

Research Article

Ferrara, Time and Guilt in Giorgio Bassani's the Heron

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Abstract

The article analyzes, in its first part, the image of Ferrara and the role of time in Bassani's novels, with particular attention to the urban chronotope he crafted, where the history of the deportation of Ferrarese Jews intertwines with the city's topography, establishing a division between the Ferrara of the saved and that of the submerged. The article then focuses on the autobiographical element, strongly implicated in Bassani's narration, where everything is filtered through memory, which, while faithfully rendering the city's history and geography, simultaneously transforms it into a "fantastic," mental place. This is as required by authentic art, by the great tradition of the historical novel, which Bassani defended in a famous controversy against the Italian Neo-avant-garde (the *Gruppo 63*) and in his quieter critique of the French *Nouveau Roman*. In this context, the second part of the study offers a reading of *The Heron*, the fifth chapter of *The Novel of Ferrara*, perhaps the most mature fruit of Bassani's narrative. The novel aligns with the themes of Francis Bacon's Neo-Expressionist painting and its variant, the Existential Realism of Alberto Sughi, discussed by Giuseppe Raimondi, one of Bassani's mentors in art writing during his Bologna years. This is followed by a detailed account of the development of *The Heron*, with attention to the functioning of narrative time and, above all, to the theme of guilt and its redemption, linked to the story of the Ferrarese Jews and addressed repeatedly, in verse and prose, also by Primo Levi.

Keywords

Ferrara, Racial Laws, Chronotope, Neo-Expressionism, Neo-avant-garde, Primo Levi

1. The Protagonism of Ferrara*

In the entire oeuvre of Giorgio Bassani (1916-2000), the city of Ferrara plays, as is well known, the role of a true protagonist. From his poetry—recalling that Bassani was also, and above all, a poet¹—now collected comprehensively by

Anna Dolfi (*Poesie complete*, 'Collected Poems', 2021), to his prose, definitively assembled by the author in *Il romanzo di Ferrara* ('The Novel of Ferrara') (first edition 1974, later revised until the final version of 1980)², the Este setting is

* The texts cited in the article are taken, unless otherwise noted, from Bassani, G. Opere [Works], edited and with an essay by Roberto Cotroneo. Milan: Mondadori; 1998; the page number refers to this edition. The English translation is my own, with the exception of Primo Levi's verses (see below).

1 A status, that of a poet, claimed by the author himself: "I am a poet, with your permission, fundamentally a poet" (p. 1347). Indeed, Bassani's beginnings were poetic, as the editor of the poetry section of "Corriere padano", and with many of his early published works (Storie dei poveri amanti e altri versi [Stories of Poor

Lovers and Other Verses], 1945; Te lucis ante 1946-47, 1947).

2 As is well known, the six "books" of *Il romanzo di Ferrara* [The Novel of Ferrara] reintroduced (with variations) his prose works: *Dentro le mura* [Within the Walls] (= Five Ferrarese Stories, 1956), *Gli occhiali d'oro* [The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles] (1958), *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* [The Garden of the Finzi-Continis] (1962), *Dietro la porta* [Behind the Door] (1964), *L'airone* [The Heron] (1968), *L'odore del fieno* [The Smell of Hay] (1972). The only organic early work excluded from this arrangement was *Una città di pianura* [A City of the Plain], published in 1940

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Received: 16 September 2025; Accepted: 29 September 2025; Published: 28 October 2025



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constant and, most importantly, decisive. It is equally well known that Bassani was able to write about Ferrara only after leaving it ³, to escape the deportation that his relatives who remained in the city faced, first seeking refuge in Florence for a few months (from August to December 1943), then settling permanently in Rome.

Ferrara's presence is initially "concealed", for a reason, as the writer would say, of a literary nature ("a late follower of the Novecento movement, I wanted to be a realist, but not provincial...")⁴. However, as Domenico Scarpa has pointed out, specifically with reference to Bassani, "one should never fully trust what an author says about themselves" [1]. Thus, it seems appropriate to consider, in addition, a more personal, or rather historical, reason tied to the anti-Semitic persecution and the consequent, instinctive rejection by the writer of a city co-responsible for the extermination of his fellow Jews. This attitude foreshadows the fierce accusation Bassani leveled, after the Liberation, against the "Ex-fascisti of Ferrara" (as the title of his famous poem edited in 1973), the vast majority of its inhabitants, who wished to return to normalcy as if nothing had happened ("some / of those who in '39 / pretended not to recognize me anymore / cross paths with me / throw their arms around me / as they did with Geo [Josz]", p. 1417). This sentiment is expressed, in the recollection of the years from 1938 to 1940 (the years of the Racial Laws), in the silencing of names and places. The city is initially referred to only generically or with its initial (F.), and toponyms are also veiled, either abbreviated, as in the first version of *La Passeggiata prima di cena* (*The Stroll Before Supper*, 1948), where Corso Giovecca becomes Corso G., or entirely omitted [2]. This occurs in the stories but no differently in the poems⁵.

In the postwar seasons, the indication of Ferrara continues to be entrusted to the initial (F*), but with progress regarding

spatial coordinates, which mark the early printed editions: in the 1953 edition (Florence, Sansoni) of *La Passeggiata prima di cena* and *Una lapide in via Mazzini* (*A Plaque in Via Mazzini*) and in the 1955 edition of *Gli ultimi anni di Clelia Trotti* (*The Last Years of Clelia Trotti*) (Pisa, Nistri-Lischi), we find references to *Via Borso*, *Via Mazzini*, *Via Saraceno*, and so on. By the time of the 1956 *Cinque storie ferraresi* (*Five Ferrarese Stories*) (Turin, Einaudi), the secrecy is entirely lifted, and places are called by their names: the city walls, streets, squares, caf  s, the Jewish cemetery, and the Christian cemetery of the Certosa, all emblematic of the urban geography. Yet, due to a lingering "reticence," in the Foreword, the author feels the need to suggest an alienating intervention on reality: "In publishing these five Ferrarese stories in a single volume, the author wishes to note that the places, events, and people represented in them are not real but purely imaginary." (p. 1582) However, this is not entirely true, as Bassani's works always deal with events and characters that are anything but fictional; starting with the male protagonist of *Lida Mantovani*, to whom he attributes his middle name, *David* (Mameli), with the final "e" removed, alluding to the biographical substance hidden behind the story of his love for a Ferrarese seamstress.

2. The Wound and the Divided City

The Ferrara narrated by Bassani is, more precisely, that of his youth, prior to 1943, on the one hand, the year of the deportation of Jewish citizens, and subsequent, on the other, to the "fateful '38" (*The Smell of Hay*, p. 875), the year of the Racial Laws ⁶. 1938 is the true fulcrum of the narrative, which focuses almost entirely on the five-year period following the threshold that opened the painful wound of racial persecution and discrimination. Even when the events refer to different periods, as in *Dietro la porta* (*Behind the Door*), set between October 1929 and June 1930—the duration of the school year for the narrator, a Jewish boy who, disoriented and uneasy, attends his first year of high school at the Guarini (*alias* Ariosto) liceo—or in *L'airone* ('The Heron'), as we shall see, set in the late 1940s: everything continues to point back to that time, indeed to that year, as the source of all narrative possibilities. After the enactment of the Racial Laws, the city would never be the same for its Jewish inhabitants, and that stigma is etched into the urban space. Bruno Lattes — one of the author's alter egos, who recurs in various forms in the narrative pages (*The Last Years of Clelia Trotti*, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, *The Smell of Hay*) — is fully aware of this, now forced to change his routes and haunts:

"he kept away from the city center and its caf  s, monopolized by the hated bourgeoisie: hated, and loved. He too chose the secondary streets. To Giovecca, Viale Cavour, Corso Roma, he preferred Via delle Volte, Via delle Volte, Via San

under the pseudonym Giacomo Marchi (Giacomo was the name of his maternal uncle, Marchi the surname of his Catholic maternal grandmother), due to the Racial Laws. This work collected short prose pieces, along with the poems *Ancora dei poveri amanti* [Still about poor lovers], which had mostly appeared scattered in "Corriere padano". As is well known, it also included an early draft of one of the "Ferrarese stories": *Storia di Debora* [The Story of Debora], sketched in 1937, later revised (with a changed title) no fewer than four times until 1956. Also noteworthy are the other youthful and wartime works recently rediscovered by Piero Pieri and published in Bassani, G. *Racconti, diari, cronache* (1935-1956) [Stories, diaries, chronicles (1935-1956)]. Milan: Feltrinelli; 2014.

3 See Corradi, C. *La Ferrara di Giorgio Bassani*. "Paese Sera Libri", March 30, 1962, now in Bassani, G. *Interviste 1955-1993* [interviews 1955-1993], edited by Beatrice Pecchiari. Domenico Scarpa, with a preface by Paola Bassani. Milan: Feltrinelli; 2019, pp. 76-82: "In any case, you can be certain of one thing: if I had always lived in Ferrara, I would never have become a writer. The things I have recounted were seen from a perspective of great distance. Rome means the absolute, the eternal, the sense of irony, of detachment. Ferrara means the particular. There is, in this book [The Garden of the Finzi-Continis], nostalgia, the desire to understand, love, and resentment for this dramatic, cruel city" (p. 78).

4 The author reiterated this multiple times, for example in *Intervista V*: "It is true that I did not yet call Ferrara by its name, but F. (a late follower of the Novecento movement, I wanted to be a realist, but not provincial...)" (p. 1319).

5 For example, *Pontelagoscuro* (a town on the outskirts of Ferrara) in the early editions of *Cronache dei poveri amanti* [Chronicles of the Poor Lovers] was titled *Pontescuro*; *Verso Ferrara* [To Ferrara] (in the same collection) was *Verso F.* in the title, while the city's name appears in full only in verse 2 in the 1982 edition; *Sera a Porta Reno* [Evening at Porta Reno], composed as early as 1937, was published only after the war; and so on.

6 Bassani, G. In *risposta V*: "during those years that were fateful for me, those, I repeat, that go from '37 to '43, I completely detached myself both from my family and from my city" (p. 1321).

Romano, Via Fondo Banchetto, Via Salinguerra, and so on, entering some tavern, some low-class bar, where, standing beside the billiard table, he watched long matches between strangers, often shady-looking, second-rate people. His entrance mostly went unnoticed.” (p. 877)

And when his fiancée, the Catholic Adriana Trentini, leaves him—in 1939—he continues to hope he might see her again, but he cannot help but consider:

“with the Racial Laws becoming stricter and more oppressive by the day (no joking: if caught, she risked ending up at the police station like a street prostitute, and he risked being sent to internal exile...), to reconnect under such conditions, only a madman could have imagined it feasible.” (p. 880)

3. A Mental Place

From what has been said, it is already evident that Bassani's Ferrara is not described objectively. Bassani is not a nineteenth-century verist, even though he was significantly influenced by French Naturalism, starting with Flaubert. The atlas of the Este capital is traced following patterns and directions that, while never betraying reality, transform it into a mental place. More precisely, history intertwines with topography in the novelistic chronotope, expressing the full tragedy of the events that prelude the annihilation of the Jewish population. The Ferrara after 1938 is thus divided into two parts, marked by the axes separating the city of the saved, complicit with fascism, and that of the submerged, the Jews of the ghetto, destined for the extermination camps [3]. The dividing line is represented, more specifically, by Corso Giovecca, the city's most important artery, and Corso Roma (today Martiri della Libertà), the perpendicular thoroughfare. Bassani established a parallelism between these two streets and the Racial Laws, and Giovecca and Roma become the dividing line for those who, after 1938, no longer dare to appear on the streets of the fashionable promenade. These two streets represent the boundary distinguishing *l'al di qua*, “this side,” of the “old” Ferrara, which is, not by chance, the setting of the *Five Ferrarese Stories*, with its narrow medieval streets and confined spaces; and *l'al di là*, “the other side,” (of the “young” Ferrara, that of Biagio Rossetti's Erculean Addition, with its straight and regular streets, villas, and noble palaces (Diamanti, Prosperi-Sacratì, Turchi-Di Bagno, etc.). Giovecca and Roma become, from 1938, “forbidden ground” for the revenant Geo Jozs (*Una lapide in via Mazzini* [A Plaque in Via Mazzini], p. 98), who initially restricts himself to safer paths within the former ghetto:

“Back from Buchenwald—it was said, for instance, by voices now decidedly rude—it was logical that he preferred to stay at home, or that, when going out, instead of Giovecca and Corso Roma, he chose to tread narrow, half-dark alleys like Via Mazzini, Via Vittoria, Via Vignatagliata, Via delle Volte, and the like.” (p. 116)

Similarly, toward the end of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, the narrator wanders with Giampiero Malnate, the

communist-leaning worker who will die in Russia, through the same places, in the ghetto and its surroundings—Piazza Travaglio, Porta Reno, Via delle Volte, Via della Colomba, Gorgadello (today Via degli Adelardi)—and only if they linger after dinner does he dare venture into the deserted Corso Giovecca and Corso Roma at that hour (IV, 7: pp. 539–541). And if in 1929, the narrating voice, to reach the Guarini (Ariosto) High School in Via Borgoleoni, rode a bicycle up Giovecca (coming from Via Cisterna del Follo, where Bassani's house was), in 1939 he takes care to avoid it when heading to the *magna domus*, invited to the first tennis match for those like him excluded from the Eleonora d'Este club: “avoiding Giovecca and the center, I came from the nearby Piazza della Certosa” (p. 379). He himself explains the reasons to Alberto Finzi-Contini, telling him that he preferred to return home by circling around the city walls, “because of the intimate revulsion I always felt at encountering certain ‘ugly faces’ gathered in front of the Caffè della Borsa, on Corso Roma, or scattered along Giovecca” (III, 2, p. 436).

The same situation is experienced by Bruno Lattes (*Further News on Bruno Lattes*), as we have heard, after the autumn of 1938, when he perceives hostile words, allusions, awkward silences, or inappropriate remarks everywhere, and feels the widespread fear among Jews of compromising themselves. And when he crosses paths with the Honorable Bottecchiari, a youthful friend of Clelia Trotti (*The Last Years of Clelia Trotti*), the old revolutionary whom fascism forced into isolation (until her death from hardship in the winter of 1944 in the Codigoro prison), he associates a clear symbolic meaning with the city's topographical structure: “seeing him pass in the opposite direction along the other side of Giovecca (on the opposite side of the barricade!—thought Bruno—and how was it that, all of a sudden, he felt solidarity with Rovigatti, with Clelia Trotti, and with all the poor, betrayed, and forgotten people of the city and countryside that he imagined behind them, happy and grateful to be with them, now and forever...)” (p. 147).

“This side” and “the other side” of Giovecca and Roma thus take on a clear social and ideological significance, also in *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, the novel that most sparked the imagination of critics and readers in their search for the place where Bassani set the book and for the family and characters acting within the villa and the large park surrounding it. Was there such a villa in Ferrara? Was there a family comparable to that of Professor Ermanno, Alberto, and Micòl, located—notably—in the area of the Erculean Addition? The author himself assured, in one of his responses, that there was not [4]. But this does not mean he altered the truth. Bassani always insisted on the truthfulness of his characters, on the existence of the concrete city behind the “imaginary” one⁷. More precisely, the garden in the novel was located “at the end of Corso Ercole I d'Este, the most beautiful and illustri-

7 Indeed, the real-life referents have been identified as the Finzi Magrini family: see Bisutti, D. I grandi narratori: Bassani, in Bassani, G. Interviste 1955-1993, cit., pp. 174-186: 177-178.

ous of the city's streets" [5], near the city walls. This is a location that, for the upper-middle-class Jews who had left the ghetto (the maze of narrow streets crowded with small shops, warehouses, and often malodorous dwellings) and moved to the Catholic and bourgeois area, gave the illusion of having achieved, especially after embracing fascism, full social integration, and thus safety from denunciations and blackmail ("Those same Ferrarese Jews who would later end up in such large numbers in the Nazi gas chambers had, for the most part, been fascists. A close friend of Italo Balbo, the podestà of Ferrara, until about the mid-1930s, he had been a Jew. Alas, yes, unfortunately. The real tragedy of the Ferrarese Jews, and of the vast majority of Italian Jews, can be said to be that of having been bourgeois, initially involved in fascism, and then, without really knowing why, ending up in the nothingness of the Nazi extermination camps," *ibid.*, p. 1327). But with the Racial Laws, even the Finzi-Continis would find themselves forced into isolation at first, and then destruction, when History (with a capital H) burst within the walls of their imposing garden.

Now, that garden, which takes shape from the "geography of the heart," was not a product of fantasy. First of all, Bassani himself tells us that along Corso Ercole d'Este, "on the left, just before the walls, there existed though the green space I wrote about, the area that could have accommodated it" (*ibid.*, p. 1322). To this, we can add that some inspiration may have come from the current English-style park that belonged to the Massari counts (hence its name), acquired by the Municipality of Ferrara in 1936 (not by chance, it was partially used by Vittorio De Sica for the filming of the 1970 film adaptation of the novel); especially because—worth noting—it is adjacent to the Certosa area and the Jewish cemetery, the "mortuary" zone, thus fully legitimized to suggest the fate awaiting the entire family. But not only that: Bassani later revealed that for his literary construction, he had also drawn inspiration from another place, not in Ferrara, but in Ninfa (at Cisterna di Latina). That is, the park of the Caetani princes' villa, which he knew well due to his association with Marguerite Gilbert Chapin⁸, the American heiress who became Princess Caetani di Bassano, founder and director of the journal "Botteghe Oscure", where Bassani served as a steady editor during its existence (1948–1960); through his efforts, the journal hosted some of the most interesting voices of new Italian literature—Tobino, Pasolini, Cassola, Caproni, Bertolucci, Calvino—and foreign literature—Capote, Char, Blanchot, Artaud, Dylan Thomas, Auden.

The issue could also be framed as follows. Consider the polemical notes leveled against Bassani by some critics and writers of the "Gruppo 63"—Nanni Balestrini, Edoardo Sanguineti, Angelo Guglielmi, Renato Barilli, Alfredo Giuliani—in journals close to them, such as "Officina", "Il

Menabò", "Il Verri"⁹. The Ferrarese author was subjected to a veritable media trial, which, with due proportion, for its ideological implications, may recall the accusations made by the Soviet Writers' Union against Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko in 1946, following the party resolution condemning them as authors "alien to Soviet literature" [6]. The accusation against Bassani, which also involved Carlo Cassola and Vasco Pratolini, was that of being a new "Liala", of focusing on decadent characters and having no disposition toward the social, but only toward "small destinies." What interest—critics asked—could there be in a mixed marriage (*Lida Mantovani*), the career of a provincial doctor entangled with a nurse (*A Stroll Before Supper*), the suicide of a homosexual (*The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*), or the haughty solitude of a wealthy Jewish family (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*)?

In his response, it is significant that Bassani invoked *The Gattopardo* by Tomasi di Lampedusa (published thanks to his efforts, as is well known), which he considered a "great national-popular poem" that had healed, "after sixty years of separatism, the divide dug by Giovanni Verga between national and southern literature." [7] Most importantly, *The Gattopardo* had demonstrated "that a historical national novel was still fully possible in Italy today" [8], following the extraordinary example of *I Promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*)¹⁰. And it is precisely in this tradition that Bassani's novels are situated, where humble and insignificant characters, their petty rivalries, and mediocre aspirations are elevated and redeemed by an antagonistic force; one that does not stem from the flaws of twentieth-century man, but from History and its impact on daily life. For Manzoni, that emblematic element was the plague; for Tomasi di Lampedusa, the upheaval tied to Garibaldi's enterprise; for Bassani, it is the Racial Laws and the Holocaust. History has the power to elevate ordinary people without qualities into memorial heroes. Thus, even if the events narrated in *The Novel of Ferrara* feature members of the Ferrarese Jewish petite bourgeoisie who, in life, were mediocre or even rejected in the author's judgment, in

9 See what Renato Barilli wrote in "Il Verri" (2, April 1962), reviewing the newly published novel: "On the Finzi-Continis family, little by little, all the 'disease' and 'decadence' are condensed, which are also present in the author's own attitude in envisioning that particular society. Now he seems to suggest that this decadence stems precisely from the feelings of those who embody it. This would lead to the strange consequence that the Jewish condition, at least in certain forms and in certain environments, carried within itself, in those years, the seeds of its own death, so that racial persecution would then intervene as a sort of secular arm tasked with materially carrying out an inwardly already accomplished demise." For the particularly heated controversy, especially from Sanguineti, which also involved Alberto Arbasino and his Fratelli d'Italia [Brothers of Italy], see Bassani, G. In risposta III, pp. 1215–1219; the attacks were preceded by a falling out with Feltrinelli due to differing ideas about literature (Roberto Cotroneo, Chronology, in Bassani, G. Opere, cit., p. LXXXIII): "Feltrinelli was preparing a changing of the guard in his publishing house, giving increasing weight to figures like Valerio Riva and Enrico Filippini (who had collaborated with 'Il Verri'), soon joined by the 'very new' Nanni Balestrini; so that soon 'neo-experimentalism and Feltrinelli became one and the same'".

10 Bassani also prepared a screenplay for a cinematic adaptation of Manzoni's novel, published edited by Salvatore Silvano Nigro (Bassani, G. I Promessi Sposi. Un esperimento [The Betrothed. An Experiment]. Palermo: Sellerio Editore; 2007).

8 "If one wishes to see, in some way, the garden of the Finzi-Continis, one must go not to Ferrara, but a few dozen kilometers from Rome, near Latina, Norma, a small town in the hills beyond the Colli Albani. It is called Ninfa": see Bassani, G. Italia da salvare. Scritti e battaglie ambientali [Italy to be saved: Environmental Writings and Battles], Preface by Giorgio Ruffolo, edited by Cristiano Spila, with a note by Paola Bassani. Turin: Einaudi; 2005, p. 106.

death—after paying the scandal of the Racial Laws, after many of them disappeared horribly, without fault—they acquire another quality. They are all embraced by a sense of pity, which in the writer merges with nostalgia for the lost world of the *shtetl*, the village of Eastern Jewish tradition. For Bassani, it must be reiterated, came from a Jewish family belonging to the affluent bourgeoisie: his paternal grandfather, Davide Bassani, was a wealthy textile merchant with a shop in the former ghetto, in Via Vignatagliata; his maternal grandfather, Cesare Minerbi, portrayed in Elia Corcos in *A Stroll Before Supper*, was a highly respected chief physician at the city's Sant'Anna Hospital. Bassani's family had been settled in Ferrara for several generations, though we do not know exactly whether they were of Sephardic (as is more likely) or Ashkenazi origin; but, as in the case of Primo Levi, what mattered was the preservation of Jewish tradition, its rules, and its rituals, observed and cherished within the family circle, as the Ferrarese writer extensively testified; and what matters, above all, is the fate shared by Eastern European Jews (*Ostjuden*) and Western Sephardim: extermination almost to the last in their ghettos and villages, in sealed train cars, or under the Zyklon-B showers¹¹.

4. The Lost and Recovered Homeland

The issue discussed thus far, which can introduce a reading of *The Heron*, ultimately points to Bassani's distinctive way of considering time (and space). Recall the famous passage from the final chapter of *The Novel of Ferrara*:

"The past is not dead ... it never dies. Rather, it recedes: with every passing moment. Recovering the past, therefore, is possible. However, if one truly wishes to reclaim it, one must traverse a kind of corridor that grows ever longer with each moment. There, at the end of the remote, sunlit point of convergence of the corridor's dark walls, lies life, vivid and pulsating, as it was when it first came into being. Eternal, then? Eternal. Yet ever more distant, ever more elusive, ever more reluctant to be possessed again." [9]

For the Ferrarese author, it was thus possible to recover the past through memory, which becomes the site of perspectival and narrative construction, illuminating characters, casting shadows, and establishing proximities and distances. Memory allows the revival of past events, which, however, are filtered through recollection. The writer thus reanimates a Ferrara unchanged in its monumental and architectural beauty, but at the same time taints it with a mournful hue, bestowed by moral indignation—revealing what the city truly was, "unjust, cruel, vulgar" [10], on the one hand, and by the sentiment of

death, on the other. In Bassani's Ferrara, the stories of the submerged and the saved Jews are indelibly etched, as if with invisible ink. And when the narrator returns, like Geo Josz (*A Plaque in Via Mazzini*), with a deep sense of pity, he touches the walls, hears the liveliness of the streets, and now sees what he could not have imagined when he left, overwhelmed by fear and disgust. But once separated by time and space, a mechanism intervenes that partially shields the memory of the city and its lost names. This can already be sensed in the early testimony of Manlio Cancogni, in the words of Bassani's father, who escaped the Fascist roundups and reunited with his son in Florence:

"His father, extremely thin and with an almost waxy pallor, sadly commented on the death of his friends. I still hear the exclamation, akin to a lament, that escaped his throat as he mentioned the names of some victims: 'Imagine, Giorgio, the two Hanau, the two Hanau...' Giorgio explained to me that these men, father and son, were modest people, artisans who had never been part of the high Jewish society traditionally linked to the Fascist bourgeoisie. Even in his father's voice, a thread of remorse was perceptible." (*I rimorsi di Bassani. Non gli riesce dimenticare*, cit., pp. 105-106).

5. The Heron: Neo-Expressionism and Nouveau Roman

I now turn to *The Heron*, the 1968 novel included as Chapter V in *The Novel of Ferrara*. It has a structure of mathematical precision, divided into four books, with 24 chapters distributed in perfect symmetry (6 + 6 + 6 + 6); this already suggests the balance of the narrative development, which essentially recounts a double farewell of the protagonist: in the first two books, the farewell upon departure—from his wife and Bellagamba, an old acquaintance from the times of Fascism—to head toward the sea and hunting in the valley; in the last two, the farewell upon return—from Cesarina, the wife of his cousin in Codigoro with whom he had not spoken for years, and from Nives, his own wife, always a stranger to him—to return to Ferrara and find peace (through death). The novel narrates, more precisely, the last twenty-four hours of life (a temporal unity clearly alluding to tragedy) of Edgardo Limentani, a Jew, a landowner, married for convenience to a Catholic, Nives Pimpinati.

The story is set on a Sunday in the winter of 1947 but harks back, as mentioned, to the fateful years of the Racial Laws. Limentani is, in fact, the Jew who escaped the massacre through flight but has never managed to heal the wound opened in 1938.

The novel echoes real characters and events, as is typical in Bassani, but always imbued with a profound moral purpose:

"The initial idea for the book came to me twenty years ago, right after the war. A childhood friend of mine committed suicide. Why? No one knew; there were no plausible reasons. He was a troubled man. He believed he was poor, yet he was

11 *Ostjuden*, incidentally, is the title of one of Levi's earliest poems, dated February 7, 1946; a world that Levi had come to know directly through the contacts he made during his return journey from Auschwitz, in the countries he passed through on that occasion (Poland, the Soviet Union, Romania, and Hungary). On this matter, see Baldini, A. *Testimone di civiltà scomparse. Levi e la letteratura mitteleuropea sul mondo ebraico-orientale*, in *Gli intellettuali/scrittori ebrei e il dovere della testimonianza. In ricordo di Giorgio Bassani*, edited by Anna Dolfi. Firenze: Firenze University Press; 2017, pp. 629-644: 640-641.

wealthy, a major landowner, he even had a tennis court in his villa. He went hunting, managed his properties absentmindedly, dressed elegantly, a gentleman, in short, a gentleman farmer. But troubled, never cheerful, never free, and with the ever-open wound of being a Jew, of always feeling different.

(...) Him, but also another, another Ferrarese Jewish friend ... and a countryside landowner. An excellent farmer. After the war, I believe in 1946, he was attacked by his peasants who demanded changes to the agricultural contracts. It was a heated time of social demands, especially in the Ferrara area where tenant farmers and sharecroppers were all communists. They surrounded him with hoes raised over their heads. He gave in, promised. Then, back in Ferrara, he turned to a lawyer. The carabinieri intervened. The matter had no criminal repercussions, but the dispute was resolved in favor of the landowner. However, from that day on, he could no longer go to the countryside. He, who was a first-rate farmer, was thus separated from his land. He had committed an irreparable act (...) Years earlier, he had committed another irreparable act. In 1939, to secure his properties, he had married a Catholic, out of calculation, without love.” [11]

As a preliminary observation, it is worth noting the dust jacket of the original edition, which reproduces a painting by Francis Bacon (*Seated Figure on a Couch*), the leading exponent of Neo-Expressionist painting, known in Italy since the late 1950s. Bassani had a significant knowledge of the visual arts, having been trained in Bologna in contact with Roberto Longhi and his students, particularly the Arcangeli brothers, and having associated, during his Bologna years, with artists like Giorgio Morandi and writers like Giuseppe Raimondi, who was for him a true mentor in writing that combined art and literature¹². Bassani also had, it should be remembered, professional experience in publishing, gained through his collaboration with “Botteghe Oscure” and the editorial roles he later held, first for Feltrinelli, then for Garzanti. For all these reasons, he was attentive to the covers of his books, which he personally chose, drawing on painters he knew and frequented. Starting with Morandi, whose *La strada bianca* [The White Road], an oil on canvas from 1941, was used for the 1960 edition of *Ferrarese Stories* (Einaudi); after, for the 1956 *Five Ferrarese Stories*, he had chosen a painting by the Rodigino artist Alberto Cavaglieri, *Sala di campagna* [Country Room], which, notably, belonged to Longhi¹³.

The chosen image for *The Heron* testifies to an evolution in pictorial taste, invoking the current of Existential Realism, a movement active in Milan in the second half of the 1950s and the early 1960s, of which Giuseppe Banchieri was a leading exponent alongside Floriano Bodini, Giuseppe Guerreschi,

and others. Their themes focused on denouncing the contemporary human condition, loneliness, despair, and the anguish of living; these are, in many respects, also the themes of *The Heron*. More precisely, Bassani was attentive to the Roman variant of Existential Realism, embodied by Marcello Muccini, Renzo Vespignani, and, above all, Alberto Sughi. The latter represented a clear connection to Bacon, a link also explicitly acknowledged by Bassani himself in the introduction to an exhibition of the group. Sughi seemed to him ready “to embrace and make his own even the lesson of Bacon, the shadowy northern sorcerer” [12], thereby definitively surpassing Morandi’s aesthetic:

“Together [Sughi and his colleagues] find themselves saying no to the painting of the Italian Novecento between the two wars: to its lyricism, its purity, its emblematic exemplarity; focusing instead on content, on the values, so disdained yesterday, of “narrative” and “illustration” (...) It is, in any case, a painting that demands the direct emotional and psychological participation of the viewer, unlike the painting of Morandi, Carrà and Rosai, which calls for pure aesthetic deliberation.” (*ibid.*)

Sughi, moreover, was also the subject of a piece by Giuseppe Raimondi, which became a milestone in subsequent criticism, included in the catalog for the exhibition dedicated to him, *Alberto Sughi, il quotidiano della città* [Alberto Sughi, the daily life of the city]. Raimondi emphasized the theme of urban solitude and its hidden complexities:

“The life of an hour or, unfortunately, the monotonous life of every hour. Because, within, there are people: men and women who bear the weight and weariness of the day poorly. Sometimes, impatience or suffering becomes nothing more than a mask, a mold, beneath which, however, there still flows, within a poor labyrinth of veins and broken channels, something that was once blood. Now, it is little more than a slow, serous substance, a purulent and sad quality that permeates the arabesque of bones and surfaces on faces. It begins with boredom, the viscous boredom of every moment, then turns into melancholy and despair. A lack of life.” [13]

Sughi’s work, particularly the canvases from 1960 and 1961, was also linked by Raimondi, beyond Bacon, to two artists notably present in Bassani’s cultural panorama: Chaim Soutine (a Russian Jew who lived in Paris in the 1930s, associated with Expressionism) and Filippo de Pisis (whose *Nude of a Reclining Boy* Bassani used for *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*): “in these three artists, at least at a certain moment, there is a common disposition to be touched, indeed grasped, affectionately taken by the arm by the themes and motifs of the restless understanding of the human condition: in what demands to be observed, understood, and pitied for the ugliness and sadness that accompany our passage on earth” (*ibid.*, p. 12).

The gaze directed at “defeated, broken, humiliated, powerless beings,” “the bewilderment, the dull astonishment toward every aspect of things”; the passive acceptance of “the incidents, the accidents of light, the unexpected shadows that

12 For the pictorial influences in Bassani’s writing, see Giardino, A. Giorgio Bassani. Percorsi dello sguardo nelle arti visive. Ravenna: Giorgio Pozzi Editore; 2013. On Raimondi and the importance of his mentorship, particularly in stylistic terms, see Rabboni, R. La memoria e la realtà. Note al carteggio Bassani-Raimondi. “Studi e problemi di critica testuale”, 83, October 2011, pp. 227-249; and Griggio, C., Rabboni, R. Giorgio Bassani, Raimondi e Ragghianti: per una scrittura morale e di civile responsabilità. “Ermeneutica letteraria”, 18, 2022, pp. 93-108.

13 Bassani discusses Cavaglieri in one of his writings on art included in *Di là dal cuore* [Beyond the Heart] (Mario Cavaglieri, pp. 1096-1098).

fall on those livid spaces of foreheads and cheeks”: these also apply to the protagonist of *The Heron*¹⁴. This is even more true when we consider the reasons with which Bassani dismissed the alleged debt to the *Nouveau roman*, on which critics have dwelt, highlighting its echoes in the slow pace of narrative time and the pursuit of objectivity. In reality, the matter is more complex: that fixation on “a separate and immobile universe, where life itself seems to have come to a sudden halt” [14] was already present in the *Ferrarese Stories* (think of the stasis characterizing the life of Lida Mantovani and her mother Maria) and owed a debt to the metaphysical and Novecento aesthetic. The reference to the *école du regard* was, if anything, a “tactical” choice for Bassani, who, moreover, did not hide (to Cancogni) his contempt for avant-gardes and experimentalism of any kind:

“[*The Heron*] was meant to be the story of a winter day, described minute by minute, meticulously, almost pedantically.

Like the novels of the école du regard?

Exactly. But not out of a desire to align with that poetics. Quite the opposite. To show how it is a literature for the moribund. Because the gaze that rests purely, indifferently on things is the gaze of someone on the verge of death, an outcast. Only an outcast, someone no longer part of life, can be pre-occupied solely with observing, describing, measuring... as happens in the novels, so to speak, of Butor and Robbe-Grillet and others. From what for them is a poetics, I made a character: Edgardo Limentani. An object in a world of objects. Someone with death upon him.”¹⁵

In other words, faced with the “narrative mannerism” (p. 1170) of the *école* and, no differently, the “idiocies” of the Italian neo-avant-garde, Bassani remained skeptical (“I have always looked more to the nineteenth century than to the twentieth,” p. 1173). The only honest way to write novels, for him, was to create a novel that worked. With *The Heron*, he did not aim for an objective novel but a novel in which the character acted objectively, not reduced to an object. The inner gnawing that Limentani constantly feels is, after all, the sign of his consciousness. Exactly as Raimondi had said regarding Sughis’ figures: “a mask, a mold, beneath which, however, there still flows, within a poor labyrinth of veins and broken channels, something that was once blood.”

14 Without, however, suggesting an impact of Expressionism on Bassani’s writing as well, as Enrico Testa does: “In the syntax of *The Heron*, the analytical-geometric register coexists (another system of forces in the book) with the pathetic-dilemmatic one (...); hence the vibrant and pathetic configuration of the writing that aims—here akin to Bacon’s paintings—at distorting outlines, at the discontinuous alteration—through jolts and approximations—of the discourse, at the unrecognizability (if one could imagine its face) of the physiognomic features of the voice” (Testa, E. “Dire tutto”. Lessico e sintassi dell’Airone, in Giorgio Bassani: La poesia del romanzo, il romanzo del poeta, edited by Antonello Perli. Ravenna: Giorgio Pozzi Editore; 2011, pp. 171-183: 182).

15 Cancogni, M. Perché ho scritto “L’airone”, cit., p. 161. See also Bassani, G., Scrivendo desidero cercare di capire me stesso, di guarire me stesso, insomma [By writing I want to try to understand myself, to heal myself, in short], in Id. Interviste 1955-1993, cit., pp. 225-242: “Whoever wrote *The Heron* might not have written it had they not wanted to write, through *The Heron*, a kind of indirect and differential critical essay concerning the French *école du regard*” (p. 227).

6. The Heron: Time and Guilt

Limentani, as mentioned, is a forty-year-old man, prematurely aged in spirit. He belongs to the affluent bourgeoisie, owning properties and land. He entered a mixed marriage for convenience and lives—notably—in the new Ferrara, in “the other side” of Giovecca, in Via Mentana, a side street off Via Montebello. Fearful of the political upheavals linked to the rising communism in Emilia in 1947, he neglects his possessions, allowing them to fall into ruin. The reason for this disinterest in life and relationships lies in the fateful five-year period, though he is not consciously aware of it: the novel is the story of how he will come to awaken and trace back to the original cause.

In the first two books, Limentani’s state of unease and uncertainty dominates the narrative. He rises early, at four in the morning, to go on a hunting trip in a boat in the Comacchio valleys, but with a thousand doubts: for he is well aware that it was risky to go about armed in the aftermath of the Liberation, especially for a landowner, with the farmhands of the lower Ferrarese region in agitation. Limentani recalls, in fact, a visit made a year earlier to his Montina properties, with the peasants demanding a revision of the sharecropping agreements, having surrounded him with raised hoes, ready to strike him on the head. The fear of communists has now taken the place of the still-fresh fear of fascists. The grim and threatening faces of the farmhands remind him of the “mug” of Gino Bellagamba (whom he is about to meet at the bar of the hotel where he will stop in Codigoro): now an aged and harmless innkeeper, but once a corporal in the militia, a “country bully” cut from the same dangerous cloth as the red subversives who held sway over the countryside (“He remembered his swagger from back then. A country bully restored to active duty by events, his near-permanent loitering in the square on the sidewalk in front of the Casa del Fascio, the threatening and contemptuous glances with which he, too, in those years, as a ‘Jew,’ as an ‘apolitical,’ and as a landowner, had been generously favored,” p. 728).

Since 1939, out of caution, he has transferred his agricultural assets to his wife Nives, a Catholic and Aryan, who, back in Codigoro, a place on the road to the sea and a site of memories chosen by Bassani not by chance, as it is emblematic of compromise, even architectural, with the Fascist regime¹⁶. The woman had once been his mistress (“a village woman in her thirties or forties, with small, gray, expressionless eyes, with a short, hooked nose like a raptor’s beak,” p. 714). He later married her (another sign of “leaving” the ghetto), but out of convenience, not affection, and since 1939, he rarely slept in the large marital bed where he had been

16 In Codigoro lives the cousin Ulderico, the Jew capable of adapting to the new times: he promptly joined the Fascist Party, then sold his house in Ferrara and moved near his lands, marrying the trouser-maker from Codigoro. Relations with him had been severed for years; Limentani had only recently spoken to him by phone, and it was Ulderico who arranged the hunting appointment with Gavino. Moreover, as mentioned, in Codigoro there is Bellagamba, who now runs a hotel and welcomes him servilely and cordially, quite unlike in the past.

conceived. Additionally, his wife was never truly accepted by the household servants, for whom the only true lady remained Limentani's elderly mother.

The protagonist is initially swept along by events. His awkward movements, which accompany, in order, his waking, dressing, descent in the dark toward the front door (a veritable descent into the depths of memory), and then the entire outward journey beyond the city walls (always a mournful sign in Bassani), into the stagnant waters of the Ferrarese plain: these correspond to a slowed-down time, obsessively marked, with repeated indications of hours and minutes that underscore the protagonist's inadequacy, his perennial "delay."¹⁷ Limentani is aware of this but does not react; just as he did not react to the economic decline of the estate (when "it was high time to abandon the old traditional crops that had become disastrously unprofitable and to transform, like many others, into mere fruit growers," p. 734), nor does he participate in the hunt once he arrives at the boat, where instead he dozes off, lulled by staring at the decoys.

The slowness of his movements is emphasized by a meticulous, detailed description, which, as noted, may recall the French nouveau roman; with the difference that the gaze of the author (and the protagonist) is far from impassive. Limentani is apathetic, but he is neither ill nor old enough to fear aging. His malaise points to his escape from deportation, his flight to Switzerland, where he stayed for a year and a half¹⁸. However, this final day is punctuated by signs of awakening; for instance, when, after considering his inertia in the face of events and the need to modernize traditional crops, Edgardo senses his condition as a *survivor* ("It was enough for him to think of himself as a farmer to abandon any such plans abruptly and to recognize himself as a survivor," p. 734)¹⁹. He

feels, in other words, that he has an unsettled score with death, because he has developed a guilt complex stemming precisely from having escaped the fate of his fellow Jews. This is the guilt of the survivor, which Levi captured in a poem of extraordinary incisiveness, *Il superstite* [The survivor], opened, not by chance, with a quotation from a line in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, about the sole survivor of that sea voyage: for Levi, this was the emblem of the necessity to bear witness, strongly felt in the camp and then acted upon upon his return, the only thing that justified survival and could stem the recurring pain of the survivor:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
And till his ghastly tale is told,
His heart within him burns.
He sees his comrades' faces,
livid at first light,
gray with cement dust,
Vague in the mist,
Dyed by death in their restless sleep:
At night they grind their jaws
Under the heavy burden of their dreams
Chewing a nonexistent turnip.
"Back, away from here, drowned people,
Go. I haven't stolen anyone's place,
I haven't usurped the bread of anyone,
No one died for me. No one.
Go back to your haze.
It's not my fault if I live and breathe
And eat and drink and sleep and put on clothes."²⁰

The torment of the *Survivor* is the same as Limentani's, whose bewilderment continues during the hunt. In the boat, he watches motionlessly as Gavino, the young former "partisan fighter" (p. 760) hired by his cousin for the hunt, sets up the decoys and shoots at all kinds of birds. And note: it was supposed to be Limentani shooting, while Gavino usually limited himself to accompanying hunters and collecting the fallen birds with the boat. Among these is the heron, which Limentani had noticed earlier struggling against the wind, thinking, "What a strange creature!" and certainly not good to eat" (p. 769). Gavino had remarked that it looked impressive when stuffed, and Limentani had thought that "he had never been able to stand stuffed birds" (p. 774). However, he forgot to tell him, and Gavino shoots it when the heron reappears

17 The marking of time is emphasized, especially in the first part: the alarm at four o'clock, the long lingering at home for the meticulous morning ritual until the additional farewells to his wife, to whom he asks the time upon entering her room (twenty minutes to five); at four fifty-eight, he leaves his wife's room and enters that of his daughter Rory, who is asleep (he leaves at five-oh-five); while in the caretaker's apartment, invited for coffee, it is five thirty-five; at six forty, he arrives in Codigoro; just past seven, he gets up from his seat in Bellagamba's bar to use the bathroom; it is eight o'clock when he leaves, and at Bellagamba's suggestion, they go to drink coffee at a bar in the square; at nine fifteen, he arrives in Volano (where he was expected at six fifteen), and at ten fifteen, he is in the boat; when the heron reappears, after its first pass, it must have been around one in the afternoon; when the wounded bird approaches the boat, it is only two o'clock.

18 See Chapter I, 1 (regarding the bedroom where he had always slept as a boy): "except, of course, for the year and a half in Switzerland" (p. 704). In May 1943, Bassani had been arrested for his antifascist activities; imprisoned in Bologna, in San Giovanni in Monte, he was released on July 26 following the fall of Fascism; on August 4, he married Valeria Sinigallia and, with her (after a brief honeymoon in Marina di Ravenna), left Ferrara for Florence.

19 Regarding the escape and the "remorse" associated with it, this was perhaps a feeling Bassani himself experienced. See, for example, what he says about the betrayed Garden, invoking precisely his own survival: "Micòl symbolizes Life, and for this reason, she dies, chooses to die; Giorgio [Bassani himself], Art: and for this reason, he lives, chooses to survive, and thus, to write" (Bassani, G. *Il Giardino tradito* [The Betrayed Garden], p. 1264). As for the autobiographical resonances, never as with The Heron had his identification with the character been more complete and total: "I have been, at various times, Micòl, and Dr. Corcos, and Professor Ermanno, and Lida Mantovani, but always to a limited extent. Edgardo Limentani, on the other hand, is the one who has most invaded my consciousness" (Livi, G. Bassani, come nasce un personaggio, in Bassani, G. *Interviste 1955-1993*,

cit., pp. 149-157: 153).

20 I quote the text from *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, edited by Ann Goldstein. London: W.W. Norton & Co.; 2015, pp. 1966-67 (translation by Jonathan Galassi). Levi also said on this matter: "I had returned from captivity three months earlier, and I was living badly. The things seen and suffered burned within me; I felt closer to the dead than to the living, and guilty of being human, because humans had built Auschwitz, and Auschwitz had swallowed millions of human beings, many of my friends, and a woman dear to my heart. It seemed to me that I would purify myself by telling, and I felt like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who seizes the wedding guests on their way to the feast to inflict his tale of misdeeds upon them" (Levi, P. *Il sistema periodico* [The Periodic System], in Id. *Opere complete* [Complete Works], edited by Marco Belpoliti. Turin: Einaudi; 2016, vol. II, pp. 968-977: 971).

around one in the afternoon. Limentani witnesses the bird's vain attempt to save itself, wounded and dragging its broken wing in the water as it approaches the shore, reaching a state of near paralysis, the peak of inertia.

The heron has an evident symbolic value, alluding to the phoenix, the animal of the eternal cycle of existence, reborn in death, and clearly prefigures Limentani's fate. However, from the heron's agony (whose death is consigned to an off-stage moment, as will be Limentani's), Edgardo's ascent to consciousness begins: he identifies with the wounded bird, substituting himself for it, to the point of asking its questions ("Where am I?" "What happened to me?" p. 776), as if he were the wounded one, needing to seek escape. The *transfert* is heightened by the fact that the wounded heron pushes itself right up against the boat, following the decoys and believing itself safe on that side: "It was so deluded, clearly, poor fool, that if it hadn't seemed to him, to Limentani, like shooting at himself in a certain sense, he would have shot it immediately. And that way, at least, it would have been over" (p. 780).

In the third and fourth parts, the return to Ferrara is completed, marking the fulfillment of the journey toward the liberating realization of guilt. The return also takes place in the dark, amidst thick fog that descended heavily from early afternoon, emphasizing the inner dimension of the story.

The return from Pomposa involves a new stop in Codigoro, which, unlike the outward journey, is "perfectly planned" (p. 782), a way to delay returning to Ferrara, which "was taking on increasingly grim and oppressive hues" (*ibid.*), like a return to a prison and apathy. Edgardo does everything to postpone it: it is still a matter of delay, but now by deliberate choice, not accidental or unforeseen as in the first part.

Limentani is obsessed with the game in his trunk, his mind returning to the image of the dying heron. He would have liked to give all the hunted game to Gavino, but he refused, and now, with about forty dead birds (ducks and coots), he can't wait to be rid of them. In Codigoro, he stops to eat at Bellagamba's place, the "Bosco Eliceo", which he would have gladly avoided the first time due to fear of unpleasant encounters. Now, however, he enters by his own decision and devours the fish served to him; with a kind of bulimia that is a first, but mistaken, response (a manifestation of materiality, of attachment to existence) to the unease he feels: which is, instead, a malaise of the soul. Limentani cannot enjoy life like the other hunters in Bosco Eliceo; he tries to, but the stench of the place disgusts him, and his stomach begins to ache.

After food, there is another mistaken response to his malaise: sex. He notices a woman in her thirties in the place, "brunette, pale, stocky, heavily made-up, sitting demurely at a nearby table" (p. 788), and understands from her suggestive glances that she is a prostitute. But, naturally, the encounter, followed by a vulgar and distressing erotic dream prompted by the woman seen in the place, only underscores his difference from others. Even in the dream, the protagonist experiences Limentani's difference: difference from the representatives of oily transformism and cunning, like Bellagamba, or

the repulsive vitality and greed for money, like the prostitute and other patrons; a difference that is racial, psychological, and also sexual, emphasized by reflections on his own member: "gray, meager, insignificant, with that circumcision mark, so familiar and yet so absurd," at the end of Chapter III.2 (p. 794); echoed by the woman in the dream: "'You're really down and out', she murmured then, no longer touching him, limiting herself to looking at him there, where he himself was looking. 'You're really done for'" (p. 806); and aimed at concealing perhaps a sense of inferiority or fear of impotence.

However, this new rest foreshadows a different awakening, that of consciousness. When he wakes from the dream, Edgardo is gripped again by the sense of anguish he had briefly felt in the morning. He now considers visiting his cousin Ulderico, after being informed that while he was sleeping, a call came from the Cavaglieri household, asking him to call back ("he suddenly felt completely reinvigorated," p. 809). However, his cousin is not at home; yet he has a long phone conversation with Ulderico's wife, Cesarina, who invites him over for tea. He accepts at first but, leaving the bar where he made the call, after promising to go and even approaching the building, he changes his mind: another clear sign of returning awareness. From her voice, Cesarina seemed to him an ambiguous type, as if she had been eager to tell him Ulderico was out to take advantage and lure him to her house ("In no time, she had churned out six children for him. But now, after thoroughly wearing him out, she was evidently throwing herself into cuckolding him shamelessly in front of the whole town, no matter with whom... tall, fat, calm. And a whore, above all," p. 820). Indeed, the entrance to his cousin's door reminds him of the brothel where Ulderico had taken him the first time. When he reaches the doorbell, therefore, he does not ring it, at the very moment he is asking himself "who he really was" (p. 822).

Here, the image of the heron returns to him, which, before its eyes clouded over from blood loss, "must have felt much like he did now: trapped on all sides, without the slightest chance of escape" (p. 823). He realizes that the solution is to learn to view life's matters from a certain distance, concluding that they were "all worth what they were worth, that is, nothing or almost nothing" (p. 824). And so, he almost gets lost in the little streets of Codigoro (the street names he knew had been replaced with new ones), enters the church of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, but for him, there is no path to divine salvation ("The proximity, moreover, of the crucifix, of that blackened, smoked, and nailed relic, disturbed him, intimidated him," p. 828), nor does he find comfort in the Catholic propaganda leaflet he holds, which urges not to worry about tomorrow because God cares for His creatures.

Leaving the church, the fog has lifted, and now, finally, Edgardo can see. He finds himself in front of a taxidermist's shop, and here occurs the second, decisive encounter with the figure of the heron. He sees, among other animals, a stuffed gray heron, but note, he also sees himself reflected in the shop window, and the idea of the perfection of death dawns on him,

a more perfect life that no longer risks deterioration. From this moment, time (and movement) undergoes a strong acceleration.

During the return to Ferrara, Limentani is truly the protagonist. He is seized by a sense of happiness at the thought of death. After considering shooting the wounded heron, he has come to the decision to shoot for real, but at himself. He is even euphoric, utterly amused, at the thought of his wife having to face the farmhands and subordinates of Montina alone, now “detached from the world and from himself” (p. 839). He arrives in the city at twenty minutes to nine, still “in the grip of a kind of intoxication,” but “it would have been enough for him to be induced to think of surviving just one more day for the happiness he had carried within himself like a treasure for an hour to dissolve instantly, and for him to feel again, even toward his daughter, stood there, staring at him over the rim of the spoon with her beautiful, dark blue, wild eyes, the usual bitter sense of estrangement, almost repulsion” (p. 843).

He bids farewell to his wife, the estate manager, and his daughter, for whom he finally feels a surge of affection. Then he shaves and washes carefully, meticulously planning the method of his suicide. Toward midnight, he gets out of bed, goes to take leave of his elderly mother (as he often did at that hour), still with a sense of inner happiness; he talks to her about his day and his cousin, boasting of a meeting that never took place and eliciting a surge of emotion in her (“attentive, as if rejuvenated by twenty years”), who recalls the times of peace “of the period she had spent in Fiesole, in a convent, when the Germans were there” (p. 853) (suggesting that his mother, too, had saved herself by hiding). Finally, he returns to his room to use against himself the rifle that, on that day, had not fired a single shot.

7. Conclusions

The story of *The Heron* marks the culmination of Bassani's tormented relationship with his city, Ferrara. The character of the protagonist, Edgardo Limentani, alludes in various ways to the author's own torments, as he, too, escaped the fate of his fellow Jews through flight. Moreover, although the narrative unfolds outside Ferrara, the urban context and its recent history continue to weigh heavily on the survivor's fate. In death, Limentani finds peace from his sense of guilt, while Bassani, the artist, chooses to survive to bear witness.

Author Contributions

Renzo Rabboni is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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