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«UNO CARNEFICE, L'ALTRO VITTIMA». ABSTENTION FROM EXISTENCE AND DE- /ARTICULATIONS OF THE VICTIM— PERPETRATOR SYMMETRY IN *THE NOVEL OF FERRARA* BY GIORGIO BASSANI

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ἀνέχου καὶ ἀπέχου

abstain and sustain

Aphorism attributed to Epictetus by Arrian of Nicomede

***Ressentiment* and «Abstention from Existence»: Re-reading Bassani through Nietzsche (and Manganelli)**

«In any environment, in any relationship, there is a more or less expressed victim/perpetrator dynamic, which is generally lived at a non-conscious level»: with these words Liliana Cavani summarized the disturbing nucleus of her renowned and controversial film *The Night Porter*.¹ Set in postwar Vienna and marked by an unsettling mixture of eroticism and conspicuous references to the Nazi past, *The Night Porter* stages a psychological drama hinged on a morbid and surreal sadomasochistic relationship involving a concentration camp survivor and a one of her former perpetrators. We don't know whether Giorgio Bassani ever watched this film, released exactly on the same year – 1974 – that saw the first publication of his *Novel of Ferrara*, the book where the author reunited into a coherent and compact macrotextual organism his narrative production. Yet, the essence of Cavani's

assertion seems to offer a compelling interpretive key to explore the disquieting «metaphysical dismay» that looms over the little «provincial theater» where Bassani has situated his personal descent into the verticality of memory.²

A crowd of suffering but not forgotten individuals, «victims» whose existences have been annihilated by history and smothered by a ruthless society, inhabits the narrative universe of the *Novel of Ferrara*. If violence is always declined in relational dimension, expressed through an encounter of active and passive bodies, subjects and objects, perpetrators and victims whose interactions are inextricable from what Walter Benjamin termed as the «moral conditions» that make an «effective cause violent in the precise sense of the word»³, such dialectic permeates at multiple levels and trajectories the entire spectrum of Bassani's oeuvre. It acquires a remarkable relevance since the debut novel of the author, *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, where the hendiadys victim/perpetrator is explicitly evoked to describe the destructive passion experienced by Athos Fadigati, seduced and literally «devoured» by the young Eraldo Deliliers:

Tacqui. Pensavo a Deliliers e Fadigati: uno carnefice, l'altro vittima. La vittima al solito perdonava, consentiva al carnefice. Ma io no, su di me Fadigati si illudeva. All'odio non sarei mai riuscito a rispondere altro che con odio.⁴

[I kept silent. I thought of Deliliers and Fadigati, one the executioner, the other the victim. The victim as usual forgave, and gave his consent to the executioner. But not me: Fadigati was wrong about me. To hatred I could never respond in any other way than with hatred]

However, even in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* this circle of inflicted and accepted violence penetrates into the sphere of most intimate feelings. For Micòl love is equally imbued with a mysterious cruelty, it designates a «ferocious sport, much crueler and more ferocious than tennis», played «with no holds barred» and «without invoking goodness of heart or honesty of purpose».⁵ To better illuminate this upsetting interweaving of Eros and Thanatos, Bassani will encapsulate in her words a citation derived from the poetry of Charles Baudelaire:

*Maudit soit à jamais le rêveur inutile,
Qui voulut le premier dans sa stupidité,
S'éprenant d'un problème insoluble et stérile,
Aux choses de l'amour mêler l'honnêteté!*

aveva ammonito Baudelaire, che se ne intendeva. E noi? Stupidamente onesti entrambi, uguali in tutto e per tutto come due gocce d'acqua («e gli uguali non si combattono, credi a me!»), avremmo mai potuto sopraffarci l'un l'altro, noi, desiderare davvero di «sbranarci»? No, per carità.⁶

*[May he be cursed forever, that idle dreamer,
The first one who in his stupidity
Entranced by a sterile, insoluble problem,
Wished to mix honesty with what belongs to love!]*

we had been warned by Baudelaire, and he knew what he was talking about. And what about us? Both stupidly honest, as alike as two peas in everything and for everything («and people who're alike don't fight, believe me! »), could we ever manage to dominate each other? Did we seriously want to «devour» each other? No, for heaven's sake]

Against the backdrop of these and other crucial isotopies disseminated throughout the narrative body of the *Novel*, this article seeks in the first place to explore the expressive and intellectual ramifications that substantiate Bassani's conceptualization of the victim/perpetrator dynamic: what is the meaning that the author of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* attributes to the word «victim»? What genre of analytical language is employed to address that dialectic of violence alluded to by Cavani's sentence? Investigating Bassani's reflection on the question of victimhood however implies bringing into purview two fundamental problematics that traverse the entire architecture of his narrative oeuvre. The first relates to the notion of «subalternity», a topic that has already stirred the attention of critical scholarship on Bassani⁷: the depiction of a subaltern subject finds a paradigmatic incarnation in the character of Athos Fadigati in *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, quintessential example of a victimized individual who «gives consent to his perpetrator». On the other hand, the response opposed by the Jewish narrator of the same novel to the signs of an incipient Fascist antisemitic campaign reveals an antithetical nature: «to hatred I could never respond in any other way than with hatred». Compared to the resignation that overpowers Fadigati, these words rather point in direction of an outright impulse of retribution fueled by what René Girard would define in terms of a «mimetic rivalry».⁸ Yet this moral and psychological attitude, hinged on the introjection of a repressed anger, has a particularly complex history in the tradition of European thought. Friedrich Nietzsche has acutely explored its manifold implications in the first essay of his *Genealogy of Morality*, devoted to a lucid critique of the notion of *ressentiment*.⁹ In the *Novel of Ferrara*, *ressentiment* and its

various denominations *livore*, «rancor», *rabbia sorda*, «mute rage», *odio*, «hatred» – constitute an almost obsessive presence: Lucienne Kroha has retraced their deep ramifications starting from the stories collected in *Within the Walls*, a title that regroups the *Five Stories of Ferrara* originally published by Bassani in 1958 and included in the first section of his *Novel*.¹⁰ Linking these two different issues and their relative strands of critical scholarship they have generated, I would like to suggest that subalternity and *ressentiment* represent the specular and yet linked polarities through which Bassani conceptualize the psychological dimension of victimhood.

At the same time, though, the thematic structure of *The Novel of Ferrara* conjoins this careful exploration of the victimary condition with a parallel emancipatory discourse. Following the thematic diachrony articulated in the later narratives of the author – I will focus primarily on *Behind the Door*, an anti-*Bildungsroman* published by Bassani in 1964 – it is possible to point out how the intellectual itinerary articulated in the *Novel of Ferrara* is not limited to a recognition of the all-pervasive presence of violence within the sphere of human action: Bassani's goal is rather that of opening a space of conscience where it might be possible to disarticulate the oppressive binarism that, according to the words employed by Cavani, would like to reduce any human encounter to a «victim/perpetrator dynamic». It is a critical disarticulation naturally devoid of any consolatory outcome: through a particularly complex *itinerarium animae* hidden across the various narratives that substantiate the textual organism of the *Novel of Ferrara*, Bassani stages a difficult yet tenaciously pursued transition that, moving beyond pathological nature of *ressentiment* and a paralyzing condition of subalternity, attempts to give voice to a different ethical posture. The result of this intellectual tension leads to a dry and vertiginous moral passion that Giorgio Manganelli has acutely synthesized in a concise but pregnant expression: *astensione dall'esistenza*, «abstention from existence». Manganelli was one of the few members of the Neoavanguardia who, in a striking divergence with the vicious polemic attacks that intellectuals like Sanguineti, Pagliarani or Barilli directed towards Bassani in early 1960s,¹¹ openly acknowledged the artistic value condensed in works like *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini*. To this purpose, in a brilliant review of Bassani's major novel, Manganelli offers series of extremely precious critical remarks:

Il mondo narrativo – Manganelli writes – direi la religione narrativa, di Giorgio Bassani si incentra su taluni simboli straordinariamente attivi ed «efficaci» – come efficace è la grazia – che hanno dignità e violenza di dogma. Come i dogmi, essi smentiscono ogni descrizione cronologica dell'esistenza, e

consacrano ad un senso discorso e personaggi grazie a una pia coazione. Simbolo primario, immobile quanto impersonalmente affettuoso, è il cimitero: non uno qualsiasi, ma il cimitero ebraico, nella cui terra sconsecrata e sacra si sciolgono le ossa anonime della tribù; quasi un ghetto intemporale, che dietro le mura isola esseri fatalmente diversi, riluttanti alla storia, usi all'astensione dall'esistenza.¹²

[The narrative world, I would say the narrative religion of Giorgio Bassani, centers on few extraordinarily active and «efficacious» symbols – endowed of the same efficaciousness bestowed by grace – that have the dignity and the violence of dogma. Like dogmas, they contradict any chronological description of existence and consecrate characters and discourse to a specific sense by virtue of a pious coaction. The cemetery – motionless and marked by an impersonal affection – is the primary symbol of this narrative universe: not an ordinary cemetery though, but the Jewish cemetery, where the anonymous bones of the tribe dissolve in a land that is both deconsecrated and sacred; almost an intemporal ghetto that, behind its walls, isolates beings that are fatally different, reluctant to history, used to the abstention from existence.]

Isolation, separateness, inner exile represent the fundamental matrices governing the existential anguishes of Bassani's «victims». Yet, this same experience of segregation often ends up configuring the source of an inflexible vocation that Manganelli acutely defines in terms of an «arrogant privilege» (*arrogante privilegio*):¹³ a frightful but deliberate willingness to distance oneself from a violent and demeaning reality. Following these suggestive indications, I would like to argue that the moral nucleus of this «abstention from existence» might be interpreted as form of radical, desperate (neo-)stoicism. The ethical trajectory reconstructed by Bassani through the literary itinerary of his *Novel* aims at a disillusioned re-visitation of the principle of *ataraxia*: the Finzi-Contini family and Edgardo Limentani in *The Heron* become the solemn interpreters of this vertiginous and tragic abstention from life that implies an equally vertiginous abstention from agency. In the painful *meditatio cum figuris* condensed in the *Novel of Ferrara*, the inhuman grace of death ends up to open an infinite space against which *both* victims and perpetrators re-discover their common finitude. It is by invoking this ineffable and yet fearful presence that, to borrow again the suggestive words of Manganelli, the characters of the *Novel of Ferrara* «enjoy an unalterable point of view: they do not suffer death, and therefore do not offer themselves as victims, but identify with it, faithful to death through some sort of arcane devotion».¹⁴

I. Subaltern Subjects

The initial segment of this interpretive itinerary takes us to the trilogy of first-person narratives placed at the heart of the *Novel of Ferrara* and, more specifically, to the first novel of Bassani, *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*. Writing about the experience of seclusion and marginalization that invests the characters of Bassani para-autobiographical texts, Alberto Giardino has pinpointed a series of significant resonances that link the conceptual organization of Bassani's oeuvre to a constellation of critical reflections elaborated by Gayatri Spivak and Antonio Gramsci on the complex question of subalternity.¹⁵ *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and *Behind the Door* can thus be interpreted, Giardino argues, as a compact narrative triptych articulating the progressive *prise de conscience* of an «unacknowledged subalternity».¹⁶ Bassani's victims are, first of all, subaltern victims: unable to realize and gain awareness of their condition of marginality.

The theme of an introjected subalternity finds a paramount expression in the construction of the character of Athos Fadigati. In delineating the absolute protagonist of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, Bassani proposes to his reader the touching portrait of a victimized subject, reduced to a desperate impotence by a painful tangle of sadisms and homophobic prejudices. Fadigati's «paralysis of the will»¹⁷, his inability – or unwillingness – to resist this oppressive environment, and his final suicide in the waters of the Po river are portrayed through a calculated crescendo of narrative elements. The onset of the novel lingers on a carefully studied situation of equilibrium: Fadigati, who moved to Ferrara from his native Venice soon after the Great War, seems to be destined to a «tranquil, enviable career» of estimated otolaryngologist.¹⁸ He enjoys a remarkable social status comforted by economic wealth and refined cultural interests. Yet, this apparent harmony relies on a tacit pact of oppressive self-restraint. Fadigati's sexual life must remain meticulously circumscribed into an invisible space, removed from the field of vision of an otherwise merciless homophobic community:

Mai nulla di pratico in pubblico, sia pure in esclusiva fase di approccio, mai nulla di scandaloso. Bensì rapporti esclusivamente clandestini con uomini di mezza età e di condizione modesta, subalterna. Con individui discreti, insomma, o, almeno, tenuti in qualche modo a esserlo.¹⁹

[Nothing enacted in public, even as regards the maneuvers of initial approach; never anything scandalous. Some relationships of a carefully clandestine kind with middle-aged men who were not that well off, belonging to a modest, subaltern condition. In short, his associations were with discrete individuals, or at least with those somebody kept in such a way as to be so.]

Fadigati's sexual diversity is secluded into a physically and symbolically «subaltern» sphere: it is not suppressed, but rather confined within a space where it can be controlled and disciplined. Homosexuality is «immunized», in line with a philosophical and biopolitical paradigm elucidated by Roberto Esposito, treated as a «deviance» that «must be thwarted, but not by keeping it at a distance from one's borders»:²⁰ by contrast, it is *included* within the space of the community and, through this repressive inclusion, transformed into an instrument of both identity consolidation and social control. This same ambiguous condition, a sort of «inclusive exclusion»,²¹ is echoed in the very language of the anonymous choral narrator, whose voice is reconstructed by Bassani in some critical junctures of the novel through a masterful use of the free indirect speech.²² In referring to the sexual diversity of the protagonist, the surrounding Ferrarese community prefers resorting to a series of periphrases or dismissive omissions that indirectly refer to the «anomaly» represented by Fadigati's homosexuality and, at the same time, vilify and condemn it:

Non si sa da chi messe in giro, cominciarono a udirsi strane, anzi stranissime voci. «Non lo sai? Mi risulta che il dottor Fadigati è...» «Sta a sentire la novità. Conosci mica quel dottor Fadigati, che abita in via Gorgadello, quasi all'angolo con Bersaglieri del Po? Ebbene, ho sentito dire che è...».²³

[Then all of a sudden – no one knows who started them – strange, no, quite extraordinary rumors began to circulate. «Didn't you know? It seems that Dr. Fadigati is...» «Wait till you hear the news. You know that Dr. Fadigati who lives in Via Gorgadello, almost to the corner of Bersaglieri del Po? Well, I've heard it said that he's...»]

«A gesture, a look was enough», Bassani continues, «it was even enough even to say that Fadigati was “like that”, was “one of them”»:²⁴ this linguistic denigration further mirrors and redoubles the symbolic confinement of homosexuality in a marginal and subaltern space. Yet, as noted by Giardino, in the textual mechanism of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* the construction of this immunitary dispositive requires the passive complicity of its own victims, and it is exactly the introjection of

a heteronormative order to represent a crucial element that Bassani intends to bring to light. The character that best exemplifies this glaring contradiction is paradoxically the figure of Eraldo Deliliers – Fadigati’s lover and tormentor.

Through the character of Deliliers Bassani offers to his reader a stunning personifications of the fundamental aporia that animates the conceptual counterpoint at the core of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*: because Deliliers, despite the ostentation of overtly homophobic, aggressive and sexist attitudes, is a *repressed* homosexual.²⁵ Unable to emancipate himself from a web of oppressive heteronormative values, Deliliers is trapped into a paradoxical condition where a disavowed same-sex desire is compensated by an opposite intensification of overemphasized homophobic impulses. Everything in his offensive and dismissive language, in his openly vulgar gestures, is suffused by an exaggerated masculinity, reinforced by recurrent mentions referred to his ‘healthy’ heterosexual exuberance and to Deliliers’ passion for pugilism – an activity that in a traditional system of gender roles represents the quintessential masculine sport. Yet, it is precisely such compulsive masculinization that ends up signaling the presence of a latent desire that must be exorcised *through* the ostentation of an aggrandized virility. This paradox helps explaining the unrestrained sadism that governs his relationship with Fadigati, the mixture of abusive, coarse and aggressive behaviors that govern this latter’s brutal seduction. Deliliers’ compulsive inclination to vilify and ‘punish’ the subject of his passion conceals a disavowed impulse to punish his own unaccepted homoeroticism. A brief but incisive scene included in the seventh chapter of the novel reveals a series of subtle but telling details. Fadigati is in the company of a group of young Ferrarese students, aboard of a train commuting between Ferrara and Bologna. Among them are also Deliliers and the narrator of the novel. The old doctor has just expressed his deep aversion towards the practice of boxing, a sport that Fadigati compares to a downright legalization of murder. Deliliers seizes then the opportunity to denigrate his future hated-loved companion and to simultaneously reassert the dystopian coordinates of a supposedly correct, vigorous (and implicitly Fascist) masculinity:

«Se fossi nel governo – it is Fadigati speaking – io proibirei il pugilato: anche quello dilettantistico. Più che uno sport, lo considero una specie di assassinio legale. Pura brutalità organizzata...»

«Ma faccia il piacere!» lo interruppe Deliliers. «Ha mai visto tirare?»

Fadigati fu costretto ad ammettere di no. Disse che, per quanto medico, violenza e sangue gli facevano orrore.

«E allora, se non ha mai visto tirare,» tagliò corto Deliliers, «perché parla? Chi

ha chiesto il suo parere?»

E di nuovo, mentre Deliliers gli indirizzava quasi gridando queste parole, e quindi, voltategli le spalle, spiegava a noi assai più calmo che la boxe, «al contrario di quello che certi fessi possono pensare», è gioco di gambe, scelta di tempo, e scherma, in sostanza, soprattutto scherma, di nuovo vidi brillare negli occhi di Fadigati la luce assurda ma inequivocabile di una interna felicità.²⁶

[«If I were in the Government, I'd have pugilism banned: even amateur fighting. Rather than a sport, I consider it a species of legal assassination. Pure organized brutality...»

«Oh, do me a favour!» Deliliers interrupted him. «Have you ever watched a fight?»

Fadigati was forced to confess he hadn't. He said that, though he was a doctor, violence and blood horrified him.

«Well then, if you've never seen a fight», Deliliers cut him short, «why are you talking about? Who asked your opinion?»

And once again, while Deliliers, almost shouting, threw these words at the doctor, and then, turning his back on him, explained to us in a much calmer voice, that boxing, «the opposite of what certain idiots may think», in essence is a sport of legs, of timing and fencing, above all fencing, once again I saw shining in Fadigati's eyes the absurd but unmistakable light of an interior joy.]

If Deliliers punishes his unconfessed homosexuality through a pathological sadism, redirecting his own anxieties against an object of love that simultaneously desired and abhorred, on the other hand Fadigati feels compelled to *be punished* for his own homoerotic desire: in this other case violence is introverted into a masochistic passion. In a perverse mechanism of inflicted and received violence, the act of being punished, reviled, abused, offers the key to decode the «absurd interior joy» unwittingly betrayed by the protagonist of the novel. Just as Deliliers, Fadigati has accepted a heteronormative vision where homosexuality can be expressed only when it is contemporaneously censored and punished: his is an equally «unacknowledged subalternity».²⁷

This sadomasochistic relationship represents the main catalyst for the dramatic *denouement* of the narrative action. Fadigati and Deliliers' liaison will come to an abrupt end during a tormented sojourn in a hotel on the beaches of Riccione, where Fadigati will be literally punched and robbed by his presumed lover. At the same time, this «scandalous» event²⁸ signals the breaking point that dissolves the curtain of (subaltern) respectability discretely maintained up to that point by the protagonist

of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*. The ensuing spiral of increasing social isolation will gradually reduce Fadigati to a condition of despair, anguish and material hardships. Unable to dissociate himself from an all-pervading homophobic discursivity, the social pressure exercised on the protagonist of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* is dramatically turned into a paralyzing *self*-condemnation. Following the public disclosure of his homosexuality, abandoned and despised by everyone, in one of his last encounters with the young narrator of the novel Fadigati will confess that he does not find even the force to «tolerate» himself any longer. The homophobic prejudice that will push him towards a suicidal despair has not only been accepted – it has been literally *interiorized*:

Dopo ciò che è accaduto l'estate scorsa – Fadigati states – non mi riesce più di tollerarmi. Non posso più non debbo. Ci crede che certe volte non sopporto di farmi la barba davanti allo specchio? Potessi almeno vestirmi in un altro modo! Tuttavia mi vede, senza questo cappello... questo pastrano... questi occhiali da tipo per bene? E d'altra parte, messi su così mi sento talmente ridicolo, grottesco, assurdo! Eh no, *inde redire negant*, è proprio il caso di dirlo. Non c'è più niente da fare, mi senta.²⁹

[After all that happened last summer I can't tolerate myself any longer. I can't, I shouldn't go on. Would you believe that I can't even bear to shave in front of the mirror. I could at least dress in a different fashion! All the same, could you imagine me without this hat... this overcoat... these glasses, this uniform of respectability? And yet, dressed up like this, I feel so ridiculous, grotesque, absurd! Eh no, *inde redire negant* couldn't be more apt. There's nothing to be done for me, don't you see?]

Subalternity is no longer expressed in terms of a suffocating social structure: it has been transmogrified into a mental habitus that infiltrates the psychic life of the individual. Unable to accept himself, to «tolerate» himself, averting an overwhelming hegemonic and heteronormative discourse, with his suicide in the waters of the Po river Fadigati bequeaths an excruciatingly ambivalent message. His death can be interpreted as a last, desperate act of rebellion against a devastating machinery of oppression or, alternatively, as a last act of unconditional submission.

II. Mimetic Hatred

The narrative framework of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, however, pivots on a dual structure, it juxtaposes the history of a double persecution reflected in «the parallel lives of two outsiders».³⁰ Along with the character of Athos Fadigati, quintessential «subaltern» victim who «gives his consent to the executioner»,³¹ Bassani intends to bring into purview also another dimension of victimhood. For the young Jewish narrator of the novel, the desolation that dries up the life of Fadigati provides a painful mirror to decode his own subaltern condition: the subterranean symmetry that connects the two central figures of the novel has received extensive critical attention. Yet, as pointed out by Lucienne Kroha, their encounter can hardly be interpreted in terms of a spontaneous convergence among marginalized subjects potentially united by a common experience of suffering. If Fadigati would like to recognize in the young narrator a potential «ally», «a friend» with whom it might be possible share and possibly alleviate the burden of his own anguish, this latter is unable to offer a sympathetic response: the solidarity between the two is incomplete, asymmetrical and unilateral.³² For the narrator, the identification with an explicitly homosexual character is so fraught with «discomfort» that it is instinctively opposed by an unconscious repulse, a rejection supposed to shore up and mask his own insecure and precarious manliness.³³ At the same time, these masculine apprehensions intertwine with an equally explicit condemnation of Fadigati's unconditional passivity, his choice not to act, not to rebel, not to fight back, that the narrator interprets as an incomprehensible plunge into an utter resignation: Fadigati is «wrong» in his choice to give «consent to his executioner». Such discrepancy emerges with striking evidence in one of the last conversations between the two characters. The problem, Fadigati admits, is given by the difficulty to «accept one's own nature»:

Forse bisognerebbe essere così, sapere accettare la propria natura. Ma d'altra parte come si fa è possibile pagare un prezzo simile? Nell'uomo c'è molto della bestia, eppure può l'uomo, arrendersi? Ammettere di essere una bestia, e soltanto una bestia?³⁴

[Perhaps one ought to be like that, able to accept one's own nature. But on the other hand how does one accomplish that? Isn't the price too high? There is a great deal of the animal in all men, and yet can we give in to that? Admit to being an animal, and only an animal?]

It is the impossibility to accept his own homosexuality and to reverse a deeply interiorized heteronormative order to literally crush the protagonist of *The Gold Rimmed Spectacles*: Fadigati's intimate conundrum stems from his inability to accept his own persona, averting an oppressive impulse to self-condemnation that overpowers him. The narrator, on the contrary, mistakes the meaning of these words into a reviling declaration of resignation. Fadigati's arduous and vertiginous dilemma is erroneously read as an invitation accept one's own *subaltern* nature:

«Oh no», dissi, «Sarebbe come dire: può un italiano, un cittadino italiano, ammettere di essere un ebreo, e soltanto un ebreo?»

Mi guardò umiliato.

«Comprendo cosa vuol dire,» disse poi. «In questi giorni, mi creda, ho pensato tante volte a lei e ai suoi. Però, mi permetta di dirglielo, se io fossi in lei...»

«Che cosa dovrei fare?» lo interruppi con impeto. «Accettare di essere quello che sono? O meglio adattarmi a essere quello che gli altri vogliono che io sia?»

«Non so perché non dovrebbe,» ribatté dolcemente.

«Caro amico, se essere quello che è la rende tanto più umano (non si troverebbe qui in mia compagnia, altrimenti!) perché rifiuta, perché si ribella?»³⁵

[«Oh no», I said. «It would be like asking: can an Italian, an Italian citizen, admit to being a Jew, and only a Jew?»

He gave me a humiliated look.

«I understand what you're saying», he replied after a while «In these times, believe me, I've many times thought about you, and your family. But, allow me to tell you that if I were in your...»

«What should I do?» I interrupted him heatedly. «Accept that I am what I am? Or would it be better to mold myself into what others want me to be?»

«I don't see why you shouldn't», he replied quietly.

«My dear friend, if being what you are is what makes you so much more human – you wouldn't be here keeping me company otherwise! – why reject, why rebel against it?»]

This dialogic counterpoint juxtaposes on the one hand Fadigati's passivity, his invitation to «accept» one's own nature and inclination to give «consent» to his own perpetrators; on the other the unwillingness of the young unnamed narrator to accept what is perceived as an unconditional surrender to an absurd logic of asymmetrical violence. The response offered by this latter to the rising tide of a growing antisemitic intolerance is by contrast grounded on an adamant logic of

mimetic retribution: «to hatred, I could never respond in any other way than hatred».³⁶ Yet, in one of the numerous slippages that so frequently dot the Bassani's skillful prose, this mimetic rivalry has anything but an emancipatory value: it does not free the subject from his subaltern position. Rather, it is exactly *through* this profession of «hatred» that the narrator is offering himself as a victim. Subalternity is not negated, but simply redoubled and reshaped into a different psychological language. It is Bassani himself to offer a key indication to decode the real nature of this «hatred» in a brief narrative sequence previously included a passage of his novel.

A few days before his last encounter with Fadigati, the narrator of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* is engaged in a brief conversation with his friend Nino Bottecchiari. Bottecchiari is the son of a family with strong socialist roots, and would like to pass for an opponent of the Fascist regime: yet, when touching on the unpleasant question of the virulent antisemitic campaign unleashed by Fascism, he dismisses the unsettling signs of the incumbent racial turn as a trivial and negligible nuisance. Italy, Bottecchiari believes, «will not go down the same road as Germany». At the end, he states, the collective frenzy initiated by the racial campaign will burst «like a soap bubble»:

«Oh, noialtri italiani siamo troppo buffoni,» replicò, senza mostrare di essersi accorto della mia ironia. «Noi dei tedeschi potremo imitare qualsiasi cosa, perfino il passo dell'oca, ma non il senso tragico che hanno della vita. Siamo troppo vecchi, troppo scettici e consumati».³⁷

[«Oh, we Italians are too buffoonish for that», he replied, without showing he was aware of my irony. «We may imitate the Germans in some things, even the goose-step, but not the tragic they have of life. We are just too old, too skeptical and worn out».]

Bottecchiari does not seem to realize that the emphasis on the word «Italians», pronounced with an Italian Jew who is about to be stripped of his own «Italianness», ends up evoking a series of uncomfortable associations. The reaction of the narrator to this awkward superficiality is immediate: «could one be more awkward», he comments silently, «more insensible, more obtusely *goyim* than that»? Bottecchiari's words end up to trigger an anguishing feeling of aversion:

E mentre Nino pieno di disagio taceva, io sentivo nascere dentro me stesso con indicibile ripugnanza l'antico, atavico odio dell'ebreo nei confronti di tutto ciò che fosse cristiano, cattolico, insomma *goi*. *Goi, goim*: che vergogna, che umiliazione, che ribrezzo, a esprimermi così! Eppure ci riuscivo già – mi dicevo –: diventato simile a qualsiasi ebreo dell'Europa orientale che non fosse mai vissuto fuori dal proprio ghetto. Pensavo anche al nostro, di ghetto, a via Mazzini, a via Vignatagliata, al vicolo-mozzo Torcicoda. In un futuro abbastanza vicino, loro, i *goim*, ci avrebbero costretti a brulicare di nuovo là, per le anguste, tortuose viuzze di quel misero quartiere medioevale da cui in fin dei conti non eravamo venuti fuori che da settanta, ottanta anni. Ammassati l'uno sull'altro dietro i cancelli come tante bestie impaurite, non ne saremmo evasi mai più.³⁸

[And while Nino remained in a most uneasy silence, I felt in me, with inexpressible repugnance, the first inklings of the Jew's ancient, atavistic hatred for anything that was Christian, Catholic, in a word *goy*. *Goy, goyim*: what a sense of shame, what a humiliation, what a loathsome falling-off, to think in these terms. And yet I had already managed this – I told myself – becoming exactly like any Jew whatsoever from Eastern Europe who had never lived outside his own ghetto. I thought of our own ghetto, of Via Mazzini, of Via Vignatagliata, of the blind alley Torcicoda. In a near enough future, they, the *goyim*, would once more have forced us to swarm there, in the narrow, twisting lanes from which, when all was reckoned, we had emerged only some seventy or eighty years ago. Piled one on the top of the other behind the gates like so many frightened beasts, we would never again manage to escape.]

«The first inklings of the Jew's ancient, atavistic hatred for anything that was Christian, Catholic»: that same «hatred» which, in his conversations with Fadigati, was indicated as the sole appropriate response to a condition of subalternity, re-emerges here with a range of completely different implications. Far from liberating the individual from the grip of an oppressive social order, this resentful rancor ends up constituting a primary symptom of that same unsustainable cage of fears and restrictions that envelopes the protagonists of Bassani's narratives. It fuels a «negative» conscience, materialized in a feeling of «repugnance» that gives life to a mechanism of self-condemnation with close resemblance to that same impulse to self-denigration that afflicted the character of Fadigati. If this latter internalized a heteronormative vision where homosexuality was perceived as an intolerable «deviance», on the other hand the language that the narrator reveals to be suffused, and not without a jarring contradiction, with a series of trite stereotypes that Fascist

ideology associated to Jewish identity, starting from the undesired identification with «any Jew whatsoever from Eastern Europe who had never lived outside his own ghetto». If Fadigati experienced a condition of subalternity because of his utter passivity, the narrating I of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* however experiences a similar paralysis of the will. His «hatred» becomes the crucial manifestation of a feared *regression* into an im-/material ghetto, whose existence is projected not only in an all too recent past, but also onto an ominous future that reveals the contours of a disquieting prefiguration of a concentrationary space alluded to by the visual imagery of «gates» surrounding a crowd of «frightened beasts». From this point of view, the *ressentiment* professed and nourished by the unnamed narrator of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* does not appear extremely different from Fadigati's inclination to give «consent to his executioner». Rather, it suggests yet another incarnation of a subaltern condition.

III. Passivity Rewritten: *Behind the Door* and the Choice of Abstinence

Subalternity and *ressentiment*, passivity and mimetic rivalry are the two primary dimensions of victimhood identified by Bassani in *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*. Despite their apparent difformity, both rely on the same binary logic hinged on the symmetrical encounter of active and passive bodies, perpetrators and victims, subjects and objects of an either inflicted or suffered «hatred». It is exactly this dualistic logic however that will be radically problematized in the narrative development of the *Novel of Ferrara*. To highlight this conceptual and thematic diachrony it might be useful to carry out a contrastive re-reading juxtaposing Bassani's first novel and another text included in the organism of the *Novel of Ferrara*, *Behind the Door*, the third and last segment of the trilogy of first-person narratives that absorbed Bassani's creative endeavor between the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The presence of a disavowed homoerotic desire traverses like an implicit *fil rouge* both texts: *Behind the Door* is a tale of initiation to sex experienced in a context of «male rivalries»³⁹, thus revealing the influence of a decisive model of «Verbildungs-Roman» represented by the *Confusions of the Young Törless* of Robert Musil. The book has thus been read as an illuminating backstory of both *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*⁴⁰: at the same time, though,

Bassani's last para-autobiographical novel represents a crucial locus of articulation where a series of problematics previously touched on in *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* are addressed through a different set of ethical and conceptual postures.

Multiple intertextual linkages connect the two works: the oppressive web of sadomasochistic relations displayed in *The Gold Rimmed-Spectacles* is echoed by an equally suffocating entanglement of idiosyncrasies that loom over the social (mis)interactions portrayed in *Behind the Door*, hinged on the morbid and abnormal relationship that binds the young narrator and the hated-loved figure of Luciano Pulga. Pulga, on the other hand, is the main engine of a sexual initiation pervaded by overtly sadomasochistic and homoerotic nuances. The first signs of this traumatizing discovery emerge during a conversation dominated by an indiscreet curiosity concerning the sexual intimacy of other male peers:

Fino ad allora non mi ero mai masturbato. Quando lo seppe, Luciano se ne meravigliò. Ma come! Alla mia età! Da quando aveva dieci anni lui si era sempre masturbato. Almeno una volta al giorno.

«Ma non fa male?»

«Macché male! Fa benissimo invece.»⁴¹

[Till then I had never masturbated. When Luciano learned this, he was astonished. How's that possible? At my age! Since he was ten he always masturbated at least once a day.

«But doesn't it do any harm?»

«Harm!? On the contrary, it does you nothing but good»]

Gradually, however, this verbal curiosity turns into an intrusive game of explicit physical requests:

Rispondevo come potevo, ammettendo tutto, anche quando non capivo bene: e cioè che sì, spesso nei momenti più impensati il «coso» mi si irrigidiva, e che una mattina o due mi ero svegliato con la camicia da notte piena di macchie umide.

Un pomeriggio Luciano si sbottonò i pantaloncini e mi mostrò il membro. Quindi pretese che anche io facessi lo stesso. Ero sempre stato pudicissimo, e riluttavo. Ma lui insisteva, e finì con l'accontentarlo. Guardò attentamente, chinandosi un poco in avanti con aria distaccata, da medico. «Tutta qui la circoncisione?» – sbottò poi a ridere.⁴²

[I replied the best I could, admitting everything, even when I hadn't properly understood: which was to say that yes, often in the most unexpected moments, my <thing> got hard, and that one or two mornings I'd woken with my nightshirt covered with wet patches.

One afternoon Luciano unbuttoned his short trousers and showed me his member. He presumed that I would then do the same. I had always been extremely shy and so refused. But he insisted and I ended up doing as he asked. He observed carefully, bending forward with a professional look, like a doctor. «Is that all, the circumcision?» he said, bursting out in a laugh.]

As it was the case with Deliliers, the figure of Pulga is dominated by a repressed and disavowed homosexuality, betrayed by his compulsive interest towards to the sexual intimacy of other male peers. Along with this subtle *mise en abîme* of a homoerotic desire Bassani has disseminated other correspondences that crisscross the textual framework of *Behind the Door* and reconnect it with themes and ambiances previously evoked in *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*. One of these interrelations concerns the desperate message bequeathed by Fadigati, his invitation to «accept one's own nature». ⁴³ This same need of self-acceptance will be encapsulated in the opening epigraph that accompanies the 1964 edition of *Behind the Door*, symbolized by a quotation derived once again from the admired Baudelaire:

«Ah Seigneur! Donnez-moi la force et le courage
De contempler mon cœur et mon corps sans dégoût!» ⁴⁴

[Oh Lord! Give me the force and the courage
to contemplate my heart and my body without disgust!]

These lines are derived from the concluding stanza of *Voyage a Cithère*, one of the compositions included in the *Fleurs du mal*, and reshape into the language of lyrical expression the same excruciating dilemma raised by Fadigati: how to «contemplate» one's heart and body «without disgust», averting the internalization of a judgmental condemnation imposed by an oppressive social order. A third significant point of contact between the two texts instead concerns the mimetic and resentful «hatred» brought to the foreground in the concluding chapters of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*. This same feeling of *ressentiment* will re-emerge in the final paragraph of *Behind the Door*, reflected in the «destiny of separation and rancor» (*separazione e livore* in the original Italian text) that looms over the protagonist of Bassani's last para-autobiographical novel:

Senonché – Bassani writes in the concluding paragraph of *Behind the Door* – nel momento stesso in cui, dinanzi a quel gramo dorso nudo, remoto, a un tratto, inattingibile nella sua solitudine, mi abbandonavo a questi pensieri, già allora doveva pur dirmi che se Luciano Pulga era in grado di accettare il confronto della verità, io no. Duro a capire, inchiodato per nascita a un destino di separazione e di livore, la porta dietro la quale ancora una volta mi nascondevo inutile che pensassi di spalancarla. Non ci sarei riuscito, niente da fare. Ne adesso, né mai.⁴⁵

[And yet in the very moment when, facing his sorry bare back, suddenly distant, unreachable in his solitude, I gave way to these thoughts, already then, something was telling me that if Luciano Pulga might be able to accept the encounter with the truth, I would not. Slow to understand, nailed by birth to a destiny of separation and rancor, it was useless to think I'd ever be able to throw open the door behind which I was yet again hiding. I just couldn't do it – there was no remedy. Not now. Not ever.]

Similar correspondences delineate a vertical genealogy suggest reading the «destiny of separation and rancor» that afflicts the protagonist of *Behind the Door* as an ominous anticipation of the mimetic «hatred» felt by the more mature pseudo-autobiographical narrator of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*. Passivity and *ressentiment* continue to represent the key coordinates that dominate the inner psychological life of the protagonists of both novels⁴⁶; yet, if similar themes transmigrate across Bassani's works, in this diachronic process of rewriting they experience a radical reconceptualization. In *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, the passivity that dominated Fadigati's life constitutes the main cause behind the progressive disintegration of his social and psychological life. In *Behind the Door*, by contrast, passivity and «inner exile» (*esilio interiore*) become the invisible roots of a deliberate and yet costly vocation to dignity: the same psychological and ethical posture is rewritten according to a reversed polarity. Isolation is no longer presented solely as a brutal condemnation imposed by an oppressive community, in what turns out to be an outright scapegoat logic, but also begins to represent a deliberate and costly commitment through which the individual can assert his own ethical autonomy. The nucleus of this renewed attitude is encapsulated by Bassani in a Dantean verse, chosen by the young narrator of *Behind the Door* to express the most intimate nucleus of a vision where his «exile» becomes the painful symbol of a desperate attempt to safeguard of one's own identity:

No, no, meglio la solitudine del posto che avevo scelto, in fondo alla fila delle donne. Il professor Bianchi, quello d'italiano, aveva cominciato le lezioni declamando una canzone di Dante, e un verso mi aveva colpito. Diceva: «L'essilio che m'è dato a onor mi tegno». Poteva essere la mia divisa, il mio motto.⁴⁷

[No, it was better to enjoy the solitude of the seat I had chosen. Professor Bianchi, who taught Italian, had started his classes reciting one of the *canzoni* by Dante, and I was struck by a verse. It read: «The exile given me brings honor». It could be my uniform, my motto.]

«Exile» implies an experience of separation, seclusion, abandonment: Fadigati is exiled from his own community after the public disclosure of his relationship with Delilieri, and it is this forceful separation that initiates a spiral of isolation and denigration that will lead him to death. The protagonist of *Behind the Door*, on the other hand, *chooses* to exile himself: and yet, far from resulting into a ruinous mechanism of self-denigration or in a «negative conscience», such condition is now transformed into a painful choice of self-preservation.

The chain of events at the center of *Behind the Door* centers on a triangle of conflictual relations that involve the young protagonist and a couple of specular and opposite Doppelgänger, respectively incarnated by the opposite figures of Luciano Pulga and Carlo Cattolica. The character of Cattolica, as his names inevitably suggests, has been molded by Bassani into a miniaturized portrait of a perfect bourgeois respectability: Cattolica hails from a socially privileged family, is firmly proud of his (naturally Catholic) religious upbringing, boasts excellent school results, is admired and flattered by schoolmates and professors alike, including the young narrator of *Behind the Door*: the two indeed share the same desk and are constantly engaged in a petty game of competitions and reciprocal emulations. Cattolica appears to be predestined to a brilliant career of surgeon and yet, this impeccable conduct is also accompanied by merciless classism, intolerance towards any form of social or religious «mixings», and a ferocious inclination to defend precise hierarchies of reputation and power. Cattolica thus will never conceal his deep sense of disgust towards Luciano Pulga, disdainfully compared to a «mongrel», a bastardized dog that only deserves to be ruthlessly and brutally punished:

Quando penso che al mondo c'è della gente come Pulga – Cattolica states in a conversation with the narrator – mi sento rivoltare il sangue. [...] Pur di intrufolarsi nelle case degli altri, chissà quanti chilometri sarebbe disposto a

macinare in un giorno, quello lì, con quei suoi due stecchi di gambine. Sai come certi cani bastardi che basta fargli un fischio e subito accorrono, trotando e scodinzolando? Da autentico meteco, Pulga è proprio così [...] Io vedi, sarà perché non sono un bastardo e nemmeno un meteco, e le mescolanze non posso soffrirle, mi fanno venire una specie di pelle d'oca, io non sto bene che a casa mia.⁴⁸

[When I think that there are people like Pulga in this world, this makes my blood boiling [...] Who knows how many kilometers he'd be willing to walk in a day, with those two frail legs of his, to stick his nose in someone else's house. You know those little mongrels, when one has just to whistle at them and they quickly come, trotting and wailing their tail? Pulga's just like that, a real tyke. [...] Maybe because I'm not a bastard or a tyke, and I can't bear mixings, they give me the goosebumps, I don't feel good unless I am at my home]

Pulga, on the other hand, represents the quintessential outcast, recently arrived to Ferrara after a childhood spent in remote villages on the Apennines, where his father used to work in a modest medical ambulatory. His family lives in precarious economic conditions, in the seat arrangement of the classroom, where precise geographies of social status and prominence come into play, Pulga is relegated to the last row, and his school results are generally mediocre. He will be rapidly pushed to the physical and symbolic margins of the human microcosm recreated by Bassani in the Liceo Guardini, and his figure is surrounded by an inexplicable aura of «physical repugnance».⁴⁹ It is precisely this sense of deep aversion that ends up representing an extremely complex and subtly ambivalent element in the textual orchestration of the book. The more Pulga is relegated into a marginal position, the more other characters of the novel refer to his figure with metaphors and allusions that unwittingly recall to mind some of the most common and entrenched stereotypes of anti-Judaic prejudice: Cattolica's words offer to this purpose a tangible example. His insistence in comparing Pulga to a «mongrel», eager to sneak into someone else's home to find some sort of stable accommodation, delineates an overt allusion to the trite *cliché* of the wandering Jew, one of the manifold manifestations of the European Judeophobia targeting the diasporic nature of Hebraism. By the same token, Cattolica's aversion for any form of «mixing» ought to be read in terms of an intolerance towards any form of social, religious and *racial* amalgam: these discursive semantics are shaped by Bassani as implicit signifiers of a subterranean, unexpressed, and yet deeply engrained racism.

It is perhaps exactly this condition of marginalization that surrounds the character of Pulga to trigger an initial emphatic reaction of the part of the young narrator, rapidly exploited by the former: the relationship between the two characters will at first develop into an assiduous frequentation. Later on, it will acquire the characters of an overtly obsessive bond.

This relational triangle reaches a dramatic breaking point with Pulga's unexpected «betrayal» of the trust of the narrator.⁵⁰ Informed by Cattolica, this latter will get to know that the screen of initial submissiveness exhibited by Pulga to catch his sympathy conceals nothing but a cunning stratagem, an artifice of «malice»⁵¹ devised to exploit the unsuspecting naivety of the protagonist:

«Come sei ingenuo!» – Cattolica warns the narrator during a telephone conversation. – «Ingenuo?» Ma non voleva spiegarmi. Di modo che, per convincerlo a parlare, o meglio, per usare la stessa frase che usò lui, a buttar fuori il rospo che da tanto tempo gli pesava sullo stomaco (dovevo sentirlo Pulga, il *mio* caro Pulga – proruppe – le belle cose che andava dicendo in giro su di me dietro le mie spalle!), fui costretto a insistere ancora parecchio.⁵²

[«How naive you are!». «Naive?». But he didn't want to explain it to me. He was so unwilling that, to persuade him, or rather, to use his own phrase – to rid him of the lead weight he was carrying – I was forced to insist a great deal. At last, he burst out saying that I ought to hear Pulga – my *dear* Pulga – what delightful things he said about me behind my back!]

Outraged by such revelation, in the mind of the protagonist the figure of Pulga rapidly metamorphoses into a deceitful «traitor». It is exactly at this point, as a result of a violent fantasy of revenge, that the narrator will unwittingly compare Pulga to the traitor *par excellence* of the Judeo-Christian tradition – Judas Iscariot:

Convinto più che mai che Cattolica non avesse mentito, pensavo a Luciano. Ma certo! – mi dicevo e mi ridicevo, compreso dell'enorme ingiustizia che Luciano mi aveva fatto, e continuando insieme a sentirmi leggero, felice, liberato da un gran peso. Ma certo! Ero stato ben cieco a non vedere per tanto tempo che Luciano era un traditore! Cercavo di sdegnarmi, di montarmi. «Che porco!» borbottavo fra i denti, «che carogna»! Domani a scuola, avrei subito affrontato il Giuda. Gli avrei chiesto a bruciapelo: «Dunque è così eh? Dunque è vero che parli male di me, eh?» e senza aspettare che lui negasse o confermasse lo avrei schiaffeggiato davanti a tutti.⁵³

[More than ever convinced that Cattolica had not been lying, I thought about Luciano. But of course! I said to myself again and again, gradually taking in the huge injustice Luciano had done me, and yet at the same time feeling glad, lightened, freed of a crushing weight. But of course! How blind I'd been for so long, not to have seen what a traitor Luciano was! I tried to shrug it off, to rise above it. «What a swine!» I muttered between my teeth, «what a bastard»! Tomorrow, at school, I would confront the Judas straightaway. I would ask him point blank: «So it's like that, is it? So it's true you badmouth me behind my back?» And without waiting for him to deny or confirm it, I would give him a slap in front of everyone.]

Two elements appear particularly significant in this sudden outburst of vengeful rage. The first, linked to the peculiar epithet that the Jewish narrator of the novel ascribes to his imaginary rival: «tomorrow, at school, I would confront the Judas straightaway». If Cattolica compares Pulga to a stray dog, eager to sneak into the house of his guest, conflating the old stereotype of the wandering Jew with the inoffensive figure of his schoolmate, now it is the narrator himself to replicate a similarly vicious anti-Semitic language. The more Pulga acquires the traits of the «traitor» who seeks the company of other only for a personal gain, the more his individuality reveals to be intertwined with the most stereotypical and offensive image of the *giudeo*, transformed into the quintessential scapegoat of a collective aggressiveness – a scapegoat that, according to this perverse logic, *ought* to be punished in what René Girard would probably term as a «sacrificial crisis».⁵⁴ On the other hand, this desire for retribution conceals the identical mimetic structure displayed in *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, where «hatred» represented the only possible response to imposed violence. Solicited by Cattolica, the protagonist of *Behind the Door* plunges into the same logic of mimetic rivalry that dominated his more mature alter ego in *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*. In response to the «huge injustice» committed by Luciano, the only possible reparation seems to be offered by direct retaliation. In this perverse mechanism of symmetrical reproduction of violence the sole possibility offered to the victim to evade from his condition of passivity points in direction of a vicious role reversal, in which the victimized subject can assert his own emancipation only through an act of specular domination, by relegating his own perpetrator into a symmetrical position of imposed subalternity.

The punishment of Pulga's betrayal is supposed to occur at Cattolica's home, where the predestined victim has been invited to «sing» the truth.⁵⁵ Hiding into an adjacent room, behind the door that gives the name to the entire novel, the narrator will eardrop the confession of Pulga and eventually, following a suggestion proposed

by Cattolica himself, is invited to punish the little «Judas» («dargli seduta stante un fracco di botte», «to beat the hell out of him» is what Cattolica suggests).⁵⁶ However, when everything seems to be ready for this violent retaliation among adolescents, the narrator of *Behind the Door* opts for a completely different and unexpected choice: after having listened – unseen – to Pulga’s denigrating statements, replete with allusions to his supposed homosexuality, this latter rather decides to walk away quietly abandoning Pulga and Cattolica to their bond of reciprocal hate and disgust. The betrayal remains apparently unpunished, the sacrifice of the little «Judas» fails to be consummated: the logic of mimetic hatred has been dissolved. But how are we supposed to interpret this choice of not acting, of not punishing Pulga?

Months after the his «betrayal», Pulga and the narrator will meet again for their last conversation. Unable to «accept the encounter with truth» and to confront his rival⁵⁷, in this final passage of the novel the narrator is seized by that same «paralysis of the will»⁵⁸ that dominated the psychology of Fadigati in *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*. There is however a major difference: passivity and «rancor», in this case, are not the result of an imposed condition, of an introjected and «unacknowledged subalternity». They are rather the result of a conscious choice: the choice not to replicate a circular logic of either accepted or imposed violence where, in order to evade from a condition of victimized subalternity, the only possibility offered to the victim is that of becoming the perpetrator of his own perpetrator. Reversing Nietzsche’s critique of the idea of *ressentiment*, «rancor» then becomes the price that the narrator of *Behind the Door* is forced to pay so as to shatter the cyclical logic of violence.

Considered from this diachronic perspective, *Behind the Door* thus proposes a fundamental reconceptualization of a central question explored by Bassani in *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*. If, in *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, the passivity of Fadigati reveals to be the devastating consequence of an introjected subalternity and of a consequent victimization, in *Behind the Door* the choice of inaction pursued by the main protagonist represents the inevitable result of a choice *not* to participate in a *Lebensform* that seems to be inevitably divided among victims (Pulga) and perpetrators (Cattolica). Through his writing, Bassani thus intends to retrace a path of introspection and intellectual maturation that will eventually find its conclusive – and yet not consolatory – elaboration in the two other major novels included in his Ferrarese cycle: *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and *The Heron*. It will be in these two texts, in fact, that the passivity of Bassani’s characters will be eventually crystallized into a radical and intentionally deliberate «abstention from existence».

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1. The sentence can be read in the introduction to the screenplay of the film, published in 1974 by Cavani herself, *Il portiere di notte*, Turin: Einaudi, 1974, pp. ix-x, and has been acutely commented by Gaetana Marrone, *The Gaze and the Labyrinth: The Cinema of Liliana Cavani*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 89-95. The movie, and Cavani's speculation on the «victim/perpetrator dynamic», elicited a direct response of Primo Levi who, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, defined *The Night Porter* a «beautiful and false film» and reacting to Cavani's assertion noted: «I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer», Primo Levi, *The Drowned and The Saved*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017 [1986], p. 37.
 2. The metaphor of the «little provincial theater», corresponding to the real and at the same time fictitious city of Ferrara where Bassani centered most of his stories, is evoked in the last lines of *Down There, at the End of The Corridor*, a prose of self-commentary that concludes of the *Novel*, see Giorgio Bassani, *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980, p. 769 (unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the *Novel* will refer to this edition, while the corresponding English translations are derived from Jamie McKendrik's translation *The Novel of Ferrara*, London: Penguin, 2018). It was instead Italo Calvino, in one of his letters to François Wahl, to talk of a *sgomento metafisico* («metaphysical dismay») in relation to Bassani's prose, perhaps alluding to an implicit connection with the metaphysical painting of Giorgio De Chirico, who authored some of his most renowned masterpieces – like *The Disquieting Muses* – during his Ferrarese sojourn, cf. Italo Calvino, *Lettere, 1940-1983*, Milan: Mondadori, 2003, p. 533. Bassani's «personal novel» incorporated within his *Novel of Ferrara* has been studied by Paolo Vanelli, *La finzione autobiografica del «Romanzo di Ferrara»*, Ferrara: Corbo Editore, 2010.
 3. Walter Benjamin, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999, p. 179, *passim* (my translation).
 4. Bassani, *Gli occhiali d'oro*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 254.
 5. Bassani, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, *ibidem*, p. 420.
 6. *Ibidem*. The poem quoted by Micòl is *Femmes damnées*, one of the lyrics included in the *Fleurs du mal*.
 7. The topic has been addressed some years ago by Alessandro Giardino, «Giorgio Bassani e il «subalterno» come esperienza dell'altro: per una nuova lettura degli *Occhiali d'oro*, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, e *Dietro la Porta*», *The Italianist*, XXXIII, 3, October 2013, pp. 427–442.
 8. The cycle of mimetic desire identified by Girard can be generically subdivided into three different components: the first is given by «mimetic rivalry», the second concerns the «collective violence of the scapegoat mechanism, which transform the chaos of the

mimetic crisis into a new social order», while the third and last component of this mechanism is given by the «religious veiling of the scapegoat mechanism, which begins with the divinization of the sacrificed victim», cf. Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013, p. i. Throughout this paper, references to Girard's mimetic theory will be primarily referred to the first of these three components.

9. It is Nietzsche himself who evokes repeated metaphorical analogies that resemble *ressentiment* to a poison capable of corrupting the individual psychology, cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1887], pp. 19 and especially 22. In the course of time the notion of *ressentiment* has been the object of an extensive cultural, philosophical and political analysis: for a first (and limited) overview on the subject it is possible to refer to the studies of Marc Ferro, *Ressentiment dans l'histoire: Comprendre notre temps*, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007, Bernardino Fantini, Dolores Martín Moruno and Javier Moscoso (eds.), *On Resentment. Past and Present*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, Jeanne Riou and Mary Gallagher (eds.), *Re-thinking Ressentiment. On the Limits of Criticism and the Limits of its Critics*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2016.
10. Cf. Lucienne Kroha, *The Drama of the Assimilated Jew: Giorgio Bassani's Romanzo di Ferrara*, chapter II, «*Dentro le mura: Men of Resentment*», pp. 40–71.
11. A concise summary of the polemic attacks that in the early 1960s the Neoavanguardia directed against Bassani has been proposed, with a relative critical evaluation, by Silvano Salvatore Nigro, «Perché Bassani non è una Liala», *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 28 February 2016, and Valter Leonardo Puccetti, ««Tentato storicismo»: Enzo Siciliano lettore indocile di Bassani», *Cahiers d'études italiennes*, 26, 2018, (published online, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cei.3866>).
12. Giorgio Manganelli, «Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini», *L'illustrazione italiana*, marzo 1962, pp. 85–86, now reprinted in *Concupiscenza libraria*, Milan: Adelphi, 2020, p. 272 (my translation).
13. *Ibidem*.
14. *Ibidem* (my translation).
15. Giardino, «Giorgio Bassani e il «subalterno» come esperienza dell'altro».
16. *Ibidem*, p. 427.
17. The formula has been coined by Lucienne Kroha, «The Structures of Silence: Re-Reading Giorgio Bassani's *Gli occhiali d'oro*», *The Italianist*, X, 1, 1990, pp. 71–102. *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* has been at the center of extensive analyses by Mirna Cicioni, «Insiders and Outsiders: Discourses of Oppression in Giorgio Bassani's *Gli occhiali d'oro*», *Italian Studies*, 41, 1, 1986, pp. 101–115 and Annalisa Carbone, «Figure dell'esclusione: *Gli occhiali d'oro* di Giorgio Bassani», in Stefano Manferlotti and Marisa Squillante (eds.), *Ebraismo e letteratura*, Naples: Liguori, 2008, pp. 179–194.
18. Bassani, *Gli occhiali d'oro*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 183.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 193.

20. The nature of this «immunitary paradigm» has been analyzed by Esposito in *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, Cambridge: Polity, 2011 (see in particular p. 8 and chapter IV.1, «Incorporations»).
21. The concept of «inclusive exception» has been theorized by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
22. Although narrated in the first person, *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* is perhaps, along with the *Five Stories of Ferrara*, the work of Bassani marked by highest grade of what Mikhail Bakhtin would term a «dialogic» principle, given by the coexistence of various narrative voices intertwined together within the same textual framework, cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
23. Bassani, *Gli occhiali d'oro*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 189.
24. *Ibidem*, p. 190.
25. As pointed out by Lucienne Kroha, the question of a repressed, feared or disavowed homosexuality penetrates the entire structure of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, and constitutes an element implicitly derived by Bassani from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Beyond a series of tangential parallelisms already highlighted by Francesco Bausi – like the «gold-rimmed spectacles» that give the title to Bassani's book, clearly modeled after Mann's description of Gustav von Aschenbach, or by the fact that Fadigati moved to Ferrara from his native Venice – it is precisely the theme of a disavowed homoerotic desire, embodied in Mann's work by the obsession nurtured by Aschenbach for the young Tadzio, to represent the main link between the two works, cf. Kroha, *The Drama of the Assimilated Jew: Giorgio Bassani's Romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 74–85, and Francesco Bausi, «Il giardino incantato. Giorgio Bassani lettore di Thomas Mann», *Lettere italiane*, 55(2), April-June 2003, p. 232–233.
26. Bassani, *Gli occhiali d'oro*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 210.
27. Giardino, «Giorgio Bassani e il «subalterno» come esperienza dell'altro», p. 427.
28. It is one of the minor characters of the novel, Mrs. Lavezzoli, to define explicitly the tempestuous relation between Fadigati and Delilieri as a «scandal», cf. Bassani, *Gli occhiali di d'oro*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 235.
29. *Ibidem*, pp. 253–254. The locution *inde redire negant* represents a (slightly incorrect) quote derived from the third carmen of Catullus' *Liber* and offers an unequivocal reference to the theme of death: «Qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum / Illuc, unde negant redire quemquam», Catullus, *Carmen* III, vv. 11-12 [Now he goes through that gloomy journey / from whence they denied anyone returns (my translation)].
30. Cf. Sergio Parussa, *Writing as Freedom, Writing as Testimony: Four Italian Writers and Judaism*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000, p. 104.
31. Bassani, *Gli occhiali d'oro*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 254.
32. Kroha, *The Drama of the Assimilated Jew: Giorgio Bassani's Romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 84.

33. The psychological roots of such denial are correlated to a series of masculine anxieties that suffuse the thematic structure not only of Bassani's first novel, but also permeate *The Garden of The Finzi-Continis* and *Behind the Door*. The real critical target envisioned behind the recurrent presence of young male Jewish protagonists who strive, and often fail to assert, a precarious «male maturity», is represented by the negative stereotype of the emasculated and «feminized Jew» crystallized by Otto Weininger in his controversial but fortunate *Sex and Character* (originally published 1903, and translated for the first time into Italian in 1913). The unstable masculinity of the characters portrayed by Bassani simultaneously configures both an echo of and a polemical response to Weininger's pseudotheories. Thus, perhaps not casually, the title of *Sex and Character* will be crucially encapsulated in the «prohibited» readings morbidly cherished by Luciano Pulga in *Behind the Door*. For a comprehensive discussion of this topic cf. also Kroha, «The Same and/or Different: Narcissism and Exile in Giorgio Bassani's Novels», *Annali d'Italianistica*, 20, 2002.
34. Bassani, *Gli occhiali d'oro*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 253.
35. *Ibidem*.
36. *Ibidem*, p. 254.
37. *Ibidem*, p. 246.
38. *Ibidem*, pp. 245–246.
39. Cf. Kroha, *The Drama of the Assimilated Jew: Giorgio Bassani's Romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 142.
40. The linkage between *Behind the Door* and Musil's novel has been pointed out and investigated by Enzo Neppi, «Sadismo a scuola: *Dietro la porta* di Giorgio Bassani fra *Cuore*, *Agostino*, *Un voyage a Cythère*, e... il tradimento di Giuda», in Giulio Ferroni and Clizia Gurreri (eds.), *Cento anni di Giorgio Bassani*, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2019, pp. 51–74.
41. Bassani, *Dietro la porta*, in *The Novel of Ferrara*, p. 515.
42. *Ibidem*, p. 516.
43. Cf. Bassani, *Gli occhiali d'oro*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 253.
44. Charles Baudelaire, *Un voyage a Cythère*, vv. 59–60. This point has been discussed by Neppi, *Sadismo a scuola*, pp. 62–63. The epigraph was removed in the final edition of the *Novel of Ferrara*, where Bassani replaced all opening quotations that previously accompanied his books with one single opening quote, derived from the eighth chapter of *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni: «Certo, il cuore, chi gli dà retta, ha sempre qualche cosa da dire su quello che sarà. Ma che sa il cuore? Appena un poco di quello che è già accaduto», cf. Bassani, *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 11 [Of course, for whoever pays heed to it, the heart always has something to say about what's to come. But what does the heart know? Just the least bit about what has happened already].
45. *Ibidem*, p. 567.

46. In describing his own nature the narrator of *Behind the Door* will thus state explicitly:
«ero debole, passivo, impotente a reagire» [I was weak, passive, unable to react], cf.
Bassani, *Dietro la porta*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 514.
47. *Ibidem*, p. 480. The Dantean line comes from the canzone *Tre donne intorno al cor*
(«Three women around my heart», v. 76), usually known as the «exile canzone», one of
most subtle and arduous composition included in Dante's *Rime*.
48. *Ibidem*, p. 539.
49. Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 505: «Ma Luciano? Come era, Luciano? La prima impressione di
ripugnanza fisica era rimasta» [But Luciano? What kind of person was him? The first
impression of physical repugnance was still present].
50. *Ibidem*, p. 532.
51. It is the narrator himself to use the term «malice», *malizia*, to describe the character of
Luciano after this latter's betrayal: «Ma la sua fronte [of Luciano] verticale e un po'
sporgente, sede di tanta malizia, quella non osavo guardargliela», *ibidem*, p. 533. As
noted by Francesco Bausi, Bassani's employment of this term hides a Dantean
reminiscence derived from *Inf.* XIV, «fu fatto il nido di malizia tanta» [The nest of such
great malice it became], cf. Francesco Bausi, «L'amore, il male, la morte: scandagli
bassaniani», *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, 83, October 2011, p. 212.
52. Bassani, *Dietro la porta*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 530. (Italics in the original.)
53. *Ibidem*, p. 532.
54. The concept of «sacrificial crisis» has been theorized and problematized by René Girard
in *Le violence et le sacré*, Paris: Grasset, 1972, pp. 63-101.
55. Bassani, *Dietro la porta*, in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 533.
56. *Ibidem*, p. 540.
57. *Ibidem*, p. 567: «Già allora qualcosa doveva pur dirmi che se Luciano Pulga era in grado
di accettare il confronto della verità, io no» [Something was telling me that if Luciano
Pulga might be able to accept the encounter with the truth, I would not].
58. Cf. Kroha, Lucienne Kroha, «The Structures of Silence: Re-Reading Giorgio Bassani's
Gli occhiali d'oro».