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Bassani's The Garden of the Finzi-Continis and Italian "Queers"

John Champagne
Pennsylvania State University

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John Champagne,
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Abstract: In his article "Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and Italian 'Queers'" John Champagne argues for a reading of the novel as not gay, but queer. Champagne argues that such a reading strategy emphasizes the ways in which the novel deconstructs normative gender, sexual, and even religious identities in an attempt both to resist the tyranny of the normal and to cope with the trauma of the Italian Shoah. A psycho-analytically inflected queer theory in this instance gives us access to the complexity of the novel's portrayal of Italian Jewish identity in fascist Italy and opens up onto a reflection upon Jewish history and memory. In Bassani's novel, Jewish and "queer" identities are linked in an effort to deconstruct (in the rigorous sense of the word) a version of the Italian Shoah that would hold Jews like the Finzi-Continis responsible for their own fate. It is thus misleading to suggest, as some other scholars have, that the novel is simply critical of the family. *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is read appropriately as Jewish not only in its content but in its form and queer in its invitation to understand an abnormal, anti-social world where "useless" pursuits like love (and art) justify and sanctify everything.

John CHAMPAGNE

Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and Italian "Queers"

There is, in Giorgio Bassani's novel *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, a passage where the unnamed Jewish narrator contrasts his non-Jewish friend Giampiero Malnate's view of homosexuals as "'poor bastards'" and "'obsessed' creatures" with his own insistence that "love justifies and sanctifies everything, even homosexuality; and more: that love, when it is pure, completely without material interest, is always abnormal, anti-social, et cetera, just like art … useless" (179). According to the narrator, about homosexuality, his friend Malnate "had very simple ideas: like a true *goy*" (179). Bassani's narrator thus queerly asserts that Jewish identity is primarily a relation of affiliation to and with the homosexual Other. *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is not Basani's only novel in which homosexuality and Judaism are linked sympathetically. Sergio Parussa reminds us that Bassani's earlier (1958) novel *Gli occhiali d'oro* (*The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles)* "recounts the parallel lives of two outsiders: Dr. Athos Fadigati, a well-respected homosexual doctor, and a young Jew," who narrates the novel (*Writing as Freedom* 104). According to Parussa, the Jewish narrator and Dr. Fadigati "are not antagonists but deuteragonists" (104). In support of this reading, Parussa quotes Bassani himself, who argues that these two characters "'sense that they are the same precisely because they are persecuted differently'" (104). And, in the introduction to his *Queer Italia*, one of the first collections of essays in English on same-sex desire in Italian literature and film, Gary P. Cestaro writes that *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* "offers an exceptionally nuanced portrait of the lethal effects of middle-class conformity on Italian 'queers' of the 1930s and 1940s, Jews and homosexuals" (8).

Taking my cue from Cestaro and recent work in sexuality studies, I argue for a reading of the unnamed narrator of Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* as not gay, but queer. Here is a provisional definition of my use of the term queer in this study: "queer theory is, among other things, an interrogation of the way modern culture depends upon processes of normalization to produce and regulate the social in general and the sexual in particular" (see Warner, "Introduction," xxvi-xxvii). A series of institutions — the military, education, religion, law, medicine, for example — use various techniques to insure our subjugation. Michel Foucault famously called these techniques *disciplines* (see *Discipline and Punish*). Rather than relying chiefly on violence, disciplines pursue our subjection through the idea of the normal and its regulatory function. Queer theory interrupts in particular the ways in which the normal depends upon a categorizing of individuals into rigid, fixed, and hierarchical oppositions: not only heterosexual / homosexual, but also male / female, white / black, and so forth. In fact, queer theory attempts to undermine any understanding of identity as either / or, us / them. It is thus opposed to the positing of a "gay" identity no less rigid and fixed than its "straight" counterpart.

From feminist psychoanalytic re-readings of Sigmund Freud, queer theory borrows the idea that gendered and sexual identities are always precarious and provisional, the result of psychosocial norms enjoined on the subject — figured in and through the Oedipus complex — that the unconscious always threatens to undermine (see Mitchell). The category of the homosexual is the product of a certain "swarming" of disciplinary mechanisms in the late twentieth century, and any attempt to understand the production of the modern homosexual subject must cope with the ways in which these mechanisms — psychoanalysis among them — "invented" the homosexual to shore up his/her normalized counter-part, the heterosexual. Queer theory can thus never simply "free" itself from psychoanalysis but must, rather, work through and over its debt to this way of understanding gender, sexuality, and their points of congruence and discontinuity. From deconstruction queer theory borrows the recognition that oppositions such as heterosexual / homosexual can be "undone" through a trick of reading attentive to the ways in which such binaries depend upon one another for their logic. Thus, their opposition is untenable. If, for example, the term heterosexual makes sense only in relation to its opposite, then there must be something of the homosexual in the heterosexual, and vice versa. Identity is by definition corrupt, impure. Finally, these disciplinary mechanisms are not simply "free-floating" but, rather, produced by capitalist relations of production and exploitation. While they do not emanate from any one place — the state, for example — they are organized into a totality by capitalism, which exerts a determining relationship on the socius as a whole (see Hennessey). While

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my analysis of Bassani's novel does focus in any detail on these material relations of production, any account of "cultural minorities" within capitalism must take into account the ways in which such categories are created and sustained by capitalism and its hierarchical division of labor, its need to create particular labor forces in specified areas of the globe, its requirement for non-remunerated household labor, and so forth (on this, see, e.g., Wallerstein). While such cultural and ethnic divisions were clearly not invented by capitalism, capitalism has taken historical advantage of historically prior forms of identity formation. Thus, for historical materialist queer theorists, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation cannot be understood apart from relations of exploitation; they are over-determined by the capitalist mode of production. While "gay" celebrates the "reverse" identity made possible by compulsory heterosexuality — and treats homosexuals as a minority group deserving of equal protection under the law – "queer" is a nagging reminder of the danger of a simple reversal of hierarchies that leaves in place a binary logic that recognizes and legitimates some sexual and gender identities at the expense of others. In other words, "queer" alerts us to "the trouble with normal," the ways in which a "gay" identity might be purchased at the price of a more radical critique of gender and sexual norms — a critique that might extend the possibilities for human freedom and expression in a way that exceeds the discourse of rights and its ability to name, codify, certify, and regulate subjectivities, and one that understands the elimination of exploitation as a precondition of that human freedom (on this, see Warner, *The Trouble With Normal*).

Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is the story of a group of young people whose lives are disrupted irremediably by Mussolini's anti-Jewish laws of 1938 and the subsequent Italian Shoah. Set in the city of Ferrara, the novel provides a rich portrait of a community that sustained a Jewish presence for hundreds of years. The novel is the unnamed narrator's attempt years later to recount his relationships with the various members of the Finzi-Contini family, relationships whose memories haunt him into his adult life. On a Sunday in April 1957, the narrator, visiting some Etruscan tombs, is motivated by the words of a little girl named Giannina to write of the Finzi-Continis — of the daughter, Micol, for whom the then youthful narrator had romantic feelings, of her brother Alberto, her parents, and the family and friends who frequented their home. In *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, there is a linking of homosexuality with decay and death through the figure of Alberto Finzi-Contini, the family's oldest son. A familiar trope in Western art and literature, this equating of the homoerotic with death might be traced genealogically from Ancient Greece, to Michelangelo's "dying slaves" for the uncompleted tomb of Pope Julius II, to Caravaggio's various portraits of the "sick Bacchus," to Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, and Thomas Mann's Gustav von Aschenbach. Critical analyses of certain representations of people with HIV testify to the durability of this equating of homosexuality with decay, the unfortunate coincidence that HIV was first detected in the West in gay men providing an alibi for the redeployment of this trope in both popular and biomedical discourse (see, e.g., Crimp).

There are numerous ways in which the ill-fated Alberto, who dies from a lymphogranuloma, is "marked" as homosexual, from the fussiness of his taste in clothes and décor, to the male nude of (gay artist) Filippo de Pisis hanging on his bedroom wall, to his rejection of the vaudeville dancer Gladys, to his attachment to his friend Malnate and the latter's fear that if Alberto "kept surrounding himself with exquisite things, perfect, flawless, one of these days he himself would end up becoming ..." (168, ellipses in the original). In fact, Alberto's sexuality is what we might call an "open secret," the ellipses in Malnate's speech indicating the acknowledgement of what is known by all and yet cannot be spoken. As the narrator tells us, when the subject of Gladys is brought up, Alberto blushes, Malnate winks, but, "on the subject of Gladys, cards were never put on the table: not on that occasion, nor on others" (109). Yet, the fact that the narrator realizes that "cards were not put on the table" suggests he knows the truth of Alberto's desire. Alberto's "secret" is thus a secret in name only. If Alberto is constructed as homosexual, however, the narrator is perhaps "queer" in the sense alluded to by Cestaro. In other words, through the figure of the narrator, Bassani "queers" Italian Jewish identity. This queerness relates not only to his sexuality but to his Jewishness as well. Again, according to the narrator, to have simplistic notions about sexuality is to be *goy*. Alberto's fate might then be read not simply as the repetition of the trope of homosexuality=death, but, rather, as an attempt by the narrator to ward off all identities that are "either/or" — heterosexual or homosexual, Jewish or *goy*. One of the much commented upon dangers of modern homosexual identity is that it threatens to reify the very binary division of sexual identity into either heterosexual or homosexual

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that historically at least some members of the early gay liberation movement sought to complicate (see Weeks 198). In killing off Alberto, Bassani kills off a version of homosexual identity just as rigid, stable, and reified as the sexual and gender identities the early movements for homosexual rights sought to challenge. And of course Alberto's illness and the family's refusal to take action against it until it is too late also functions in the novel as a metaphor for the inability of the Finzi-Contini family to act in the face of the growing threat of anti-Semitism — Alberto's death prefiguring those of his family members, who seem literally paralyzed by their inability to believe that the Shoah could come to Italy.

What evidence in the novel suggests that in fact that the narrator is "queer"?

1) The narrator is unnamed. Rather than reading this device as a gesture to disguise any alleged autobiographical impulse, we should instead understand it as both a resistance to the idea of identity as fixed and stable and a refusal of the parents' prerogative to name the child and thus assign it a knowable, identifiable place. Given that so much of the novel poses questions around what it means to be a man, perhaps even gender ambiguity is at play in this refusal to name. The struggle between father and son to determine the son's identity is also an issue here. Specifically,

2) Early in the novel, the narrator tells us he is attracted by the diversity of the Finzi-Continis "to the same degree that my father was repelled by it" (23). This passage is significant on at least two counts: the narrator's attraction to and embracing of differences among Jews, as well as his refusal to adopt and identify with the position of his father. That some kind of Oedipal struggle is occurring here is obvious, as father and son are frequently at odds: "I resolved to do exactly the opposite of what my father wished," the narrator tells us (47). The "object" over which both father and son try to lay claim, however, is not the mother but a daughter, Micol Finzi-Contini — a surrogate mother figure in terms of her (initially gentle) rejection of the narrator's advances, her description of him as like an orphan (148), and the power he grants her to control his actions and feelings. His very denial of the masochism no one else has accused him of calls up the image of Micol as the adored and feared pre-Oedipal mother (159; on masochism and the pre-Oedipal mother, see Deleuze). That she does not simply reject his physical advances but lies "motionless as a statue beneath the blankets" (159) as he presses up against her suggests the degree to which he has projected his fantasies onto her and turned her into a fetish. To take this even further: keeping in mind that the Oedipus complex is a mechanism for aligning sexual desire with gender, the novel is anti-Oedipal. The small human animal who negotiates "successfully" the Oedipus complex emerges from it as the happy, appropriately gendered heterosexual, the "active" male or the "passive" female. The novel is thus "anti"- rather than "pre"-Oedipal in its desire to resist what it recognizes simultaneously as inevitable. In other words, the novel is not inviting a delusional return to the pre-Oedipal or a world free of the divisions of sexuality and gender but invites resistance to heteronormativity and its reliance on certain fantasies of identity.

3) This is a novel about time — the desire to freeze time, via memory, and to hold in abeyance loss, to ward off an inevitable sorrow, a sorrow that is not only inevitable psychically — in order to "pass" into heteronormative human culture, the child must give up its inappropriate, polymorphous desires and gender identifications — but also a sorrow that is historically inevitable, given the reality of the Italian Shoah. It is a commonplace of psychoanalytic criticism to note that the Oedipus complex is precisely a narrative, possessing inexorable drive of narration toward its own conclusion and offering the reader multiple points of identification — just as the child must identify with the mother and the father to negotiate successfully the twin poles of the complex (Freud, "Passing" 169). Significantly, Bassani begins the novel by announcing a series of losses — the disappearance of the Etruscans from history, the loss of the beloved Finzi-Continis, the loss of childhood implied in the narrator's ruminations on the words of the child Giannina, the adults having lost the ability to understand the world as she does. It is thus anti-Oedipal in that the act of reading *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is for the reader not exactly the solving of a riddle or the movement forward to the resolving of an enigma (in fact, by the seventh page of the novel, we already know that the Finzi-Continis are dead and how they died), but chiefly an attempt to defer and delay that very series of losses with which the novel begins. The riddle the novel sets out at its beginning is a much more difficult one to solve, one whose answer remains elusive, even at the novel's conclusion: why are the narrator's memories so powerful that, fourteen years after the death of the family, the narrator's heart "ached as never before" at the thought that "only one, among all the Finzi-Continis I had known and

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loved" had managed to be buried in the family tomb in Ferrara (7; the narrator is referring here to Alberto, who dies before the Shoah).

In the Prologue of the novel, the narrator draws our attention specifically to the young girl Giannina's sadness upon visiting the tomb of the Etruscans. It is she who thus sets the stage for the novel. According to the narrator, "Giannina had prepared us to understand. It was she, the youngest, who somehow guided us" not only as we as readers enter the heart of those tombs where "there at least nothing would ever change," but by extension the world of the narrator's memory, populated by all the Finzi-Continis he had loved (7). It is well known that, early in his career, Freud abandoned the idea of an "Electra" complex running parallel to the little boy's Oedipal struggle. He spent the rest of his life trying — some would argue, unsuccessfully — to make sense of the "riddle" of femininity. This theme of the impossibility of woman was later echoed by Jacques Lacan in his insistence that there is no Other of the Other, that woman, defined by patriarchal culture as lack, cannot be understood except in a relation of negation to the man (see Rose 51). The novel might thus be described as anti-Oedipal in terms of its attempt to posit a little girl as "the one who knows," the one who leads the narrator, and us, as readers, into the past. The adult male narrator's identification with the female child Giannina suggests a kind of polymorphous perversity on his part, as well as proposes that the story we will read belongs to both of them. Also pertinent is here the argument that the loss that accompanies the Oedipus complex — loss that is figured in our phallocentric culture by castration — is allegedly "repaired" by language, although in fact language can never make good on its promise to repair loss. For language — particularly literary language — is characterized precisely by its polyvalence, its slipperiness, its refusal to mean just one thing, its refusal to be itself. For a sign by definition stands for something else. (Literary) language is duplicitous, queer. It will not mean what we say. It is thus fitting that an anti-Oedipal novel should take as its subject loss, a loss it makes present in its very telling.

4) Micol and Alberto are often figured in the novel as "the same," as if their gender is "both/and." Alberto's homosexuality is significant in this regard, given the historical tendency to (mis)read homosexuality as gender inversion. The narrator tells us early on that his relationship to the two siblings had always been "more intimate" — although more intimate than what is left unanswered — and that this intimacy is related to their Jewishness, precisely the grounds on which his father rejects them (21). For when, at various points in the novel, the narrator's father criticizes the Finzi-Continis, it is because they are either not fascist, or not the right kind of Jews, or both. A particularly rich example, linking their inappropriate relationship to Judaism and fascism with their gender troubles, occurs early in the novel, when the narrator's father expresses his outrage that "the whole Finzi-Contini tribe, with no distinctions between males and females," re-enters the Italian synagogue after a five-year absence, at the time of the racial laws (46). The narrator also notes how much Micol's speech resembles Alberto's. In fact, the two share a private language anti-Oedipal in its resistance to the norms of proper pronunciation and meaning. Late in the novel, Micol tells the narrator that imagining making love to him would in fact be like making love to her brother Alberto and that she and the narrator cannot make love because they are too much alike; in fact, "exactly alike in everything" (149). Heteronormative gender roles do not allow this similarity, a similarity Freud insists upon in the pre-Oedipal period, when the child is still unaware of sexual difference and its consequences (see Freud, *Three Essays*).

5) The narrator's own sexuality might be described as queer. I am aware of the fact that, on the surface, the novel reads like a story of unrequited heterosexual love, with some readers constructing Micol as the prototypical bored, bourgeois cock-tease, the woman who says no when she means yes, who toys with men's emotions, *la donna è mobile*, etc. This reading is clearly one that informs Vittorio De Sica's film of Bassani's novel (*Il giardino dei Finzi Contini*), the original poster for the movie offering the viewer a pastoral scene of Micol and the character of the narrator that has very little to do with the novel. This re-writing of Micol as *femme fatale* was not lost on the film's reviewers. For example, in his review of the film, Vincent Canby, admitting that he has not read the novel, describes Micol as "simply willful and cruel" (<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9807E7DE173DEF34BC4F52DFB467838A669EDE>). Similarly, Peter Stack argues of Micol that "the seductive power she exerts is only an attempt to test her allure as a woman" (<http://articles.sfgate.com/1996-11-22/entertainment/17787475_1_finzi-

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continis-vittorio-de-sica-jewish-family-s-home>). Given the way De Sica's film re-writes the novel by turning the narrator's suspicion that Micol is sleeping with Malnate into reality, the film can only be described as a gross misreading of the novel, one that is unfortunately but not unpredictably heteronormative, given the realities of Italian cinema in the 1970s. The addition by De Sica of a scene in which Micol makes love to Malnate while the narrator watches is particularly telling. In the hands of a "queer" director, the scene might have been an occasion to explore the polymorphous, perverse pleasures available to this latent *ménage à trois*. Instead, it seems to be simply an occasion for Micol to demonstrate the power she wields over the narrator. Similarly, the close relationship between Micol and Alberto is portrayed as creepy rather than queer.

A more careful reading of Bassani's book would challenge this Oedipal account of the narrator, Micol, and the novel itself. In addition to the narrator's speech in defense of homosexuality, his love of both Alberto and Micol, and their similarities to one another, late in the novel Alberto's sickness becomes for the narrator "another secret ache, the source of a rage perhaps even more acute and painful than the thought of Micol … There were moments when, to see [Alberto] bloom again, I would have given anything" (177). There is something obsessive about the narrator's proclamations of sexual desire for Micol and his inability to act, initially, on that desire, something the narrator both recognizes and denies, something we might tentatively term "fetishistic" in his treatment of Micol, providing we remember that fetishism can be an enabling fiction in the face of trauma — not the trauma of the recognition of sexual difference, but the trauma of the Oedipus complex itself, which requires the human subject to abandon its polymorphous desires and "settle" for heterosexuality. In the classic Freudian account, fetishism is both a recognition and denial of sexual difference (see Freud, "Fetishism"). It allows its subject to hold two contradictory propositions at the same time: "I know the woman is castrated, but." All efforts of the imagination, including literature, are in some sense fetishistic in that they require a (willing) suspension of disbelief. That this novel is itself about coping with the trauma of the Italian Shoah is also significant here, for, as I argue, some traumas can never be adequately "worked through": Fetishism is a survival strategy. And this novel, the telling of the already known — the killing of Italian Jews — has a particularly fetishistic quality about it in its use of repetition, namely the repeating of the story of the Finzi-Continis, a story whose end is announced at the beginning. But what if, instead of seeing fetishism as a refusal of sexual difference, we read it as an attempt to resist sexist culture's reading of the woman's body as a lack? For fetishism's refusal to "see" sexual difference may in fact be a radical insistence that heteronormative culture exaggerates sexual difference to create an Other. Perhaps the fetishist needs the fetish in order to achieve sexual satisfaction because reading the partner's body as a "lack" is a turn-off — not because he fears castration but the opposite: because he does not see his partner as the "hole" he has to make "whole." His anti-Oedipal resistance produces his partner's body as a site of plenitude lacking nothing, the sex act coming to re-present not the completion of the self in the Other but an excess of the Other in the self. The "problem" with the narrator may precisely be that he refuses the heteronormative rules of the game: he fetishizes Micol precisely because he sees her as "the same" rather than as his inferior opposite.

As a woman, however, Micol knows the consequences of refusing the rules of heterosexuality. She cannot indulge in the kind of imaginary femininity allowed to the male modernist artist in particular, captured in Flaubert's "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," for example. Her refusal interrupts the male narrator's story. The fetish speaks back, reminding the narrator that, in the "real" world of heteronormative male privilege, some subjects are freer to resist the rules than others. Using here Freud's texts against themselves**,** playing up the way they recognize and yet fudge the violence of heteronormativity, rather than seeing both fetishism and queer sexuality as failed attempts to negotiate the Oedipus complex, we might see in them a "successful" resistance to normalized, hierarchical gender relations and normative heterosexuality with its insistence that someone always be "on top" (for another instance where a queer theorist re-reads fetishism so as to de-pathologize it, see Dean). Micol herself recognizes that normative heterosexuality requires the battle of the sexes, the impulse to annihilate the Other, and the difference that Other represents. She describes heterosexual love as "a cruel, fierce sport" where each sex desires to "tear each other limb from limb" (149). This is precisely why she refuses the narrator's sexual advances. She loves him too much — and she is too much like him — to envision such a relation. As she explains to the narrator, "I was *beside* her, did I

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understand? Not *facing* her?" (149; emphases in the original). In the post-Oedipal game, the players see sexual difference and its consequences, a sighting that is only possible via a particular physical vantage point. Standing side by side, the two literally cannot see the difference a penis makes and Micol knows that such blindness to hierarchized sexual difference is impossible in a phallocentric culture. Micol refuses adamantly to drag the narrator into "something for people reciprocally determined to get the upper hand," something "*bloodthirsty*" (149; emphasis in the original). For the Oedipus complex resolves itself not simply when the child recognizes sexual difference but when it imagines that difference — through the trope of castration — as absolute, irreconcilable, and hierarchical. This is what castration signifies, a difference that marks one sex as inferior to the other, and only one of the two can win the battle.

Once the narrator has been "scorned" by Micol, he turns to his friend Malnate, who takes his breath away (173). This new crush on Giampi has been anticipated earlier in the novel, when the narrator tells us how they hated and loved each other: "I only had one desire: that [Giampiero] should admire me" (105; Interestingly, the narrator describes how this desire dates from "the first time I sat facing him" [105]). Reciting poetry together, frequenting cafes, dining, strolling through the amusement park, visiting the whorehouse together, the narrator and Malnate have a series of homosocial dates that lead to the "coming-out" scene in which the narrator confesses his belief that love is always "abnormal, anti-social" (179). But in a world organized by heteronormativity, the Oedipal moment — when the child acquiesces to the law of the father, forsakes its polymorphous, bisexual pleasures, and accepts its social position as a heterosexual, "active" male – can only be staved off for so long. A narrative cannot defer its own ending indefinitely, and Bassani cannot hold in abeyance forever the ultimate tragedy of the Italian Shoah and the fate of the fictional Finzi-Continis. In one of the very last chapters of the novel, the narrator's father asserts his Oedipal prerogative, demanding that the child abandon its socially inappropriate desires: "That night, too," the narrator tells us, "I did not escape [my father's] control" (185). Specifically, in this penultimate scene, the father uses a variety of strategies to steer his son safely onto the path of a normative, heterosexual masculinity. He praises the narrator for his recent trip to the brothel, a trip that seems to have left the narrator unmoved. He insinuates that the son must give up his unhealthy identification with that "wretched" homosexual, Dr. Fadigati, the man who had committed suicide "for love" in the father's very own house, lest the narrator, too, "turn" queer. The ellipses in the father's speech in this scene are highly telling in that they suggest a parent struggling to talk to his son about the sin that dare not speak its name, the father resorting to such heteronormative clichés as "'Your temperament (I have the impression you take after your grandmother Fanny), your temperament … You're too sensitive, that's it, and so you are never satisfied … you are always looking for'…" (190, ellipses in the original). Finally, the father reinforces existing social norms and hierarchies by insisting that a marriage to Micol — the wrong kind of Jew — would also violate class boundaries: "'The Finzi-Continis were not right … they weren't people for us … They are different … they don't even seem *judim* … she [Micol] was superior to us … socially'" (190).

Successfully wielding the threat of castration, a symbol for being banished outside of the social, the narrator's father provokes the dissolution of the son's Oedipus complex: "it was as if something (a kind of knot, an age-old secret tangle) were slowly dissolving" (186). The son's acceptance of the father's wishes is ritualized in the sealing of the deal with a kiss, "a long, silent, tender embrace" (186) which reads in this particular instance not merely as a residual resistance to Oedipus but also as its opposite. For, as Freud argues, every successful resolution of the Oedipus complex also requires a love of the father and a fear of the mother, that love ultimately being replaced by an identification with his position as patriarch. For the sublimation of this pole of the Oedipus complex — the male child's desire for the father — makes possible the male homosocial bonds on which phallocentric culture is predicated and depends (Freud, "Passing" 169): "That is how I gave up Micol," the narrator tells us (186). He takes his father's advice to be "more manly," less queer, more like his fascist father. Lucienne Kroha reads Bassani's novel similarly as about Judaism and manhood, although she comes to conclusions decidedly different from those I outline here, primarily because she is working within a resolutely heteronormative framework. Kroha sees the narrator not as resisting Oedipus but rather as fleeing the Oedipal "into the fantasy world of pre-oedipal narcissism, in which the comforting mirroring of the child by the mother shields the infant from the harsh realities of a hostile world" (191). What

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the narrator cannot "embrace," according to Kroha, is "the difference between himself and Micol, the reality of her sexuality as a woman and his own adult masculinity." What Kroha represses here is the way in which the Oedipus complex constructs that difference as hierarchized, with woman representing the "hole" whereby adult masculinity constructs itself as "whole" — woman as "the other" who herself has no other. Kroha also ignores the fascism of the narrator's father and sees no irony in the narrator's attempt to "mend fences" with him (192). More troublesomely, she argues that Malnate represents a kind of ego ideal that makes possible the narrator's psychic "development": "He [the narrator] relinquishes Micol and takes his place next to Malnate, the positive male figure in his Family Romance gone awry and accepts that the only way to be a Jew and a man at this time in history is join the Resistance and to fight" (193). Such a reading of the novel is precisely (and not metaphorically) heteronormative in that it reads resistance to the Oedipus complex as delusional. For, according to Kroha, the garden of the Finzi-Continis represents not a space of resistance to fascism but an artificial reality created "to avoid the narcissistic injury of exclusion and marginality" (193). Not coincidentally, such a reading also must repress the narrator's critique of Malnate's goyish homophobia. Implicit in Kroha's account is the assumption that "the only way to be a Jew and a man at this time in history" is to be straight and goy, and not to be like the Finzi-Continis, whom she sees as "proud and misguided" (189). Kroha ingnores such obvious and important aspects of the novel as the way the Finzi-Continis open their home, at some peril to themselves, to the young people excluded from the tennis club by the racial laws, and, even more significantly, the way Signor Finzi-Contini makes his personal library available to the narrator so that he may finish his studies once he has been expelled from the municipal library. Given the long history of attempts by Italian Jews in particular to undermine and thwart strictures placed on them by Christian authorities – strictures relating to such things as where they may live, what kinds of clothes they may wear, and the kinds of occupations they may pursue — Signor Finzi-Contini's efforts can only be construed as a characteristically Jewish response to political oppression (on this history, see Davis). Kroha's heteronormative framework does not allow her to see the ways in which the Finzi-Continis actually and materially resist fascism. This is symptomatic of an inability to read the connections the novel is drawing between resistance to heteronormativity, resistance to fascism, and resistance to a "proper" Jewish identity as defined by the narrator's father.

The Shoah was a destruction of the Other designed to shore up the boundaries of the Oedipalized self, which, owing to the unconscious, is always in danger of turning queer. Anti-Semitism, like homophobia, like misogyny, is, as Richard Sennett suggests, symptomatic of a fear of contamination. It is ultimately also a fear of the sexual itself and its potential to represent as desirable the dissolution of the self in the other (see Bersani, "Is the Rectum"). As British novelist Jeannette Winterson puts it, the problem with heterosexuality is that most men want simply to be "the destroyer and never the destroyed" (170): The heroine of her novel *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* longs to be both. An absolute, non-reciprocal destruction of the Other is required by an absolute repression of the Other within the self. In its attempts, however ultimately futile, to recapture the garden of the Finzi-Continis and defer the Italian Shoah, Bassani's novel is not simply nostalgic. Rather, it is an act of mourning, a working through of grief that, contra Freud, may never be completed, as some traumas may be so profound that a complete recovery — however that might be measured — may never be possible. Freud's account of mourning is in fact very much in keeping with this novel in which "every single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected" (Freud, "Mourning" 166). But the ending — and beginning — of *The Garden of Finzi-Continis* does not suggest that, following this "extraordinarily painful" (Freud's words) work, "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" — at least not the ego of the narrator. But a work of fiction has no obligation to return to "normal" life and our queer Jewish narrator might find it particularly ironic that he is expected to return to a world of normalcy to which he has always been denied full access in the first place.

Bassani's novel is a queer invitation to lose ourselves in a memory that is not a memory, an attempt to bring to crisis — and not simply invert — a series of binaries, including literature / historiography, memory / history, Christian / Jew, observant / assimilated, heterosexual / homosexual, male / female. It is and is not autobiographical, it is and is not historically accurate, and it is and is not an Oedipal narrative, for example (concerning historical accuracy, September of 1943

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seems a bit early for the Finzi-Contini family to have been taken off to prison: The infamous clearing of the Roman ghetto occurred on 16 October of that year and the first sweep of the Venetian ghetto in early December [see Picciotto]). And the stance the novel takes toward the Finzi-Continis themselves must be similarly deconstructive. To assume that the Finzi-Continis were simply fiddling while Ferrara burned, is to assume, by extension, that more Italian Jews should have anticipated the Shoah and fled the nazis and this is to misunderstand the complexity of the relationship of fascist Italy to both anti-Semitism and nazism (a relationship many historians are still trying to untangle [for two opposing accounts, see DeFelice; Sarfatti]). It is not their money, nor their faulty fascist credentials, nor their not being the right kinds of Jews that lead to their downfall: it is nazi and Italian anti-Semitism, which did not, after all, ultimately distinguish between rich and poor Jews, fascist and non-fascist Jews, "assimilated" and "observant" Jews, and so forth (a point demonstrated by Stille). This deconstruction is what makes the novel not only "queer" but also Jewish, and as Yosef Yerushalmi reminds us, Jewish memory and Jewish history exist in an uneasy but necessary relationship to one another: "As a result of emancipation in the diaspora and national sovereignty in Israel Jews have fully re-entered the mainstream of history, and yet their perception of how they got there and where they are is most often more mythical than real" (99).

In conclusion, in its deconstruction (in the rigorous sense of the word) of a version of the Italian Shoah that would hold Jews like the Finzi-Continis responsible for their own fate and its use of fiction to complicate our easy assumptions about what it meant to be a Jew in fascist Italy, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* is read appropriately as Jewish not only in its content but in its form and queer in its invitation to understand an abnormal, anti-social world where "useless" pursuits like love (and art) justify and sanctify everything.

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Author's profile: John Champagne teaches English at Pennsylvania State University Erie, the Behrend College. His fields of interest in research include the representation of gender and sexuality in modernist film and literature. He is also a novelist and essayist. Champagne's publications include *The Ethics of Marginality: A New Approach to Gay Studies* (1995), "A Feminist Pirandello: Female Agency in 'As You Desire Me'," *Forum Italicum* (2005), and "Last Winter, in Marrakech," *Gay Travels in the Muslim World* (Ed. Michael Luongo, 2007). He is currently working on a book on the representation of masculinity in Italian fascist era painting, music, and literature. E-mail: <jgc4@psu.edu>

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