

“THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI-CONTINIS” AND CULTURAL MEMORY: The Portable Monument and Its Afterlives — By Henry Alejandro Guzmán Mitchell

INTRODUCTION

Giorgio Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* occupies a special place in Italian literary culture. An instant bestseller in 1962, it was soon followed by a film adaptation directed by Vittorio De Sica, for which he received the Academy Award in 1972. Since then, the novel has been translated, anthologized, and even adapted for the stage, reaching new generations of readers and critics who continue to praise the style and enduring power of Bassani's original text. Like most of Bassani's work, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is a story of return, both physically and in memory, to Ferrara, the place of his childhood. The novel's power arises in large part from the tragic real-life story of this place, and the annihilation of its Jewish community. Bassani, himself a Jew, witnessed the deportation and deaths of his closest friends and family at the hands of Nazi forces. The murder of its members, the destruction of its monuments, and the widespread amnesia concerning Italy's involvement in wartime persecution against Jews have pushed the community from living memory to the recesses of cultural memory. Today only forty Jews remain, and according to the community's head Rabbi, Luciano Caro, no marriages are in the offing.¹ The great generation is dying, and with them their memories, leaving local Ferrarese Jews to turn to archival records and works of historical fiction in order to understand their past.

The story Bassani writes is partly autobiographical. At least his representation of the place appears to be, even if the characters and eponymous family at its center are fictional. An

¹Alexandra Schwartz, “A Writer’s Tomb of Words, and the People Who Took It Personally,” *The New Yorker*, May 28, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-writers-tomb-of-words-and-the-people-who-took-it-personally>.

unnamed narrator tells the history and tragic end of the Finzi-Continis, an aristocratic Jewish family with long ties to the community who are all, with the exception of the eldest son Alberto, deported to Auschwitz and perish somewhere in Germany or Poland. The tragedy of their end arises in large part from the fact that their deaths are unknowable. In life, they were so well-known in the Ferrara of Bassani's novel, and so wrapped in a mythology all their own, that one couldn't help but notice their shiny brougham when it rode into town; or their immense family tomb that sat at the end of an abandoned lot next to the Jewish cemetery; or admire, not without envy, the large plot of land, more park than garden—known as *La Barchetta del Duca*—where they buried themselves for generations, only showing their faces on high holidays at the local synagogue. In the end, however, they passed unremarked, unknown, like millions of others, in gas chambers in Germany or Poland, leaving no trace, not even a grave, by which to remember them.

Before the tragedy of the Racial Laws, which removed Jewish professionals from their jobs, children from their schools, and all names from phonebooks, newspapers, and radio programs, Jews were a part of civic life in Italy. Prominent land-owning families like the Finzi-Continis existed in real life: Bassani himself grew up in a similar situation, his father collecting the majority of his income from rent payments. At the library, at school, at the tennis club, he frequently interacted with Jews and non-Jews alike. It was a time-tested phenomenon, a centuries-old fact: the Jews of Ferrara were fully enfranchised Italians, who had maintained a powerful presence in local politics and cultural life for nearly a century.

This integration was not unique to Ferrara. The *Risorgimento* had been a fruitful opening-up of Jewish life to Italian culture more broadly, testifying to the fundamental acceptance of Jews in nineteenth-century Italian civic life: one that could not be taken for

granted elsewhere in Europe, where the Jewish Question remained a constant and serious concern in intellectual and political circles. Above all, the assimilation of Jews into Italian civic life is perhaps most obviously attested by the role of Renzo Ravenna during the fascist period. Until the Racial Laws, he served as Ferrara's podestà (its fascist mayor), himself enacting many of the anti-Jewish measures Bassani writes about in the novel. That a Jew could hold such a position, especially under fascism, speaks to how thoroughly Jewish identity had been folded into Italian civic identity. For this reason, the Racial Laws came as a shock. They didn't just strip Jews of their rights; they retroactively declared impossible an Italian and Jewish identity that previous generations had taken as a matter of course.

The Garden of the Finzi-Continis follows one of these prominent land-owning families from unification-era enfranchisement to fascist persecution. The novel's narrator, an avatar for Bassani himself, knows the family from their rare encounters at the synagogue on high holidays, and from a once-a-year exam date when all children were obligated by the state to complete their placement exams at the public school. It was here that the young narrator met them, fatefully. Years later, having only seen the Finzi-Continis in these particular contexts, he receives a call from Alberto who invites him to play tennis on the private court in their garden. This visit is the first of many to the *Barchetta del Duca* our narrator makes. As the novel progresses and the Racial Laws press in on their lives, a small group consisting of the narrator and a few friends (Jews and non-Jews) congregate at the family estate for regular tennis matches in the afternoon. The garden provides a reprieve from the worsening political situation in Ferrara. Indeed, the home takes on mythical qualities, altering not a bit inside despite changes in the outside world: domestics are still employed, the family retains their land-holdings, and the historical inevitabilities of Nazism are anything but inevitable. Reading the novel from the other side of

history, however, the Finzi-Continis' home and garden is given—albeit retroactively—the qualities of a waiting room, or more fittingly, a tomb, where they, the living, are interred, awaiting destruction. By the novel's end, we realize that it, too, has become a tomb in its own right: a monument for the fictional characters in the novel to be sure, but also for the friends and family Bassani lost during the war whose deaths went unrecorded and were likely to disappear completely were it not for his work.

The novel-as-tomb is supported, I will argue, by the many references to tombs within it, and by the objects which Bassani invests with tomb-like qualities; above all the Finzi-Continis' own home, *La Barchetta del Duca*, and garden. In the end, Bassani's monument is a powerful artifact of the Second World War in Italy, a memorial of Ferrara's Jewry, a critique of aristocracy—especially of those who choose to live in a hermitage of their own making—and a text that is fundamentally about texts, one which shows characters reading, engaging with, and making meaning out of great works of literature, of which the novel is now one. Bassani's now-classic novel condenses a great deal of information into one site of cultural meaning that has, by its own virtues and continued engagement, inspired many other texts and adaptations. The particularities of the historical moment Bassani preserves were at risk of being forgotten—in part because those who were killed received no commemoration of their deaths, but primarily because of a widespread and active refusal throughout Italy to acknowledge its responsibility for wartime persecution against Jews. For this reason, I will put forth an interpretive framework that reads the text as a "portable monument," to use Ann Rigney's term, where threads of historical data and cultural symbols converge to create a lasting and revisitable site of meaning for Italy's postwar identity.

CULTURAL MEMORY: NORA, HALBWACHS, AND RIGNEY'S "PORTABLE MONUMENT"

Since this essay looks at the novel through the framework of cultural memory, it is worth defining the work and some of the terminology in the field before continuing any further. The field of cultural memory theory is, in origin, the outgrowth of “collective memory,” a term coined by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who saw individuals as agents whose personal histories were implicated in the larger histories of the collective. He understood memory-making as a collaborative and interpenetrative process between individual actors and cultures; a theory which, nearly forty years later, received serious attention from scholars in the fields of sociology, history, and memory theory. The first to rethink Halbwachs' model were Jan and Aleida Assman, who distinguished between "communicable," or living memory, and "cultural" memory proper, defining the latter as a constellation of cultural objects that are fixed and enshrined in that culture's canon even after the carriers of "communicable" memory die. A culture's memory, in other words, is made up of a "body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image."²

Almost contemporaneously, historian Pierre Nora coined the term *lieu de mémoire*, defining it as a condensation of cultural meaning into a form. He also based his theories on the work of Halbwachs, and was particularly inspired by Halbwachs' suggestion that places held special meaning for cultures because they could be visited, and revisited in the present.³ Taking this “spatial” model, Nora produced a groundbreaking history of French cultural memory by

² Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 125–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488538>, 132.

³ Ann Rigney, “Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory,” *Journal of European Studies* 35, no.1 (2005): 21.

locating and analyzing specific *lieux* of its national heritage.⁴ This was the initial approach at least, but as his work developed over nearly a decade, so did his definition of *lieu* to include a "material" as well as "non-material" place which "by dint of human will or the work of time, has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community."⁵ Whether physical, like a cathedral, or immaterial, like a distributed work of art, it qualifies as a *lieu de mémoire* if it remains a repository of meaning for the culture it represents.

Drawing on Nora's and the Assmans' work, literary theorist Ann Rigney holds up Oradour-sur-Glane as an example of a *lieu de mémoire* in France's cultural memory. A small village in the Limousin region of central-western France, it is one of the most brutal sites of Nazi violence during the Second World War. 643 people were murdered and the village was burned, leaving no trace of its inhabitants behind. In the aftermath of the war, the village became a landmark, a monument in the nation's history to Nazi crimes. Rigney writes that "with the consolidation of Oradour as a national memory site, other towns where atrocities had also been carried out but on a smaller scale ended up sidelined within the national arena. All roads seem to lead to the one *lieu de mémoire* at Oradour, as it were, symbol par excellence of Nazi injustice."⁶ In her analysis, this *lieu de mémoire* became a repository for the memories of other towns ravaged by Nazi forces, and thus changed how locals—now having to face news cameras—grieved. After becoming invested with meaning from all sides, it transformed into a national symbol of mourning.

⁴ Ann Rigney, "Plenitude," 18.

⁵ Pierre Nora, preface to, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). English translation: *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xvii.

⁶ Ann Rigney, "Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory," *Journal of European Studies* 35, no.1 (2005): 19.

Thinking with Halbwachs and Nora, and their conceptions of cultural memory sites as places to be visited and reinvested with meaning, Rigney proposes thinking about literature as a "portable monument," one which receives criticism and adaptation in its circulation throughout a cultural space, and so changes over time. Of importance in Rigney's argument is the continued relevance of a text-monument in the culture in which it circulates. Its "aesthetic properties," she argues, are as essential for making it memorable as the events it portrays.⁷ When thinking about the enduring relevance of a national text like *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, then, it is important to think about why it has achieved and held this position, and to what aesthetic qualities it owes its popularity. This essay will argue that the novel endures because it does something that a straight history can't: that is, it leaves its symbols both overdetermined, and underexplained. The ambiguities that persist are, what's more, productive because they invite interpretation. They create, by virtue of their unresolved ironies, an enduring transit line for generations of interpreters. This is evidenced by the adaptations that have come out—the first a film directed by Vittorio De Sica, the second an opera written by Michael Korie—that seek to smooth out the inconsistencies, promote certain meanings and suppress others. This is, ultimately, the prerogative and cost of adaptation: it permits by its selection of certain features and omissions of others the renewed relevance of the original text in the cultural sphere, while turning some of the productive symbols of the original into signs of miscarried meaning.

This paper will commence with a reading of the novel as a monument—both structural and symbolic—examining the tombs that appear within it and the novel's self-conscious relationship to historical narrativity. The second section will draw on the work of Hayden White to read the novel as a historical text that comments on its own narrativizing, and will examine Professor Ermanno, Micòl, and the narrator as three historians whose competing philosophies of

⁷ Ann Rigney, "Plenitude," 20.

history illuminate Bassani's own. The third section will examine the novel's afterlives—the De Sica film and the Korie opera—as legitimate acts of cultural memory that interpret the novel from the perspective of their own social present, but in doing so either misrepresent the cultural specificity of Ferrara in the 1930s or allow the symbolism of the original to miscarry.

PART 1: THE TOMB

The novel begins and ends with a tomb. Approaching middle-age and writing at a distance of over ten years, the novel's narrator takes us on a tour of his childhood and the characters who populated it. "For years I have wanted to write about the Finzi-Continis—about Micòl and Alberto, professòr Ermanno and signora Olga—and the others who lived or like me spent time at the house in Corso Ercole 1 d'Este, at Ferrara, shortly after the last war broke out."⁸ Travelling with him is a ten-year-old girl named Giannina who, fascinated by the Etruscan mausoleums they had driven nearly an hour outside Rome to see, realizes at once that within each tomb lies the embalmed body of someone who used to be alive, like her. She turns to her father to ask, "Why are old tombs less gloomy than new ones?" To which he replies, "Well, of course, people who've just died are nearer to us, so we love them more... you see, the Etruscans have been dead for such ages that it's as though they'd never lived, as if they'd always been dead."⁹ The youngster receives this fairytale with a hearty pause and finally says, "But now that you've said that... you've made me think that the Etruscans did actually live, you know, and I love them just as much as everybody else."¹⁰ This rumination, surprising and tender considering

⁸ Giorgio Bassani, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1962); English translation: *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, trans. Isabel Quigley (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 7.

⁹ Bassani, *Giardino*, 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

its source, prepares the reader for a long discourse on death, remembrance, and forgetting that underpins the novel. The little girl's question speaks to the ancient as much as to the recent past, to strangers and close friends alike whose deaths all face an ultimate and inevitable forgetting. It is only by the compassion and active imagination of the living, Bassani seems to be saying, that the recent or long-dead can be remembered for the vital subjects they once were.

"Our trip to the necropolis," he writes, "was wrapped round in the remarkable tenderness of what she had said. It was Giannina who made us ready to understand. It was she, the youngest, who in a way led us on."¹¹ Led them along she did; taking her words to heart, our author begins to change the way he looks at the tombs. He pays close attention to the decorations on the noble Matuta family's tomb, the "plaster casts of the beloved trusted objects of everyday life: stoppers, ropes, hatchets, shears, spades, knives, bows, arrows, even hunting dogs and marsh birds" that adorn the tufa walls.¹² From this historical data, he imagines what life may have been like for Etruscan tomb-visitors, what their weekend strolls may have consisted of, what they talked about. It's a game of make believe that goes against his sense of philology and history, but to which he gives himself with childlike abandon: "They would come from their nearby homes, probably on foot—I imagined—family groups, troops of young people like those we had met just now in the road, pairs of lovers or friends, or else alone; just as today, in Italian villages, the cemetery is still the place where every evening stroll is bound to end."¹³ The past is not difficult to imagine if one does so from a contemporary position, casting real-life people as ancient characters, placing them in familiar locales. History, whether done by the most serious or amateur of practitioners, is written in this way: one invariably interprets the past from their subjective position in the present. Not unlike fiction, it requires an imaginative faculty, a desire

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bassani, *Giardino*, 11.

¹³ Ibid.

not only to record the facts, but to synthesize and interpret, to invest the past with something of one's own.

The most obvious of these inventions is the Finzi-Contini family. While several Ferrarese elites would come to recognize themselves in Bassani's portrait, none was his sole inspiration. In truth, the Finzi-Continis were a composite of a few real-life families with whom Bassani was close. The eponymous family lived in a mansion in Ferrara, where, in fact, Bassani stayed for a few months while writing his novel. But many argue that the Finzi-Continis of the novel were actually modeled after the Finzi-Magrinis, one of few Ferrarese families who had a private tennis court and estate like the one that appears in the book. Others still say that it is modeled after the Bonfilioli family, who were Bassani's patrons and in whose library he wrote many of his works. The point is that while the Finzi-Continis weren't a "real" family, they were, at the same time, a caricature of a certain landowning class in Ferrarese society—one that was sufficiently realistic as to rustle some feathers.

Returning to the novel's first scene, we can interpret his re-enactment at the Etruscan cemetery as a "first pancake," a rehearsal if you will, for the novel's larger historical project. Here he proves—albeit on a small scale—that history-writing is, unavoidably, and always, based around a *narrative*. He places himself, the novelist-historian, in the shoes of ancient grave-visitors, imagining what ancient life may have been like using the limited historical data at his disposal. Making synthetic meaning out of the symbols on their tomb walls, he not only rehearses what he will do in the pages that follow, but what interpreters and adaptors will do to his work in years to come: he takes the signs of a long-dead civilization, places them in the lexicon of the present, and re-invests them with new meaning.

He does the same with the tomb of the Finzi-Continis, commissioned by Moisè Finzi-Contini—the family patriarch in whose honor the city dedicated a plaque on the wall of the Synagogue on Via Mazzini, "commemorating his virtues 'as an Italian and a Jew.'"¹⁴ This designation, inscribing the family's—and by extension the community's—integration in Ferrarese civic life, reifies their identities as "Italians" in the state Mazzini helped to create. But perhaps this sign is, also, a harbinger of persecution to come, and foreshadows the ease with which fascists decoupled the two identities—"Italian" and "Jewish." The family grave of Moisè Finzi-Contini, then, which sits "massive" and "imposing" at the end of an abandoned lot next to the adjoining Jewish cemetery, is seen to bear their family's history as consummate Italian Jews: at once outsiders and community leaders. Even in death they are set apart from the common run by their aristocratic airs, by their ostentatious show of wealth:

And with so much marble at his disposal, and such marble, too!—white from Carrara, red from Verona, grey flecked with black, yellow, blue, pale green—the architect had, in his turn, lost his head. An incredible mess came out of it, echoes of the mausoleum of Theodoric at Ravenna, the Egyptian temples at Luxor, Roman baroque, and even, as the stocky pillars of the peristyle showed, archaic Greek of Cnossus, all jostling one another. But there it was. And gradually, year after year, time that in its way always settles everything, somehow managed to harmonize this unlikely mixture of styles.¹⁵

This mix of styles, our narrator explains, can only be explained by the following: obviously, the architect was given "carte blanche" and had, admittedly, gone a bit crazy; but first and foremost, the design of the tomb spoke to the character of its commissioner, Moisè, who had been "swept up into the mood of euphoria" by the civil liberties afforded him, a Jew, by the newly unified Italian state—not least of which was the right to own land. The history of this Moisè, evoked most clearly in the design of his tomb, is also a history of the Jewish aristocracy generally, whose

¹⁴ Bassani, *Giardino*, 17-18.

¹⁵ Bassani, *Giardino*, 18.

expanded rights following the *Risorgimento* signaled their legitimate entrance into Italian society. The tomb of Moisè is, in this sense, a founding document, an architectural record of a community's arrival into civic life, built in the confidence that its place there was permanent.

The connection Bassani draws between the Matuta family tomb he describes in the first scene and that of the Finzi-Continis is striking. The Matuta tomb, like the one commissioned by Moisè, is off the beaten path, but immediately noticeable, set apart from the other ordinary tombs around it. To arrive at the Matuta family tomb, one must follow "a smooth paved road...winding round towards the hills of the hinterland..."¹⁶ The Finzi-Continis' tomb similarly rises "some distance from the entrance gate, in fact at the far end of an abandoned stretch of ground where no one had been buried for half a century"¹⁷—over which nettles, ferns and other wild plants had swarmed over the years. The Matuta tomb is large enough to house all of the family's dead, and is actually described in these terms: Bassani calls it "a second home" with beds on which the deceased "would be laid to rest with his fathers..."¹⁸ What's more, we are told that the tomb of the Finzi-Continis, especially its size and siting on the lot, re-enacts the customs of their aristocratic life in Ferrara: "the same isolation, the same separation with which the Finzi-Continis had surrounded their dead surrounded their other house as well, the house at the end of the Corso Ercole I d'Este."¹⁹ The Finzi-Continis' tomb is, then, a kind of second home resembling in many ways their actual house. As with the tomb that had managed to "harmonize" an "unlikely mixture of styles," so is the home at the end of Ercole I d'Este transformed over generations "into a kind of neo-Gothic manor-house, English style..."²⁰ But if the tomb can be read as a kind of second home, equally true is the inverse: that their home be read as a kind of second tomb. The evidence

¹⁶ Bassani, *Giardino*, 8.

¹⁷ Bassani, *Giardino*, 17.

¹⁸ Bassani, *Giardino*, 11-12.

¹⁹ Bassani, *Giardino*, 19.

²⁰ Bassani, *Giardino*, 20.

is in Bassani's similar treatment of the two sites. The garden, like the tomb, is reached by a winding, off-road path, accessible only to those who know where to look. Like the tomb, it is surrounded by neglected land, overgrown with weeds, separated from the rest of Ferrara by walls. Like the tomb, it houses a family that has withdrawn from the world, that receives visitors only on its own terms, and that preserves within its walls a way of life already, in some sense, finished. The Finzi-Continis do not simply live in their garden; they are interred in it, waiting, patiently, for a history that is already closing in around them.

It is in this way that Bassani evokes the ultimate annihilation of this Jewish community from the very start. The novel's time runs in two directions: the reader can choose to read it forwards—that is, keeping pace with the characters on whom the worrying implications of the Racial Laws bear gradually, even imperceptibly—or backwards, that is, from the point of knowing what the Racial Laws lead to: mass deportations to Auschwitz. Thus, the tomb of the Finzi-Continis in the first, a forward-looking reading, is something like their house: a structure set up in the expectation of permanence, of life continuing as normal, of the future stretching endlessly ahead. Of course, this is a reading that only permits if we ignore historical realities, if we suspend knowing the story's end and instead imagine what the Jewish community may have felt in the period of the Racial Laws when, despite escalating measures, the specter of Nazi annihilation was anything but inevitable. But if the novel is read backwards, one can't help but notice how the Nazi deportations haunt it from the beginning. Before the characters who inhabit the home at Ercole I d'Este are introduced in full, we visit the home in the present—in the late 1950s, when the novel was written, at which point the home, like many homes in Europe following the deportations, became a spot for looters and squatters. Despite once housing the noble Este family, it now doesn't even make it into the pages of the Touring Club (Italy's

equivalent of the Michelin Guide) because "it no longer exists, quite literally. All of the large trees... were cut down..."²¹ What's more, following the first run of desecration, the squatters decide to remove all remaining traces of the house's history, "scraping the last remnants of the old paintings off the walls"²² to ward off city inspectors who might evict them. Whereas before the war the Touring Club "never failed to mention it," now the house goes unremarked, unvisited, removed not only from recorded history, but now from active circulation in the cultural sphere. It is, to use Lia Brozgal's term, a "*non-lieu de mémoire*"—a concept she develops in her study of October 17th, 1961, a massacre of 200 Algerian protesters perpetrated by the city's police force that was covered up and thus almost entirely forgotten by the French public for the following twenty years. The sites of the murders weren't just well known throughout Paris—they were famous monuments known throughout the world, though these places bear no record of it. A term that can be "understood multiply as alternatives (or even challenges) to Nora's 'classic' *lieux* of franco-French national memory", the *non-lieu* makes room for *lieux* that have been destroyed, or otherwise resist palimpsestic readings.²³ The Touring Club of the novel sees to it that the house can no longer be visited, taking it out of circulation among Ferrara's cultural objects, and thus condemning it to be forgotten: "even the few Jews left who make up the languishing Jewish community seem to have no memory of it."²⁴ Of course, our narrator remembers it; he remembers it all too well. By virtue of his writing, he becomes a lone cultural carrier, a time traveller who is barred entry into the garden, but re-members it, that is, reconstructs it as much for himself as the reader. No longer a *lieu de mémoire*, as it were, but a

²¹ Bassani, *Giardino*, 21.

²² Ibid.

²³ Lia Brozgal, *Absent the Archive: Cultural Traces of a Massacre in Paris, 17 October 1961* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 158.

²⁴ Bassani, *Giardino*, 20.

non-lieu, the house at the end of Corso Ercole d'Este finds a new, definitive form in the language of the text that will, in time, replace what remains of the community's memories.

The novelist-as-historian is, furthermore, given a degree of freedom in his treatment of past events—one that the straight historian can't enjoy. Throughout the novel, the narrator is seen entering the garden and home of the Finzi-Continis many times: a series of returns made by his embodied character, and simultaneously by the novelist himself, a phantom who views these scenes all these years later, having of course lived past the story's end. As if *La Barchetta del Duca* were a real place, one which his avatar is permitted to enter and re-enter, he endows each visit to the *lieu de mémoire* with *a posteriori* meaning, that is, from the other side of history. If we read the novel in this way, the narrator's final return to *La Barchetta del Duca* is invested with a haunting quality: here Bassani-the-writer seems to step in with his own two feet, designating the home for entombment before its time. Rarely without his bike, Bassani's young avatar is seen climbing the old garden wall, pedalling "out into the open, meaning to make a wide turn round the clearing,"²⁵ before stopping and regarding the old familiar outhouse that witnessed many unsuccessful trysts with Micòl. His nocturnal return echoes the journey he made at the beginning of the novel to the Etruscan tomb, transforming the car gliding on "a smooth paved road...winding round towards the hills of the hinterland..." into the bike's "wide turn." Though the mode of transit is updated, the journeys mirror and speak to each other in revealing ways. For instance, the novelist's Etruscan sojourn actually intended a different destination: the tombs were arrived at by accident; it was really the medieval castle outside of Santa Marinella our narrator sought. "Attracted by the towers of a medieval castle that sprouted suddenly on the left," he decides to turn "down an unpaved country lane" that leads to the castle; only, when he arrives, it's not what he expects. Looking at it closely, it's "a lot less medieval than it promised from a

²⁵ Bassani, *Giardino*, 288.

distance,"²⁶ and they decide to visit the nearby Etruscan tombs instead. The initial journey, meandering and culminating in an unexpected, off-road destination, reifies the proverbial trip down memory lane, evoking most powerfully Nora's *lieu de mémoire*. The progression from medieval castle to Etruscan tomb functions as an analogue for *La Barchetta del Duca* and the Finzi-Contini tomb in the Jewish cemetery. Both destinations are reached by winding roads whose traversal awakens latent histories activated by the journeying writer. In the first case, the ancient sepulchre is presented to our narrator intact, with signs of the long-dead Etruscan civilization marking the walls, denoting ancient customs and rites that our narrator synthesizes, interprets, and refracts from his contemporary position. His gaze transfigures those signs into a story which, as yet unknown to the reader, is his own. Returning to the novel's first narrative invention, then, will allow us to read the novel's end. Nearly word for word, the final return to *La Barchetta del Duca* is recreated, becoming a kind of coda that, once repeated, retroactively imports meaning onto the first scene. The author's reconstruction of Etruscan life reads as follows:

They would come from their nearby homes, probably on foot—I imagined—family groups, troops of young people like those we had met just now in the road, pairs of lovers or friends, or else alone; just as today, in Italian villages, the cemetery gate is still the place where every evening stroll is bound to end. They came among the cone-shaped tombs, which are as solid and heavy as the bunkers the German soldiers strewed vainly all over Europe during this last war (gradually, through the centuries, the iron cart-wheels have cut two deep parallel furrows in the paved road that crosses the cemetery from one end to the other): tombs that, even inside, obviously resembled the fortress-houses of the living.²⁷

Etruscans, those ancient antecedents of the modern Italian people, become stand-ins for the characters of the novel. "Pairs of lovers" are imagined to have strolled from their homes to

²⁶ Bassani, *Giardino*, 7.

²⁷ Bassani, *Giardino*, 11.

these ancient tombs, just as, at "about midnight, without knowing why, or what he was really looking for," the narrator pedals "along the unpaved lane that ran smoothly, curving slightly along the inside of the wall of the angels."²⁸ A powerful echo of the opening scene, he steers toward the garden of the Finzi-Continis in expectation of finding the familiar home—just as he begins the book, and the book's journey through memory, in search of the "medieval castle." He passes by "lovers," "tossing about half-naked," like those "pairs of lovers" he imagines frequented the Etruscan tombs thousands of years ago.

Though the mode of transportation has changed, the voyage is the same: with eyes on the castle in the first journey, and *Barchetto del Duca* in the last, the destination of ancient and modern lovers alike is the cemetery, "where every evening stroll is bound to end."²⁹ In the final scene, the lovers' evening stroll is transformed into a nocturnal journey that indeed ends at the cemetery: only, the gate of the Etruscan cemetery has been transformed into the perimeter of the Finzi-Continis' property, on whose threshold, perched on grassy slopes just outside, lie lovers. As he intended to find the "medieval castle" but alighted on the cemetery instead, here he finds a tomb in place of the *Barchetto del Duca*. The Finzi-Continis' home becomes a living-tomb, the end written before its time—written, in fact, at the novel's very beginning. The novel can itself be seen as an evening stroll down memory's winding lane, and it is only fitting that it should end at the cemetery. "A fine novel," the narrator says to himself, grinning, winking at the reader who has nearly finished the novel he plans to write. Only one scene remains, the Epilogue. "My story with Micòl Finzi-Contini ends here," he writes—his constant, inconstant strolling partner. It only makes sense that the novel's evening stroll should end here, at her home that has, over the novel's

²⁸ Bassani, *Giardino*, 285.

²⁹ Bassani, *Giardino*, 11.

course, transformed into a second tomb. The Epilogue reads like a headstone, functioning as a final document, inscribing the Finzi-Continis' fates.

None of the characters would find a proper burial except Alberto, who died of lymphogranuloma in 1942, "dying so slowly that... despite the deep furrow dug through the midst of it by the Racial Laws, the whole of Ferrara, from a distance, was affected by it."³⁰ This line, a metaphor for the false security held by the Finzi-Continis in spite of the Racial Laws, reproduces an image found in the Etruscan scene, though transformed here. In the Italian original, the word is *solco*—furrow—and it appears first in the Etruscan cemetery passage, where the iron cart-wheels have cut two deep parallel *solchi* into the paved road through centuries of visitation. These are furrows worn deep by generations of the living visiting their dead: a transit line that keeps the tombs and the cultural artifacts within them in perpetual circulation. The Finzi-Continis, however, are deprived of this timeless link. The furrow cut by the Racial Laws is of a different order entirely: not a path worn by return, but a wound cut through the community, severing it from the continuity that the Etruscan furrows represent. They all, except Alberto, are not buried in the family plot but perish in unmarked graves somewhere in Germany or Poland. The home, marred beyond recognition, its walls peeled bare, retains not the faintest trace of its former inhabitants. It is no longer a *lieu de mémoire* but a tomb effaced—separated from, not connected to, history by the deep furrow dug by fascism, whose legacy would be similarly scraped from Italian memory in the years to come.

In closing, the final scene replays the first, but emerges unrecognizable, transformed. The tomb of Moisé, erected at the time of Jewish enfranchisement and styled in all its euphoric ostentation, was placed atop ample ground with the intention of commemorating generations of Finzi-Continis. "Massive" and "imposing," its proportions commensurate with the *Barchetto del*

³⁰ Bassani, *Giardino*, 291.

Duca, it was intended, like those Etruscan tombs, to be a fortress-house for the dead. But the Finzi-Continian line is severed, cut through by the forces of history. The Finzi-Continis' home provides an inadequate surrogate: though it becomes a second tomb, where the family ensconces itself while awaiting a slow, aristocratic death, it is marred beyond recognition by squatters, and since elided in the Touring Club's new travel guides, unreachable. The *lieu* becomes a *non-lieu*, so cut off from cultural memory that it may as well be the dwelling of an ancient civilization. In its place, the book becomes the family's only grave, visited virtually by generations of readers like you (and me).

PART 2: NOVEL'S THEORY OF HISTORY

If the novel is to be treated as a monument—one that not only inscribes the lives and fates of the Finzi-Continis but of the thousands of real-life Italian Jews denied proper burials in concentration camps—the reader is led to ask a series of questions related to the theory of history: primarily, whether or not literature, and particularly historical fiction, is an adequate way of recording the past. From this question, it is also interesting to ask what place narrativity has in the practice of writing history, and whether an historian's interpretation of events in some way disturbs their "factual" or "true" natures. While certainly not the first or last to take up these questions, Hayden White has nonetheless produced some of the finest and most comprehensive writing on the subject of historiography in the last fifty years. In a very helpful gloss of the origins of the word "narrative," White outlines its main explanatory function: to narrate, he writes, is to "translate knowing into telling;" to make information privately held publicly

accessible.³¹ Not only does this imply the social function of narration, but it anticipates an important argument he will make later: that narratives must order themselves around the social world of the day, and that history proper is, fundamentally, a literary invention—a sequence of events that bears the author's interpretations, evoking, reconstructing, and metaphorizing the past in the context of the present. More often than not, a historical treatment presents "facts," neutral on their face, in a sequence of "semantic metonymies" that build toward the realization of one of the following literary structures: the epic, the tragic, the comic, and so forth.³² In other words, the events dealt with by an historian aren't valued in themselves; a story isn't inherently tragic or comic, but is endowed with those qualities once it has been emplotted in a specific way.

If history is to be thought of in narrative terms, it is logical to ask why a novel, however evocative in its representation of a historical past, shouldn't be considered a true history. Conversely, why is history proper treated as an accurate way of evoking the past if, in its very arrangement and interpretation of facts, it fundamentally alters their meaning? The novel responds to these questions on the level of its own writing, functioning as a fictionalized yet personal history of Ferrara, and in the world of the text where characters are seen discussing the topic at length and producing historical texts of their own. Professòr Ermanno Finzi-Contini, Micòl Finzi-Contini, and the narrator are all historians in their own right, working on three separate manuscripts. Ermanno produced two, or attempted to, in his college days—a process of writing described, more than anything, as the copying-down of facts. What he comes up with is something like a chronicle, which organizes the facts in chronological time but fails to comment on them, and thus generates no new scholarship in the process. This approach to history is not shared by Micòl and the narrator, who write manuscripts that invest the source material—in her

³¹ Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5–27. 5

³² Hayden White, "Narrativity," 19.

case, the poetry of Emily Dickinson, and in his, the writings of the Italian poet Panzacchi—with interpretations of their own. A hovering presence throughout their discussions, Bassani organizes this discourse, imparting his own ideas of what it means to be truthful in one's account of the past, how to treat and interpret facts, and whether or not it is possible to write a narrativized history—like the novel itself—without grossly misrepresenting “reality.”

The manuscripts written by Professòr Ermanno Finzi-Contini are a good place to begin a discussion of narrativity in history, largely because the histories he writes lack, even refuse, the narrative form altogether. An amateur scholar, he begins but never finishes two manuscripts: one on Venice's deceased Jewry, for which he simply recorded the names and inscriptions on the tombstones. Here, Ermanno memorializes the past in a way that modern historians warn against: meticulous in his preservation of facts, and utterly silent on their meaning. He does the same in the other manuscript: a treatment of the writing of a Jewish poetess named Sarah Enriquez Avigdòr. Though responsible for “many 'excellent' sonnets,” her legacy has been corrupted by claims of different authorship, all motivated, Ermanno assures the narrator, by the common antisemitism of the period. But rather than engage with this speculation, even by refutation, he chooses to say nothing of it.

“If, in the future, I happened to have anything to do with this Sarah Enriquez (or Enriques) Avigdor myself—a subject that deserved far more profound and careful study than he had managed to give it in his youth—at a certain point, quite fatally, I would have to come up against certain dissident . . . discordant . . . voices, in fact with the writings of various third-rate literary men, mostly contemporaries of the poetess (libellous writers fairly bursting with envy and anti-semitism), who tried to insinuate that not all the sonnets signed by her, and not even all the letters she wrote to Ceba, were . . . how could he put it? . . . all her own work. Well now, of course, been able to help knowing of the existence of these rumours, and in fact, as I'd see, he had faithfully set them down; all the same...”³³

³³Giorgio Bassani, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1962); English translation: *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, trans. Isabel Quigley (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 181.

Fearing a battle with history's "discordant," "dissonant" voices, he decides to "faithfully set them down," recording the rumors without interpreting or contesting them. The reason? "His ideal," he explains, "was certainly to get at the truth, but in doing so he must never lose his sense of what was suitable and just."³⁴ This approach, consistent across both manuscripts, is to preserve all the facts of the past intact, stable. What takes the place of discourse is recitation by Ermanno—a transcript of the conversation that evinces no interest in the subject beside the interest in naming it. The poetess Avigdòr, then, becomes a mere sign, as do the names of the unnamed dead. That they exist is made sure by Ermanno who carefully copies down the names and available facts, which he then copies again for the benefit of the narrator, who copies the transaction one final time in the book. These people existed, but they bear no mention beyond the fact of their existence. They are condemned to obsolescence because they fail to organize around a historical argument. Though disseminated, they remain illegible, their latent meanings untapped and, therefore, immobile.

Ermanno's attitude toward history finds a parallel in his love of objects. It is known by many in the Ferrara of the novel that Giosè Carducci had stayed at the noble Finzi-Continis' estate a generation before and had written letters documenting his fortnight-long stay, now in the possession of the Professòr. Carducci's poems had earned him acclaim in his time and were considered by generations to come as vital artifacts of Italy's unification era. But the works which Professòr Ermanno prizes are significant not for their style or political contributions, but because they document Carducci's stay at Barchetto del Duca. In them, the interests are pedestrian: he devotes five of the fifteen letters to the single subject of a certain "salama da suge"³⁵—a salami made on the property. Ermanno keeps these letters as a testament, foremost, to

³⁴Bassani, *Giardino*, 182.

³⁵ Bassani, *Giardino*, 182.

the high status their family has enjoyed since the Risorgimento. The great revelation of these letters lands on an absurd note, and the care Ermanno evinces for preserving them is the same as his other bourgeois interests: he is, foremost, a collector of artifacts whose existence guarantees their importance, not the other way around.

This love for objects is passed down to his daughter, Micòl, who can name every tree on the property, and who can transform a defunct object into a vital subject by her gaze. In this way, she regards the austerity and beauty of a canoe which she enjoins our narrator to admire:

Just look at that little canoe instead, and please admire the honesty, dignity, and moral courage with which it's managed to draw all the right conclusions from its own complete loss of function. Things die, too, you know. And so, if they too have to die, well there it is, it's so much better to let them go. That has much more style about it, apart from everything else, don't you agree?³⁶

While the canoe's past adventures may be written on its hull, in the wear on its varnish, Micòl would rather it exist in a mute, full state, than receive any repairs—much less, other people's conclusions. She wishes, like her father, to keep it for its form, for its aesthetic qualities as an art object without function. Above all, "apart from everything else," it has "style." Both daughter and father cherish the objects in their private collections—Ermanno his letters, Micòl the canoe as well as a large collection of glass vases called *lattimi*—and wish not to alter them in any way: in his case by interpreting the historical documents, or in hers by repairing the boat. What Micòl reveals is that the "style" she's after is, in the end, Ermanno's historical imperative too. It is for the aesthetics of purity, of the wholeness of the original artifact, that he doesn't risk interpretation. Like the chronicler, who records events in sequence without emplotting them, Ermanno mistakes preservation for meaning, and collection for history.

³⁶Bassani, *Giardino*, 119.

Soon after Ermanno's presentation of the unfinished manuscripts, the door separating his office from the main reading room of the library is kept open; and in the coming weeks, as the narrator continues work on his own thesis on Panzacchi, his conversations with Ermanno become daily:

"We stayed talking together until lunch time. With the result that from then on the door between the billiard room and the study, which until then had always been shut, often stayed open. Most of the time we both carried on in our respective rooms, of course. But we met much more often than before: professor Ermanno coming to see me, and I going in to see him. When the door was open we even exchanged a few words: 'What's the time?', 'How's the work going?' and so on. Some years later, in the winter of 1944, in prison, these were the phrases, the kind of questions, I was to exchange with an unknown neighbour in the next cell, shouting up through the cell window: spoken like that, above all for the need to hear one's own voice, to feel alive."³⁷

The progression from Ermanno's library to political prison cell is striking, though not immediately clear. Bassani's biography becomes helpful for interpreting the scene, for he, too, was interred in a prison camp as a result of his antifascist political activity during the war. The cell his avatar occupies is a single, permitting him no face-to-face contact with the neighboring inmate. What passes for conversation is the series of questions and presumed answers he writes: "What's the time?," "How's the work going?" But "above all," these questions are asked to no one at all; they are intoned as proof of existence, spoken and received like echolocation—to remind him of his own vitality, of his capacity to produce speech. Both men—Ermanno and the narrator—are hard at work on their scholarly projects, but their tasks are ideologically different. Ermanno is, in his assiduous record-keeping, erecting a monument to various figures of interest among the Italian Jewry, hoping to preserve them by simply naming their existence. The narrator's approach is different: his political activity—for which the real-life Bassani was also imprisoned—is a hazard, a contribution, a dangerous one at that, to the antifascist discourse on

³⁷Bassani, *Giardino*, 183.

which Professòr Ermanno is decidedly silent. The consequences of any untoward conclusion are great; but without such risk, one never truly lives. It is in discourse that we risk being wrong, risk violating what's proper, but where we participate in the world and thus become vital subjects. The narrator's repeated intonation to his cellmate prevents him from being forgotten, just as Ermanno's documentation attempts the same for the countless dead. In the end, however, Ermanno's method of recording is made unproductive by his fidelity to propriety: allowing beauty and his admiration of form to prevent his work from being shared and remembered. In the same way, the intonation of existence will never, until his tragic end, reach beyond the confines of their property, allowing him to fall, as do the dead he records, into oblivion.

The meditation on writing history, and the spatial arrangement of the scene—of the two inmates talking to each other—is reproduced in, or I should say taken from another source: an Emily Dickinson poem for which, in preparation for her thesis, Micòl had written a translation. The translated poem is sent along with the original to the narrator by mail:

*Morii per La Bellezza;
e da poco ero discesa nell' avello, che,
caduto per Vero, uno fu messo nell' attiguo
sacello.
"Perché sei morta?" mi chiese sommessò
Dissi: "Morii pel Bello."
Io per La Verità: dunque e lo stesso, –disse,
–son tuo fratello"
Da tomba a tomba,
come due congiunti incontratisi a notte,
parlavamo così; finché raggiunti l'erba ebbe
nomi e bocche.³⁸*

*I died for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room.
He questioned softly why I failed?
"For beauty," I replied.
"And I for truth, —the two are one;
We brethren are," he said.
And so, as kinsmen met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.³⁹*

³⁸Bassani, *Giardino*, 155.

³⁹Bassani, *Giardino*, 156,

Though the particulars of her thesis are not disclosed—neither here nor elsewhere—perhaps her attitude toward history and criticism can be found in her selection and translation of the poem. As with the canoe, I am sure that she would have preferred to leave it intact so it may "draw all the right conclusions" on its own; but her work reveals a different attitude towards the material. Unlike professor's copying, her work involves translating, updating for an Italian context and thus, though keeping the meaning intact, disfiguring the original. The poem itself speaks to her historical philosophy. It is about two interred dead, each separated from the other by the wall their tombs share. One, the poem tells us, dies for beauty; the other, for truth. They are one in the same, "we brethren are"—and so the two "talked between the rooms" as Professor and the narrator and as the narrator and his neighbor in prison. Are "the two" "one"—beauty and truth? It depends on who you ask. Professor Ermanno's conviction stands that truth is, of course, what should be aimed at, but that this conviction should not lead one astray, into drawing too much attention to oneself, for the sake of propriety. The narrator—Bassani, himself—would say the opposite; that to pursue beauty, the cousin of Ermanno's propriety, is a dangerous practice as an historian whose commitment to truth should stop nowhere—even if it means ending up in prison. To tell history, in whatever form, the past must be confronted honestly, unflatteringly, which means that the characters he portrays may be betrayed by the text—so be it. Micòl says something different—and her contribution is made legible in her translation. The ambiguous meaning of "failed" in the original is made clear with her replacement: "why I failed?" becomes "perché sei morta?" "why are you dead?", refitting the following lines, which in the english read: "[I failed] for beauty" "And I [failed] for truth"—to signify something different and more concrete: "I [died] for beauty" *Morii pel Bello*, and "I [died] for truth" *Io per la Verita*. Death is transformed from a "failure," to a consequence:

whether you pursue beauty, or whether you pursue truth, you will vanish like the rest. The end is the same: as the moss that covers their names shows us, death and forgetting are inevitable.

But if a certain fatalism is presented in Micòl's translation, this is belied by another imperative: a desire, evidenced by her translation, to move scholarship forward by considering the original document in a different light. Her manuscript, though it appears perfectly in line with her father's philosophy of history, risks interpretation, which makes it, unlike Ermanno's history, a proper history as opposed to a chronicle. What's more, reading the Dickinson poem in light of this discussion of history, it can be seen to offer its own contribution. If we consider Hayden White's contention that history requires a narrative—that is, an organizing principle other than chronological time to make meaning—then what separates the annal, or the chronicle, from history proper is, paradoxically, the text's formal qualities, its adherence to a literary form. It is this move which transforms signs like the names Ermanno dutifully records, into symbols of cultural meaning. History's fidelity to the facts lies not in the mimesis of simply presenting them, but in the quality of its representations. The form of the account isn't only helpful, but necessary if it is to convey a historical perspective. Further, it is the form—which can be taken here as a stand-in for Emily Dickinson's "beauty"—that makes the contents, the "truth," of a historical text, legible. The two then, are one, as Micòl's translation readily attests.

In closing, the novel that Bassani writes does the historical work that Ermanno expressly fails to do. It recreates Ferrarese life, but makes no claims to mimesis. It creates its own subjective narrative of the past that can at best be seen to evoke it. He creates, in the process, various fictional sites that readers can visit in *lieu* of real ones. So convincing are his descriptions of the mythical garden and home of the Finzi-Continis that to this day tourists flock to Ferrara in search of them, only to be told that they never existed. Though there are still places in the novel

that can be visited in real life, the novel has become the most visited site of all, receiving—albeit virtually—new generations of readers who interpret its contents from their positions in the present. Through narrative form, Bassani achieves what historians are often afraid to do: he interprets the scattered signs of the past through his own inventions.

Part 3: FROM MONUMENT TO PORTABLE MONUMENT: ON ADAPTATION AND THE NOVEL'S AFTERLIVES

Ann Rigney applies her theories of text-monuments to the writings of Sir Walter Scott, a 19th century novelist whose rise to fame was matched only by his precipitous fall from public memory a century after his death. His disappearance at the coming of modernism is "borne out," pointedly, in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, "where she depicts the philosopher Mr. Ramsay, worried that his own work will be forgotten, sitting down to read some novel by Scott..."⁴⁰ But if Scott's works were largely untouched by the 20th century reader, contemporary literary works still bore their traces—a phenomenon on which Rigney hinges her theory of the *portable monument*, a term that productively binds the "monumentality" of a text, to its "mobility."⁴¹ With regard to Scott's writing, the twin forces are in operation: his novels, enshrined as they were in Britain's literary canon, left their traces on subsequent works. In this way, his "particular strength as a memory-maker was that his work, as literature, was not tied down...but could operate in both national and transnational frameworks."⁴²

The aesthetic qualities of Scott's text monument give it, like Bassani's work, its international transit fare. "A central theoretical assumption" on which Rigney's analysis stands,

⁴⁰ Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 10.

⁴¹ Rigney, *Afterlives*, 13.

⁴² Rigney, *Afterlives*, 13-14.

then, “is that a memory is alive only as long as it generates new versions of itself.”⁴³ The work that she does to destabilize the notion that the past is recoverable, that monuments alone do the commemorative work, and that facts are measured by the solidity of their inscription, sets up her theory of re-membling as an active, ongoing process. Even on the level of the word, “re-member” implies an active reconstruction of the past. The novel, then, like Rigney’s portable monument, consummates the beginning of the process of cultural memory, but in no way completes it:

It is evident that monuments reflect a communal desire to hold onto the memory of some person or event, and to give tangible expression to this desire in a particular location. But it can be argued that particular places, and the monuments located there, function as repositories of cultural memories only by virtue of the stories that are told about them or by the rituals that are carried out there. Thus monuments can be seen as the outcome of a whole series of other acts of remembrance using other media, including text and image, that lead people to converge on that particular place. Although setting up a monument may seem like the culmination of public remembrance, it is in fact only the beginning of a new memorial phase.⁴⁴

The novel attains the historical permanence it seeks not by staying the same but by changing, and is therefore not simply re-activated in the present, but formed anew. In other words, memorials, even text-monuments like this one, don’t memorialize on their own; the people who visit them do. And when it comes to adaptation, the people who hazard an interpretation of the original text are responsible for keeping it alive. A text, like a tomb, falls out of a culture’s memory if it is no longer visited.

For this reason, by virtue of its mobility and the possibility of reproduction, literature is a powerful tool of remembrance that often wins out over other cultural monuments as a result of its aesthetic qualities. If the novel’s discourse on history has taught us anything, this is what history

⁴³ Rigney, *Afterlives*, 12.

⁴⁴ Ann Rigney, “Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory,” *Journal of European Studies* 35, no.1 (2005): 21.

requires of its practitioners: to produce a document that is not only meaningful in content, but form, too; that its information receives more than Ermanno's "putting down." Instead, facts must be set to narrative as notes to a melody. This is what gives a cultural memory its transit fare. If a monument alone can't guarantee preservation in the cultural sphere, it is, at best, the beginning of the process of cultural memory, not the end, and its continued relevance to that culture relies in large part on the capacity of that monument not only to record the past, but to invite visitors to experience it and even amend it. By the time we reach the novel's Epilogue, then, after which point the fates of the novel's beloved characters are chronicled dispassionately in a list of dates and descriptions, the reader is both gratified and devastated by the final lines:

Micòl kept telling Malnate that she cared nothing for his democratic, social future, that she abhorred the future in itself, far, far preferring "le vierge, le vivace et le bel an jourd'hui", and the past even more, the dear, the sweet, the pious past. And as these, I know, were only words, the usual desperate, deceptive words that only a real kiss would have stopped her uttering: let them, just these and no others, seal the small amount the heart has managed to remember.⁴⁵

These characters, whose futures had seemed so bright, are all, with the exception of the narrator, killed in one way or another during the war. Micòl, and the rest of the Finzi-Continis are sent to death camps where they perished unknown in unmarked graves or crematories; Malnate would die in the Italian division on the Russian front; and the rest of the friends who used to attend the daily tennis matches in the Finzi-Continis' garden are also presumed to have been deported, or else called up for service. The Epilogue is terse, a register foreign to the language we've come to expect from its author. It's as though Bassani intends, with solemn economy, to engrave them, to erect a monument of his own as permanent as stone.

But in truth, despite the accumulating weight of his sentences, the story doesn't end here. In the sixty years following the novel's publication, these characters have been variously revived

⁴⁵Bassani, *Giardino*, 293.

for the screen and the stage, re-activating the cultural memories of the original text in new forms designed to reach new audiences. The first adaptation, written for the screen by Ugo Pirro and Vittorio Bonicelli and directed by Vittorio de Sica, was widely celebrated in America and even took home the Academy award for best foreign film in 1972. Two years later—12 years after its initial publication—Bassani would compile all of his Ferrarese books into one massive volume titled *The Ferrara Novel*. Most recently, in 2022, the novel was adapted once more, this time for the stage by composer Ricky Ian Gordon and librettist Michael Korie. The continued excitement for this novel is hard to believe, especially if we consider its popularity in America of all places.

In a recent panel held by NYU's Casa Italiana, in promotion of the newly released opera, a few scholars of Italian literature held forth for an hour-and-a-half-long discussion of the novel and its afterlives. The debate is lively, and I recommend watching it in its entirety.⁴⁶ Perhaps what is most striking about it is the excitement that they generate. Guests frequently talk over each other, debating fact versus fiction, symbolic meaning, and literary style in the novel. On the subject of *which* is the definitive version of the novel—the original release, or Bassani's edited version from 1974—Bianca Finzi-Contini Calabresi (yes, the real descendant of the Finzi-Continis) makes the case that both of Bassani's versions ought to be considered the authoritative versions, and should therefore be taken together. While the reader will be gratified by Reddit threads that make the case for one version or the other, the truth is, they represent two different Ferraras and two different Bassanis: one written in the rear-view mirror of Bassani's then-recent memory, and the other, from the other side of nearly forty years of writing and processing his life in this place. Bassani's oeuvre, compiled rather neatly in this *Ferrara* volume, is an attempt to re-create the community, an imagined version of it at least, in the kaleidoscopic

⁴⁶The link to the discussion can be found on NYU's Casa Italiana Page:
<https://www.casaitaliananyu.org/digital-library/videos/garden-finzi-continis-novel-film-and-opera/>

fullness of his memory. What the reader realizes after reviewing Bassani's changes, noting the addition of extended passages on trees, or of characters inserted in stories where they previously didn't belong, one understands the very fictional nature of the original. While drawn with the utmost precision, from his own life experiences as well as those of close friends, Bassani's writing is, and always has been, the work of one man. It is, as happens to anyone's memories of their childhood, affected by time, refracted ceaselessly through the present. The idea that in order to preserve the original, adaptations must treat it hermetically, is an approach to history not countenanced by the novel itself. In fact, it argues for quite the opposite: a modern treatment must be given if the cultural memory it carries is to remain accessible.

Still, the speakers who gathered for this panel discussion were most interested in where the Ferrara of Bassani's literary inventions stood up to, versus betrayed, the "actual" real events of his life. Each participant is seen vying for time in front of the mic, sounding the dissonance of history's many voices. Several of them knew Bassani personally, or knew the people on whom Bassani had based his characters, or, were otherwise familiar enough with Bassani's biography and the history of Ferrara to comment on the historicity of his work and had strong opinions on his life and art. What becomes clear is the instability of memory: their opinions are as varied, as multidetermined as the Ferrara of Bassani's novel, as the Finzi-Continis who populate it, and the Italian Jews in whose honor Bassani erects his text-monument. It stands to reason: the Jews of Ferrara were a people defined, in some ways, by contradiction. They were outsiders, but, as is attested by their entrance into Ferrarese life from the Ghetto after unification, also, an integral part of it. They were a tiny minority, counting 1,800 at the turn of the century, and just 700 in 1934 out of a population of 135,000 inhabitants throughout the city. And yet, their presence in Ferrara, continuous since before the Spanish Inquisition, was known throughout Italy. The

conclusion drawn from these historical contradictions is an obvious one: that the community has always resisted being described in one way.

It is worth noting that the Ferrara that Bassani writes and rewrites over the years, attempts to recreate the fabric of this community in all its indissoluble ironies, not least of which, was Jewish membership in the Fascist Party. Bassani inflates the figure in his work, stating that the number of card-holders was 90%. In truth, it was more like 20%, but perhaps the figure, outsized in his memory and his representation, has something to do with his relationship with his father who was, like many other modern Jews, an ardent fascist, a believer that Mussolini's fascism was far preferable to Hitler's, and who, like many other Jewish fascists, was sent to the death camps. The existence of these ironies in Bassani's work, and the care with which he maintains them—that is, fails to smooth them over in his later revisions, is partly what gives rise to adaptations that all seek, with varying levels of sophistication to resolve their tensions. Take the film, for instance. De Sica's 1970 masterpiece, was, when it reached America, an instant success. It continues to reach audiences throughout the world, and more so than ever in a highly reproducible digital format. Bassani famously hated it, publishing an article titled, *Mio Giardino Tradito*, "My Garden Betrayed." His hatred arose in large part because the film answered too many of the novel's questions. Why didn't Micòl love the narrator? The film's answer: because she loved Malnate. How closely is the novel's narrator modeled after Bassani himself? The film says it is an exact representation, naming the lead Giorgio, though Bassani refuses to name the narrator at any point. The Micòl of the film, who is shown nude, splayed on a bed after a scene of lovemaking with Malnate, is demystified, unnecessarily sexualized, and what's more made cruel to an onlooking Giorgio. This has no basis in the original. Micòl does not refuse the narrator because she prefers Malnate, or because she cannot love, but because to begin a

relationship would be to fix her, to make her, as the film does, a distillation: concrete, flat, and dead. "Things die, too, you know," she tells him. "And so, if they too have to die, well there it is, it's so much better to let them go."⁴⁷

Anecdotally, Giorgio Bassani once said that Marilyn Schneider was the only person who truly understood Micòl—an American of all people! So impressed had he been by the paper she wrote at the University of Minnesota in 1974, titled "The Mythical Dimensions of Micòl Finzi-Contini," that he approved a series of interviews with the author, sharing details about his process and explaining the overlap and discrepancies between the mythologized Ferrara and the "real" Ferrara. It is no surprise that the paper received such warm praise from the author. Not only does it offer many fine analyses of the novel's symbols—of Micòl and the garden in particular—but it does so with respect for them, allowing and promoting their continued function rather than neutralizing them.

It becomes clear to the reader only after finishing the book that Micòl is, and has been, a mythic character all along, and the register of her love story with the narrator is somehow both obviously ill-fated from the very start, and unexpectedly tragic by the end. These qualities are made possible by the obscurity out of which Bassani forms Micòl. One never quite knows how she feels about the narrator—whether she is, in fact, in love with him, and refuses to face it, or whether she means her word: that all romantic feelings vanished with childhood. But that's the point. The mystery in which Bassani shrouds her is ultimately what protects her, what makes her the potent symbol she is, who the reader exalts—as does the narrator—and whom the reader invests with all kinds of mythic qualities.

As Marilyn Schneider points out, though the text-monument that the narrator constructs is dedicated to the Finzi-Continis, his intention couldn't be clearer: it is truly meant for his

⁴⁷Bassini, *Giardino*, 119.

beloved, Micòl. In the first place, the novel is dedicated to her. What's more, she is central to the main arc of the story, a story which is bounded by her entrance on one side, and her death on the other: "My story with Micol Finzi-Contini ends here. And so this narrative ought to end now, since all I might add would no longer concern her, but, if there was anything to add, only myself."⁴⁸ There is a strong argument to be made that Micòl is the novel's central symbol: at once overdetermined and unexplained, a goddess figure whose mythical qualities exceed any single identification. She is truth and beauty simultaneously, an impossible combination that the narrator imagines, but can never define.

If a film adaptation must *show* as opposed to *allude* to, one must accept that certain elements of the original text, the subtlety of Bassani's representation of Micòl, for instance, will be lost. This is only natural. Michael Korie, the librettist responsible for adapting the novel for the stage, said the following: "So much of the novel was beautifully understated and implied; I don't think that you can have an implied opera." The same is true for film, of course. Adapting the text, whether for film or stage, requires—by the nature of the form—explaining elements that were left unanswered in the original, while inevitably occluding others that can't be taken up with the same depth in a visual format.

As the film settles the ambiguity of Micòl's relationship with Malnate, the opera makes explicit the homoerotic tensions between Malnate and Alberto. Malnate, as described by the panelists present at the NYU discussion, is a magnetic character—for men and women alike. He is, in this way, an overdetermined character, one whose obvious sexuality, expressed in physical terms as an overgrowth of hair, or an overdeveloped, even repulsive swarthy manliness, becomes a catchall for the novel's outsider qualities. He is, despite his homophobic comments, a character with whom men confide—not least of whom is Alberto, which the opera makes explicit in a love

⁴⁸Bassani, *Giardino*, 291.

affair not present in the novel. The power of his character, as a symbol of desire and contested masculinity, lies precisely in his at once overdetermined and underdefined qualities, allowing the reader to draw his own conclusions, and urging the adaptor to, unadvisably, condense him into a sign of legible, but neutered, meaning. Korie was explicit about this choice: he cites Bassani's own writing on the subject, on his representation of homo-erotic desire in his novels, and of Korie's own experience as a gay man as contributing factors to his interpretation. As a cultural carrier, Korie is well within his right to update the original in accordance with new kinds of representations made possible in our contemporary cultural landscape. The cultural carrier should do precisely this. But this doesn't mean that all representations are suitable for the original material. Other features of the adaptation are less tasteful. For instance, the opera depicts Perotti, the head servant of the Finzi-Continis, as a caricature of an antisemite, going so far as to call Giorgio a "christ-killer." The antisemitic Perotti, enlivened to make the specter of Nazi persecution more scarily felt, is a gross mischaracterization of the Ferrarese domestics Bassani knew. The Perotti in the novel is a countervailing symbol, a force of good who, like other loyal domestics, helped Jews in a period of rising antisemitism. By making Perotti a despicable bigot, the opera reifies a stereotype—and for what purpose? Comparing the novel's treatment of Micòl, Malnate, and Perotti with the representations they find in the novel's afterlives raises productive questions about the function of adaptation. Is there a limit to how much the original form can be resized, refitted, in order to fit a new cultural mold? How many of the ambiguities must be left intact in order to remain an active cultural symbol? At what point does adaptation pass from modernizing, to betraying the original?

One of these lost objects, appearing in the original and vanishing in subsequent iterations, is the image of milk, a symbol that stands for ambiguity. The image of milk appears at four

critical points in the novel. The first mention comes with the introduction of Bruno Lattes. His name means milk, *latte* in Italian, the symbol of innocence itself. He is the first in the world of the novel to be expelled from Italian civic life for being a Jew—cast out while the Finzi-Continis preserve the illusion of safety. Milk as innocence appears once again in Micòl's room. She is quite proud of her collection of lattimi—a type of Venetian vase so-named for the milky-white quality of their glass. They are defunct objects of pure form, transparent to their functionlessness and opaque to their meaning. The third occurrence of milk in the novel takes place in the garden: when milky shadows are seen collecting on the property during one of the Finzi-Continis' afternoon gatherings. In this scene, taking place towards the end of the summer of '38, Ermanno reassures the narrator about the future despite mounting antisemitism—a hopeful attitude that proves, like the novel's enchanting shadows, a shrouding mechanism, an illusion, the final checkpoint of denial before an increasing array of signs in the outside world speak to quite the opposite realization. The fourth, and final, milky image is the cinema screen—white, obscure, suspending whatever is projected onto it. At this point the narrator has been cast out of the garden, and begins palling around with Malnate who takes him to the cinema:

When we went in, the film had already started, and as soon as we sat down I started whispering ironical comments without paying attention to Malnate, who kept telling me to be careful, not to *bausciare**, that in any case it just wasn't worth it. And he was quite right. A fellow in the row in front of ours, suddenly jumping to his feet against the milky background of the screen, threateningly told me to shut up. I retorted with an insult, and he shouted back : "Fòra, boia d' un ebrei !"t and flung himself on me, grabbing my neck. It was lucky for me that Malnate, without a word, was ready to hurl my assailant back into his seat, and drag me out by the arm before the lights went up again.⁴⁹

The novel never tells us what is playing onscreen, but in the film, De Sica shows us: Hitler greeting Mussolini. The milk resolves into the most legible image of fascism imaginable. The antisemitic attack that follows transforms from an unclear eruption in the original to an

⁴⁹Bassani, *Giardino*, 254.

obvious consequence in the adaptation. Once the fog is lifted, the face of Hitler revealed, the terror paradoxically diminishes. The same principle can be applied to Spielberg's 1975 film "Jaws," whose shark terrifies precisely because it can barely be seen. The moment it appears on the boat, it reveals the falseness of its own creation: an animatronic machine styled to appear like a shark that fails, once it has been identified as such, to terrify. This is what De Sica does to Micòl too. The moment her affair with Malnate is revealed, her betrayal cemented, De Sica takes something away: a special power of hers, sustained until the novel's very end, to avoid being defined. The fate of Micòl is the same as those milky images in the novel: her productive ambiguities, her status as an unresolved symbol become, in adaptation, nothing more than a sign.

CONCLUSION:

In 1978, Giorgio Bassani published *In Gran Segreto*, the last collection of original poetry he would publish before the anthology *In Rima e Senza* gathered all of his verse together—as *The Novel of Ferrara* had done for his prose. One poem from the collection is titled "Le Leggi Razziali"—in English, "The Racial Laws"—and is as much about the laws and their legacy as it expresses a desire, through art, to bear their history and to move beyond them. In a video posted by the Fondazione Giorgio Bassani, originally broadcast on the Rai channel sometime in the early 1990s, he stands in the courtyard of his family home and recites the poem before the magnolia tree to which it is dedicated.⁵⁰

⁵⁰<https://www.facebook.com/fondazionegiorgiobassani/videos/giorgio-bassani-legge-le-leggi-razziali/267723280523735/>

“The Racial Laws”

The magnolia right in the middle
of our Ferrara house’s garden is the very
same that reappears in almost every
book of mine
We planted it in ’39
ceremoniously
just a few months after
the Racial Laws were brought to bear
it was a solemn-comical affair all of us
fairly light-hearted God permitting despite
that irksome immemorial appendix
Judaism
Walled-in by four walls forewarned
soon enough it grew
black luminous intrusive
pointing firmly up towards the imminent
sky
full day
and night with grey
sparrows dusky blackbirds
unflaggingly scanned from below by
pregnant

cats and by my
mother –
she too in tireless vigil there behind
the windowsill forever brimming
with her crumbs
Straight as a sword from its base to its tip
now it overtops the neighbouring roofs
beholding every bit of the city and the
infinite
green space that circles it
but now somehow stumped I can guess
how it feels frail-tipped unsure
of a stretch up there in the heights a narrow
space
in the sun
like someone at a loss
after a long journey
as to which road to take or
what to do ⁵¹

⁵¹Translation by Jamie McKendrick,
<https://primolevicenter.org/printed-matter/the-racial-laws/>

First framing him in close up, looking up somewhere in the distance, the camera moves to reveal the magnolia towering over the four walls of the garden enclosure, grown considerably in the fifty years since it was planted. One comment reads, “la magnolia è diventata un mito, da quando la casa di Bassani è stata venduta nel 1993, la si può vedere solo dal tennis Marfisa d’Este o da Palazzo Boncossi.” In English: *The magnolia has become a myth ever since Bassani’s house was sold in 1993, which can only be seen from the Marfisa d’Este tennis club and the Boncossi Palace.* The magnolia has become a myth in its own right, but so have the works in which it appears. The tree, like the works in which it is engraved, rises over the enclosure, symbolically bearing and transcending its historical moment. The Facebook comment is poignant when one considers that the “Marfisa d’Este” one of the only Ferrarese sites from which the tree is visible, was the same tennis club that expelled some of Bassani’s characters under the Racial Laws, and Bassani in 1939 for being a Jew. The tree, then, becomes a reminder of the history of its author, whose works endured despite state violence that sought his end. That the magnolia’s planter identifies with it is evident in his verse: “somehow stumped I can guess//how it feels frail-tipped unsure//of a stretch up there in the heights a narrow space//in the sun//like someone at a loss//after a long journey//as to which road to take or//what to do.” He imports his current mid-life condition on his reading of the tree, finding Ferrara bereft of his friends, his community destroyed beyond recognition. The racial terror of the fascist period and subsequent Nazi invasions were so thorough that they sought to remove any traces of Jewish existence in Europe, scrubbing their names from phonebooks, removing the works of Jewish authors from cultural life, and, eventually, leaving no record of their cremated remains. When Bassani was a young author, he even had to publish his works under a pseudonym. But despite state suppression, his work survived, and became “monuments” to this period of racial terror, but

possessing something rare: the capacity, like the tree, for continued growth. The tree, like the works in which it appears, is an alternative to the “portable monument,” though it shares in its main principles. The tree, like *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*—both the book, and the fictional garden at its center—is a cultural symbol that doesn’t simply endure, but *grows*. The work that Bassani does to commemorate his childhood, the fascist terror that attempted to wipe his community from history books, is gratified by the novel’s afterlives—even if their quality is under question. The cultural memories that Bassani plants are as vital a part of Ferrara’s skyline as the Magnolia tree, and will remain in active circulation in the national and transnational cultural spheres for decades to come so long as his beloved *giardino* is visited, and revisited.

HENRY ALEJANDRO

GUZMÁN MITCHELL

University of California, Berkeley

WORKS CITED

Assmann, Jan, and John Czaplicka. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 125–133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/488538>.

Bassani, Giorgio. *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*. Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1962. English translation: *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. Translated by Isabel Quigley. New York: Atheneum, 1965.

Brozgal, Lia. *Absent the Archive: Cultural Traces of a Massacre in Paris, 17 October 1961*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020.

Nora, Pierre. Preface to *Les lieux de mémoire*. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1984. English translation: *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, translated by Arthur Goldhammer. 3 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Rigney, Ann. *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Rigney, Ann. "Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory." *Journal of European Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005): 11–28.

Schwartz, Alexandra. "A Writer's Tomb of Words, and the People Who Took It Personally." *The New Yorker*. May 28, 2015.

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-writers-tomb-of-words-and-the-people-who-took-it-personally>.

White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5–27.

Korie, Michael, and Ricky Ian Gordon. *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (Opera). 2022.

NYU Casa Italiana. "Garden of the Finzi-Continis: Novel, Film, and Opera." Video.

<https://www.casaitaliananyu.org/digital-library/videos/garden-finzi-continis-novel-film-and-opera/>

Fondazione Giorgio Bassani. "Giorgio Bassani legge Le leggi razziali." Video.

<https://www.facebook.com/fondazionegiorgiobassani/videos/giorgio-bassani-legge-le-leggi-razziali/267723280523735/>

Primo Levi Center. "The Racial Laws." Translated by Jamie McKendrick.

<https://primolevicenter.org/printed-matter/the-racial-laws/>