

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

3

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THE ANGLO-ITALIAN AFTERLIVES OF THE FINZI-CONTINIS. TIM PARKS READS GIORGIO BASSANI

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The reception of Giorgio Bassani's work in Anglophone countries reveals a discrepancy between America and Europe. The reasons for the warm American and tepid British reception of Bassani will be addressed and Tim Parks' work as a mediator will be investigated. Parks' study of *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* and the controversy caused by his specific reading will illuminate why Bassani's rendition of history and predilection for North American culture have shaped the British reception of his work.

Keywords: Giorgio Bassani, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, Tim Parks, Jewish Italian writer, British reception, Holocaust, Second World War

1. *Giorgio Bassani from an Anglophone Perspective*

The reception of Giorgio Bassani's work in Anglophone countries reveals a discrepancy between America and Europe. While in the United States and Canada his academic recognition has increased since the Sixties, the resonance of his writings in Great Britain is more elusive. The reasons for the warm American and tepid British reception of Bassani will be addressed and Tim Parks' work as a mediator will be investigated. While the attention dedicated to Parks may raise the question as to why his view should be regarded as a catalyst, it will become clear that an insight into the British reception of Bassani can be gained by delving into the controversy caused by Parks' specific reading. His study of *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* proves to be the paramount source allowing to reconstruct and assess why Bassani's rendition of history as suspended memory and his predilection for North American culture have shaped the British reception of his work.

Between the Sixties and Eighties Bassani travelled to the United States, consolidating his rapport with academics and publishers. Paola Bassani recalls that her father's first American trip was to San Francisco, where he launched the exhibition *Italia da salvare* in 1967¹. Over the following two decades he visited several cities, promoting the English translations of his books and teaching courses of Italian literature at the Universities of

¹ V. Ruocco, *Giorgio Bassani, "La parola dipinta"*, 21 April 2009, "i-Italy, The multimedia network for all things Italian in America", <http://www.iitaly.org/magazine/article/giorgio-bassani-la-parola-dipinta> (last accessed November 12, 2021).

California, Illinois, and Indiana. From the 21st to the 29th of October 1984 he was in San Francisco again to support *Italia da salvare*².

The importance of Bassani's legacy in America has been widely documented over the last decade. In the collection of essays *Poscritto a Giorgio Bassani*, published in 2012 to commemorate his death on the 13th of April 2000, editors Roberta Antognini and Rodica Diaconescu Blumenfeld have achieved an unprecedented outcome, drawing attention to Bassani's bond with the USA and including contributions to Bassani studies by American critics. The interview with his daughter Paola, the memoir by Dacia Maraini, the memoir by Alain Elkann, and the twenty-seven essays on diverse aspects of his intellectual engagement are complemented by an appendix that brings to light unpublished American findings: an interview to Bassani at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York in 1966, a letter, dated 20 May 1976, to Edoardo Lèbano, Professor Emeritus of Italian at Indiana University, a letter, dated 21 March 1976, to secretary Bruna Lanaro at *Italia nostra*, some unpublished photographs, and the first English translation of the short story *Il concerto*, originally published in his early collection *Una città di pianura* under the pseudonym Giacomo Marchi³. More recently, American Bassani has been illuminated by Sergio Parussa⁴ and Valerio Cappozzo⁵; international Bassani has been investigated by Rosy Cupo⁶.

Bassani's familiarity with North America and scholarly research into his North American network have no parallel in Great Britain, where his work has been more the object of superb translations than systematic study. The British translators of Bassani are creative writers in their own right. *Cinque storie ferraresi* (1956)⁷, *Gli occhiali d'oro* (1958)⁸ and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1962)⁹ were first translated by writer and film critic Isabel Quigly during the early '60s. Poet Jamie McKendrick has been the translator of Bassani

² For details about his American trips see *Giorgio Bassani: Cronologia*, Fondazione Giorgio Bassani, <https://www.fondazionegiorgiobassani.it/cronologia/> (last accessed November 12, 2021).

³ *Poscritto a Giorgio Bassani. Saggi in memoria del decimo anniversario della morte [Postscriptum: Critical Essays on Giorgio Bassani in Memory of the Tenth Anniversary of his Death]*, R. Antognini – R. Diaconescu Blumenfeld ed., LED, Milano 2012, <http://www.ledononline.it/ledononline/index.html?ledononline/510-giorgio-bassani.html> (last accessed November 12, 2021).

⁴ S. Parussa, *L'odore della poesia. Giorgio Bassani e Henry James*, in *Lezioni americane di Giorgio Bassani*, V. Cappozzo ed., Giorgio Pozzi, Ravenna 2016, pp. 67-88. See also *Scrittura come libertà, scrittura come testimonianza: quattro scrittori italiani e l'ebraismo*, Giorgio Pozzi, Ravenna 2011.

⁵ V. Cappozzo, *Incontri indiani. Lettere inedite di Giorgio Bassani*, in *Poscritto a Giorgio Bassani*, pp. 41-54; *Il viaggio in America di Giorgio Bassani tra poesia e insegnamento*, in *Lezioni americane di Giorgio Bassani*, pp. 15-40; *'Dall'altra parte della luna'. Le poesie di Giorgio Bassani tra gli Stati Uniti e il Canada*, "Cahiers d'études italiennes". Issue on *Da Ferrara a Buenos Aires. Contributi sulla ricezione italiana e internazionale dell'opera di Giorgio Bassani*, 26, 2018, pp. 89-113, <https://journals.openedition.org/cei/3925> (last accessed November 12, 2021); *Genesi e storia del libro Lezioni americane di Giorgio Bassani (con uno sguardo sul futuro)*, in *Cento anni di Giorgio Bassani*, G. Ferroni – C. Gurreri ed., Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma 2019, pp. 99-112. See also *Dal particolare all'universale: i libri di poesia di Giorgio Bassani*, V. Cappozzo ed., Giorgio Pozzi, Ravenna 2020.

⁶ R. Cupo, *'Un vero scrittore internazionale'. La diffusione mondiale delle opere di Giorgio Bassani*, "Cahiers d'études italiennes", pp. 20-42, <https://journals.openedition.org/cei/3785> (last accessed November 12, 2021).

⁷ G. Bassani, *A Prospect of Ferrara*, Faber & Faber, London 1962.

⁸ G. Bassani, *The Gold-rimmed Spectacles*, Faber & Faber, London 1960.

⁹ G. Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, Penguin Books, London 1965.

since the early twenty-first century¹⁰. Considering that the translations are widely available at bookstores and libraries, the limited reception of Bassani in Great Britain raises questions that concern his stylistic rendition of historical and cultural memory as well as his relationship with the country.

2. *Bassani's Memory*

Readers who approach *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* expecting to gain an insight into the history of Fascism and the Holocaust in Italy will find instead that Bassani showcases semi-autobiographical experiences through an adult first-person Jewish narrator whose childhood and youth memories reveal his bond with a prominent Jewish family between 1929 and 1943. The narrative opens in 1958 with the anonymous protagonist explaining that after many years, on a Sunday in April 1957, he has finally decided to follow his impulse to write about Micòl Finzi-Contini, her brother Alberto, their parents, Professor Ermanno and Signora Olga, and all the people who used to inhabit or visit the house in Corso Ercole I d'Este, in Ferrara, before the war broke out. The story unfolds as a long flashback highlighting the epiphanic encounter between the teenage narrator and the almost thirteen-year-old Micòl in 1929 and their intimate friendship immediately after the enactment of the Racial Laws in 1938.

While historical events unfold in the background, the existential significance of the relationship, made manifest through the act of recollecting, connects the incipit, which immediately reveals the Finzi-Continis' tragic death, to the Epilogue, detailing their capture by the Fascists in September 1943, short stay at the prison in Via Piangipane, transfer to the concentration camp of Fossoli, near Carpi, in November of the same year, and subsequent deportation to Germany. In dealing with events that have changed the course of world history, Bassani oscillates between mimesis and transfiguration, minute description and selective vision, chronicle, and autobiography. In a few initial and final pages written in 1962 Bassani condenses the terror of the Holocaust personally experienced two decades earlier, during the period of his clandestine political activism in the anti-fascist resistance, imprisonment in May 1943, and release on the 26th of July, the day after Mussolini's ousting. The writer and his wife Valeria Sinigallia had to live under assumed names in Florence for a brief period, then settled in Rome, where he spent the rest of his life.

Channelled through the interaction of the protagonist with specific places and people in Ferrara, Bassani's circumscribed perspective acquires a universal value. The choice of a double focus – a zoom into the microhistory of the protagonist and a panoramic lens for the master narrative of the war – is the most subtle feature, that readers may find appealing or distancing. The sense of rarefaction and suspension conveyed through elaborate sentences full of subordinate clauses adds to the elusiveness of his rendition.

¹⁰ G. Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, Penguin Books, London 2007; *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, Penguin Books, London 2012; *The Smell of Hay*, Introduction by Ali Smith, Penguin Books, London 2014; *Within the Walls*, Penguin Books, London 2016; *The Heron*, Penguin Books, London 2018; *The Novel of Ferrara*, Foreword by A. Aciman, W.W. Norton & Company, New York/London 2018.

McKendrick acutely observes that “some readers (on the internet) have felt exasperated by these serpentine constructions, but I’ve noticed, with some relief, that their Italian counterparts make the same complaints about the original. It’s something you have to take or leave with Bassani”¹¹.

3. Bassani and the Finzi-Continis through the Lens of an English Italophile

The English writer, essayist, translator, and scholar Tim Parks plays an exceptional role in the circulation of Bassani’s work. Parks read English literature at Cambridge and Harvard and approached Italian literature gradually, without knowing the language, initially choosing authors with a more accessible style, such as Natalia Ginzburg, Alberto Moravia, and Carlo Cassola, and going backwards in time, until he gained familiarity with the vernacular Italian of Dante and Boccaccio. Parks’ translations of Machiavelli, Leopardi, Moravia, Pavese, Calvino, Tabucchi, and Calasso, his written essays on the Medici, Garibaldi, Mazzini, Collodi, Silone, Montale, Gadda, and Malaparte prove the efficacy of his pragmatic method¹². His knowledge of Italian literature, history, politics, society, and culture has thrived on his familiarity with Italy, where he has lived for forty years since 1981, acquiring Italian citizenship in September 2021. To Bassani and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* he has dedicated an essay that has had a wide circulation between 2005 and 2015, and an interview published in *Five Books* on 21 November 2011.

A comparative close reading of Bassani’s novel and Parks’ essay will highlight Parks’ understanding of Bassani and support the argument that the tepid British reception can be attributed to the novelist’s restrained perspective on the Holocaust. In Spring 2005, the essay appeared as the *Introduction* to the Everyman’s Library edition of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* which adopted the translation by renowned North American translator William Weaver, originally published in 1977. On 14 July 2005, it was published as *On ‘The Garden of the Finzi-Continis’* in “The New York Review”. In 2008, it was republished with the title *Gardens and Graveyards* in *The Fighter: Literary Essays*. In 2012, the Italian version *Controllo e negazione. L’allarmante modernità dei Finzi-Contini*, translated by Giulia Failla, was included in *Postscript to Giorgio Bassani*. In 2015, it reappeared as *Giorgio Bassani: The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* in *A Literary Tour of Italy*.

Parks’ approach to *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* is supported by an inductive method that he defined as best suited to his mindset and personal circumstances¹³. Through close reading, Parks [re]constructs the style and examines the historical and political views expressed in the novel. Bassani’s limited use of specific references to the political scenario and preference for a subdued rather than a sensational tone conjure up an elegiac representa-

¹¹ A. Cassin, *Translating Bassani. Alessandro Cassin in Conversation with Jamie McKendrick*, “Printed_Matter. Centro Primo Levi Online Monthly”, 18 December 2018, <http://primolevicenter.org/printed-matter/translating-giorgio-bassani/> (last accessed November 12, 2021).

¹² Parks meticulously explains how he learned Italian and developed his skills as a translator in his *Introduction* to Id., *A Literary Tour of Italy*, Alma Books, Richmond 2015, pp. VII-X.

¹³ Ibidem.

tion of the historical circumstances that defined Italy, and particularly Ferrara, before and during the Second World War. For Parks, the mismatch between great ideological agendas and the reasons of a single person or group generated an ironic vision that Bassani used as a narrative engine.

In the autumn of 1943, one hundred and eighty three members of the Jewish community of Ferrara, a small town in the northeast of Italy, were rounded up, imprisoned, and deported to concentration camps in Germany. Only one returned. This atrocity is the grim premise behind almost all of Giorgio Bassani's narrative fiction. He was twenty-seven at the time and had grown up in that community. His father was among those deported.

Yet the Holocaust as such is never the subject of Bassani's writing, nor is he interested in elaborating his own personal denunciation of anti-Semitism or Fascism. There seems to be no political agenda driving his work and no sensationalism. Rather, his aim is to have life, as he sees it, emerge within the frame of the special circumstances that prevailed in Italy, and in particular in his home town of Ferrara, in the years of his adolescence and early adulthood.

And life, as Bassani sees it, is complex, rich, comic, and very dangerous. Above all, individual psychology and group dynamics can never be neatly superimposed on the great ideological divides of the time. This is the source of the all-pervasive irony in his writing. In "A Plaque in Via Mazzini," a short story that appeared in 1956, Bassani writes about the one Jewish deportee who did return to Ferrara from Nazi Germany.

[...] Rather than moving out of the ghetto in order to get into Italian society, the Finzi-Continis have moved out of society altogether and begun to cultivate what B's father sees as absurd pretensions to nobility (the name Finzi-Contini in Italian actually suggests 'fake little counts')¹⁴.

Parks' perceptiveness is as enlightening as his inaccuracies are unexpected. Bassani's father, Angelo Enrico, was not deported and died in 1948. The interpretation of Finzi-Contini is debatable. The version of the article published in "The New York Review" presents some slight modifications and a conspicuous typo. The title of the short story *Una lapide in Via Mazzini*, correctly translated in English as *A Plaque in Via Mazzini* in the *Introduction*, appeared as "A Plague in Via Mazzini" in "The New York Review"¹⁵. The errors about the deportation of Bassani's father, the symbolic meaning of Finzi-Contini, and the title of the short story attracted the critique of Masolino d'Amico and Anna Saxon-Forti, who wrote to "The New York Review":

¹⁴ T. Parks, *Introduction* to Giorgio Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, translated by W. Weaver, Everyman's Library, Alfred A. Knopf, New York/London/Toronto 2005, pp. VII-XX, VII, XI.

¹⁵ T. Parks, *On 'The Garden of the Finzi-Continis'*, "The New York Review", 14 July 2005, <https://nybooks.com/articles/2005/07/14/on-the-garden-of-the-finzi-continis/> (last accessed September 29, 2021).

In response to:

On *'The Garden of the Finzi-Continis'* from the July 14, 2005 issue

To the Editors:

Tim Parks ["On 'The Garden of the Finzi-Continis,'" *NYR*, July 14] has Giorgio Bassani's father rounded up and deported with other members of the Jewish community of Ferrara, but he wasn't—as indeed "B"'s father isn't in the book. Romolo Valli, who plays this character, *is* deported at the end of De Sica's *film*, but Bassani was indignant at this license, so much so indeed that he threatened to withdraw his name from the credits of the movie.

Masolino d'Amico

Rome, Italy

To the Editors:

In his article "On 'The Garden of the Finzi-Continis'" Tim Parks shows such ignorance of the Italian language that I fear for Bassani's masterpiece in its new English edition, if Mr. Parks had anything to do with it aside from writing the introduction. Mr. Parks translates the Italian title of Giorgio Bassani's short story "Una lapide in Via Mazzini" as "A Plague in Via Mazzini." *Lapide*, in Italian, means plaque, or memorial tablet. Nothing to do with the black death. For Mr. Parks's sake, let's hope it was a typo...

Yet, more serious is the blunder in his statement "the Finzi-Continis moved out of society altogether and began to cultivate what B's father sees as absurd pretensions to nobility (the name Finzi-Contini in Italian actually suggests 'fake little counts')." Evidently, Mr. Parks doesn't know the difference between the Italian word *finti* (fake, phoney) and the name of a prominent Italian Jewish family, the Finzi, whose origins can be traced back to the fourteenth century: a name that has no particular meaning in Italian (and was probably derived from the biblical Pineas).

Considering that Mr. Parks teaches and therefore most likely lives in Milan, what language does he speak there? Esperanto?

Anna Saxon-Forti¹⁶

When death is involved, inaccuracies produce a hyperbolic effect. It is evident that Parks should have checked whether Bassani's father had been deported, above all because the movie deviates from the novel. Since the autobiographical component and the tragic end of many protagonists are the backbone of Bassani's writing, such an error is more ponderous than one would like to acknowledge. Moreover, it is unfortunate that a plaque commemorating Jewish people who lost their lives in concentration camps came to be misspelled as a contagious disease. The symbolic repercussions of this typo are all too evident and one can only regret that it was not spotted before the article was published. However, d'Amico's and Saxon-Forti's highbrow reactions invite reflection. While exhibiting a detached, sardonic attitude, d'Amico calls into question Parks' knowledge of Bas-

¹⁶ M. d'Amico/A. Saxon-Forti, *Bassani's Father*, "The New York Review", 20 October 2005, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2005/10/20/bassanis-father/> (last accessed September 29, 2021).

sani's life. D'Amico's reference to De Sica's movie instils the doubt that Parks' source of reference may be derivative, relying on a figurative rendition of the novel rather than the study of Bassani's biography. Saxon-Forti's more vigorous criticism is aimed at exposing Parks' ignorance of Italian language and culture, with which he has become acquainted in an informal way. Their chastisement may fall within the category of banter, a mode of asserting authority all too popular in academia, yet the gravity of the tone evokes an accusation of treason. Parks' reply is as apologetic as it is self-assured:

Tim Parks replies:

My thanks to the various people who have pointed out my mistake with regard to Bassani's father. The error shows the dangers of accepting information from the Internet without cross-checking. The Web site has now been alerted.

And yes, "plague" should be "plaque." Ms. Saxon-Forti is no doubt aware that this is a typographical error since the story begins with the appearance of the plaque on a wall in Ferrara. Again my apologies.

The question of the name Finzi-Contini is more interesting. Finzi is, of course, as Ms. Saxon-Forti suggests, the name of a well-known family. Like Contini, it is not an unusual name in Italy today. Putting the names together, however, is suggestive. "Finzi" can well evoke *finzione*, "a made-up story," and is very near to *finto*, "fake," of which the plural is *finti*. Contini does literally mean "little counts." In Bassani's novel the narrator's father accuses the Finzi-Contini of aping the Italian aristocracy. Intrigued by all this, but being a cautious man, I spoke to colleagues at IULM University, Milan, about the connection. They all agreed that once the suggestion was made, it was hard to deny it was there.

If Ms. Saxon-Forti, whose own name would immediately alert the interpreting mind were it to appear in a novel, is still anxious about my competence in Italian, she can consult my many translations of Calvino, Calasso, Moravia, et al., or study one or two recent editorials in *Corriere della Sera*. Even after twenty-five years living and working in a language, there is always room for improvement and I do welcome comment from those eager to help¹⁷.

Alerting the website that the information about Bassani's father is inaccurate is hardly a solution, because the problem is structural. "His father was among those deported", the last sentence of the first paragraph, states a fact that delivers an emotional blow and arouses the readers' empathy. Not only is it stylistically relevant, but it is also a conceptual core of the essay. Its removal is less straightforward than one might think. If the father had actually been deported, Bassani's subdued tone would convey a remarkable power, demonstrating an ability to channel personal tragedy into an anti-sensational narrative. He was not, thus the indirect representation of the Holocaust must originate from different motivations.

Whether Bassani's father was deported or not, changes the impact of the dialogue between the fictional father and his son who is coping with a painful separation from Micòl.

¹⁷ T. Parks, *Reply*, "The New York Review", 20 October 2005, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2005/10/20/bassanis-father/> (last accessed September 29, 2021).

It is reasonable to speculate that Bassani's narration of the relationship between the protagonist and his father would have been different if his own father had been deported. In particular, the conversation about Micòl and the prospect of an engagement and a marriage would resonate differently. Even though the fictional father fully appreciates the girl's qualities, he stresses the different social status and foresees financial hardship.

"But an en-gage-ment!" he articulated, widening his eyes. "An engagement, my dear boy, means then getting married; and in times like these, and without a steady profession furthermore ... now I ask you if ... I imagine that, to support the family, you wouldn't count on my help (which I wouldn't be able to give you [...]), or, still less, on hers. The girl will surely have a fine dowry," he added, "no doubt about that! But I don't think you ..."

"Never mind the dowry," I said. "If we had been in love, what difference would the dowry have made? "You're right," my father agreed. "You are absolutely right. I myself, when I became engaged to Mamma, back in '11, paid no attention to these things. But times were different then. You could look ahead, to the future, with a certain serenity. And though the future didn't prove so jolly and easy as the two of us imagined (we were married in '15, as you know [...]), it was society that was different then, a society that guaranteed ... Besides, I had studied medicine, while you ..."¹⁸

This candid dialogue between father and son would acquire a pitch of dramatic intensity if Bassani's own father had been sent to a concentration camp. Exceeding the scope of a life lesson, the words of the father in the novel would express the pathos of an intangible and yet crucial testament. Further on in his article Parks acutely observes how the pursuit of respectability and integration supports the father's fragile conviction that joining the Fascist Party has the advantage of facilitating his participation in Italian public life while preserving his commitment to the Jewish community¹⁹. Opting to fix the initial biographical inaccuracy by simply expunging the sentence seems facile, above all if one considers the penetrating study Parks then devotes to the protagonist's father.

By objecting to the scene of the father's detention in the movie, Bassani was indeed prophetic. The narrative divergence is a heartbreaking final dialogue in which the father, after meeting Micòl and her family in the Ferrara school where the Jews were being held captive, expressed the tenuous desire that they could stay together. Bassani must have anticipated that the alteration introduced by De Sica would disrupt the original story, generating interferences and blurring the boundaries between life, the novel, and the movie.

The interpretation of the family name is particularly intricate. Whereas the hypothesis that "the name Finzi-Contini in Italian actually suggests 'fake little counts'" is only hinted at in the article, it is meticulously explained in the reply: one wonders why the rhetorical use of names to convey details about the characters was not immediately elucidated, above all since it involves a sensitive topic such as pretentiousness. Parks' statement would have required a more rigorous philological investigation and benefited from a prudent presentation.

¹⁸ G. Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, pp. 188-189.

¹⁹ T. Parks, *Introduction to G. Bassani, The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, pp. VII-XX, p. X.

It is remarkable that modifications are introduced in every new edition of the article. To explain the social behaviour of the Finzi-Continis, Parks uses two different tenses in the 2005 *Introduction* and “The New York Review” article.

Rather than move out of the ghetto in order to get into Italian society, the Finzi-Continis moved out of society altogether and began to cultivate what B’s father sees as absurd pretensions to nobility (the name Finzi-Contini in Italian actually suggests “fake little counts”)²⁰.

Rather than moving out of the ghetto in order to get into Italian society, the Finzi-Contini have moved out of society altogether and begun to cultivate what B’s father sees as absurd pretensions to nobility (the name Finzi-Contini in Italian actually suggests “fake little counts”)²¹.

The change from simple past to present continuous conveys a sense of duration that is absent in the first version. The family’s claim to a noble status through a secluded, exclusive existence does not happen once and for all, it entails a permanent life choice. *Gardens and Graveyards*, the 2007 edition of the article published in *The Fighter: Literary Essays*, shows that Saxon-Forti’s critique has been acknowledged. Parks stresses the hypothetical nature of his interpretation and emphasises the historical quality of the surname:

Rather than moving out of the ghetto in order to get into Italian society, the Finzi-Contini have moved out of society altogether and begun to cultivate what B’s father sees as absurd pretensions to nobility. (The name Finzi-Contini in Italian might actually suggest ‘fake little counts’ though it should be said that Finzi is the name of a well known Jewish family)²².

Unexpectedly, the very first version was used again in the 2015 edition published in *A Literary Tour of Italy*:

Rather than moving out of the ghetto in order to get into Italian society, the Finzi-Contini have moved out of society altogether and begun to cultivate what B’s father sees as absurd pretensions to nobility (the name Finzi-Contini in Italian actually suggests ‘fake little counts’)²³.

It would be interesting to know why Parks returned to the not so nuanced version in which his reflection on the surname sounds more assertive than interpretative. Also, the inaccurate reference to the deportation of Bassani’s father reappears. The latest edition, translated

²⁰ T. Parks, *On ‘The Garden of the Finzi-Continis’, “The New York Review”* (last accessed September 29, 2021).

²¹ T. Parks, *Introduction* to G. Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, p. XI.

²² T. Parks, *Gardens and Graveyards*, in Id., *The Fighter: Literary Essays*, Harvill Secker, London 2007, pp. 15-28, p. 19.

²³ T. Parks, “Giorgio Bassani: *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*”, in Id., *A Literary Tour of Italy*, Alma Books, Richmond 2015, pp. 341-352, p. 345.

into Italian, specifies that Finzi is a famous Jewish family but also plays on the probability that the pun was intended:

Piuttosto che uscire dal ghetto per integrarsi nella società italiana, i Finzi-Contini si spostano al di fuori della società e iniziano a coltivare quella che il padre di B interpreta come un'assurda presunzione di nobiltà (e probabilmente il nome, anche se corrispondente a quello di una nota famiglia ebrea, non è stato scelto per caso)²⁴.

In *The Best Italian Novels recommended by Tim Parks*, Toby Ash's interview published in *Five Books* on 21 November 2011, Parks chose *Novelle rusticane* (1883, *Little Novels of Sicily*) by Giovanni Verga, *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923, *Zeno's Conscience*) by Italo Svevo, *L'isola di Arturo* (1957, *Arturo's Island*) by Elsa Morante, *La luna e i falò* (1950, *The Moon and the Bonfires*) by Cesare Pavese, and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1962, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*). It is a conversation in which Parks' autobiographical gleanings illuminate his profound understanding of Italian literature. Engagement and isolation, two driving forces that, in his view, Bassani's masterpiece shares with Pavese's *La Luna e i falò*, define the major ambivalence of the Western bourgeoisie:

this book is [...] not really just about the Jews or about the Holocaust, it's about a desire on the part of this family, which is typical of all Western bourgeois society, to possess the whole world in your house and garden and to control it all without having to really be exposed to the outside world. [...] clearly Bassani is criticising this family for their behaviour and for their desire to remain outside the world and believing that they could not be involved in the world, because other people are taking positions against the Fascists, against what's happening, whereas they've just withdrawn. He's doing that, but at the same time you can feel his immense attraction to their way of life, to how beautiful it is that they don't actually get involved. It's a lovely ambiguous book in that sense²⁵.

In *A Literary Tour of Italy* (2015) Parks achieves a critical synthesis supported by a bright declaration of hermeneutic relativism: "this is my vision of Italy, my particular view. It always seems important to have that said"²⁶. Developing his intuition about the human impulse to intervene in society and the desire to enjoy a sheltered life, he defines the cultural identity of the Italians: "Italianness itself [entails] a particular way of framing problems of illusion and reality, a powerful tension between the imperatives of political action and the desire to be spared involvement of any kind"²⁷.

²⁴ T. Parks, *Controllo e negazione. L'allarmante modernità dei Finzi-Contini*, in *Poscritto a Giorgio Bassani*, pp. 367-378, p. 371.

²⁵ T. Ash, *Tim Parks recommends the best books on Italian Fiction*, "Five Books", <http://fivebooks.com/interview/tim-parks-on-italian-fiction/> (last accessed September 29, 2021).

²⁶ T. Parks, *A Literary Tour of Italy*, <https://timparks.com/non-fiction/a-literary-tour-of-italy/> (last accessed September 29, 2021).

²⁷ T. Parks, *Introduction*, in Id., *A Literary Tour of Italy*, pp. VII-X: pp. IX-X.

Emphasising that the idealistic and sceptical views in 19th- and 20th-century Italian novels were deeply rooted in the historical context, Parks explains that *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* becomes more meaningful if one recollects how strongly the Italian intellectuals felt about participating in public life. Bassani was an active member of the liberal-socialist, anti-fascist and anti-republican Action Party, and although he did not leave a deep mark on British culture, his committed and yet elusive role has elicited Parks' enduring interest. There is a sentence that only a British scholar deeply acquainted with Italian culture could write. He observes that Micòl, Alberto and the protagonist are taking far too long to write their undergraduate theses and earn their degrees: "It is a situation that Italian readers will immediately recognize. The undergraduate thesis, something not required in most Anglo-Saxon universities, is a moment of initiation in Italy, a passport to the adult world"²⁸.

4. Bassani, the USA, the UK, and Parks

Bassani's peculiar treatment of the Holocaust and appreciation of the USA has generated an imbalance in the American and British reception, only partially mitigated by Parks' contribution. In fact, the controversy over Parks' philological and linguistic knowledge of Bassani's work illuminates the complexity of Bassani's diverse reception in Anglophone countries. The paradoxical fact that the first version of Parks' debated essay was published in *The New York Review* only adds to the complexity.

Bassani's legacy in British literature and culture can be further explained by examining an entry in the seventh and latest edition of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2009), in which authors from around the world and interart perspectives were introduced:

BASSANI, Giorgio (1916-2000). Italian novelist, poet, short story writer, and editor. Born into an assimilated Jewish family in Ferrara, the main theme of his writings concerns the varied experiences of Jews in Fascist Italy and the impact of the racial laws of 1938. His best-known works are *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, a compendium of six works written between 1956 and 1972, including *Cinque storie ferraresi* (1956, rev. 1974; *Five Stories of Ferrara*, 1971), and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1962: *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*), turned into a film by Vittorio De Sica (1970). Bassani was principally responsible for ensuring the publication of Lampedusa's novel *Il gattopardo*²⁹.

The short entry highlights how Bassani's poetics is inextricably connected to the history and politics of Italy during and after the Second World War. It is a necessary contextualization which situates his writings within the domain of war narratives by Italian Jewish authors and offers clues as to the reasons for his modest recognition in Britain.

²⁸ T. Parks, *Introduction*, in G. Bassani, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, p. XIV.

²⁹ Bassani, in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, D. Birch ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 102.

The specific treatment of Jewish themes that has defined Bassani's identity as a twentieth-century Jewish Italian Holocaust writer has been appreciated in North America and Canada, because those are the Anglophone countries with which he established a profound intercultural dialogue. As his daughter claimed, "America represented freedom for those who had come out of the Italian Resistance movement; for those who had risked death many times against the dictatorship, America was true democracy"³⁰.

Great Britain did not exert a particular appeal to Bassani; there he has become known only through the translations of his books. It is Parks' Italophilia that has generated his unique understanding of the Finzi-Continis. His intense activity as a scholar of Italian studies has allowed him to contribute to the British reception of Bassani with a critical insight sustained by his exceptional Anglo-Italian identity. Viewed through the augmented perspective of his British and Italianate eyes, Parks' reading of the novel is surprisingly influential in defining the international response to Bassani.

³⁰ V. Ruocco, *Giorgio Bassani*, my translation.

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