

July 3, 2006

Madhuri M. Yadlapati

Response to Margaret Brose Re: *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*

Margaret Brose explained how 1938 was an important date for reading modern Jewish writers, as the date when the racial laws were instituted. This raises the issue of how identity, and the creative identity of a writer in particular, is shaped by the experience of a time and place. We continue to discuss the question raised earlier of what makes a Jewish writer. It's especially clear that Northern Italian Jewish writers would formatively identify with this date, with the racial laws, with what apparently was a very sudden labeling of Jews as Jews. However, in a sense, I imagine that 1938 serves as such an identifying event for Jewish writers later as well, writers who did not live in northern Italy on that date, but who nevertheless experience it as a definitively formative moment in their own re-collected memory of Jewish identity, whatever that may mean in particular.

According to Professor Brose, during the 15th and 16th centuries, Ferrara actively invited Sephardic Jews. The Este family, who ruled during the Ferrara Renaissance, later brought Ashkenazi Jews as well into Ferrara. However, once Ferrara was annexed into the papal states, the Jewish community experienced a decline in their quality of life, as Jews then were forced to live in the ghetto until 1859. One of my questions is then how the experiences of the Jewish community in Ferrara was different from that in Venice. Was there in fact greater freedom, were there more synagogues, greater toleration, or more segregation? Were Ferrara Jews not segregated in the ghetto before the papal annexation?

Professor Brose described the period between 1859 and 1938 as one of total assimilation of Jews in the Ferrara community. Unlike those in many other Italian cities, Jews in Ferrara were especially patriotic and very loyal to the fascist movement. They had become landowners and had been important in the Risorgimento. Given the total assimilation into Ferrarese life, the racial laws of 1938 hit hard. Brose mentioned several writers of Italian Holocaust literature who grew up during this period of the racial laws. She raised an interesting similarity that is rather curious, and that I wish we had more time to consider. The writers she mentioned, Moravia, Morante, Bassani, Carlo Levi, Primo Levi, and Roselli, were very "local" in their writing, pertaining to one particular city. So we see Bassani set the Garden of the Finzi-Continis in Ferrara, and especially in that case, the restriction to a place, to the garden, to the family's estate, to the city of Ferrara is incredibly prominent to the story he was telling.

Brose proposed this generation of writers had a deep personal experience of their time and place; the writers she mentioned were specifically local in their scope. So now, as this generation of writers who were morally shaped by the experience of racial laws passes away, Professor Brose asked, what does it mean to be writing as a Jew in Italy today? With respect to the question of what it means to be a Jew, Brose proposed the movement from a national identity to a local identity to a global identity. The national identity that emerged with citizenship and enabled support of fascism then moved to a local identity by the time of the racial laws. However, Professor Brose argued that the identity of being Italian and Jewish doesn't exist anymore, and that today to write as a Jew in Italy, one must have a global identity. This historical, social movement she

identified from national to local to global identity is an interesting framework, but it is not entirely clear to me. I would like to hear more on this movement from local to global identity. What is specifically global in Jewish identity in the post-war period, or today? Does this mean that Jews everywhere have identified with each other regardless of national differences and once again have become a nation of their own, because of the loss of European national identity? With the racial laws that suddenly fragmented their identity as Italians, for example, is the global identity that emerges the sense of being a Jewish nation again, a nation without a nation? If so, where does that come from, given the total assimilation that occurred earlier? Given the loss of religious, ethnic, Jewish identity, where does this new Jewish identity come from? Is it perhaps a somewhat artificial reconstruction of what must be a Jewish nation?

Professor Brose presented Bassani's *Garden of the Finzi-Continis* in terms of a duality of experience of Jews in Ferrara, a duality of assimilation and exclusion. However fully assimilated, they created their own self-isolation. The family in Bassani's book demonstrates this motif repeatedly, of those who were inside, who were part of the group, and those who were outside. Brose raised the oxymoron of the isolation of assimilation, as the family created their own ghetto and sought ways to exclude others. This is what Bassani criticized, according to Brose. She also raised a certain facet of guilt of being the one not deported, not arrested, which was Bassani's own experience and which is reflected in the book. The constant question for him then is "why am I saved?" I am curious as to how this guilt might be connected to the "isolation of assimilation". I think they are connected, because both are part of the more general contemporary experience of those who are alive after World War II, after the Holocaust. The isolation of assimilation sounds to me like a late 20th century condition of western life, as we're all increasingly assimilated into a larger sameness of culture. The regional differences have been at least flattened, if not erased, across America, for example. With this assimilation into a single large block of sameness, then modern American life demonstrates an isolation as well. There are no particular differences, no unique segments of society to identify with. This is a broad generalization, but I wonder if this convergence of a Jewish Italian experience of the racial laws of 1938 with the more general western anonymity in life is itself part of the global identity of being a modern Jewish writer. How is the experience of guilt, that is, the simple guilt of living what is seen as undeserved or unearned, related to this isolation? I think the guilt of modern existence emerges also from not being part of a community, in which one's connections to others define one's identity. I would like to hear more about any such connection between the guilt of survival and the isolation and assimilation both in the Italian Jewish context and in the larger contemporary context. In other discussions here about what it means to be a Jew, or what makes a Jewish writer, one of the identifying characteristics raised was that it means to be divided. This sense of being divided also speaks to this contemporary context of anonymity.