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LUOGHI DELLO SPIRITO, LUOGHI DELLA SCRITTURA
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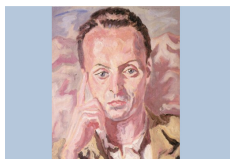


a cura di
Portia Prebys e Stefano U. Baldassarri

Le Lettere

In copertina: Giorgio Bassani a Villa Schifanoia, Città di Castello, giugno 1981. Foto di Portia Prebys (Archivio Fotografico del Centro Studi Bassaniani del Comune di Ferrara).

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ALESSANDRO GIAMMEI

QUEER LOVE IN GIORGIO BASSANI'S *GARDEN**

And such were some of you: but ye are washed,
but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified [...].

Corinthians, 6:11

Inanimate objects acquiring agency as they lose function, living ghosts conjured by those destined to die, lymphocytes hurrying to beat the deadlines of history, a dog as a gatekeeper, a gatekeeper as an archivist. And plants of course, negotiating their names between dialect and botanical nomenclature; infesting walls, tombs, and American poems. Giorgio Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is Italy's most sophisticated and influential attempt at queering normative divides through the novel form on the eve of Postmodernity¹. It continuously blurs the

* This essay is rooted in an interdisciplinary seminar that I taught at Princeton University in the Fall of 2017, titled *Black Queer Jewish Italy*. I would like to thank the undergraduate and graduate students who took part in that seminar, as well as Gary Cestaro, who joined us as a guest lecturer on the theme of queer filiation in Italian literature. I am also grateful to Portia Prebys and Stefano Baldassarri for inviting me to the conference that informed this book, and for their generosity and patience in the laborious passage from the talk to the essay. Thanks to peer-reviewers and editors, to Daniel T. Grimes for his linguistic support, to Michela Murgia for her theological guidance and to Sergio Parussa and Valerio Cappelletto for our Florentine conversation on Bassani at the Giubbe Rosse. The research presented in this essay was funded by a starting grant from Bryn Mawr College.

¹ By using this chronological category I am not ascribing Bassani's work to the poetics or ideology of Postmodernism. On this distinction in the specific case of

margins that traditionally discipline identities and individuals, beyond the macroscopic historical dichotomy between Jews and Gentiles in Ferrara after the Racial Laws – beyond, in fact, thematic references to same-sex desire and homophobia in the plot. It smashes the quintessential binary nature of fascist culture, and it does so from outside of the typical modern Italian paradigms of *biografismo* and *tematismo*²: it is not a novel about or written by a queer person, but it is a queering novel. This essay, drawing on recent Anglo-American scholarship on Bassani, intends to substantiate this claim through the close reading of a crucial passage of *The Garden*, opening a discussion about the intersectional, non-binary, and ultimately post-human potential of the novel. But first, it must ask a question that the field of Italian Studies has had a hard time with. What is a queer novel?

1. *Spectacles and Cute Boys*

When considering Bassani's fiction from the point of view of Queer Studies, *The Garden* is not the first novel that comes to mind. In 1984, Bassani himself pointed to a different book when he spoke about his literary reflection on Judaism and homosexuality with the students of the École Normale Supérieure in Fontenay-aux-Roses³. He insisted on Athos Fadigati, one of the deuteragonists of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* (the other being the unnamed,

Italian culture, see R. DONNARUMMA, *Postmoderno italiano: qualche ipotesi*, in «Allegoria», XV (2003), n. 43, pp. 56-85; R. CESERANI, *Raccontare il postmoderno*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1997, pp. 120-124.

² Francesco Orlando, the leading voice of Italy's systematization of literary theory, discussed *biografismo* in a 2003 lecture that was recently published; see F. ORLANDO, *Sui limiti del biografismo e dell'ideologismo nella critica letteraria. Due inediti*, ed. by E. ZINATO, I Nuovi Samizdat, Padova 2011. On *tematismo*, beyond Mario Praz's sophisticated *critica tematica*, see M. FUSILLO, *Il tematismo nella critica letteraria poststrutturalista*, in *Percorsi dell'ermeneutica*, ed. by C. RESTA, Sicania, Messina 1998, pp. 153-179.

³ E. KERTESZ-VIAL, *Interview de Giorgio Bassani, 15 mai 1984*, in «Chroniques italiennes», II (1985), n. 2, pp. 68-81.

autobiographical narrator). Fadigati, the middle-aged Venetian doctor who joins Ferrara's bourgeois society just to be ostracized and forsaken when his sexual behavior becomes known, is arguably the first non-autobiographical, non-idealized, and non-typified homosexual character of Italian literature. Unlike other sinister or anyway cursed non-heterosexual characters in Bassani's fiction (from *Behind the Door* to *A Night in '43*), he is not a confused teenager, an emblem of fascist sterile masculinity, or a two-dimensional figurine. Sergio Parussa compared him to Proust's Charlus, «one of the first fully developed gay characters in Western literature»⁴, and placed him at the chronological beginning of the recent and faltering history of the Italian «homoerotic novel». But again, what do we mean by that category? Does Fadigati's sexuality define the novel in which he appears as a central character? Is a queer novel a homoerotic novel?

In a 2007 interview, Edmund White ironically boiled down a similar question to a matter of commodification and genre-building based on para-textual hints. He stated that a «gay novel» is «one that is marketed as gay», and added «usually [with] a cute boy on the cover»⁵. The joke alluded to the horizon of expectation of contemporary Anglo-American readers, and clearly stemmed from White's own editorial experience: the success of his most famous novel, *A Boy's Own Story*, established (or at least crystallized) an international paradigm for the diffusion of queer fiction as a defined and recognizable genre. The editorial trope of the «cute boy on the cover» arguably started with the first edition of *A Boy's Own Story* in 1982 (fig. 1A), and defined a strategy of communication for literary products to be perceived as gay – at least in their themes. If we take White's comment out of its postmodern context and use it to verify what happened to

⁴ S. PARUSSA, *Reluctantly Queer: In Search of the Homoerotic Novel in Twentieth-Century Italian Fiction*, in *Queer Italia: Same-Sex Desire in Italian Literature and Film*, ed. by G. CESTARO, MacMillan, New York 2004, pp. 173-186: 173.

⁵ D. SHANKBONE, *Edmund White on writing, incest, life and Larry Kramer*, in «WikiNews», November 8, 2007 <https://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Edmund_White_on_writing,_incest,_life_and_Larry_Kramer>, visited on September 10, 2019.

Bassani's *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* in the Anglophone market (from the 60s to recent editions), a sort of evolution towards the image of a «gay novel» is pretty clear.

The covers of early editions of Athos Fadigati's story focus on him and on his titular eyeglasses (fig. 1B), paradoxically in the foreground as objects of observation. The doctor and his spectacles receive and bear the gaze of the reader, who in turn receives the book as a novel about a character and the lens through which this character looks at reality – about, ultimately, a point of view, a (queer) perspective. In more recent editions (fig. 1C) the imagery shifted to photographic portraits of male youth. The photographed men, pictured as absolute «cute boys», have no visual link to the story or its context, nor can they be directly linked to the profile of a specific character in the novel. They represent what Fadigati's perspective is oriented upon, they put the reader behind the spectacles and reveal what the spectacles frame. Now marketed as a proper «gay novel» in White's terms, *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* appears to be a book about Fadigati as subject, not object: a book from Fadigati's point of view rather than about it. This shift from Fadigati to cute boys (from looking at spectacles to looking through spectacles) is misleading, and not just because the author and the narrator do not share Fadigati's desires.

There are a number of important postwar Italian novels that thematize homoeroticism in a non-autoscopic, non-autobiographical way – fittingly, they tend to have the picture of a cute boy on the covers of their early editions (fig. 1D). What makes *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* different from such novels is not just that Bassani narrated homosexuality as an accidental possibility and built a homosexual character with a full fictional biography outside of the traditional frame of the “sexual awakening” and, in general, the “coming of age” narrative. The crucial difference is that Bassani did not adopt Fadigati's point of view, and yet placed it at the base of the novel's gnoseological ambitions, as the early Anglo-American covers suggest. The reader is given the tools to understand Fadigati, but through compassion, not identification. Contrarily to what the recent covers imply, no observer can directly put on Fadigati's spectacles.

2. Fictional Queers versus Queering Fiction

The fact that we do not read *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* through Fadigati's lens makes it hard to interpret it as a «gay novel» *tout court*, despite its marketing. In the aforementioned essay on Italy's homoerotic novels, Parussa shows why queer authors such as Comisso, Saba, and Pasolini failed to write fully-formed queer novels in the first half of the 20th century and, as I said, saluted Fadigati as the first real queer character of Italian literature. Despite this, Fadigati remains a stranger. Unlike White's characters from the 80s on (and, ultimately, even Proust's Charlus in *Sodom and Gomorrah*), he is written as an impenetrable enigma that can only be understood indirectly and externally, from a parallel but separated perspective that is more akin to perplexity than curiosity. His behavior – and especially his suicide – would be utterly incomprehensible if his vicissitudes were not decipherable through the key of the Judaic experience of his fictional interlocutor (whose point of view, unlike Fadigati's, was directly experienced by the author – and, through his narration, by the reader).

In the conversation with the *normaliens* from which I started, Bassani reclaimed an international thematic leadership of sorts, arguing that he was the first author in the world to write about homosexuality without experiencing it personally («*je suis l'unique écrivain au monde qui ait écrit sur les homosexuels sans l'avoir jamais été*»)⁶. In a study of Bassani and homosexuality that investigates the sexuality of the characters of *The Novel of Ferrara* (and, rather unsubtly, the sexuality of the author himself)⁷, Valter Leonardo Puccetti debunks the global scale of the claim, but does not convincingly contradict it within Italian literature⁸. Even if we accept Bassani's 1984 claim, *The Gold-*

⁶ KERTESZ-VIAL, *Interview*, cit., p. 70.

⁷ See V. L. PUCCETTI, *Bassani e l'omosessualità*, in «Cuadernos de Filología Italiana» XXII (2016), n. 23, pp. 27-41.

⁸ Puccetti's proposes, as an Italian precedent, Mario Soldati's *La confessione*, published in 1955. Considering Soldati as an «etero», as Puccetti does, arguably erases the bisexual identity that emerges from the author's memoirs and autobi-

Rimmed Spectacles remains a book about homosexuality as an investigable condition («*sur les homosexuels*»), and ultimately a Jewish book that interrogates the othering of queer people in correlation with the experience of racism. Its claimed thematic primacy, so to speak, becomes interesting from the point of view of Queer Studies only through intersectionality. The irreducible intransitivity of Fadigati, sealed by his death, makes him a queer character without a queer novel: a tool to understand something else, an indirect object rather than a subject.

In order to fully understand the place of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* in Italian Queer Literature, one should consider the original cover image that Bassani personally chose for the first edition⁹. In Italy, the novel was marketed with «a cute boy on the cover» since the very beginning (fig. 1E). However, the boy in question is not a platonic photographic image of masculine youth like those in current Anglo-American editions of the novel: he is the subject of a rare watercolor by one of the quintessential queer painters of Italy's modernism, the Ferrarese Filippo de Pisis. The image, so subtly recognizable for a learned Italian reader, implies an external homoerotic gaze: an authorial filter that the photographs chosen by Penguin Random House (fig. 1C) cannot provide. In fact, the watercolor as an object is more telling than its human subject: it is exactly the kind of picture that could have appeared in the home (or medical study) of a tasteful, if bold, Ferrarese bourgeois man in the first half of the 20th century. It could have belonged to Fadigati himself. While alluding to the central theme of the novel, the reproduction of de Pisis' painting on the cover does not promise to give the view through Fadigati's spectacles. Just as the original watercolor offers a glimpse into de

ographical literature. On sexuality in Soldati's work, see Parussa's aforementioned essay and N. GARDINI, *Das Homosexuelle in Soldati*, in «Studi Novecenteschi», XXXIV (2007), n. 73, pp. 195-208.

⁹ On the cover images of Bassani's books, see A. DOLFI, *Un iter malinconico da Morandi a Bacon*, in EAD., *Giorgio Bassani. Una scrittura della malinconia*, Bulzoni, Roma 2003, pp. 89-148. See also G. VENTURI, *Vedere con le parole e con la pittura: Bassani tra letteratura e storia dell'arte*, in «La Rivista», III (2015), special issue titled *Textes et intertextes pour le Roman de Ferrare*, ed. by A. DOLFI and D. LUGLIO, pp. 11-26.

Pisis' own desiring perspective (not a depiction of boyhood, but a specific gaze on a boy), its printed version under the title of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* states not only that the book is about a point of view, but that point of view is a male and queer one. For this reason, it is more eloquent than the recent and earlier covers adopted on the Anglophone market.

In sum, Bassani's novel on Fadigati has recently and wrongly been marketed as a «gay novel» (in White's terms). It is, however, a foundational Italian «homoerotic novel» (in Parussa's terms), not just because of the sexuality of one of its deuteragonists, but also (and foremost) because of the indirect, intersectional take on that character that the direct perspective of the other deuteragonist allows for. Centered on a queer character, it is a novel «*sur les homosexuelles*», a novel about queers (in Bassani's terms). In this sense, we may say that it is Italy's first queer novel.

However, if we evade the frames of marketing, character analysis, thematology and psychoanalytic biographism, the strange perspective encapsulated by de Pisis' cover-image does not really address the question from which I started. If a queer novel is not just a novel with fictional queers but rather – as a reading of queer theorists such as Eve Sedgwick invites us to believe¹⁰ – a novel that queers fiction, allowing it to overcome a normative vision of relations, emotions, and institutions, then *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, with its tragic ending to be understood through the lens of the Racial Laws, is not a queer novel. At least, it is not a queering novel. Read as a sequel to it, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* takes up the challenge.

My idea is that *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, which does not openly thematize same-sex desire and does not have a cute boy on its cover (fig. 1F), is a fundamentally queering novel: a novel that, rather than normalizing homosexuality in the literary imagination or just investigating it as a form of correlative oth-

¹⁰ I am thinking, of course, of seminal contributions such as E. KOSOFKY SEDGWICK, *Epistemology of the Closet*, University of California Press, Berkeley (CA) 1990.

erness in relationship with Judaism, acknowledges its deviation from norms as a feature that does not need correction, and includes it in a general critique of hierarchical, Cartesian, normative systems of discrimination and Foucauldian discipline.

3. *Queering Love*

To be sure, thematic and psychoanalytic homoerotic readings of *The Garden's* plot and its characters have already been proposed, drawing on both biographic and symbolic elements of the narrative¹¹. However, the goal of most of these interpretations has been to demonstrate that either the narrator himself or one of his main male counterparts was written as a more or less closeted homosexual. Homosexuality as a condition (in particular as a form of defective or deviant masculinity) has been included in the articulate landscape of mortuary symbology that substantiates *The Garden*, along with infirmity, infertility, and impotence. My goal is to go beyond the triangular relationships among the main characters, the psycho-sexual profiles of Alberto and of the narrator's father, and the role and agency of Micol. I intend to look at the ways in which *The Garden* transcended the fruitful limits of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, intersecting and equating forms of otherness in a less thematic and more direct, ideological (or rather anti-ideological) way. To do so, I propose to start from a close reading of an often-cited passage that connects the novel with Fadigati's story.

The passage consists of an account of a dialogue between the narrator and Malnate. The two young men talk about Fadigati's death, an event that happened in their storyworld¹² and would eventually share the same macro-novel with their story when

¹¹ Besides the aforementioned article by Puccetti, see for instance E. BOILLET, *Alterità e sessualità nel Romanzo di Ferrara di Giorgio Bassani*, in «Chroniques Italiennes», XXVIII (2014), n. 2, pp. 178-208.

¹² I am borrowing the concept of "storyworld" from Narratology. See D. HERMAN, *Storyworld*, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by D. HERMAN, M. JAHN, and M. RYAN, Routledge, London-New York 2007, pp. 569-570.

collected in *The Novel of Ferrara*. The exchange is reported to the reader indirectly, but with a few direct quotations. In it, homosexuality is reduced to one component, love, and compared with disengaged and absolute forms of art:

Da Fadigati a venire a parlare dell'omosessualità in genere il passo era stato breve. Malnate, in materia, aveva idee molto semplici, da vero *goy* – pensavo fra me –. Per lui i pederasti erano soltanto dei “disgraziati”, poveri “ossessi” dei quali non metteva conto di occuparsi che sotto il profilo della medicina o sotto quello della prevenzione sociale. Io, al contrario, sostenevo che l'amore giustifica e santifica tutto, perfino la pederastia; di più: che l'amore, quando è puro, cioè totalmente disinteressato, è sempre anormale, asociale, eccetera: proprio come l'arte – avevo aggiunto –, che quando è pura, dunque inutile, dispiace a tutti i preti di tutte le religioni, compresa quella socialista¹³.

McKendrick's English translation reads:

From Fadigati to a more general discussion of homosexuality was just a few steps. On this topic Malnate had very uncomplicated views – like a true *goy*, I thought to myself. For him, pederasts were nothing but “miserable wretches,” “poor obsessives,” about whom there was no point bothering apart from a medical perspective or with a view to social prevention. By contrast, I maintained that love justified and sanctified everything, even pederasty. I went further, saying that love, when it was pure, by which I meant totally disinterested, is always abnormal, asocial, and so on: exactly like art – I added – which when it's pure, and therefore useless, displeases the priests of every religion, including Socialism¹⁴.

In her recent seminal book on *The Novel of Ferrara* and Bassani's personal and literary inquiry into Jewish masculinity, Lucienne Kroha cautioned against queer interpretations of these lines¹⁵,

¹³ G. BASSANI, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (O, p. 552).

¹⁴ G. BASSANI, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, English trans. by J. MCKENDRICK, Penguin Books, London 2007, p. 223.

¹⁵ See L. KROHA, *The Drama of the Assimilated Jew: Giorgio Bassani's Romanzo di Ferrara*, Toronto University Press, Toronto 2014, p. 251.

insisting on Bassani's less than optimal record on the matter of homosexual behavior. Not only did he associate, as I mentioned, male homosexuality with despicable characters in other works – and, in general, with a negative and regressive passivity that one should aspire, in his narrative, to overcome – but his public declarations often betrayed a close-minded mentality typical of his generational and social milieu. I agree with Kroha on the point that, while Bassani was well aware of the non-normative nature of Jewish gender performance and of the inter-discursivity between Judaism and homosexuality, he did not «embrace homosexuality wholeheartedly»¹⁶. However, while it does not change our understanding of Bassani's sexuality (or, more importantly, of his take on sexuality as an intellectual and an author), the passage from *The Garden* is still pivotal for the literary contemplation of the queerness (the abnormal, asocial quality) that links pure love, pure art, and any diversion from what norms and their enforcers (the priests of every religion) prescribe. I am going to insist, at the end of the essay, on how such an absolute queering quality of love, linked to but independent from queer sexuality, involves the treatment of useless and obsolete objects, unproductive assets, human and non-human characters in the novel, affecting the sentiments and the language of the protagonists and the narrator. For now, I would like to take a closer look at the passage itself.

Kroha's cautious assessment of the value of the narrator's comment on Fadigati's otherness is a direct response to a queer reading of *The Garden* by John Champagne¹⁷. Champagne was the first critic to decisively switch the focus from *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* to *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* in order to discuss Bassani from a Queer Studies perspective, and he mostly did so by drawing on Parussa's and Cestaro's contributions to the field of Italian Queer Studies¹⁸ as well as the theoretical paradigms set up by Foucault and by Queer theorists such as Michael

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

¹⁷ J. CHAMPAGNE, *Bassani's The Garden of the Finzi-Continis and Italian "Queers"*, in «Comparative Literature and Culture», XII (2010), n. 1, pp. 1-10.

¹⁸ See CESTARO (ed.), *Queer Italia*, cit., pp. 1-17 and S. PARUSSA, *Writing as*

Warner. From the perspective of my essay, most of his interesting points (from the reading of the narrator himself as queer to the link between Judaism and homosexuality revealed by the inability of Malnate, as a *goy*, to understand Fadigati) are not relevant. What interests me is Champagne's intuition of how the intertwined rejections of anti-semitism and homophobia in the dialogue between the narrator and Malnate deconstruct fascist normativity at large. My aim for the rest of this section is to push this intuition further through a more philological analysis of the letter of the text.

Malnate's intention to sound virile and socialist is of course reminiscent of the pathologizing lexicon of fascist persecution. The only direct quotations in the whole dialogue isolate words that revive the linguistic marginalization of non-conforming identities that shaped Italian society under Mussolini, and the closing remark reveals (more to the reader than to the supposedly idealist fictional interlocutor) how the social normativity of postwar anti-fascist hegemonies (both the communist and the catholic one) ultimately continued to discipline otherness along similar lines. Through his narrator's perspective and language, Bassani dismantles a form of trans-historical medical and para-military rhetoric of social hygiene that truly blurred the distinction between anti-semitism, homophobia, and other forms of biopolitical disciplining across the decades of the 20th century. Dismissing this kind of rhetoric as simpleness («*idee molto semplici*») rather than cruelty is a way to elegantly overcome binarism: the problem is not the acceptance or rejection of the other, but the inability to see otherness as a spectrum beyond the distinctions between pathological and sane, criminal and legal.

The rather clinical word *omosessualità*, with which the passage begins, quickly turns into *pederastia* when the narrator starts defining his position. This switch is interesting. The use of *pederastia* immediately historicizes homoeroticism, alluding to the cultural frames that authorized it before modernity as a form

Freedom, Writing as Testimony: Four Italian Writers and Judaism, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse (NY) 2008.

of erotic pedagogy, friendship, and elective affinity – as well as modern revivals of the same frames, from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* to the Shakespearian and Michelangelesque portions of Umberto Saba's *Songbook*. After all, such homosocial paradigms were (and are) not new or exotic at all for any Italian who went through the public school system: Giovanni Gentile, the leading intellectual of Mussolini's Italy, filled the state-mandated curriculum with historical and literary material from classical antiquity, with the *Iliad* at the core of middle-school programs and translations from Catullus' *Carmina* and Sappho's fragments since the first year of high school. The risk of using the term pederasty to define Fadigati's otherness is to banalize the discourse, trapping «*l'omosessualità in generale*» into pastoral and platonic frames that defuse and remove the doctor's real, contemporary, and accidental case. However, what is queering in the passage (and this is my main point) is not pederasty *per se*, but rather love. Reducing Fadigati's anomaly to his sexual orientation – defined technically («*omosessualità*»), in terms of social normativity («*disgraziati*', *poveri* 'ossessi'»), and as a historical phenomenon («*pederastia*») – would be as simple as Malnate's dismissal of the question. It is love, not pederasty, that is inherently «abnormal, asocial, and so on», it is love that encompasses the case of Fadigati and makes it akin to useless art. Love queers pederasty, not the other way around.

4. *Love is Love (and Love Conquers All)*

To shield pederasty from Malnate's rhetoric, the narrator defines it as one of the many possible consequences of love. To shield the inherent queerness of love from the discipline and punishment of any form of religion (including ideology), he compares it with forms of art that do not serve power, politics, or propaganda. The rhetorical strategy is not neutral in the context in which the novel was published: a moment that saw Italian aesthetics largely polarized between eastern and western pressures – between social realism and abstraction, lyricism and neo-avant-garde poetics, neorealism and the experimentations

of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Federico Fellini's second phase. Such an ideological and poetic divide is effectively represented by the two parts of the film *La Rabbia*, conceived by Gastone Ferranti and directed, in 1963, by Pasolini and Giovannino Guareschi. Paradoxically, Bassani participated, as a voice-over narrator, in the most lyrical portions of the first segment of that film, lending his voice to Pasolini's heretical Marxism and to his apocalyptic concerns about informal painting. However, his protagonist's point in *The Garden* seems to respond, from the other side of the barricade, to ideological critiques of non-engaged art, such as Pasolini's own famous invective against Picasso in *Gramsci's Ashes*¹⁹, or Palmiro Togliatti's condemnation of Giorgio Morandi's bottles²⁰, or even, of course, the derision of Bassani's own work by the younger radical writers of the nascent Gruppo 63²¹.

Before declaring its quintessential abnormality in connection with pure art (and at odds with the expectations of religious and political priests), Bassani's protagonist extends the queering power of love to the entire universe: love should affect what we think of pederasty because love affects everything («*l'amore giustifica e santifica tutto*»). A classical textual memory, with its rich early modern legacy, is evidently at the root of the powerful conclusion that love transcends norms, society, and any religion: Vergil's hemistich *Omnia vincit amor*, from the *Bucolics* (X, 69). The immense Anglophone fortune of the formula, from Chaucer to Rock music, tends to insist on erotic and romantic interpretations. For an Italian like Bassani – who attended the *liceo classico* and then studied Art History and Literature in Bologna – those three words may bear a more abstract, Neo-

¹⁹ On the ideological value of *Picasso*, see S. TICCIATI, *L'errore di Picasso*, in «Paragone» LII (2001), nn. 33-35, pp. 56-86 and A. GIAMMEI, *Nell'officina del non-sense di Toti Scialoja: Topi, toponimi, tropi, cronotopi*, Edizioni del Verri, Milano 2014, pp. 69-76.

²⁰ See the article signed Roderigo di Castiglia (but by Togliatti) in the column *A ciascuno il suo* of «Rinascita» (X, n. 1, January 1953, p. 8).

²¹ Who famously called him «Liala», weaponizing the pseudonym of a popular *feuilleton* writer, who had great success in the first half of the century.

platonic meaning. They are, after all, the literary hypo-text of Michelangelo's *Genius of Victory* (fig. 2), a Florentine sculpture that clearly speaks to the torments of a pure but abnormal (and specifically homoerotic) love²². And a pupil of Roberto Longhi such as Bassani could not ignore the other most famous representation of the supremacy of love: the oil by Caravaggio, known as *Amor Vincit Omnia* (fig. 3), that 20th-century critics have read through a queer lens²³. It is not important, here, to establish whether Bassani was thinking of Tommaso De Cavalieri or of Cecco di Caravaggio while reviving the trope of 'love conquers all'. What matters is that the absolute universality in which *pederastia* is included does precisely what the plot of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* could not do: it makes us understand Fadigati not by analogy, but by equation; not by comparison and intersection but by identification and inclusion. After all, the Vergilian motto has been recently fruitfully appropriated by LGBTQI+ public art. Unveiled in 2018, the facade of the Gucci ArtLab (a creative hub in the outskirts of Florence) includes a monumental mural that seems to directly allude to the passage in *The Garden* (fig. 4). In it, the motto appears at the base of a rising fist colored in the traditional rainbow of queer activism, with two Cupid-like figures ready to let their arrows fly towards it. The golden circle that usually appears on top of the heads of saints and angels in religious paintings crowns the composition.

Considering this last detail, it is particularly interesting that, to further explain the agency of love Bassani chose two theological verbs: «*giustifica*» and «*santifica*». The effect of love on pederasty (and, ultimately, on «everything») is the same that conversion and baptism promise to produce in Christian doctrine. Justification and sanctification were, in fact, crucial concepts in

²² On the complex question of Michelangelo's sublime passions, see L. BARKAN, *Transuming Passion. Ganymede and the Erotics of Humanism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 1991.

²³ On the question of Caravaggio's sexuality, from Berenson to Spear, see D. CARRIER, *Caravaggio: The Construction of an Artistic Personality*, in ID., *Principles of Art History Writing*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park (PA) 1974, pp. 49-81 (in particular, pp. 64-67).

the passage from Judaism to Christianity in the New Testament, and later in the schism between Catholicism and Protestantism. Paul uses them to preach to the Corinthians in the passage quoted in the epigraph of this essay, a passage that is related to the social and sexual behavior of the saint's addressees. The letter deals directly with the theme of homoeroticism as an unproductive, antisocial behavior: according to Paul, men who lie with men, along with the sexually immoral, the adulterers, and the idolaters, will not inherit the kingdom of God. However, even if some of them used to be part of these unworthy categories, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are now washed, and therefore sanctified and justified (literally made holy and appropriate). By appropriating this language to argue that love turns homosexuality into something holy and appropriate without any need for sacramental washing, Bassani's narrator fundamentally queers love itself, which is queer (*«è sempre anormale»*) even when it does not involve homoeroticism at all. The plot of the novel shows that the protagonist's concept of love is in many ways immature and doomed, leading him to a tragic and unsolved sentimental destiny. Nonetheless, it represents a soberly revolutionary take on affection beyond gender and sexuality.

In 2017, a few weeks before the Australian Parliament voted for an amendment to recognize same-sex marriage, a hillside sign on Tasmania's Midland Highway, normally used to advertise the local rodeo, was rearranged into a message that read «Love is love» (fig. 5A). The same slogan appeared a few months before at the Twitter headquarters in San Francisco (fig. 5B) in a colorful installation made of wool that was unveiled for the local Pride. It is the title of Maria Bello's 2015 memoir (fig. 5C), of a 2016 DC comic book anthology to benefit the survivors of the Orlando Pulse shooting (fig. 5D), and has been printed or handwritten on countless yard posts and protest signs held at Prides and other manifestations throughout the current decade (fig. 5E). In short, it became a viral formula to support LGBTQI+ rights, especially since Donald Trump's election. I do not intend to speculate about what Giorgio Bassani would think of the current movement for marriage equality, or to imagine his position in contemporary debates about the social integration

of non-straight identities, couples, and families. The fact that, if he were alive, he would probably not be an ally of LGBTQI+ causes – and that during his life he did not do much, as a public intellectual, to support the legislative and cultural agendas of gay and lesbian movements in post-war Italy – does not change the remarkable proximity between his 1962 literary intuition and the 21st century rhetoric of queer activism, a rhetoric that, in the Sixties, would have been hard to conceive as queering. Legendary activist Franklin Kameny, in the years in which *The Garden* was becoming an international success (also thanks to a controversial cinematic adaptation by Vittorio De Sica), coined the impactful slogan «Gay is good», implicitly intersecting the fight against homophobia with that against racism, iconized by slogans such as «Black is beautiful»²⁴. The inclusive shift of focus from pride to equality, from de-demonization to alliance and intersection, took place over half a century of negotiating the value and meaning of normality and queerness.

Once again, I am not arguing that Bassani was ahead of his times, or that *The Garden* invented a postmodern queer slogan. However, I believe that this novel should be reclaimed as a turning point in queer Italian literature, precisely because it does not directly deal with queer identities or homophobia, and it is not specifically concerned with normalization and assimilation. One of its main points, powerfully encapsulated in the brief dialogue between the narrator and Malnate, is that no form of love or art is normal, that any true love and any true art displeases disciplining institutions and their enforcers: that art is art, and love is love.

As I suggested in the premise of this essay, a queer reading of *The Garden* should include a wider consideration of how Bassani justified and sanctified a number of abnormal, asocial, useless and unfruitful human and non-human characters and relations in it, besides the memory of Athos Fadigati and his tragic love for Deliliers. The very garden of the title for instance, able to

²⁴ See F. KAMENY, *Gay is Good: The Life and Letters of Gay Rights Pioneer Franklin Kameny*, ed. by M. LONG, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse (NY) 2014.

interact with Micol and rebellious to the disciplining language that her father, who rules over the supposedly productive flora of the countryside, establishes to define it, queers the divide between vegetal and animal life. The relationships of humans with their inanimate companions – Perotti with his obsolete car and elevator, Alberto with the valuable furnishings of his bachelor pad, Micol with her *lattimi*, which figuratively or oneirically transfigure into biological substances such as cheese and fruit – subtly challenge the boundary between object and conscience, thingness and function, organic and inorganic matter. The queering of normative divides makes *The Garden* overcome the totalizing patriarchal anthropocentrism that dominated fascist society, in a subtle but radical rejection of hierarchies and binaries that is extremely relevant for current visions of a new, rhizomatic humanism that universalizes abnormality, justifies unproductiveness, and sanctifies deviation.



Fig. 1. Book covers of: A. EDMUND WHITE, *A Boy's Own Story*, Dutton, New York 1982; B. GIORGIO BASSANI, *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* (from left to right: Penguin, London 1963; Faber and Faber, London 1960; Atheneum, New York 1960); C. GIORGIO BASSANI, *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, Penguin Classics, New York-London 2012 (from left to right: version for the Anglo-American market; version for the South African market); D. from left to right: ALBERTO MORAVIA, *Il conformista*, Bompiani, Milano 1951; ALBERTO MORAVIA, *Agostino*, Bompiani-L'Espresso, Milano 1988; ELSA MORANTE, *L'isola di Arturo*, Einaudi, Torino 1957; E. GIORGIO BASSANI, *Gli occhiali d'oro*, Einaudi, Torino 1958; F. GIORGIO BASSANI, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, Einaudi, Torino 1962.



Fig. 2. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Il genio della vittoria* (The Genius of Victory), 1532-1534, marble, 261 cm, Palazzo Vecchio, Firenze. Photo © Yair Haklai.



Fig. 3. Michelangelo Merisi (Caravaggio), *Amor vincit omnia* (Love Conquers All), 1601-1602, oil on canvas, 156 × 113 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Photo © Jörg P. Anders.



Fig. 4. Mural on the Gucci ArtLab, 2018, Scandicci (Firenze). Photo © Gucci.

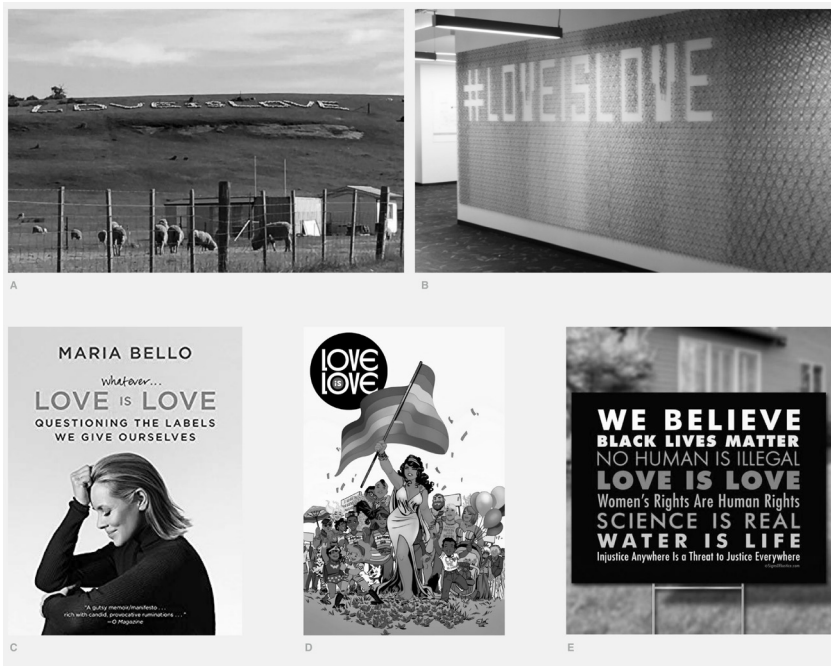


Fig. 5. A. Hillside sign on Midland Highway, 2017, Tasmania. Photo © Adam Jones; B. #LoveIsLove, 2017, Peruvian wool and nails on wall, Twitter HQ, San Francisco. Photo © Lorna and Jill Watt; C. Book cover of Maria Bello, *Whatever... Love is Love: Questioning the Labels We Give Ourselves*, Dey Street Books, New York 2015; D. Book cover of Marc Andreyko and Sarah Gaydos (Eds.), *Love is Love*, IDW Publishing, San Diego 2016; E. SignsOfJustice, *We Believe Yard Sign*, 2016, print on plastic, 60.96 × 45.72 cm. Photo © SignsOfJustice.

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