma anche me stesso ...³⁶

There is a light irony in the tone of this passage. Professor Ermanno's «glowing and shining eyes», which rest on the narrator and on his «future as a man of letters», and on the scholarly research that should fulfill a «secret, transcendent» ambition, hint perhaps at a sense of embarrassment on the part of the narrator – as if he, perceiving a lack of proportion between the professor's expectations and the task of completing a scholarly research on local Jewish history, were taking a step back; and as if he sensed that what is expected of him, of his future as writer, is memory – what is passed on to him is the task of transmitting Jewish memories to new generations, and the commandment to always remember the past, any past.

At the end of the short story *Argon*, Primo Levi too masks with light irony the embarrassment that he felt as a child every time his grandmother Màlia offered him an old, stale chocolate. Perhaps, like the gifts from Professor Ermanno, this chocolate too represents the passing of time and the importance of memory; the act of passing it on to the child represents the transmission of memories to new generations; and its sweet, sour flavor represents the pleasant and difficult task of remembering. The grandmother's chocolate is stale and worm-eaten, but the child quickly hides it away in his pocket. No matter how hard it is to swallow, nor how difficult they are to transmit, the child holds on tight to his chocolate, and the adult to his memories.

Perhaps, like Levi in *Argon*, in this passage of *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, Bassani too hints at the ambiguity of gifts, and, in particular, at the double nature of the gift of memory which is at once a lightness and a burden, a freedom and a responsibility, a vital possibility and a difficult, unavoidable duty. He seems to invite us to interpret all of his works as the completion of the ellipsis placed at the end of the paragraph, as the realization of Professor Ermanno's hope that someone make another attempt, give himself another possibility and continue his work on memory. In this light *Il giardino*, as well as all the other novels and

³⁶ *Ivi*, 472.

stories that compose the *Romanzo di Ferrara*, can be read as a series of works that preserve Jewish memories, not simply because they recount Jewish stories but because they share a way of remembering the past that is central to Jewish history and thought: memory as an attempt at salvaging the past and changing the present.

As Levi Della Torre has remarked in *Mosaico*, this attempt, this constantly renewed possibility, is central to Judaism and to the Biblical notion of the «remnant». In his interpretation, the remnant does not so much refer to those who have been saved through their goodness as to those who have had the privilege of surviving and who therefore have the responsibility to bear witness to the past and put history back into motion ³⁷. Perhaps both Ermanno's historical research and the tale of Bassani's narrator reflect, in different ways, a similar chance, a similar duty, to salvage the past. Perhaps the secret design that transcends both Professor Ermanno and the narrator, and which is sealed by the gift of the two works on Venetian antiquity, coincides with this possibility, effort, and hope. The professor has not managed to finish the research he began in his youth, namely to write a history of the Jews of Venice, he knows that his son Alberto is not interested in historical and literary studies, and he will not live long enough to see the project through. Possibility and effort reappear however in the narrator, who is passionate about study and literature.

Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini, however, is a work of fiction. As such, it deals with the past in ways that are different from pure historical research, traditional literary criticism, or from the kind of learned, scholarly writing favored by Professor Ermanno. Unlike narratives that aim at an entirely objective discourse, literary texts combine history and autobiography with fiction and imagination; they mix collective and individual history, objective and subjective narratives. Thus, in Bassani, the recovery of the Jewish past does not so much unfold under Professor Ermanno's objective, historical gaze, as under the subjective gaze of memory – as if the narrator of *Il giardino* had picked up the thread of Jewish history that, years before, Professor Ermanno had passed on to him, and used it to weave a narrative work peopled with imaginary characters, fictitious settings, made-up events that give readers a kind of knowledge of that same past which is not merely factual.

On the one hand, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* is characterized by

³⁷ Levi Della Torre 1994, 42-43.

precise references to historical facts, real places, names, and dates, and by a degree of concreteness and precision in describing reality that has led readers to wonder how much of the novel's plot is fictional, how much is real, whether or not its characters are inspired by real people, where to draw the line between history and literature, reality and imagination. The presence of historical events in the novel, as well as the author's attention to their exactness, is certainly linked to the fact that among these events is the Shoah: there is a history that can no longer be ignored by a writer, and that requires care and attention in order not to betray its historical truth. On the other hand, the novel seems to evince a need for concreteness and precision even in detailing events that are likely to be the product of imagination. At the beginning of the novel, for instance, the narrator names the members of the Finzi-Contini family one by one, he mentions the address where they lived and the exact day of the year in which he found the impulse to write down his memories, a Sunday in April 1957. Here, concreteness and precision acquire a meaning that goes beyond attention to the veracity of historical facts and has to do, instead, with the way in which the figurative use of language can preserve a memory of the past and provide a different, not strictly historical knowledge of the past. Without betraying the veracity of historical facts, the use of literary tools and imagination – that intimate and slightly melancholic list of names, the concreteness and specificity of that address and that date – gives to the narrative a historical concreteness that brings the story of the Finzi-Continis closer to the novel's readers and may have consequences on their emotions and their ethical sense. Thus, the inclusion of history within a fictional narrative counts not only as a way to bear witness to the past but also as a way to transform that same history into a paradigm for the present. What counts in this novel is not only the historical datum, but also its actualization, not only the fact, but also the possibility of transforming it into memory of the past in the present. Not only the historical past that Professor Ermanno studies but also the past that Micòl evokes and makes alive in the present by her language, her mood, her pilgrimages to the dear places of her childhood, her memory.

At issue here is a kind of writing that bears witness to the past without renouncing the resources offered by imagination. It is a literature that includes historical facts without suppressing the subjective gaze on those facts, without denying that other not purely factual, not purely objective elements of writing – such as the author's gaze, the narrator's and the character's voices, as well as the readers' reactions – may also

contribute to knowledge of reality. Although history is necessary for knowing the past, historical facts are not enough. For sorrows and joys, justice and injustice, emotions and ethics, to be carried from the past to the present, for suffering to come out of the past and be put back within the circle of life, as Aharon Appelfeld writes in *Beyond Despair*³⁸, for history to be memory, it is necessary to have a type of writing that, without posing a threat to the integrity of the historical discourse, does not suppress the subjective gaze on the past or sharply oppose historical and literary discourse but sees them as two equally important sides of the knowledge of the past. In Judaism, history is necessary because meaning is not ahistorical: meaning is not an eternal, immutable entity, as it is in myths, but it happens in history and in its becoming. At the same time, writing and interpretation of history are necessary so that that history can be saved and transmitted and so that it can acquire different meanings in different times for different generations.

As James Young has remarked in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, history and literature, reality and writing have never been diametrically opposed; they are interdependent, they permeate one another like the past and our response to it³⁹. Writing remembers the past so that the past can find its voice in the present; literature incorporates historical facts and characters so that they can become the inspiration and paradigm of resistance in the present. In this light, the narrative voice is no longer just the descriptive, analytical voice of a detached observer; it is rather a performative voice of memory and healing.

During a visit to an Etruscan cemetery, the vision of the ancient tombs of a lost civilization remind the narrator of the Finzi-Continis, and of the other families in the small Jewish community of Ferrara, and of their lives before the Shoah. The monuments to a lost civilization remind him of another civilization, persecuted and dispersed too, but still living and present. So begins *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*. It begins with a witness who tries to gather and connect the fragments of the past, with a voice that tries to tell their story today, a Sunday in April 1957, so that their story can find expression in the present, and perhaps both past and present can be healed. From the very beginning of *Il giardino*, the act of writing is an act of remembering, a response to the storm of the past, to the catastrophes of history, to inscrutable matter. Memory, here, reconnects reality and writing, history and lit-

³⁸ Appelfeld 1994, XIV.

³⁹ Young 1988, 4.

erature, facts and their interpretations, past and present. It turns the opposition between history and imagination into a vital tension: no longer the rights of history *versus* the rights of imagination, but the right of history *and* the rights of imagination. Here, within memory, the tigers and kittens of Ginzburg's poetics, the burden of writing the truth and the lightness of writing fiction, seem to find a possible reconciliation⁴⁰.

For the narrator of *Il giardino*, the Etruscan tombs that count not so much for their historical, archeological, or documentary meaning as for their ability to remind him of the Finzi-Continis and compel him to tell their story. Likewise, for Bassani, the recovery of the Jewish past, of any past, is not just history, archeology, or antiquarianism; rather, it has the richness of the subjective gaze with its emotions, its joys and sorrows, and with its ethics, its desire to call out injustices and its longing for justice, that are characteristic of literature, art, or psychology. It has the historical and eschatological depth that the human voice gains once it is within time – a voice that tries to bring back to the present fragments from the past and postpone at the horizon of time what may be the ultimate meaning of those fragments and those lives. Thus recovering the past is inspiration and paradigm, memory and hope. It is an inspiration to gather the fragments of the past, to listen to its voices and bring them back to life in the present. And it is a paradigm for action in the present inasmuch as these fragments and these voices, in their historical concreteness and specificity, become models for resistance in the present, hope for the future. In this historical specificity, in this temporal concreteness, they find a second chance of life. While remembering the story of the Finzi-Continis, «di Micòl e di Alberto, del professor Ermanno e della signora Olga –, e di quanti altri abitavano o come me frequentavano la casa di Corso Ercole I d'Este, a Ferrara, poco prima che scoppiasse l'ultima guerra»⁴¹, while giving voice to the concrete story of a Jewish family from Ferrara during World War II – Bassani also tells a universal story. Thanks to its historical specificity and concreteness, his imaginary tale takes on a universal meaning, becomes part of a collective memory and an abstract paradigm for humankind.

⁴⁰ According to Natalia Ginzburg, when writers are confronted with past memories, they must choose between truth and imagination, reality and fiction, between «muoversi in mezzo a un branco di tigri» and «giocare con una nidiata di gattini». Ginzburg 1987, 195-196.

⁴¹ Bassani 1998, 317.

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